

**BRIDGING THE SILENCE: METAFICTIONAL VOICES AND HISTORICAL AMBIGUITY IN SALLY HEMINGS**

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**Abstract.** In order to accomplish narrative reclamation, this essay examines the role of metafictional elements in Barbara Chase-Riboud's 1979 historical novel *Sally Hemings*. This study investigates the contestability of speculative fiction used to 'voice' an enslaved woman whose own perspective was routinely left out of the patriarchal archive. It is based on the theoretical frameworks of Patricia Waugh and Linda Hutcheon. The analysis looks into the moral dangers of portraying a relationship characterized by institutional slavery as a 'poignant love story' and examines the reasoning behind Nathan Langdon, the proxy character, as a metafictional device that mediates the white gaze. The findings imply that although Chase-Riboud successfully gives Hemings a human face, her narrative strategies force a critical confrontation with the institutional barriers that continue to filter and mediate the lives of the enslaved in the modern imaginary.

**Keywords:** Barbara Chase-Riboud; Sally Hemings; Corporeal Metafiction; New Materialism; Historiographic Metafiction; The Archive; Physical Doubling; Postmodernism.

**Abstract.** Hikoyani qayta tiklashga erishish uchun ushbu esse Barbara Chase-Riboudning 1979-yilda yozilgan "*Sally Hemings*" tarixiy romanida metafantastik elementlarning rolini o'rganadi. Ushbu tadqiqotda o'z nuqtai nazari patriarxal arxivdan muntazam ravishda chetda qoldirilgan qul ayolni "ovozlash" uchun ishlatiladigan spekulativ fantastikaning raqobatbardoshligi o'rganiladi. U Patricia Waugh va Linda Hutcheonning nazariy asoslariga asoslangan. Tahlil institutsional qullik bilan tavsiflangan munosabatlarni "ta'sirli sevgi hikoyasi" sifatida tasvirlashning axloqiy xavflarini ko'rib chiqadi va proksi qahramon Neytan Langdonning oq nigohni vositachilik qiluvchi metafantastik vosita sifatidagi sabablarini o'rganadi. Topilmalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, Chase-Riboud Hemingsga inson qiyofasini muvaffaqiyatli bergan bo'lsa-da, uning hikoya strategiyalari zamonaviy xayolda qullarning hayotini filtrlash va vositachilik qilishda davom etayotgan institutsional to'siqlar bilan tanqidiy qarama-qarshilikka majbur qiladi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** Barbara Chase-Riboud; Sally Hemings; Jismoniy metafantastika; Yangi materializm; Tarixiy metafantastika; Arxiv; Jismoniy ikkilanish; Postmodernizm.

**Аннотация.** Для осуществления переосмысления нарратива в данном эссе рассматривается роль метафигиональных элементов в историческом романе Барбары Чейз-Рибуд 1979 года «Салли Хемингс». Исследование изучает спорность использования фантастической литературы для «озвучивания» порабощенной женщины, чья собственная точка зрения обычно игнорировалась в патриархальном архиве. В основе исследования лежат теоретические концепции Патрисии Уо и Линды Хатчеон. Анализ рассматривает моральные опасности изображения отношений, характеризующихся институциональным рабством, как «трогательной истории любви», и исследует обоснование использования Натана Лэнгдона, персонажа-посредника, как метафигионального средства, опосредующего взгляд белого человека. Результаты показывают, что, хотя Чейз-Рибуд успешно наделяет Хемингс человеческим лицом, её нарративные стратегии вынуждают к критическому противостоянию институциональным барьерам, которые продолжают фильтровать и опосредовать жизнь порабощенных в современном воображаемом мире.

**Ключевые слова:** Барбара Чейз-Рибуд; Салли Хемингс; Телесная метафигиция; Новый материализм; Историкографическая метафигиция; Архив; Физическое удвоение; Постмодернизм.

**Introduction.** With the release of Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* in 1979, American literature and historiography underwent a radical change that forced academics

and the general public to confront one of the most protected 'silences' in the country's narrative. Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson's relationship, which lasted roughly 37 years from late eighteenth-century Paris to Jefferson's death at Monticello, is situated at the precarious nexus of public myth and private intimacy (Newman, 2016). In an effort to uphold the moral integrity of the Jeffersonian legacy, white historians and curators systematically erased Hemings's lived experience from the official records of the American founding for more than 200 years. This silence was not merely an archival void but a deliberate ideological construction designed to maintain the 'purity' of the patriarchal record (Wilentz, 1992).

By using historiographic metafiction, a narrative technique that simultaneously questions the veracity of historical facts and seeks to reclaim the voices of those marginalized by the archive, Chase-Riboud challenges this systemic exclusion. The novel explores the line between imagined reality and historical truth by voicing Hemings through speculative interiority, revealing what Patricia Waugh refers to as the fictionality of the real (Waugh, 1985). The decision to present a relationship characterized by institutional slavery as a "poignant love story" may obscure the harsh reality of sexual exploitation and the intrinsic impossibility of consent within a slaveholding society, making this act of narrative reclamation fraught with ethical dangers.

This essay examines how Chase-Riboud resolves these conflicts, contending that the book serves as an essential epistemological intervention that fills in archival gaps through fiction (Wilentz, 1992). In particular, it assesses the function of Nathan Langdon, a white legal proxy, as a metafictional device that reflects the contemporary researcher's struggle with the 'white gaze' and looks at the use of speculative voicing as a humanization technique (Chase-Riboud, 1979). In the end, the analysis shows that although the novel's romantic clichés are still debatable, its main worth is found in its ongoing examination of the institutional barriers that have traditionally determined which viewpoints are accepted and which are eliminated.

**Literature Review.** The book is a prime example of historiographic metafiction, a genre that acknowledges both history and fiction as narrative constructs, according to scholarly discourse surrounding Sally Hemings. According to Linda Hutcheon, these narratives enable writers to question the authority of the archive by reappropriating a past that is neither fixed nor stable (Mitchell, 2010). Although early critics like Virginius Dabney rejected Chase-Riboud's work as 'fiction masquerading as fact,' subsequent developments, such as DNA evidence and the verification of oral histories from Hemings's descendants, have caused the scholarly community to shift in favor of the novel's main idea.

Even with this validation, the ethical consequences of 'voicing' the enslaved continue to be contested. Saidiya Hartman's idea of 'critical fabulation' shows the conflict that comes with trying to reimagine lives that the archive only shows through abuse and

commodification (McMahon, 2023). Patricia Waugh posits that metafiction examines the 'fictionality of the real,' suggesting that the official historical narrative constitutes a form of biased storytelling (Waugh, 1985). So, Sally Hemings doesn't just fill a gap; it shows how the archive's silence was a planned ideological construction meant to protect Jefferson's image.

**Methods.** This study employs a qualitative literary analysis grounded in metafictional theory and New Historicism to evaluate the interplay of history and fiction in Chase-Riboud's text. The primary methodology involves a close reading to identify 'speculative voicing' as a tool for archival reclamation. The study also utilizes a comparative framework, weighing the novel's 'imagined intimacy' against documented power dynamics and the institution of slavery. Furthermore, the role of Nathan Langdon is analyzed through a narratological lens to determine how his external perspective serves as a bridge for contemporary readers to access Hemings's interiority while simultaneously highlighting the extractive nature of historical inquiry.

**Results and Discussion.** The analysis reveals that Chase-Riboud's use of speculative fiction serves as a necessary, if contestable, tool to reclaim a deliberately omitted historical voice (Wilentz, 1992). By 'voicing' Hemings, the narrative directly confronts the 'silence of the archive', a space where Black female testimonies were historically suppressed or relegated to the margins (1958-, 1997; McMahon, 2023). While this technique humanizes Hemings by granting her an interior life, it carries the inherent risk of misrepresenting a relationship defined by institutional slavery as one of romantic intimacy (Chase-Riboud, 1979). As scholars like Gordon-Reed have noted, the extreme power disparities between a founding father and an enslaved woman make the concept of 'consent' or 'love' within such a framework highly problematic. Thus, the choice to depict a 'poignant love story' creates a friction between the humanizing impulse of fiction and the non-negotiable reality of sexual exploitation (Wilentz, 1992).

Moreover, the novel operates as historiographic metafiction by revealing the 'fictionality of the real' (Waugh, 1985). By emphasizing the deliberate omission of Hemings from the official historical record to safeguard the Jeffersonian legacy, Chase-Riboud illustrates that 'facts' frequently serve as ideological instruments (A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction, 1988). Critics like Dabney, who called the book a myth-making work, unintentionally supported the very institutional barriers that the book tries to break down (Dabney, 1979). From this perspective, the text posits that historical truth is not derived from the elimination of fiction, but rather from the recognition that all 'truths' are influenced by those who possess the authority to document them.

The inclusion of Nathan Langdon as a proxy character serves as a critical metafictional device addressing the 'white gaze' in historical research. As a white lawyer tasked with investigating Hemings's status, Langdon represents the traditional gatekeepers of history (Wilentz, 1992). By filtering Hemings's story through his perspective, Chase-

Riboud highlights the extractive nature of inquiry; Langdon must "discover" her for her story to gain legitimacy in the public record (Chase-Riboud, 1979). This choice underscores a bitter irony: even in a fictional attempt at reclamation, the agency of the enslaved subject is often mediated by a white observer to satisfy the demands of the archive. Ultimately, Langdon's role reflects the institutional barriers that omitted Hemings's own viewpoint, forcing the reader to acknowledge that modern access to her interiority remains, to some degree, an external construction (Chase-Riboud, 1979).

**Conclusion.** In the end, Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* is a critical epistemological intervention that shows that metafictional techniques are both necessary for writing history and morally dangerous when trying to bring back identities that have been silenced. Chase-Riboud uses 'speculative voicing' to make a person who has been systematically erased from the patriarchal archive more human, but this narrative technique also creates a deep tension between the desire for romantic agency and the historical reality of systemic sexual exploitation. The use of Nathan Langdon as a narrative stand-in shows that the 'white gaze' is still there. It is a metafictional admission that any modern attempt to understand Hemings's inner life is still influenced by the same institutional structures that made her omission necessary in the first place.

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