

“No Protection for Black Girls:” Defining Rape Across Racial Lines

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December 2011

Leaving countless remains of African bodies in the depths of the Atlantic Ocean floor, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade has displaced fifteen million Africans from their continent (Arajo et al.). European slavers who observed African culture recognized the fiscal gain of forced reproduction by breeding the African slave woman and saw her as beneficial to The New World plantation; as a result, African women and African young girls made up one-third of the human cargo aboard most ships that were brought through the Middle Passage (Hooks 17). Due to their physical disadvantage African women and girls were much easier to detain compared to their male counterparts. European slavers made many efforts to alter the free African woman and young African girls into seasoned slaves. Physical abuse and torture was only the beginning of that brutalizing process.

During the journey to The New World, African women and young African girls were often permitted to move freely about the ship making them an easy target for sexual assault (Hooks 18). Since they were more likely to work closely with a White family, rape was a common method of terrorization used to dominate unruly African women and girl captives. Since pride and dignity was also seen as a threat, the African woman or girl who exemplified any sense of self-worth was a target for degradation. European slavers believed the African female slave had to be brutalized and exploited in order to make her submissive. Furthermore, a seasoned slave that is submissive is viewed as marketable at the auction block. In her first book,

Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism, Bell Hooks explains why torture and abuse was more prevalent among African women slaves as opposed to their male counterparts:

In order to make his product saleable, the slaver had to ensure that no recalcitrant black female servant would poison a family, kill children, set fire to the house, or resist in any way. The only insurance he could provide was based on his ability to tame the slave,” and taming the African female slave meant constant demoralization through sexual exploitation (20).

The University of Virginia Library has provided actual images from slavery that shows the degree of punishment enslaved African girls were subjected to. While an enslaved African girl hangs from a tree with deep gashes all over her body. Stedman, a young Dutchman, witnessed this event in 1774. She was only eighteen-years old and was given 200 lashes for refusing to have sexual intercourse with an overseer (see Fig. 1).

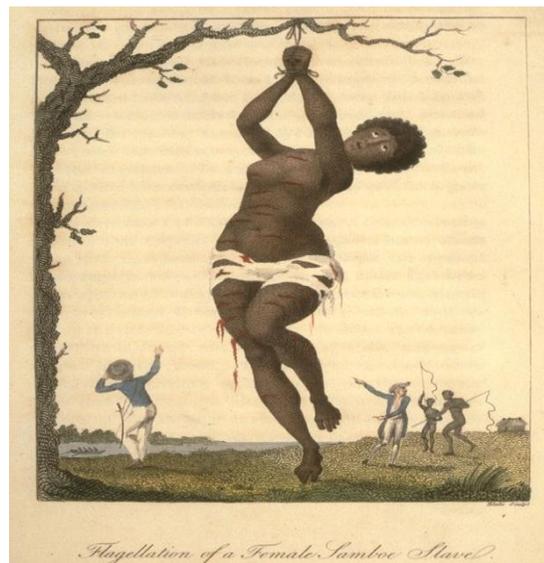


Fig. 1. Jerome Handler & Michael Tuite, Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave, “Whipping a Slave, Surinam, 1770’s,” 1774, (University of Virginia Library, 1988) 326.

The rape of enslaved African women and girls was widespread during slavery and the sexual exploitation of the African female slave was never defined as rape. Black women were the suppliers of new American born slaves and raping Black women and young girls meant profit. This was not only profit for the slave masters but profit to the larger American economic system, creating a “sexual economy” (Adrienne D.). The commonness of rape against African women and girls, combined with the system’s refusal to name the crime and offer enslaved African women justice was a form of legal institutionalized sexual assault. Before the Civil War the rape of an enslaved African woman or girl was not even considered a crime and the persecution of perpetrators who raped enslaved African women and girls was non-existent. Most whites refused to identify the accountability of White men in the continuous sexual exploitation of Black women. According to Tera W. Hunter, in her book To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labor’s After the Civil War:

Rape and “black women” were words that were ever uttered in the same breath by white Southerners. Any sexual relations that developed between black women and white men were considered consensual, even coerced by the seductions of the black women’s lascivious nature (34).

Many black mothers who grew up in slavery feared to “...see their children grow. [They knew] not their fate...Where the white boy has every opportunity and protection, [theirs] will have few opportunities and no protection” (Lerner 158). This form of legal institutionalized sexual assault is deeply rooted in sexual myths about enslaved African women and young girls. In addition, it reveals a strong correlation between the justification of the sexual assault of enslaved African

females and the rape of many Black women and young girls today. Presently, the African American woman is raped at higher rates because of inherited social biases regarding her sexuality from the Trans Atlantic slave trade and the North American institution of slavery; as a result, there is no protection for black girls.

Historically, African American women have endured the burden of many stereotypes regarding their sexuality. Over time these problematic messages have been internalized misconstruing with the characterization of young African American women and girls sexuality. African American women have long represented not only the caretaking “mammy” but the sexually loose, pervasive and morally unrestrained “jezebel.” Patricia Hill Collins speaks of the image of the black woman as “jezebel,” and how it derived from the North American institution of slavery. By demoting “all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women,” Collins argues that this image “provid[ed] a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White [slave masters]” during the time leading up to the Civil War (Collins 69). These myths about Black women are some of the early justifications for rape during slavery and it was believed that enslaved African women and girls required a “civilizing influence upon [their] supposed unrestrained sexuality” (Collins 69).

During the antebellum South, enslaved African women and girls who were repeatedly raped were not acknowledged as victims. Margaret Garner, an enslaved African woman infamous for killing her own children, is an example of how sexual exploitation during slavery was never defined as rape. She is also the inspiration behind Toni Morrison’s award winning novel Beloved that was later transformed into a feature film. After escaping with her husband and four children by crossing the frozen Ohio River into Cincinnati, Margaret arrived at her uncle’s home to seek refuge. Her uncle left the house to seek advice from an abolitionist, named

Levi Coffin, who then agreed to assist him in getting the Garners to safety. Regrettably, while her uncle was absent, slave bounty hunters found the Garner's blockaded in her uncle's house. Fearing re-enslavement not only for herself, but for her young children, Garner killed her two-year old daughter with a butcher knife. As she attempted to murder her other children, Garner was restrained by the bounty hunters.

Since Margaret Garner was subject to the stipulations of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and was also legally responsible for the murder of her daughter by the state of Ohio, many debated whether she'd be put to trial. Since she was legally the possession of her slave master, many argued whether Garner should be tried as a person or property. In an effort to gain the juries sympathy, Garner's lawyer argued that her motivation in murdering her daughter was not only the fear of returning to the physical hardships of slave life, but rather the habitual sexual demoralization and rape that occurs along with it. Few enslaved African girls reach the tender age of sixteen without receiving advances from their master's (Lerner 158). Garner believed that murdering her children, especially her daughters who were all products of rape, would save them from the hell on earth that slavery was well known to be. Lucy Stone, an American abolitionist and suffragist, also argued in Garner's defense to convince the jury that Margaret Garner is indeed a victim and she was in fact continually raped:

The faded faces of the Negro children tell too plainly to what degradation the female slaves submit. Rather than give her daughter to that life, she killed it. If in her deep maternal love she felt the impulse to send her child back to God, to save it from coming woe, who shall say she had no right not to do so? (Weisenburger).

Garner wanted to protect her daughters from the long-standing sexual abuse she tried to escape from to begin with. Even though Margaret's children were physical evidence that rape occurred,

disappointingly, due to victim blaming, proposing that enslaved African women seduced their White assailant or even initiated the sex, implications of rape and sexual abuse were never formalized.

The belief that African women are sexual objects was seared throughout the American consciousness well after slavery ended. These stereotypes inherited from slavery have given birth to the ideology that African women and girls today are nymphomaniacs, open, loose and ready for sex at all times. Moreover, since African American women today are considered “[hyper] sexual savages... a sexual savage, a non-human, cannot be raped” (Hooks 52). These myths have become even more embedded throughout every aspect of American culture with its constant images of false Black womanhood and references to Black women as “bitches and hoes.”

Presently, there is still no protection for black girls. Currently, in the United States African American women and girls are still being raped. Black women and girls make up 18.8 percent of those rape victims (Dept. of Justice). Approximations from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) continually show that “African-American women [and girls] are at greater risk of victimization by violent crime than are whites or persons of other racial groupings” (21). This included rape, physical assault or stalking. Even 2010 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, a double rape, happening around 4am on October 26th left one young African American woman dead. Strangulation took the life of 26-year old Angie Quick Lavender after she was raped and sodomized in her friend’s apartment. After murdering Quick, the perpetrator, 30-year old Ellis Lamont Patton (who is also African American) made his way upstairs where a friend of Quick’s was sleeping. In terror, her friend awoke to Ellis raping her before he fled the scene. After he left, the surviving victim ran downstairs to find her friend

Angie unresponsive on the couch. Angie and her perpetrator Ellis were dating for almost two weeks before the attack. Angie had recently developed a fear of him and requested to stay at her friend's apartment. Little did Angie know that she would willingly invite him into the apartment that early morning causing her tragic death.

In addition to inherited racial biases misconstruing with rapes definition, many would argue that rape taking place on dates or through an acquaintance is not rape at all. In today's culture, it isn't considered rape if the woman agreed to go out on a date with the perpetrator or made the decision to wear revealing clothes. If you happen to be acquainted with the person many would disagree saying it isn't rape. Angie Quick also invited Ellis into her house and "that's not rape. Rape is when a guy you don't know grabs you and holds a gun to your head... [And] if there is no gun or knife, you haven't been raped..." (Warshaw 19). Angie Quick couldn't have possibly been raped since victims aren't raped by someone they know, right?

Without a doubt countless rapes, specifically acquaintance rapes, could have been averted by young women like Angie Quick if they hadn't trusted the perpetrator or if women "acted earlier on the "bad feeling" that many victims [and survivors] later report they felt but [initially] ignored" (Warshaw 21). It is essential to acknowledge that in most acquaintance rape cases the victim could have avoided the crime by making a better decision but, like race, it should not change the basis that determines whether or not rape occurred. In addition, it does not make the victim responsible for the crime. These myths and stereotypes can be very persuasive but rape is indeed an act of violence, not seduction. Angie Quick is one of the many young African American woman victims of acquaintance rape making up 70 to 80 percent of all rape crimes that occur in the United States (Warshaw 12). Moreover, it would be safe to also say that

thousands of enslaved African women were also victims of acquaintance rape having endured the constant sexual abuse from their slave masters.

Regardless of clearly defined terms in legislation defining rape, society continues to misinterpret the definition. This is constantly conflicting with society's perception of what rape truly is. Through legislation the term sexual assault replaced rape because a whole range of sexual activities were being identified, like acquaintance or date rape. Before that time it was defined by common law, traditionally seen as a crime of theft of a man's property. Deeply rooted in sexist thinking, the rape of a woman before becoming part of the Criminal Code was seen as a greater offense to her husband or father than to the woman herself. It also dismisses the fact that a woman can actually be raped by her husband. Furthermore, if there was no vaginal penetration then it was not legally considered rape. It undermines that fact that a perpetrator can use forced oral copulation to rape a victim. Attempted rape is also another possibility because the entire crime does not have to be completely carried out in order for it to be legally defined as rape. By only including women and men encounters it does not shine light on the fact that men can also be sexually assaulted as well. Countries like Canada carried out this law until it was reformed in 1983. In this historical context, one can only imagine how the definition of rape, especially during the slavery's antebellum period in America, was misinterpreted. With that being said, one can clearly see how the definition of rape has changed over time. There has fortunately been a huge progression thanks to many women's groups and the feminist movement's. Unfortunately, if the majority of our society does not keep up with these changes in addition to not acknowledging the barriers faced by victims of color, it can definitely lead to misunderstandings. Moreover, it can lead to even the victims themselves not recognizing their own victimization.

The myths rooted in slavery about Black women's sexuality were internalized in my own mind causing me to never identify with being sexually abused as a child. Childhood sexual abuse is a form of rape where an adult or older adolescent uses a child for sexual stimulation. Like many survivors of childhood sexual abuse and rape, the hardest part is defining it. I never defined what was occurring as sexual abuse. What started out as a game with my oldest sister's husband, who was 26 at the time, turned into a viscous cycle of coerced sexual encounters. I felt my body betraying me in so many ways at the adolescent age of 12 that I began to think of myself as a whore or slut, tarnished and internally filthy. I possessed not the visible kind of filth that stains your clothes or ruins your rugs, but the worse kind of filth, the kind you cannot see. My abuser "took my pearl and left an empty shell of me" ("Sullen Girl"). There was no protection for me and as the abuse went on I couldn't understand why I allowed this to happen. Searching for the words to name what was occurring, I couldn't even comprehend at times what exactly was going on. Regrettably, at the young age of twelve stereotypes rooted in slavery were already scorched into my young consciousness through negative images in the media. I was a part of the new era of Hip Hop whose main mode of production was exploiting and objectifying African American women, also known as "video hoes;" as a result, I didn't classify it as abuse or rape. My young psyche came to the conclusion that I must be a whore. Therefore, a whore, as slavers referred to African women, cannot be raped.

My mind lacked the complexities to grasp that I was being sexually abused, that I was in fact being raped. I didn't realize that I was being sexually assaulted, dominated and violated. I didn't understand that anyone touching another person, specifically a child, in certain places will result in a euphoric feeling that any human being would naturally enjoy, but I still had a "bad feeling" about the encounters. I still blamed myself for it happening. I was without

enlightenment, struggling on my own for definition in the dark, trying to figure out why I felt so dirty. I blamed myself for not having the strength to make it stop. I blamed myself for not knowing how to control my body against his advances. I blamed myself for not having the psychological capacity to set boundaries. I blamed myself every moment during those seven confusing years during my adolescence that I kept my sexual abuse a secret from my entire family. Since my abuser was a part of my family for seven years I looked my abuser in the face every day. I looked him in the face until I couldn't take it anymore and finally, at 17 my moment came. It was the moment that breaks all silences, the moment I defined what happened to me.

Giving my abuse definition forced me to identify with it while granting me the power to make it stop. Definition gave me the power to tell an adult I trusted that I was in fact being abused and that I was not a whore or a slut who "asked for it." It gave me the power within to make my abuser go away. Definition gave Margaret Garner the power to run in order to free herself and her daughters from the sexual exploitation of slavery. Once we gain the clarity to see through the smoky mirrors of myths and stereotypes, racial biases and victim-blaming, definition gives power leaving no room for misinterpretation.

In conclusion, undoubtedly, today in America the African American woman and young girls are raped at higher rates because of inherited social biases regarding their sexuality from the Trans Atlantic slave trade and the North American institution of slavery; as a result, there continues to be no protection for young black girls. Rape is unquestionably a form of sexual assault, violence or dominance committed on another person's body against their will. Acquaintance rape is rape. It should not be dismissed as a "misguided sexual adventure" (Warshaw 20). Rape "is an exercise of power" and Black women and girls must take back their power to redefine [their] sexual identities (Brownmiller). Myths and stereotypes that have

devalued Black women have left a deeply ingrained belief in the consciousness of Americans that black women are less valuable than any other woman. To offset the harmful gender messages in the media that heavily penetrate young Black girls minds, it is imperative that Black women (mothers, daughters and sisters) reconstruct the sexual identity of the Black woman. If Black women succeed, barriers and stereotypes about their sexuality will be broken. They must define Black womanhood differently, and work towards their own empowerment by defining their own sexual politics. Black girls must find their voices in order to eloquently express, own and claim “sexual identities that are [safe], empowering, fulfilling, and joyous” (Adrienne D.)

It is imperative that the definition of rape and sexual assault be expanded. Rape law needs to continually be reformed in order to change society’s attitude towards rape that involve intersections of race and class. Education is needed to increase the public’s awareness of rape and dispel prejudices about this crime. Additionally, the government needs to provide more support to the social institutions that seek to raise the collective consciousness about rape. Consciousness and “knowledge, as does faith, helps to light the way. [Definition] clears the fog of ignorance so that we can see what’s clear and true, even if it’s ugly” (Stone 11). Finally, society must identify the sexual violence of young Black girls “direct relationship to all the existing power structures... This relationship is not a simple, mechanical one, but rather involves complex structures reflecting the interconnectedness of the race, gender and class oppression that characterize the [rape of Black women and girls]” (Angela D. 47). Society must recognize the value and the obligation to defend our Black women and girls who make up 18.8 percent of rape victims. As a society we must continue to break the silence. We must break the silence of the enslaved African girls, of the African ancestors, who lived and died never having the opportunity or safety to give their abuse a voice or definition. The world must break the silence for Angie

Quick and for the Black girls who are still being raped in America today. Lastly, the world must break the greatest silence for the women and children being frequently raped in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Every 2.5 minutes in America a woman is raped and by the time this paragraph is finished, a rape crime will be carried out.

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