

BELINDA (SAY HER NAME)

Kiah Duggins '21

INTRODUCTION

Belinda Sutton was born in Ghana in 1712. The Royall family enslaved her in Massachusetts after she was kidnapped from her home and brought to America as a child. Belinda's 50 years of unpaid slave labor contributed to the fortune that the Royall family later used to found Harvard Law School (HLS) and the Royall Professorship. After Belinda obtained her freedom from slavery, she courageously petitioned the Massachusetts General Court for reparations from the family who stole her labor, her wages and her childhood. She successfully petitioned the court for reparations in 1783 after the Royall family freed her, but did not receive all of the payments she was promised. She continued petitioning the courts for reparations until 1793, when she died.

222 years later, in the fall semester of 2015, HLS students who were inspired by Black South African students' #RhodesMustFall movement created the Royall Must Fall movement. As a part of the Royall Must Fall movement and the subsequent Reclaim movement, these HLS students renamed HLS' student lounge after Belinda Sutton. Belinda Hall became a sight of occupation, political education, and resistance against the school's erasure of marginalized realities, racism and imperialism. Students now hold an annual gathering in Belinda Hall called Disorientation to teach the history of radical activism at HLS, and to recognize the labor of marginalized people who imagine and fight for less oppressive futures. Most of the leaders of the Reclaim movement and Disorientation are Black women and femmes.

Belinda Sutton's story of perseverance and courage means everything to me as a Black woman at HLS. HLS' powerful façade of tolerance and fairness can make it difficult to identify when the school harms marginalized communities, much less call it out. Although I witness and endure injustices at school, the immense privileges afforded to me as an HLS student make me wonder if I should stop protesting and just be grateful. I consequentially feel gaslighted and unsure of when to speak up. Blessedly, hearing Belinda Sutton's story at Disorientation during the fall of my 1L year gave me permission to demand better. Belinda Sutton was also in a place of relative privilege when she demanded reparations as a free Black woman. However, Belinda Sutton refused to be silenced by gratitude. She did not characterize Isaac Royall's decision to free her from slavery as a benevolent act because she knew that she never should have been enslaved in the first place. Belinda Sutton did not become silenced

by gratitude when the court granted her partial reparations in 1783 because she knew that the legal system had enabled the theft of her labor.

With the example of Belinda Sutton and the help of other marginalized students, I am learning not to be silenced by gratitude. When a professor publicly discouraged me from denouncing my classmates' racist comments in writing¹, 26 students joined me in his office to educate him about White fragility and tone policing². When HLS remained silent during the Kavanaugh hearings, we walked out of class and demanded that the administration remove Justice Kavanaugh from HLS' faculty. When the Dean of Students' Office told organizers that we couldn't have Disorientation in Belinda Hall during my 2L year, we collectively pushed back and reserved our right to politically educate fellow classmates. Like Belinda Sutton, marginalized students petition an inherently unjust and cruel cornerstone of the American legal system for a world in which powerful actors must cede and redistribute resources back to the oppressed peoples who created those resources. Like the courts that Belinda Sutton stepped into, HLS has repeatedly blocked marginalized students' petitions for justice. Like the spirit of Belinda Sutton and all oppressed peoples who take their liberation into their own hands, these students will continue to demand that harms be repaired and power structures be transformed.

I incorporated call and response in this poem as an homage to West African storytelling traditions, as an elevation of the contemporary #SayHerName movement centering Black trans and cis women, and as an acknowledgement of the reality that many voices must work together to create beauty in the face of oppression. The first time I read this poem aloud, it was with 200 people who gathered in Belinda Hall in opposition to HLS' silencing tactics and in furtherance of radical re-imaginings. May this poem be read aloud to thank, honor and remember Belinda Sutton, an ancestor who gives us the courage to fight.

In solidarity,
Kiah Duggins '21

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1. Kiah Duggins, *A #BlackHistoryMonth Message for my Harvard Law Classmates*, SEASONS BEGINNING BLOG, Feb. 2, 2019, <https://seasonsbeginningblog.wordpress.com/2019/02/02/a-blackhistorymonth-message-for-my-harvard-law-classmates/>.
 2. Katy Waldman, *A Sociologist Examines the "White Fragility" That Prevents White Americans from Confronting Racism*, THE NEW YORKER, July 23, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-sociologist-examines-the-white-fragility-that-prevents-white-americans-from-confronting-racism>; see also, Robot Hugs, *No, We Won't Calm Down – Tone Policing Is Just Another Way to Protect Privilege*, EVERYDAY FEMINISM MAGAZINE, Dec. 7, 2015, <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/12/tone-policing-and-privilege/>.

Belinda (say her name)

An African woman, a Black woman
 Ripped from her home in West Africa as a child
 To work as a slave for the family
 Whose endowment allowed Harvard Law School to exist.

Belinda (say her name)

An African woman, a Black woman.
 Whose 50 years of enslaved, unpaid labor allowed Harvard Law School
 to exist

Belinda (say her name)

We thank you. We honor you. We will not forget you.

Belinda (say her name)

An African woman, a Black woman
 Who described America as “a Land, where, Lawless domination sits
 enthroned – pouring bloody outrage and cruelty on all who dare to be
 free”³

Belinda (say her name)

An African woman, a Black woman
 Who still found the courage to petition the courts four separate times
 for what she described as “the enjoyment of one morsel of that im-
 mense wealth, apart whereof hath been accumulated by her own indus-
 try, and the whole augmented by her servitude”⁴

Belinda (say her name)

We thank you. We honor you. We will not forget you.

Belinda (say her name)

An African woman, a Black woman
 Despite all of your labor that allowed Harvard Law School to exist
 We now sit in a hall that Harvard Law School refuses to name after
 you

We now sit in a hall that students are expressly prohibited from teach-
 ing your history in

Belinda (say her name)

An African woman, a Black woman
 We will petition the courts for liberation, just like you
 We will say the names of Black women like Sandra Bland who spoke
 truth to power, just like you
 We will fight for reparations for all of the people whose unpaid, thank-
 less labor augments Harvard Law School’s immense wealth, just like
 you

Belinda (say her name)

We thank you. We honor you. We will not forget you.

3. The Royall House and Slave Quarters, *Belinda Sutton’s 1783 Petition*, Feb. 14, 1783, <https://royallhouse.org/belinda-suttons-1783-petition-full-text/>.

4. *Ibid.*

Belinda (say her name)

We reclaim this space

We will not let you be erased

We reclaim this space

We will not let the marginalized people who built and continue to build Harvard Law School be erased.

Belinda (say her name)

We thank you. We honor you. We will not forget you.