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Sexual Violence and Power: An Examination of the Relationship Between Sexual Violence, Race, Class, and Gender During Slavery

By
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Introduction

In order to completely comprehend the history of American slavery, it is important to highlight, discuss, and understand the entire story of the life of slaves. Many narratives regarding slavery tend to focus on the physical abuse of slaves, such as whippings, but do not focus on the sexual abuse that both female and male slaves suffered from. The sexual abuse that enslaved males and females faced was used as a weapon to control slaves physically and psychologically. Not discussing the sexual violence that Whites perpetrated against enslaved peoples erases the horrific acts that were committed to them.

The legacy of this often-unspoken part of slavery has led to African-American men and women to become hypersexualized in the United States. Black men are perceived as being sexual predators because they cannot control their sexual urges and Black women are portrayed as being sexually promiscuous and therefore, constantly looking for sexual partners. These racial and sexist stereotypes have not been recently constructed—there is a history behind them and one cannot understand the history without discussing the sexual violence of slavery. Thus, in this paper, I argue that the racial aspects in sexual assault were effective in reinforcing the gender and class hierarchies that existed between Black and White individuals during the mid-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries in America, while also reinforcing slavery.

Sexual Violence and Race

¹ The author, being also an editor, recused himself from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

Race and rape became connected with one another through the legal system in the early years of America. When describing the physical attributes and the lives of Africans and Blacks, Whites often compared them to animals, such as orangutans.² By comparing Africans and Blacks to orangutans and claiming that they had sexual relations with them, White men believed that they did not need consent when engaging in sexual acts with their slaves. Since animals did not give consent to one another when breeding, African slaves and their descendants were to be treated in the same manner since they were considered to be “animals” themselves. Due to the animalistic comparisons between Africans and apes, Black women were considered to be sexually promiscuous and therefore they could not be raped because it would be interpreted in court as them actively looking to have sexual relations with a man. Black men were also considered to be sexually promiscuous, which led to Whites defining sexual assault as a violent incident if the perpetrator was Black. In contrast, sexual assault that was committed by a White person was deemed as a sexual act.³

The contrasting beliefs of regarding sexual assault as a violent act for Blacks and a sexual act for Whites, lead to elite White men creating and upholding racialized sexual assault laws in order to maintain the superiority of Whites within the class hierarchy. Black men who were accused of sexually abusing a White woman were given a harsher punishment in court, such as execution, compared to their White counterparts who would more than likely suffer no punishment at all. The reason for the harsh sentence was not because the White female victims were assumed to have been raped, but because making sexual advances towards a White woman was considered to be a crime against her husband and/or father because she was socially

² Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Boston, MA: Printed by H. Sprague, 1965).

³ Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

considered to be their property since men were considered to be the dominant gender. The raping of a White woman by a Black man was also regarded as a crime against society because it demonstrated that Blacks were the dominant race by exercising their power over a White woman's body.⁴ White men feared sexual relations between Black men and White women because of their anxieties about losing their place within the class hierarchy. In order to address these fears, the British colonies in America enacted laws that prevented Black men and White women from entering into relationships with one another by enslaving women who dared to become romantically involved with a slave.⁵

Sexual Violence and Gender

Sexual assault was effective in reinforcing the gender hierarchies in America by not allowing slaves to have control over their bodies. Slavery had a devastating and dehumanizing impact on female and male slaves; one reason being that they were exposed to many instances of sexual violence, which affected them physically and psychologically. Harriet Ann Jacobs, a former slave from North Carolina, said, "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women."⁶ Since male slaves were generally valued for their labor and physical strength, it was the best economic decision to not assault male slaves as much as female slaves.⁷ Slaveholders did not want to injure and therefore prevent their male slaves from performing their tasks to the best of their ability. On the other hand, female slaves were valued for their reproductive capability. This led to masters raping them in order to have them reproduce children. Slave

⁴ Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁵ William H. Browne, ed., *Maryland Addresses the Status of Slaves in 1664*, PDF, Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1883).

⁶ Harriet Ann Jacobs, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.," Documenting the American South, 2003, accessed May 09, 2018, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html>.

⁷ Kevin Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers in the Atlantic World," *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March, 2006): 1327-1355; Kevin Dawson, *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

women were often used as breeders, forced to give birth to children in order to add to their master's wealth. However, once the child was born, the slave woman was denied the right to be their mother. As Jacobs points out in her biography, the children that were created from sexual abuse were often sold to another owner in order to protect the honor and dignity of the master's wife, or she would be forced to face the fact that her husband was engaging in sexual relations with his slaves.⁸ Slave women had to endure the physical, mental, and emotional abuse from not only their masters but from their mistresses as well.

Just as slavery affected the womanhood of female slaves, it similarly affected the manhood of male slaves. Lewis Clarke, a former slave, declared that a slave “can’t be a man” because he could not protect his wife and daughters from being sexually assaulted by slaveholders and other White men.⁹ In Josiah Henson’s narrative, he recounts the moment of his mother’s rape by an overseer, where her screams for help were so loud that his father heard and ran to save her. His act of defense of his wife earned him “one hundred lashes on the bare back, and to have the right ear nailed to the whipping-post, and then severed from the body.”¹⁰ Henson’s father was completely changed as a result of the harsh punishment. It was physically damaging to him, but it was also psychologically damaging. The punishment was given in order to show slaves their fate if they ever challenged a White man’s authority to a female slave’s body, demonstrating the White man’s complete control over them and their loved ones. This incident emasculated Henson’s father because it meant that he could not protect his wife from harm, possibly leaving him with a feeling of guilt and powerlessness.

⁸ Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

⁹ Thomas A. Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 3 (September 2011): accessed May 09, 2018, doi:10.2307/j.ctt22nmc8r.12.

¹⁰ Josiah Henson, *Truth Stranger Than Fiction. Father Henson's Story of His Own Life*," Documenting the American South, 2000, 4, accessed May 09, 2018, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/henson58/henson58.html>.

Not only did sexual violence perpetrated against female slaves emasculate male slaves, but sexual violence committed against male slaves themselves was emasculating because it meant that they had no control over their own body. Traditionally, men were supposed to be the dominant gender. Men not only had control over their own bodies, but they also had control over the bodies of others, depending on their race. Masculinity meant strength, courage, independence, and assertiveness. For enslaved males who were raped, it stripped away their masculinity because it meant that they no longer had control over their bodies and did not have the strength to assert their power over their rapist. It was especially emasculating for enslaved men if a woman abused them because it signified that they were so weak that they could not even prevent a woman, a person who they would traditionally have power over, from taking advantage of them. The sexual abuse of male slaves took away any agency that they had.

Aside from her own experience, Harriet Jacobs also mentions that White women, specifically the White daughters of the masters, raped their father's slaves. "They know that the women slaves are subject to their father's authority in all things;" writes Jacobs, "and in some cases, they exercise the same authority over the men slaves."¹¹ The master's daughters would overhear conversations between their parents that discussed their father's sexual relations with his female slaves. These conversations could have sparked the curiosity and sexual fantasies of the daughters, and since their father was having sexual relations with his slaves, they believed that they could do the same. As a way of rebelling against their fathers and patriarchal society, the White daughters engaged in sexual acts with slaves in order to prove their dominance over others.

¹¹ Harriet Ann Jacobs, "*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.*," 8.

In addition to rebelling against the patriarchal society, White woman sexually abused slaves as a way to maintain their status in the class hierarchy. As upper-class women, the mistresses and daughters of slaveholders needed to obtain a reputation of purity, which meant that they could not engage in sexual acts outside of marriage. By raping and sexually abusing male slaves, White women were able to express their sexual desires, while maintaining their reputation. If they were to have sex with a White man outside of marriage, they would risk becoming pregnant, destroying their image of purity and ruining their chances of upward mobility. However, if they engaged in sexual intercourse with a male slave and became pregnant, the woman could have the baby sold off as a slave to prevent the public from finding out.¹²

Conclusion

Rape and sexual abuse became an important tool for Whites to gain power and control over their slaves. In the early years of America, rape was considered a sexual act for Whites, but for Black men, it was deemed as a violent crime. In order to allow for these acts of sexual violence of slaves to be legal, laws were created by upper-class Whites to ensure that their place within the class hierarchy was not disturbed. The racial aspect of sexual assault was used to ensure that gender hierarchies and the institution of slavery were maintained. Rape became a strategy for White slave owners to reproduce a sustainable workforce and for White women to demonstrate that they had power. Unfortunately, these racist and sexist stereotypes created during the time of slavery has survived well into the twenty-first century where Black men are considered sexual predators and Black women are regarded as sexual objects. However, these stereotypes can be dismantled, but it would take the examination of the past, discussions, and

¹² Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the 19th-Century South* (New Haven: 1997).

willingness of others to address these issues by at first acknowledging the *entire* narrative of slavery. Until then, the legacy of slavery will continue to live on.

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