

“Aged, and Blind”: Ma. Presence, a Former Enslaved Woman on the Mosquito Shore (Nicaragua)

“Anciana y Ciega”: Ma. Presence una exesclava en la Costa de la Mosquitia (Nicaragua)

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Abstract

This article analyzes *Ma. Presence*'s life story by implementing reading against the grain combined with critical fabulation to examine minutes of meetings held on the eve of the emancipation of slavery on the Mosquito Shore (1841) and a chapter in Charles N. Bell's autobiography (1989). It aims to re-imagine and reconstruct *Ma. Presence*'s experience as an enslaved and a “free black woman”. *Ma. Presence* was captured into slavery in Africa as a little girl. She survived the middle passage and survived enslavement in Jamaica and Bluefields, where she worked until she was old and blind. Enslavers typified her as a discarded slave. Retelling the life of this “ordinary” black woman contributes to ongoing efforts to highlight black enslaved women's experiences. Simultaneously, this paper contributes to a more extensive discussion on the collective memory of slavery, the enslavement of children, gender violence, sexual reproduction during enslavement, aging, disability, discarded enslaved people, and the transition to emancipation. It is argued that in a multicultural patriarchal web, black women's experiences as enslaved or free persons are marked by gendered violence, dislocation, dispossession (deprivation), and dehumanization. Nevertheless, they are strong evidence demonstrating black women's day-to-day resistance that contributed to their survival.

Keywords: Mosquitia, collective memory of slavery, gender violence, discarded slaves, respectability

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Resumen

Este artículo analiza la historia de vida de *Ma. Presence* mediante la implementación de lectura resistente y fabulación crítica para examinar las minutas de la abolición de la esclavitud en la Mosquitia (1841) y un capítulo de la autobiografía de Charles N. Bell (1989). Busca recontar su experiencia como mujer negra esclavizada, y su proceso de transición hacia la emancipación. *Ma. Presence* fue capturada y esclavizada en África durante su infancia. Sobrevivió al pasaje transatlántico y el régimen de esclavización en Jamaica y Bluefields, donde trabajó hasta que envejeció y perdió la visión. Los esclavistas desestimaron su valor monetario, y la tipificaron como inútil e improductiva. El destacar la historia de vida de *Ma. Presence* contribuye a los esfuerzos de distinguir las experiencias de mujeres negras esclavizadas que usualmente no se comparten. Simultáneamente este análisis contribuye a una discusión amplia sobre la memoria colectiva de la esclavitud, la esclavitud durante la infancia, violencia de género, seneclidad, invalidez, y la transición hacia la emancipación. Se argumenta que, situadas en una red patriarcal multicultural, las experiencias de las mujeres negras, como esclavas o personas libres, están marcadas por la violencia de género, la dislocación, el despojo (privación) y la deshumanización. Sin embargo, también hay evidencias de la resistencia cotidiana de las mujeres negras lo cual contribuyó a su supervivencia.

Palabras clave: Mosquitia, memoria colectiva de la esclavitud, violencia de género, esclavos desechados, respetabilidad

I. Introduction

It was the mid-1840s in a remote port town called Bluefields², situated on the eastern Mosquito shore³ (known today as the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua), facing the Caribbean Sea, surrounded by a dense forest and deep rivers. There lived “an old and blind African woman” (Bell, 1989, p. 24). A former enslaved who was kidnapped as a little girl from her village in Africa; survived the middle passage; sold in auction in Jamaica, and years after, once again sold and shipped to Bluefields (which was a British settlement), where she was “emancipated” on August 10th, of 1841. In the Record Book of Bluefields, which includes the list and enslaved holders and names of manumitted enslaved, she appears as *Present; aged, and blind*. In his autobiography, Bell (1989) refers to her as *Ma. Presence*⁴. This portion recorded in Bell’s autobiography

2 Bluefields is named after the Dutch pirate Abraham Blauvelt who hid in the bay’s waters in the early 17th century (Mode, 2020). Bluefields, the largest city along the southeast Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, is inhabited by Mestizos, Creoles, and Indigenous people (Rama and Miskito), who speak Spanish, Creole, and Miskito, respectively.

3 The British named the Mosquito Shore after the Miskito Amerindians, who controlled the territory. After centuries of dispute, war, and diplomatic negotiations between England, Spain, the US, Nicaragua and Honduras, the Mosquito Coast was annexed to Nicaragua in November 1894. In 1960, the International Court of Justice divided the area, granting the northern portion to Honduras (*Britannica*, 2013).

4 Ma. Meaning Mother. Title given to older women as an act of respect and recognition.

and minutes of emancipated enslaved are priceless pieces that help us glimpse the experience of an enslaved woman living in Bluefields.

Very little is known about slavery on the Caribbean Coast of Central America. The fragmented archive and the absence of first-person slave narratives make it challenging to reconstruct this history⁵. In Nicaragua, mainstream nationalist discourses have neglected the available information, which has resulted in Nicaragua's ambiguous knowledge of slavery (Gordon, 1998)⁶. This paper highlights Ma. Presence's life story and provides insights into the lives of Creoles⁷ (people of African descent)⁸ living in Bluefields in the aftermath of slavery. Retelling Ma. Presences' life story contributes to rescuing her story of enslavement on the Mosquito Shore. It supports prominent black scholars such as Deborah Gray White, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Mathurin Mairs, Darlene Clark Hine, Saidiya Hartman, Barbara Bush, Jennifer Morgan, Sasha Turner, Marisa Fuentes, Daina Berry, among others, efforts to "retrieve the invisible Black women from anonymity" (Bush, 1990, p. 8), to rescue her from oblivion (S. Hartman, 2008; S. V. Hartman, 2007). To highlight the life of the "ordinary" enslaved black women whose experiences deserve a unique distinction from that of the light skin mulata, by examining Ma. Presence's experience, this paper contributes to a more extensive discussion on the collective memory of slavery, the enslavement of children, gender violence, sexual reproduction during enslavement, aging, disability, and discarded enslaved people.

Ma. Presence is introduced to us in Charles N. Bell's⁹ (1989) autobiography *Tangweera: Life and adventures among gentle savages*. Bell was born in Scotland but raised among the Miskitu Indians (whom he called *gentle savages*) and former black enslaved on the Mosquito Shore. Although the autobiography broadly describes the Miskito people, the first chapter of this book provides ethnographic details into the life and community system of people of African descent living in Bluefields in the aftermath of slavery. I access fragments of Ma. Presence's life story through the lens of a white, old man, whose heteropatriarchal stance, biased memory, and prejudiced perspective about black people¹⁰. I read against the grain (Morgan, 2016), combined

5 Juan Francisco Manzano's autobiography is the only first-person narrative known of an enslaved in the West Indies (Cuba).

6 I do not want to disregard the URACCAN's Afro-Commission joint efforts with Dr. Edmund Gordon to recue this essential part of the History of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua.

7 For purposes of this study, the terms Afro-descendant, Creole, and Black are used synonymously. Variation in the use of these terms does not connote any distinction.

8 The Creoles in Nicaragua are Afro-Caribbean people descendants of enslaved Africans brought by the British to the Mosquitia shores in 1641. In 1841 slavery was abolished, and the newly freed established the Creole society. After the abolition of slavery in the West Indies (1833), migration occurred from the Caribbean Islands to the Caribbean coasts of Central America. In Nicaragua, these Black immigrants became members of the Creole community (Goett, 2017; Gordon, 1998).

9 Charles Napier Bell (1835 – 1906), born in Scotland, was the son of James Stanislaus Bell, who, along with his brother George Bell lived in Bluefields and were involved in the exportation of lumber. In 1841, at the death of Robert Charles Frederic (The Mosquito King), James Stanislaus Bell was named Sheriff and Commandant of Bluefields and tutor of the deceased king's two daughters and one son who became the king (George Augustus Frederic II). Charles Bell returned to Scotland in 1857 after Britain had agreed to cede the Mosquito territory to Nicaragua.

10 In his autobiography, Bell (1989) explains, "This book was written in my old age, but it is a record of my youth, passed among gentle savages of Central America" (p. v).

with critical fabulation (S. Hartman, 2008)¹¹ to analyze and re-imaging Ma. Presence's life experience as an enslaved and a free black woman [emphasis added].

Storytelling and Memory

Bell (1989) describes Ma. Presence as a “source of mystery and wonder; a cheery, humorous old soul who told stories of scenes in her life and long stories of Africa” (p. 24). Ma. Presence was a storyteller. Despite being aged and blind, she evoked reminiscences of her childhood and of how she was captured into enslavement, which she shared with younger ones in the community. Children such as “Rooty (Ruth; a mulatto girl), Pennyluppy (Penelope), Joody (Judith; a quadroon), Joney and Minta (Joannah & Araminta; a pair of tall, well-made twins as black as sloes), Crusoe, Humphrey” (Bell, 1989, p. 24). Bell, and the young Miskito King George, would gather and listen to Ma. Presence. This was Ma. Presence account:

I am a Mandingo from a Mohammedan tribe from the headwaters of the Niger. I lived in a village of huts surrounded by a strong high fence. At night the gates were shut, and the jackals and hyenas howled around. Sometimes on dark nights, I heard the crashing and tramping of ahsnoonoo (the great elephant). During the day, our gallant warriors, including my father and my brother, went hunting and would return with trophies. A green robust forest surrounded our little village. A beautiful river flowed the rocky bed in the valley below where we often spent those old hot days. There we played, jumped, laughed, and giggled. One day, we were enjoying the refreshing waters of the river. Suddenly we heard dreadful screaming, the sounds of guns up in our village, and flames rising from the huts. We rushed out of the bank to see what was happening when we saw a warrior grab a little girl by the arm and drag her away into the bush. Then, I was abruptly caught by a giant who wore a horrendous mask. Our warriors were out; no one came to our rescue. At the sounds of sobbing, crying, and screams, I opened my eyes and saw a large caravan of people. I was tied to an older woman who never stopped crying. I cried too. I was only a little girl. I was so scared that I could not recognize any familiar face. We walked and mourned for days until I saw ‘the great black sea.’ I’ve never seen something like that before. I covered my mouth with my hand and was lost in astonishment, horror, and fear (Bell, 1989).

¹¹ Reading Against the Grain, or “resistant” reading, is a valuable technique black women historians utilize to analyze the fragmented archive. It consists in distancing oneself from what is said in the text and deducing the alternative information it offers, leading to an alternative interpretation. Critical Fabulation is a creative semi-fictional writing style that allows historians to fill the gaps and emptiness embedded in the fragmented archive of slavery. This strategy is helpful in reimagining and reconstructing black enslaved women's life stories and experiences that mainstream historians tend to disregard.

Then I saw a man, a white man. He dragged a woman into a canoe. She was naked, and She fought back fiercely. Two men came to his rescue. They held her tight and tied her hands and feet so she could not move. She looked like a warrior; I'd never seen a woman fight like that. Being amazed by this scene, I was distracted by grotesque voices. I could not understand what was said. Their gesture indicated we should go into the canoe. Then we crossed over into a bigger boat. I don't remember how many days we spent crossing the great black sea, but it was a long journey. Many got sick, and many died on the way. We arrived in Jamaica (Bell, 1989). I was sold to a planter¹²; he carefully inspected my body to ensure I had no defects. I don't know how much he paid for me. He took me to his house, where I worked as a helper in the kitchen. A few years later, I was pregnant by my master. But my son died at a young age (Bell, 1989). I was sent to work on the sugar field in the mill¹³.

In a short while, I was sold to Mr. Thomas, who brought me to Bluefields. He rented me out to Mrs. Emma Hodgson. I worked in the making of sugar cane syrup. We first squeezed the sugarcane in an old African mill. There the cane is crushed until the last drop of juice falls into the calabash. A great pot is on the fire, into which every calabash is poured. We used a cocconut shell fixed to a long stick and a large branch of sea fan to slowly stir the boiling juice. When the juice was boiled to a clear thick syrup, we stored it in demijohns which then was used to sweeten coffee, chocolate, and lemonade. Mr. Thomas was satisfied with the wages he received for my labor. I worked till I was old and blind. Although I had lost my sight, I did some cleaning and small gardening for Mr. Thomas. Nevertheless, he wanted to sell me off; no one would purchase an old and blind woman. Shortly, I lost my strength, and at this, Mr. Thomas abandoned me. Since then, I've lived by charity (Bell, 1989). One day a man named McDonald came to Bluefields and said to all the enslaved: You are a free people.

In his autobiography, Bell (1989) asserts that "no people could tell stories like the black people" and that "Ma. Presence was among the best" (p. 25). Ma. Presence's storytelling practice gives insights into Creole's oral tradition, a shared cultural practice within the Black diaspora rooted in African values and rituals used to transmit ancestral knowledge (Banks-Wallace, 2002). For black Diasporic communities, storytelling, in the form of tales, old sayings, songs, and proverbs, constitutes a resistance mechanism and cultural healing practice; "storytelling facilitates the narrative of trauma and serves as motivating factors that bring behavior into focus, and ideas

12 Planter is the English term used to refer to men that dominated the agricultural market during the 17th and 18th centuries in the Americas. These were upper-middle-class farmers and owners of a plantation that relied on the system of chattel African slavery to ensure their workforce (Burnard, 2018).

13 We do not have data on the various manual work Ma. Presence performed during enslavement in Jamaica or Bluefields. Nevertheless, I offer an alternative answer to fill this gap.

into action” (Chioneso *et al.*, 2020, p. 100). Storytelling is a process that structures one’s experiences into practical stories that help answer existential questions and help make sense of human behavior. For Black women, storytelling is a means to evoke memories and feelings to explain what it means to be a woman of African descent across time and space (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Chioneso *et al.*, 2020). In her book *Black Autonomy: Race, Gender and Afro-Caribbean Activism*, Goett (2017) attests to Creole oral tradition. While conducting ethnographic research in the Creole community of Monkey Point (located 48.7 km south of Bluefields), women’s storytelling time became an essential source of information. Overtime, Goett identified its “pedagogic and political function” (p. 31) and argues that through storytelling Creole women “encourage young people to embrace a similar form of historical consciousness and thus work to mobilize intergenerational political activism” (p. 31).

Storytelling is a genuine African tradition. Individuals who kept the stories maintained the cultural and historical connection between the present and the past. They were a source of knowledge and wisdom, highly valued and respected; storytelling was a form of day-to-day resistance for enslaved communities (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Chioneso *et al.*, 2020; Thompson, 2011). Thompson (2011) claims that the oral accounts of enslaved serve as the evidence of things not photographed. Trachtenberg (1985) argues that photography adds value to historical knowledge and strengthens the visual memory of slavery. Especially in a society that regards visual records as the primary evidence or first-hand witness. Nevertheless, in the absence of photography, the oral testimonies produced in the form of accounts, tales, or songs were effective tools that prevented abandoning enslaved experiences into oblivion. Storytelling was a powerful tool to counteract the British empire’s attempt to use the lack of visual evidence to control the narrative or to willfully forget the atrocities they enacted upon the enslaved (Thompson, 2011).

It was the enslaved who, by remembering and reproducing their stories, obfuscated the British empire’s intention. The enslaved transmitted their experiences and knowledge to their descendants orally, strengthening the African diaspora’s collective memory and identity (Gilroy, 1993; Trouillot, 1995). It demonstrates that the enslaved enacted various forms of day-to-day resistance and did not easily succumb to slavery; they resisted forgetting their homeland and allowing the nihilation of their identity (Bush, 1990). The enslaved (not white people) were the first abolitionists. Their oral testimonies constitute the most substantial evidence of the atrocities they endured at the hands of a white heteropatriarchal supremacist system. Through sharing tales of the past, the black diaspora developed a longing for Africa (their motherland) and obtained a clearer understanding of who they are as a people (Hartman, 2007).

Unfortunately, in his autobiography Bell (1989) does not provide more details about the various stories Ma. Presence shared. It is remarkable that although she was aged and had lost sight, her memory was lucid. At an old age, she still evoked scenes of

her homeland and the stories she learned as a child from her parents or tribe's elders while still in Africa. She also remembered and narrated events related to her personal experience as an enslaved, accounts she shared even after receiving manumission. This fact contradicts historians who suggest enslaved children did not possess the depth of cultural knowledge as adults and, therefore, could not maintain their African traditions (Lawrance, 2014). Ma. Presence was enslaved as a little girl. Nevertheless, she remembered and even participated in spiritual ceremonies conducted in "regular African fashion" (Bell, 1989, p. 19).

Although adult enslaved Africans had a more vigorous repertoire of their African community's cultural and spiritual traditions, I want to highlight that enslaved children (sucklers and toddlers) who may not have been able to remember their homeland and those born into slavery in the Americas, learned these customs from their parents and adult member in enslaved communities. Under constrained circumstances, the enslaved formed their own communities and practiced their African belief and cultural traditions (Beckles, 1996; Beckles & Shepherd, 2000; Bush, 1990; Shepherd, 2006). They reproduced these cultural practices and knowledge and continued to share them with younger generations. In restrained circumstances, they preserved the collective memory of Africa as their motherland and maintained a collection of traditions (e.g., spiritual, health) rooted in African belief. Importantly, Ma. Presence shared these in the form of stories, which constituted a healing process allowing her to cope with the traumatic experience of enslavement. This contributed to her survival. Ma. Presence's storytelling practice demonstrates that she resisted forgetting her motherland; she fought not to forget how she was abducted from her family; from her tribe.

The Transatlantic Journey

We do not have data that would inform of Ma. Presence's age or her given name at birth. We know that she was a "little girl" when abducted from her village. Since she could remember her childhood in Africa, we can infer that she was a preadolescent child. Morgan (2016) and Diptee (2006) argue that African women and children were kidnapped or sold into slavery and shipped to the enslaved settlements in the Americas in significant numbers from the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade (fifteenth century). During an attack, slave raiders could not easily distinguish victims by age or sex. Therefore, although slaveholders preferred to purchase young men in their prime age (ages 14 through 45), slave raiders seized men, women (including pregnant women), and children indistinctively (Diptee, 2006). Additionally, adult men had a higher possibility of fleeing from the raiding site. Therefore, women and children were easily captured (Lawrance, 2014). In many instances, women and children outnumbered the men captured and shipped to the Americas (Diptee, 2006; Morgan, 2016).

Based on available data, transatlantic scholars estimate that from 1775 through 1807, children accounted for 16% of the captives from West Central Africa (Diptee,

2006). Lawrence (2014) argues that the percentage increased to 50% after the abolition of the British transatlantic slave trade (1807). The legal prohibition of transporting and selling human cargo to the Americas had no immediate effect. It instead resulted in an illegal trade that continued through 1837 (approximately). It is impossible to know the age of the enslaved children that survived the middle passage because captains, sailors, or doctors did not register enslaved person's ages, nor were they invested in specifying the number of women and children on their voyage (Lawrance, 2014; Morgan, 2016). Another inconvenience that contributed to the fragmented record is that enslavers had no specific standard to define childhood. British slave traders determined the age of their cargo based on height. An Individual under 4 feet 4 inches was considered a child and would most likely be under age 14 (Diptee, 2006; Morgan, 2016; Pasura *et al.*, 2013). Enslavers utilized categories such as suckling infants, crawling children, and toddlers to describe young children who were often transported with their mothers (Morgan, 2016). Lawrence (2014) suggests that once on the voyage, children were not considered a threat to captains and sailors. Therefore, they were not subject to all the restrictions forced on adults to prevent their escape. Children were valued less than adults and sold at a lower price. Nevertheless, planters found it prudent to purchase children since they were less defiant, more naïve, vulnerable, and malleable, especially for lifetime loyalty (Diptee, 2006; Lawrence, 2014).

We neither have a record of Ma. Presence's age at the time of her encounter with Bell's family, nor her age when granted manumission. In the list of manumitted slaves of August 10th, 1841, she appears as "Present, aged and blind"; owned by a "Mr. St^a Thomas." Nonetheless, we do know that in the British slave regime, age 50 was used to typify someone old (Doddington, 2018). For most slaveholders, age and gender made no difference in the workload assigned to the enslaved. Aged individuals were forced to work until they had lost strength. Aged enslaved lost monetary value. Planters preferred individuals in their prime age (14-45). Ma. Presence's account suggests she lost sight and physical strength due to aging while living in Bluefields. Mr. St^a Thomas abandoned her a few years before emancipation; she survived on charity. Bell (1989) denotes that his family practiced charity toward Ma. Presence for at least fifteen years. These facts suggest that Ma. Presence was between fifty-five and sixty years when Bell's family first met her. This estimation indicates that Ma. Presence was captured into slavery during the abolitionist¹⁴ era (around the 1790s).

Ma. Presence refers to the fact that she was from the interior of Africa and, as a child, had never heard of or seen the ocean. Besides the terror slave traders inflicted upon her, the encounter with the ocean marked the beginning of an unknown fate as a chattel enslaved person shipped to the Americas. Ma. Presence describes that when they arrived at the coast and saw "the great black sea, I covered my mouth with my hand and was lost in astonishment, horror, and fear" (Bell, 1989, p. 25). The intensity

¹⁴ Activism and advocacy for the abolition of slavery (1780s through 1880s).

of the terror she experienced was such that it caused her to see a black ocean, not blue, green, or marron color waters. Morgan (2016) claims that for captives bound to enslavement, the transatlantic journey was "steeped in the anguish of dislocation, fear, and deprivation" (p. 143). Women would soon discover that their status as enslaved encompassed free manual and sexual labor.

In slavery at the Sea, Mustakeem (2016) introduces us to details of slavery on the West African Coast and the violence slave traders executed to subjugate Africans. Mustakeem (2016) argues that, at the beach, individuals captured into slavery were treated as new cargo, meticulously inspected, and selected to be shipped based on their productive and reproductive value. Nevertheless, for those from the interior of Africa, their encounter with the ocean was terrifying.

Olaudah Equiano (or Gustavus Vassa, 1745-1797), who belonged to the Igbo tribe from the inland of the West Coast, narrates in his autobiography that he was captured into slavery when he was eleven years old (1756), along with his sister. After being sold to various African masters, they sold him to white men who transported him to Barbados. He, too, refers that his encounter with the "great black sea" filled him "with astonishment and fear" (Equiano & Sollors, 2001, p. 16). Ma. Presence was clueless about the many enslaved that had journeyed the ocean, of the many that lay dead in its depth; a roaring ocean that manifested the rage and claims for justice of those who did not survive the crossing.

As a child on the slave ship, Ma. Presence witnessed how men and women fought and resisted to avoid being enslaved. There she also saw how slowly many succumbed to white men's will. As a child, she may not have been beaten. Nevertheless, witnessing the atrocities inflicted upon others, combined with the terror of the "the great black sea" and the uncertainty of her destiny, contributed significantly to shaping her into a chattel slave. We do not have details of Ma. Presence's journey in the middle passage. Nevertheless, Morgan (2016) refers to an enslaved woman named Belinda, who described the crossing as the "most excruciating torment" (p. 157). Equiano described it as a "wrenched" passage (Equiano & Sollors, 2001, p. 16). Mustakeem (2016) asserts that the middle passage (the ocean and the ships) constituted the "epicenter in the making and unmaking of transported slaves" (p. 4). This was a process of detaching the enslaved from their humanity, identity, and memories as they were shaped into chattel (a property). As a little girl, Ma. Presence survived the middle passage, and she did not forget her village, her family, her origins, and her identity. As an aged and blind person, she continued to share her story.

Ma. Presence & Sexual Reproductive Value

Ma. Presence was enslaved during the abolitionist era, which resulted in the legal prohibition of the slave trade (1807). Besides being forced to do manual and sexual

labor, her experience as an enslaved was heavily marked by her sexual reproductive capacity. Not being able to import a free workforce from Africa jeopardized slaveholders' financial stability. To sustain their economy, they idealized a strategy that would guarantee their production. Since enslaved offspring were born into the mother's status, slaveholders turned to childbearing as the means to ensure new enslaved. For this reason, this era is called the pro-natal era (S. Turner, 2017). Slaveholders granted special attention to enslaved women's bodies and their sexual reproduction capacity (S. Turner, 2017). This context elucidates that although Ma. Presence was captured into slavery as a child, slave traders carefully inspected her body as they sought healthy women. During the pro-natal era, enslaved women's ability for childbearing and childrearing became crucial.

Once in Jamaica, once again slaveholders scrutinized Ma. Presence's body to examine her reproductive capacity. Before the abolitionist era, enslavers were not interested in reproduction because they believed pregnancy and childcare distracted enslaved women from their core duties. They thought it resulted in low production and high financial losses because pregnancy hindered women's performance at work and demanded special care that they were unwilling to assume. Additionally, childrearing represented a delay in productivity, and the maintenance of children implied an additional expense. The extreme brutality of slavery (abuse, overwork, inadequate diets, and neglect) also harmed enslaved women's fertility. Despite being pregnant, enslaved women continued their daily chores regardless of their state. In the fields where the distribution of labor was non-gendered pregnant women continued working side-by-side with men. This often-caused premature birth or miscarriage (Burnard, 2018; Bush, 1990; S. Turner, 2017). Those who could carry their pregnancy to completion suffered from malnourishment and depression. The newborn also suffered from low nutrition, which made them vulnerable to various diseases; the lack of adequate medical attention resulted in high infant mortality rates. Most died before completing their second year of birth (Turner, 2017).

The abolitionist era and the end of the slave trade (1807) brought enslavers and planters to consider biological reproduction as an alternative to guarantee the free workforce they depended on for the success of their plantations. Consequently, childbearing became an asset of enslaved women's worth (Burnard, 2018; S. Turner, 2017). We do not have information related to who purchased Ma. Presence. Nevertheless, according to her accounts, this slaveholder impregnated her. It is most likely that she became a mother during adolescence. Nevertheless, her son died at a young age. In this context, since enslavers and planters in Jamaica had preferences when choosing enslaved women for breeding purposes, the death of her child caused her reproductive capacity to be questioned and used as a marker to reduce her monetary worth. Slaveholders considered women belonging to the Igbo tribe as the best species because of their supposed capacity to bear healthier children. Angola and the Mandingo were considered fragile and lazy and were typified as the worst for breeding

(Turner, 2017). Ma. Presence belonged to the Mandigo tribe, which means she was considered an unqualified woman for childrearing. Although there is no evidence to determine enslaved women's reproductive capacity based on ethnic background, slave traders and planters had established their standards. During the pro-natal era, an enslaved women's reproduction capacity was a crucial criterion for determining her monetary and social value (Turner, 2017). Not bearing more children contributed to Ma. Presence's depreciation.

We cannot determine why Ma. Presence did not have more children. It is possible that since she was still in adolescence when she first became a mother, her body lacked the maturity to carry a pregnancy, which may have resulted in barrenness or made her vulnerable to miscarriage. There is also the possibility that she exercised agency over her body and decided to use medicinal plants as a contraceptive method. This was a common practice among enslaved women to prevent their offspring from being born into enslavement (Turner, 2017). Whatever the case, Ma. Presence was sold in auction, and her body was again publicly contested; not being able to prove her worth via reproductive capacity, Ma. Presence was valued based on her labor capacity. In that context, when pricing, criteria such as sex, health condition, age, and ethnic background were used to determine the enslaved monetary worth. Even if enslaved women worked effectively, they were priced up to 25% less than enslaved men (Burnard, 2018).

Sold and Shipped to Bluefields

We do not know how many times Ma. Presence stood on the auction block before being transported to Bluefields. Nevertheless, once again, she was forcedly dislocated and had to journey the horrifying black sea, which reminded her of the uncertainty of her destiny. Ma. Presence may have had previous knowledge about a place called Bluefields because this territory was a British settlement. The British controlled an important critical triangular commercial route between Jamaica, Belize, and Bluefields (Dawson, 1983; Gordon, 1998). Bluefields was one of the most important ports in this trading system and was considered the "meeting place of the Indian Nations" (Gordon 1998, p.38). This denotes a fluid mobilization and influx of information between these sites. The Book of Record of Bluefields, which includes a list of emancipated slaves of August 10th, 1841, listed the slave owners and their enslaved names. A Mr. St^a Thomas appears as her master. Reviewing the minutes of the meetings conducted with slaveholders in August of 1841 to discuss the abolition of slavery on the Mosquito Shore, we can identify that his full name was Stanislaus Thomas Heely. He was the Secretary to the King, Commandant, and Sheriff of the Middle District.

Ma. Presence worked as an enslaved until she lost her vital strength. As an old and blind enslaved person, her productive value decreased significantly. Ma. Presence was typified as disabled and unprofitable. The enslavement regime was a result of

capitalism and modernization (Gilroy, 1993). The enslaved body's worth was based on its capacity for productivity and profit (Burnard & Garrigus, 2016; Mintz, 1986; Mustakeem, 2016). Based on their physical conditions, the enslaved were distinguished into three categories: abled bodies, disabled but useful, disabled, and useless. Monetary value ranged from £42 to £165. Those who were disabled but functional (useful) were valued between £5 to £23 (Barclay, 2014, 2017)—nevertheless, Ma. Presence's age and gender were against her.

In the antebellum south, planters implemented various strategies to deal with the aged enslaved, including shifting work roles (light work such as gardening), reducing workload, or offering manumission to let go of responsibilities (Doddington, 2018). In Jamaica, as in the British West Indies, Tuner (2017) observes that aged women were entrusted with taking care of children. To some extent, aged individuals were still helpful. Ma. Presence was placed in the list of "old, disabled, and useless," valued at £0. One could only wonder how many times Ma. Presence stood on the auction block to be publicly scrutinized as her "master" hoped for someone to find her useful. Not being able to sell her off, Mr. St^a Thomas abandoned Ma. Presence to live on charity (Bell, 1989); she became a discarded slave (Barclay, 2014, 2017; Doddington, 2018; Forret, 2016). According to Bell, Ma. Presence had lived of charity for many years before he and his sister Emelia arrived in Bluefields. Nevertheless, in a short while, she was left entirely to their responsibility, which they assumed for almost fifteen years (Bell, 1989). The Bell family was forced to leave the Mosquito Shore in 1857. Bell's account suggest that she died before their departure.

The Emancipation

According to minutes in the Record Book of Bluefields, in compliance with the Britain Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, on January 1st of 1839, King Robert Charles Fredrick proclaimed the abolition of slavery on the Mosquito Shore. He ordained that by January 1st of 1841, slavery was to be entirely abolished. Nevertheless, slaveholders were reluctant to this mandate and did not yield to the King's proclamation. In August of 1841, Colonel Alexander McDonald (Chief Commissioner for the Government of the Mosquito Nation)¹⁵ traveled from Belize to Bluefields and Corn Island to declare and ensure the abolition of slavery. Minutes indicate that on August 10th, Colonel McDonald, along with Robert Charles Fredrick (King of the Mosquito Shore), Patrick Walker (secretary), Stanislaus Thomas Healy (Secretary to the King, Commandant, and Sheriff of the Middle District), Peter Shepherd (Commandant Sheriff for the Southern District), Captain Gordon, the Doctor, and several other officers, sustained meetings with slaveholders on the subject of the manumission of enslaved people (Great Britain, Public Record Office, Colonial Office (CO), London).

¹⁵ Served as Chief Commissioner for the Government of the Mosquito Nation for two terms. First from 1829-1830. Second from 1837-1843.

Slaveholders argued that they had purchased their slaves at a high cost. Therefore, they "expected compensations similar to that awarded by Great Britain to proprietors in the West Indian Colonies." They also express their concerns regarding who would be responsible for ensuring their compensation. The Mosquito Shore government agreed that 'proprietors' would receive the sum of "twenty-five-pound sterling per head," to be paid in installments every six months for a period of 3 years. By August 10th of 1844, the governor of the Mosquitia would guarantee the debt to be fully paid. At this, slaveholders stated that slavery on the Mosquitia was basically "virtual." They practiced a benign form of slavery and preferred to grant manumission once paid in full. They explain that "the country was poor" and note that "even the King himself received wages from Great Britain" (Great Britain, Public Record Office, Colonial Office (CO), London). Therefore, it was impossible for him to guarantee compensation. Notably, enslavers' reluctance to abolish slavery could have been fueled by the fact that the enslavement system continued to be a cornerstone of North America's economy. From 1838 the US government indentured to control the Mosquito Shore and initiated a system of enclave economy, influencing the sociopolitical context and establishing a successful trading relationship between Bluefields, Pearl Lagoon, Corn Island, San Andres, Jamaica, Curacao, and the US (Gordon, 1998), which facilitated the flow of information and influence. Slaveholders on the Mosquitia may have wanted to follow their pattern rather than following Britain's ordinance to abolish slavery.

Colonel McDonald sustained that compliance with the Britain Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 was mandatory and that the former enslaved would be granted manumission "to enjoy an equality of civil rights and free to follow what pursuits they choose so long they do not disturb the public tranquility" (Great Britain, Public Record Office, Colonial Office [CO], London). According to the list of slaves in the Record Book, On August 10th, McDonald emancipated 44 enslaved in Bluefields and 24 from Pearl Key Lagoon. Mobilizing to Corn Island, on August 27th, he granted manumission to 98 enslaved people (Great Britain, Public Record Office, Colonial Office (CO), London). This record elucidates that although her owner, Mr. St^a Thomas, had discarded and abandoned Ma. Presence, he did not grant her legal manumission. On emancipation day, he claimed Ma. Presence as an able slave and expected to be paid fully for her freedom.

Minutes in the Record Book indicate that on July 24th of 1843, on behalf of former enslavers residing in Corn Island, Commandant James Bowden (who also appears as a slave owner) extended a letter of Complaint to Colonel McDonald stating that no actions had been taken concerning the compensation they were promised. On January 10th of 1844, on behalf of former slaveholders from Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon, commandant James Stanislaus Bell submitted another letter to John Fancourt (the new Colonel and Chief Commissioner for the Government of the Mosquito Nation)¹⁶. The

¹⁶ Served as Colonel Chief Commissioner for the Government of the Mosquito Nation from 1843-1851.

missive explained that the former “proprietors” have not received any remuneration and that they were “in very reduced conditions.” Copies of the minutes of meetings sustained in August of 1841 and the list of slaveholders indicating the number of enslaved they owned were attached to each letter. Mr. Stanislaus Thomas appears demanding his “rightful £25 in compensation.” Notably, years after the abolition of slavery, he was still expecting remuneration for a slave categorized as disabled, useless, and unprofitable, an enslaved woman he had previously discarded. Ma. Presence’s experience provides insights into another aspect of chattel slavery. It demonstrates how enslavers would profit from an enslaved in any circumstance. Slaveholders would even benefit from a deceased enslaved body if possible (Berry, 2017). The fact that the former slaveholders insisted on receiving monetary compensation suggests that they felt deceived, and most likely, these complainers never saw the former enslaved as free people and may have continued to claim them as their property.

The Aftermath of Slavery

Bell (1989) describes that the little town of Bluefields was inhabited approximately by “500 or 600 blacks and mulattoes, and by two or three whites” (p. 16). They were all different shades of colors “negroes — brown mulattoes, coffee-and-milk-colored quadroons, and a few nearly as white” (p. 28). The majority lived in huts¹⁷ built of hardwood posts, rafters, ridgepoles, and papta palm, thatched with the leaves of the silico palm. The kitchen was separated from the main house. Most families owned small farms which were located far from the town¹⁸. While men went hunting and fishing, women were responsible for domestic work (minding the children, washing clothes, and baking). Not being able to have a farm, Ma. Presence had a little garden next to her house, which she was unable to take care of due to her infirmities.

Older women such as Ma. Prudence, Ma. Patience, and Ma. Fidelia would often reiterate to Emelia that there were others in the community well deserving of the attention given to Ma. Presence. Even men tried to take advantage of the benefits Ma. Presence enjoyed. In short, a man named Ta. Tom (a tall and powerful black man) courted Ma. Presence, with whom she got married in their fashion (at the time, there were no formal marriages in Bluefields). In exchange, he took care of her garden, from which she made appreciation gifts to Bell’s family. Ma. Presence did not escape the criticism from other women within the community who denoted she had no shame and laughed at how she made a ‘papisho’ (puppet-show)¹⁹ of herself for believing

17 Ma. Presence owned a hut that was divided into a bedroom and sitting room. There was a separate shed used for the kitchen. The sitting room was furnished with a rough table and two benches. The bed in its room was a framework of sticks, supported on forked posts stuck into the ground. On the sticks was a wide sheet of thick bark as hard and stiff as a board. On this was a thick, soft mat made from midribs of the plantain leaf, bound closely side by side with twine. A gray patchwork coverlet was all the bedclothes necessary in this hot climate. A large pillow stuffed with the silk-cotton and covered with a clean pillowcase completed the bedclothes (Bell, 1989).

18 There they cultivated plantains, cassava, rice, yams, breadfruit, eddos, Indian corn, and the edible arum root, with oranges, sapodillas, guavas, mammees, papaws, star-apple, pineapples, soursops, custard-apple, sugarcane, and mangoes (Bell, 1989).

19 A popular phrase used to express a silly or foolish person or action.

that at her age and in her condition, she could engage in a romantic relationship. It is to note that according to the list of formerly enslaved people, Tom appears to be 45 years old when manumitted. In other words, he was at least ten years younger than Ma. Presence.

Besides her neighbor's criticism, Ma. Presence confronted a more significant problem. In a state of drunkenness, Ta Tom enacted intimate partner violence against her. Bell (1989) refers to the many times he and his sister intervened and assisted Ma. Presence by washing her bruises with vinegar and brown paper. One night Ta Tom's aggression was so intense that he almost killed Ma. Presence. In response, three magistrates (two black men and a white man) had him tied to a guava tree and whipped with a manatee strap. They expelled him from the community with the order not to return to Ma. Presence's home. A few weeks after, Ta. Tom fought with a runaway slave from St. Andrews, who fatally injured him. Some men brought Ta Tom with broken ribs, unconscious and dying, and laid him on Ma. Presences' bed; shortly after he died. As a decent wife, Ma. Presence mourned his death appropriately; a wake²⁰ ceremony was conducted in accordance with their African custom. Ma. Presence was once again lonely and widow (Bell, 1989).

Ma. Presence's experience informs us of the various forms of oppression black women endure at the hand of white men and black men. As enslaved and emancipated people, black women confronted various forms of gendered violence, even from their intimate partners (Beckles & Shepherd, 2000; Burnard, 2018; Bush, 1990; Fuentes, 2016; S. Turner, 2017). The status as a "free person" did not protect black women from the patriarchal system in which they were situated in a lower hierarchical position than men (hooks, 2004; Mohammed, 2004). Black men were not hesitant to hold their supposed superior status. The abolition of slavery did not eradicate violence against women. This means that the conceptualization had a different meaning for black women (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2000, 2002). It is important to consider why Ma. Presence was still open to welcoming a man into her life and home even if she had her basic need supply. Ma. Presence's choice may have been influenced by the desire to form a family (for companionship), which elucidates the dependence on the male figure as a symbol of protection. Considering her extreme fragility as an old and blind woman made her more susceptible to men's abuse and manipulation.

It is essential to highlight that Ta. Tom was not the only one enacting violence against his partner. According to Bell (1989), in Bluefields, it was a common custom for black men to enact violence against their wives.

²⁰ The dead body was set in the bedroom. The living room was lighted with pitch-pine torches stuck into the ground. An old African obeah man sat on the ground chanting and mumbling unknown words while he mixed something in a calabash and went around the room, offering it to various persons. Then those who had drank of it got up and walked around the room, singing some strange refrain, while those seated, among whom were a few old women, clapped their hands and chanted in response, "Ah quaquah hanancy doo, Aha tonda rake am,' all in different tones, till the air seemed alive, but all answering each other in exact time" (Bell, 1989, p. 31). After this, an old African told hanancy stories of Africa.

Wife-beating was fearfully common, and quarreling was carried out systematically. In the still nights, we used to listen with horror to the yells and screams of beaten women, while one or more old women for an hour at a time would make the woods echo with abuse and curses, as from a distance they defied their enemies, who took no notice of the volleys of imprecations. (Bell, 1989, p. 19)

Bell (1989) affirms that black “women are used to being beaten, and it makes no difference in their attachment to their husbands” (p. 26). Notably, these battered women were not quiet recipients. The previous excerpt indicates that women responded verbally with a series of curses. Bell’s assertion that the aggression made no difference in these women’s attachment to their spouses is not entirely true. If these women rebuked the perpetrator, it means they were conscious that men’s aggressive acts were unacceptable. It is necessary to analyze their precarious conditions and ideals regarding family and men’s headship. Bell (1989) noted the Creoles “somewhat kept up to the mark by Europeans traders and the ones living among them” (p. 30), which means that they tried to keep up with European standards. Even before the arrival of the Moravian missionaries, the Creoles practiced some form of respectability. Stoler (1989) claims that white middle-class European men defined for themselves middle-class respectability based on the Christian principle of moral behavior, personal hygiene, and intellectual capacity to distinguish themselves from the poorer class and as a mechanism to shield themselves from the European elites’ exploitation. To assert their “uniqueness,” they relied on dimensions such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, skin color, nationality, culture, religion, etc., to stratify people placing them in specific and differentiated social statuses. Based on this ideology, Europeans claimed their supposed supremacy over other racial groups. White men claimed racial, cultural, and technological superiority to justify their exercise of colonial power, treating non-white individuals as their subjects (Cooper & Stoler, 1989; Stoler, 1989).

Black women might have been familiar with their partner’s aggressive behavior because, during enslavement, white men allowed enslaved men to practice a certain degree of patriarchy in relation to black women, which included various forms of gender violence. Black women were to hold a subject positionality even if they were demanded to work as hard as men (Beckles, 1996, 2006; Beckles & Shepherd, 2000; Bush, 1990, 2010; Fuentes, 2016; Harris *et al.*, 2018; hooks, 2004; Mohammed, 2004; Turner, 2017). Davis (1981), and hooks (2004), argue that at the abolition of slavery, black men used the excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages combined with aggressive behavior toward black women to reinstate their manhood and authority and to claim their patriarchal position within their family and society. This denotes that for the sake of holding up to a certain degree of respectability, black women were invested in keeping their families together. Additionally, in impoverished circumstances, even if these women continued to work as domestic servants, their precarious conditions made them reliant on men’s incomes. These facts demonstrate that in the aftermath

of slavery, black women remained in a patriarchal multicultural web dominated by men belonging to various ethnic-racial groups (Goett, 2017; Hodgson-Suarez, 2022).

Becoming a Pry'ng soul; Ma. Presence and the Moravian Missionaries

Concerning the arrival of the Moravian missionaries, Bell (1989) describes,

Before the Moravian missionaries arrived, we were very heathen at Blewfields²¹. There was no marriage, no christening, no church, and even when missionaries introduced marriage, the people did not take to it much: they preferred their own looser tie. The first thing the missionaries did was to abolish 'wakes' as being too heathen. (p. 30)

The Moravian had already established various mission sites across the British West Indies. They were among the first to evangelize the enslaved and were the first to offer them day schools, which they continued to do even after the abolition of slavery (Hüsgen, 2013; Offen & Rugeley, 2014; Richards, 2007; M. Turner, 1998; Zacek & Brown, 2014). Moravian missionaries made their first exploratory visit to Bluefields in 1847. Nevertheless, they began their missionary task in 1849. Heinrich Pfeiffer, Johann Lundberg, their wives, and Ernst Kandler, a carpenter, settled in Bluefields and began evangelizing the black population residing in Bluefields (Offen & Rugeley, 2014)²². They labored to eradicate wakes and obeahism. They introduced marriage by church, child christening, and regular church assembly. Their mission was to "reform" the former enslaved to live up to Judeo-Christian standards. Even when Creoles practiced some form of European standards and were familiar with the meaning of Christmas, Bell observes that the black people "were slowly relapsing into the superstitious, gloomy, half- savage state into which the blacks, left to themselves, always sink back" (Bell, 1989, p. 19). This excerpt reveals how the few whites viewed the Creoles. The Moravian's main task consisted in helping the newly freed transition into freedom by teaching them to adhere to the standards of civilized society (Zacek & Brown, 2014). To achieve their goals, missionaries provided them with religious, financial, social, and cultural self-realization (Hüsgen, 2013; Melton, 2010; Offen & Rugeley, 2014).

21 As in some old maps of the Mosquito Coast, in his text Bell (1989) refers to Bluefields as Blewfields.

22 The Puritans from England (from which the Anglican church emerged) settled in Providence and San Andres islands (1630) were the first to establish commercial relationships with the Moskitos. Although they did not institute any official church, they evangelized among the Moskito people and taught them the Lord's Prayer (Gordon, 1998). These Puritans were slave holders and may had had some influence in their enslaved as well. Even if there were no official religious institution on the Coast, Creoles possess notions of middle-class European's respectability, and celebrated Christmas (in their own fashion) even before the arrival of the Moravian missionaries.

Concerning the arrival of the Moravians to Bluefields, Bell describes:

In a course of time, some Moravian missionaries settled in Bluefields, and all the people forthwith took up religion and praying. It was no long before this fervour attacked Ma. Presence. The chief missionary's name was the Rev. Mr. Pfeiffer, and for a while she became a devoted disciple. One day she groped her way to our house and said to my sister 'Miss Bell, please gie me pair a old silpas. Maas Pfeiffer say me must turn a pryin soul; but how me foo turn pryin soul when me no have no silpas?' So having been provided with a pair of old slippers, she duly attended church and became a prying soul. (Bell, 1989, p. 27)

Ma. Presence understood that modifying her appearance was crucial to becoming a praying soul. Zacek and Brown (2014) claim that missionaries felt accomplished when parishioners changed their attire and presentation because such changes indicated that individuals had developed a sense of shame, a virtue they supposedly lacked prior to evangelization. Missionaries applauded Black women's effort to achieve respectability by emulating stereotypes of white women's humbleness and modesty. Rooted in heteropatriarchal ideology, Moravians instructed Black men to be God-fearing, industrious, private property holders, and household heads. Black women were taught to be diligent wives and mothers (Catron, 2014; Gordon, 1998; Zacek & Brown, 2014).

It is also interesting to consider how *Ma. Presence* viewed these white missionaries. Note that she continued to call them 'maas' (master). Furthermore, it is essential to ask ourselves in what manner did these missionaries presented themselves to black people. In the West Indies, missionaries presented themselves as benevolent, humanitarian, working-class individuals who could identify with enslaved people's precarious conditions (M. Turner, 1998; Zacek & Brown, 2014). Simultaneously, the missionaries were very strict and served as evangelizing agents that observed and regulated people's behavior, passed judgments, determined sanctions, and induced moral guilt (Gordon, 1998; Offen & Rugeley, 2014; M. Turner, 1998; Zacek & Brown, 2014; Catron, 2014). These precepts are basis for Creoles respectability (Gordon, 1998; Gordon-Ugarte, 2022; Hodgson Suarez, 2022). Nevertheless, even nominally, association with the church granted status. It denoted that the individual was no longer a heathen but had reformed their lifestyle and could participate in a civilized society (Catron, 2014).

Shortly after their arrival, the Moravian church became the leading religious institution on the Mosquito Shore. Missionaries occupy the position of counselors to the Mosquito king and his council. They influence crucial areas such as education, health, infrastructure, economy, and political affairs (Gordon, 1998; Offen & Rugeley, 2014). Besides sharing the gospel, missionaries labored as schoolteachers, judges, and treasurers in various communities (Offen & Rugeley, 2014). Overall, Moravians instilled the practice of a hetero-patriarchal evangelical protestant respectability.

They relied on “watchful and helpful scriptural church discipline” (Offen & Rugeley, 2014, p. 18). To ensure that parishioners would adhere to their teachings they utilized the Bible to instruct, correct, and chastise. The former enslaved had resisted by not adhering to everything the missionaries ordained. Ultimately, they combined Christianity with some of their traditional spiritual practices. As in many parts of the West Indies, the enslaved and newly freed fashioned an Afro-Caribbean form of Christianity for themselves (Catron, 2014). There was a cultural resistance at play, and a subtle dialectic between cultures. From this perspective, the Creole society emerged in an atmosphere of conflict, and resistance, and simultaneously of adaptation and reciprocal assimilation (Smith & Paton, 2021). Becoming a praying soul guaranteed *Ma. Presence* of Christian burial. Nevertheless, in private, Creoles continued to conduct their wakes in their own cultural fashion.

II. Conclusion

Ma. Presence life story reflects enslaved women’s experiences within various stages of anti-Black hetero-patriarchal colonialism and neocolonialism. From the moment enslavers abducted her away from family and village in Africa, *Ma. Presence* endured the atrocities of the manual and sexual labor enslavers and planters imposed upon her, which resulted in a life of sadness, humiliation, exploitation, dislocation, dispossession, death, mourning, and importantly, day to day resistance. Her conditions as a barren, aged, and blind enslaved woman significantly complicated her predicament. In these conditions, she was typified as unproductive, useless, and unprofitable, placing her in a more vulnerable position; discarded and forced to be a beggar (to humiliate herself to survive).

In a heteropatriarchal multicultural web, as an enslaved and free black woman, *Ma. Presence* withstood various forms of gender violence at the hands of white men and black men. Notably, the abolition of slavery did not eradicate gender violence. Black women were forced to remain in a lower hierarchical position with regard to men. This means that obtaining the status of “freedom” had a different connotation for black women. Importantly, the aftermath of slavery brought *Ma. Presence* and Creoles into a period of reformation at the hand of Moravian missionaries. Rooted in evangelical protestant respectability, and a form of benevolent patriarchy, these white men strived to civilize the newly freed. Nevertheless, *Ma. Presence*’s life experience highlights the importance of black oral tradition and collective memory as essential tools of resistance and survival. Neglected and discarded *Ma. Presence* did not keep silent. Even after the abolition of slavery, she continued to share her story.

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