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The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery

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IN 1787 AN ENSLAVED MAN IN Maryland raped a free black woman. The story comes to us from the female victim in the incident, Elizabeth Amwood. One white man, William Holland, had her “Pull up her Close and Lie Down he then Called a Negrow Man Slave” “and ordered him to pull Down his Britches and gitt upon the said Amwood and to bee grate with her.” A fourth individual in this horrific scene, a white man named John Pettigrew, operating with Holland, pointed a pistol at the unnamed enslaved man and Elizabeth Amwood. All the while, Holland taunted them both, asking if it “was in” and “if it was sweet.” Afterward, William “went up into the Company and Called for Water to wash his hand, saying he had bin putting a Mare to a horse.”¹

Scholars have suggested that rape can serve as a metaphor for enslavement—thus applying to both men and women who were enslaved. As Aliyah I. Abdur-Rahman argues, “The vulnerability of all enslaved black persons to nearly every conceivable violation produced a collective ‘raped’ subjectivity.”² The standard scholarly interpretation of how slavery affected black manhood is perhaps best captured by the comments of one former slave, Lewis Clarke, who declared that a slave “can’t be a man” because he

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¹ Petitions for William Holland, March 1787, Governor and Council, Pardon Papers, box 4, folder 47, Maryland State Archives (hereafter MdSA). See also Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 85.

² Aliyah I. Abdur-Rahman argues: “More than simply a condition of black women’s experience under slavery, rape serves as a useful paradigm for assessing and describing the position and experience of black people in total under slavery’s brutal regime” (“‘The Strangest Freaks of Despotism’: Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives,” *African American Review* 40, no. 2 [2006]: 230–31).

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could not protect his female kin from being sexually assaulted by owners and overseers.³ Clark's concern, the rape and sexual assault of black women and girls, has been well documented by the historical record. Thelma Jennings and others have analyzed the literal sexual assault of enslaved women in a range of contexts.⁴ Physical sexual abuse of women and girls under slavery ranged from acts of punishment to expressions of desire and from forms of forced reproduction to systems of concubinage. Slavery violated the masculinity of black men who were denied the ability to protect vulnerable female dependents. According to Deborah Gray White, "Those who tried to protect their spouses were themselves abused."⁵ The emasculating psychic toll, White further argued, could have led men to eschew monogamy or resist marriage altogether.⁶

The rape of Elizabeth Amwood reveals that black manhood under slavery was also violated in other ways that are less easily spoken of (then and now), namely, the sexual exploitation of enslaved men.⁷ The historical sexual assault of men and boys is well known, if mostly unarticulated.⁸ The scholarship on early America shows us numerous instances of rape and sexual assault of men and boys. Ramón Gutiérrez has argued that individuals of the Native American third sex, or berdaches, were frequently prisoners of war used for

³ Lewis Clarke, "Leaves from a Slave's Journal of Life," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 20 and 27 October 1842, reprinted in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John W. Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 156–58.

⁴ Thelma Jennings, "'Us Colored Women Had to Go Through a Plenty': Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women," *Journal of Women's History* 1, no. 3 (1990): 45–74.

⁵ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985; New York: Norton, 1999), 146. See also, for example, Daina Ramey Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest Is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 81.

⁶ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 147.

⁷ The rape of adult men in conflict and war today, for example, goes underreported and is much less discussed than rape of women as a weapon of war. In 2005, for example, in eastern Congo and northern Uganda, rape of boys and men was a notable feature of the conflicts there. This has been documented by the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International. See, for example, its *2005 Annual Report for Congo (Dem. Rep. of)*, available online at <http://www.amnestyusa.org/annualreport.php?id=ar&yr=2005&c=COD> (accessed 1 August 2010). Also muted in discussions of the rape and sexual assault of men is prison rape. See, for example, Human Rights Watch, "No Escape: Male Rape in U.S. Prisons," 2001, available online at <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/2001/prison/report.html> (accessed 1 August 2010). On the history of sex and sexual abuse behind bars, see, for example, Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). More often than not, rape of men in prison is the subject of derisive humor in popular culture masking a deep discomfort and homophobia. But dismissive humor also hides the deeper threat that male rape exposes—the penetrability and vulnerability of men.

⁸ Michael Scarce, *Male on Male Rape: The Hidden Toll of Stigma and Shame* (New York: Plenum, 1997).

sex and emasculated. We also know through the handful of extant sodomy cases that males have been so abused. The seventeenth-century Connecticut gentleman Nicholas Sension, for example, sexually preyed on his male servants. Virtually all of the cases of sodomy that came to the courts in early America involved individuals violating status boundaries—instructors on students, masters on servants. None involved peers.⁹

In the context of slavery, literary scholars have shown that sexual abuse of men was part of the Spanish slave system in Cuba. Robert Richmond Ellis argues that the account of former slave Juan Francisco Manzano “has commonly been regarded as a searing indictment of a physical mistreatment of slaves” but “can also be read as silent testimony to a kind of abuse largely unacknowledged by historians of slavery and critics of slave narratives: the sexual violation of male slaves.” As Ellis points out, the topic has largely gone unexplored for a wide variety of reasons, including the obvious barrier of the historical record in that “male victims of slave rape left behind no biological record in the form of offspring” as well as the prevalent homophobia in traditional Latin American societies, which would have prevented men from telling their stories given that “male sexual passivity . . . was particularly stigmatized insofar as it was seen as entailing a loss of masculinity.”¹⁰

This article uses a wide range of sources on slavery—early American newspapers, court records, slave owners’ journals, abolitionist literature, and the testimony of former slaves collected in autobiographies and in interviews—to argue that enslaved black men were sexually assaulted by both white men and white women. It finds that sexual assault of enslaved men took a wide variety of forms, including outright physical penetrative assault, forced reproduction, sexual coercion and manipulation, and psychic abuse.

It is difficult to determine with certainty the prevalence of the sexual abuse of male slaves. Martha Hodes concludes that the sexual “coercion” of black men in antebellum America “lurked as a possibility regardless of how frequently it came to pass.”¹¹ Antislavery movements documented relatively more instances of such abuse than did previous eras. Nineteenth-century sources discussing slavery in the South, for example, are more abundant given the abolitionist movement, which drew attention to sexual depravity to argue for the immorality of slavery as an institution. Given the variety of social and cultural barriers to documenting the sexual abuse of enslaved black men, however, it would be an error to assume that the pattern of surviving

⁹ See Thomas A. Foster, ed., *Long before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), introduction and essays by Ramón Gutiérrez and Richard Godbeer.

¹⁰ Robert Richmond Ellis, “Reading through the Veil of Juan Francisco Manzano: From Homoerotic Violence to the Dream of a Homoracial Bond,” *PMLA* 113, no. 3 (1998): 422–35.

¹¹ Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 139.

sources reflects the historical practice of abuse. Indeed, the unlikelihood that cases would have been documented at all suggests that it would be safe to say that, regardless of location and time period, no enslaved man would have been safe from the threat of sexual abuse.

In many ways the cases discussed here have been hidden in plain sight. This article revisits instances that other scholars have cited in their studies of sex and slavery. In particular, it is indebted to Martha Hodes's research on antebellum sex between white women and enslaved black men, Thelma Jennings's work on the sexual exploitation of enslaved women, and Deborah Gray White's study of plantation life for enslaved women.¹² Through their painstaking research in slave records, these and other scholars show that the sexual abuse of enslaved women was ubiquitous. Establishing this now widely accepted conclusion was itself a challenge, for historians had to argue against deep-rooted racist depictions of enslaved women as hypersexual. Turning to the sexual abuse and exploitation of enslaved men builds upon the perspective of this recent literature to challenge the view of black men as hypersexual and white women as passive and asexual.

Although scholars have acknowledged the sexual assault of enslaved women, none to my knowledge have highlighted the sexual abuse of enslaved men. In part, we have taken our cues from the nineteenth-century abolitionist writers who drew upon certain gender-, race-, and class-infused understandings of sexual assault to appeal to a particular audience. As Martha Hodes reminds us, though, it was not simply that sex between black men and white women was uninteresting to abolitionists. Individuals recognized that it was "dangerous to the cause" to insult the virtue of southern white womanhood.¹³ The rape of slave men has also gone unacknowledged because of the current and historical tendency to define rape along gendered lines, making both victims and perpetrators reluctant to discuss male rape. The sexual assault of men dangerously points out cracks in the marble base of patriarchy that asserts men as penetrators in opposition to the penetrable, whether homosexuals, children, or adult women. This article, therefore, confronts our own raced, classed, and gendered perceptions of rape and argues that we have a moral imperative to recognize the coerced sexuality of enslaved men as rape. Narrowly defining sexual assault along gendered lines has obscured our ability to recognize the climate of terror and the physical and mental sexual abuse that enslaved black men also endured.

BLACK MALE BODIES

The sexual exploitation of enslaved black men took place within a cultural context that fixated on black male bodies with both desire and horror. Sexual

¹² Ibid.; Jennings, "Us Colored Women"; White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*

¹³ Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 128.

assault took a wide variety of forms, but the common factor in all was the legal ownership that enabled control of the enslaved body. Winthrop Jordan notes the conflicting messages embraced by Anglo-American culture as it sought to control and circumscribe the bodies of enslaved men and women, on the one hand voicing repulsion for Africans, framing them as beastly, ugly, and unappealing, while on the other hand viewing them as hypersexual. Anglo-American culture had a long-standing view of black men as “particularly virile, promiscuous, and lusty.”¹⁴ Although this view is consistently framed as a negative one, given Anglo-American cultural norms of moderation and self-control, it is clear that early Americans also saw erotic possibilities and beauty in black bodies. We know, for example, that some slave masters fetishized and objectified women of color, understanding that sexual abuse was about power and not simply expressing sexual desire. The presence of antebellum “fetish” markets of light-skinned enslaved women, in particular, has been well documented by scholars. Edward Baptist, for example, argues that the antebellum domestic slave trade might be reconsidered as a “complex of inseparable fetishisms” given the slave traders’ “frequent discussions of the rape of light-skinned enslaved women, or ‘fancy maids,’” and “their own relentlessly sexualized vision of the trade.”¹⁵

The evidence also leads us to speculate that an unusual interest in light-skinned men may have paralleled the more formalized and documented fetish market in “fancy maids” that Edward Baptist has analyzed. Such an interest is found in testimony presented to the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission (AFIC), which was established by the secretary of war in 1863 to document the conditions of those freed by the Emancipation Proclamation. White abolitionist Richard J. Hinton, for example, testified that “I have never yet found a bright looking colored man” “who has not told me of instances where he has been compelled, either by his mistress, or by white women of the same class, to have connection with them.”¹⁶ In another case, a man testified that a man who had been “brought up in the family” was also coerced into sex by his mistress, his family connection suggesting that he was mulatto. We also have some evidence of light-skinned black men as sexually prized. Testimony to the AFIC included reference to light-skinned men as “fine looking.”¹⁷ One man told the AFIC: “It was an extremely common thing among all the handsome mulattoes at the South to have connection with the white women.”¹⁸ In the antebellum divorce

¹⁴ Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 151.

¹⁵ Edward E. Baptist, “‘Cuffy,’ ‘Fancy Maids,’ and ‘One-Eyed Men’: Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States,” *American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (2001): 1620.

¹⁶ Richard Hinton testimony, quoted in Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 130–31.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ James Redpath testimony, quoted in *ibid.*, 127.

case of one white couple, Dorothea and Lewis Bourne, Dorothea's chosen lover, an enslaved man named Edmond, is described in the records by more than one neighbor as "so bright in his colour, a stranger would take him for a white man."¹⁹ Such testimony raises the possibility that in this patriarchal society the sexual abuse of "nearly white" men could enable white women to enact radical fantasies of domination over white men with the knowledge that their victim's body was legally black and enslaved, subject to the women's control.

Although we have no evidence for a sexual fetish market in black male flesh, historical scholarship shows us that black male bodies might well be eroticized by white observers. Jordan claims that Anglo-American culture long held a fascination with the penises of black men and projected both desire and jealousy upon an objectified and disembodied black phallus.²⁰ Colonial accounts abound with recorded instances of masters and others commenting not only on the nudity of slaves but on their bodies with a certain fascination. As Philip Morgan reminds us, "daily encounters had a sexual dimension" in part because slaves "wore little or no clothing." One observer in 1781 named William Feltman remarked on the reaction this nudity might provoke among Virginia women, given that "young boys of about Fourteen and Fifteen years Old" were "virtually naked." Feltman quipped: "I can Assure you It would Surprize a person to see these d——d [damned] black boys how well they are hung."²¹ Numerous abolitionist images also fixate on the black male body as perfection, highlighting muscular bodies and, in almost pornographic detail, exposed buttocks, enduring unjust abuse and degradation. William Benemann and others maintain that the image of whipping exposed male flesh carried a homoerotic charge—one that mirrored the nearly obscene fixation on whipping nude enslaved women, as has been suggested by scholars such as Colette Colligan.²² John Saillant's work on the eroticization of the black male body in early abolitionist literature also contributes to this view that whites found sexual appeal in black male bodies. He notes that this literature idealized black male bodies in a manner that included an unusual focus on height, musculature, and skin color. Accounts in late eighteenth-century and early

¹⁹ Lewis Bourne divorce petition, Louisa County, Virginia, 20 January 1825, quoted in *American Sexual Histories*, ed. Elizabeth Reis (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 166–67.

²⁰ Jordan, *White over Black*, 34–35.

²¹ Military journal of Lt. William Feltman, 22 June 1781, HSP, quoted in *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry*, by Philip D. Morgan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 398–99.

²² William Benemann, *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America: Beyond Romantic Friendships* (New York: Harrington Park, 2006), 68–69; Colette Colligan, "Anti-Abolition Writes Obscenity: The English Vice, Transatlantic Slavery, and England's Obscene Print Culture," in *International Exposure: Perspectives on Modern Pornography, 1800–2000*, ed. Lisa Z. Sigel (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 67–99.

nineteenth-century American publications like the *American Universal Magazine* and the *Philadelphia Minerva* described black male characters as “the blackest, the best made, the most amiable,” “beautiful in shape as the Apollo of Belvedere,” and “Tall and shapely.”²³ Black men’s bodies could be described in sympathetic tones: “Jack knelt down—not a muscle of his countenance quivered—he was entirely naked, and was a remarkably muscular and well made man. He looked like a fine bronze statue.”²⁴ Accounts also discussed the “strength of limb, the roundness of muscle, mind, tender affection, sympathy,” in efforts to combat slavery; such details served to underscore the moral injustice of enslaving these men.²⁵ It is also worth noting that, despite the homoerotic nature of these accounts suggested by their content, women made up the backbone of the abolitionist movement and readily consumed such literature. Accordingly, these descriptions lead us to conclude that white women were exposed to cultural ideas about black male beauty, desirability, and physical prowess.

Yet at the same time, black men’s genitalia were subject to scrutiny and punishment. Castration and other genital mutilations served as punishment in the hands of overseers and owners as well as in popular depictions of public enforcement of “justice.” Thus, the *Boston News-Letter* reported in 1718 the assault of a white woman but with a focus on black male genitalia that warned off “all Negroes meddling with any White Woman”: “A Negro Man met abroad an English woman, which he accosted to lye with, stooping down, fearing none behind him, a Man observing his Design, took out his Knife, before the Negro was aware, cut off all his unruly parts Smack and Smooth, the Negro Jumpt up roaring and run for his Life, the Black is now an Eunuch and like to recover of his wounds & doubtless cured from any more such Wicked Attempts.”²⁶ In 1762 a North Carolina enslaved black man convicted of raping a white woman had his “private parts cut off and thrown in his face” as part of his execution.²⁷ While these articles recall the depiction of black men as agents of sexual assault, still then a notion in formation but one that would long remain in the American tradition, they also underscore how punishments for perceived or actual sexual infractions, in the hands of whites, focused on black male bodies and in particular in maiming the genitalia of enslaved men.

Already in the era of slavery Anglo-American culture embraced a message about black men as particularly sexual, prone to sensual indulgence, and desiring white women. Such messages undoubtedly served to demonize and define the population of black men but would also have raised the

²³ John Saillant, “The Black Body Erotic and the Republican Body Politic,” in Foster, *Long before Stonewall*, 314.

²⁴ *Colored American*, 5 October 1839.

²⁵ *North Star*, 17 November 1848.

²⁶ *Boston News-Letter*, 3 March 1718.

²⁷ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 405.

radical possibility for some women of the desirability of such men as highly sexual and accomplished—a model of masculinity that highlighted power, strength, and mastery rather than one of moderation and self-control.

Objectification of black men affected bodies and minds. Depictions of sexual prowess and the myth of the black rapist constituted one form of sexual abuse. This myth contributed to the legal and political disenfranchisement of black men from the earliest days of the Republic.²⁸ Yet the psychic toll was also high. Being told that one is hypersexual and uncontrollable cannot be dismissed as mere racist caricaturing; for some men such messages would have inflicted great emotional pain.

HOMOSEXUAL ASSAULT

Like heterosexual relations between white men and black women, sex between masters and male slaves undoubtedly occurred, sometimes in affectionate and close relationships but also as a particular kind of punishment. That we have a handful of documented instances is noteworthy, given the prohibitions against sodomy in early America, the absolute power that owners wielded and that enabled them to keep such moments secret, and the shame that was attached to being sodomized by a master and that could ensure the victim's silence.

Abolitionist literature demonstrates the possibility of the sexual assault of enslaved black men by slave-owning white men of what was called the planter class. John Saillant's analysis of early abolitionist literature both shows the homoerotics of the literature and provides examples of masters who were said to be sexually abusing their slaves.²⁹ In one such account, authored by Joseph LaVallée, a slave named Itanoko was subjected to rape by a white slaver named Urban. Urban was described as a "ravisher" who, Itanoko explained, was "struck by my comeliness," and he did "violate, what is most sacred among men." As Saillant explains, although Itanoko was rescued, he found himself on a plantation in Saint Domingue, where he met Theodore, "whose 'criminal complaisance with the overseer' allows him to give 'free scope to his irregular passions.'" As Saillant explains, "The 'irregular passions' apparently include sexual activity with black men, which LaVallée calls 'crime,' 'vice,' and 'rapine,' all 'enormities' resulting from 'unbridled disorders' and 'passion.'" ³⁰

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, published in 1861 by abolitionist and escaped slave Harriet Jacobs (under the pseudonym Linda Brent), also

²⁸ See, for example, Leslie Harris, "From Abolitionist Amalgamators to 'Rulers of the Five Points': The Discourse of Interracial Sex and Reform in Antebellum New York City," in *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, ed. Martha Hodes (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 191–212.

²⁹ Saillant, "The Black Body Erotic," 303–30.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 310.

included mention of male slave owners sexually abusing male slaves. Jacobs alluded to this abuse in the context of the rape of slave women and girls, lamenting that “no pen can give adequate description to the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery.” That corruption extended beyond female victims, for, as Jacobs wrote, “in some cases they exercise the same authority over the men slaves.”³¹ Jacobs’s autobiographical account also includes an incident between a slave named Luke and his owner that Abdur-Rahman reads as “somasochistic” and one that “reveals in general the entwining of desire and coercion that typifies the master-slave relationship.” He writes: “Linda remembers Luke as a particularly degraded figure” sent to the master’s son, a man described in coded terms as a depraved homosexually inclined individual. It was in this man’s service that Luke “became prey to the vices growing out of the ‘patriarchal institution.’”³² Abdur-Rahman points, for example, to passages in Jacobs like the following:

The fact that [the young master] was entirely dependent on Luke’s care, and was obliged to be tended like an infant, instead of inspiring any gratitude or compassion towards his poor slave, seemed only to increase his irritability and cruelty. As he lay there on his bed, a mere wreck of manhood, he took into his head the strangest freaks of despotism; and if Luke hesitated to submit to his orders, the constable was immediately sent for. Some of these freaks were of a nature too filthy to be repeated. When I fled the house of bondage, I left poor Luke still chained to the bed of this cruel and disgusting wretch.³³

Even while most of the accounts illustrating sexual abuse of enslaved men came from the nineteenth century, eighteenth-century sources indicate the practice was not limited to that era. Slave owners’ diaries, for example, also reveal instances of sexual assault perpetrated by masters, indicating that the literary examples reflected a certain social reality. The eighteenth-century diary of a Jamaican planter named Thomas Thistlewood tersely noted two incidents of homosexual assault. In one entry he recorded: “Report of Mr. Watt Committing Sodomy with his Negroe waiting Boy.” The language is specific enough to indicate this was a case of sodomy—not the more common attempted sodomy found in the historical records. It also notes the power dynamic within a power dynamic by singling out a “boy” and not an adult man. Thistlewood’s diary also noted “strange reports about the parson and John his man.” While the term “strange reports” is not precise, Trevor Burnard interprets it as meaning homosexual activity.³⁴ Again it

³¹ Linda Brent [Harriet Jacobs], *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), quoted in Abdur-Rahman, “The Strangest Freaks,” 236n13.

³² *Ibid.*, 231. See also Benemann, *Male-Male Intimacy*, 149–50.

³³ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, 233.

³⁴ Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 216.

is worth noting that this act occurred between a slave owner and a close personal servant rather than with a field hand. As such, this type of abuse follows a broader pattern that suggests the closer the proximity to whites, the more likely that sexual abuse was to occur.

RECONSIDERING FORCED COUPLING

In the story from eighteenth-century Maryland that opened this article, it is clear that the unnamed enslaved man was also a victim of sexual assault. Yet such stories have rarely been told by historians, and this account itself was documented only by chance. One of the white perpetrators of the assault, William Holland, was convicted of assault and battery on the free black woman, Elizabeth Amwood. Holland petitioned the governor of Maryland for a pardon. Included in the pardon file was a memorandum from Amwood detailing the assault.³⁵ The case illustrates the sexual vulnerability of black women, to be sure. But we must also recognize the physical and psychological toll that such an event would have taken on the enslaved man, who was unnamed. Forced to rape this woman at the point of a gun, not only would he have had to deal with the legal and moral consequences of assaulting a free black woman—someone he may or may not have known—but his manhood was also usurped.

Other accounts of forced sex reveal that male slaves could also suffer punishment for a forced attack. An abolitionist newspaper, the *National Era*, reported in 1853 on the case of another unnamed man, described only as a “negro man, belonging to H. France.” The man had been “burned at the stake” for having “attempted to commit rape” and for murder. What makes this case unusual, however, is that after the execution the “citizens of Pettis county” requested that the France family leave the community, “having some suspicion that the negro was instigated to the perpetration of the deed by his master.” In addition to “aiding and abetting the murder,” the master was criticized for his “bad examples set before slaves, by conversing with them in relation to the virtue and chastity of white women, and in defamation of their character; thereby influencing them to commit deeds of crime and rapine.”³⁶ We must consider that France may well have forced his slaves to assault white women, since to take the story at face value is to accept the rhetoric of an ignorant, animalistic, and docile slave who, excited by France, was set loose upon women.

At a minimum, this last story raises questions about how often slave masters used male slaves to inflict sexual punishment on women, whether free

³⁵ Petitions for William Holland, March 1787, Governor and Council, Pardon Papers, box 4, folder 47, MdSA. See also Block, *Rape and Sexual Power*, 85.

³⁶ *National Era*, 4 August 1853.

black, enslaved, or white, and about the toll that these forced rapes would have taken on those men, who could rarely resist the will of their masters. In this instance, it resulted in the punishment for the slave of death by being burned alive. It is important to note again that the man was unnamed. His designation as only a “negro” man dehumanizes him, rendering him in his assault on the woman a symbol perhaps of all black men, but we must rehumanize him as another type of victim in a multilayered sexual assault perpetrated by white men on both black men and white and black women.

Forced sex also took place within the context of so-called slave breeding. From what little documentation we have, we know the practice of forcing slaves to reproduce had colonial roots. Most scholars identify the early nineteenth century as the period of greatest expansion of this practice, coinciding with the growth of slavery in the United States and the maturation of the domestic slave trade. In his account of his experiences as a slave, William J. Anderson described what he knew about one master’s attempts at forced breeding: “I have known him to make four men leave their wives for nothing, and would not let them come and see them any more on the peril of being shot down like dogs; he then made the women marry other men against their will. Oh, see what it is to be a slave? A man, like the brute, is driven, whipped, sold, comes and goes at his master’s bidding.”³⁷ Many slave owners allowed enslaved men and women to develop personal ties and to form relationships and families of their own choosing. Others, however, clearly took a more active role in selecting for the qualities they wanted in slaves, forcing some to have children or to live as husband and wife. The conclusions that historian Thelma Jennings draws about the power that slave owners held over enslaved women should be applied as well to enslaved men: “The white patriarch had the *power* to force them to mate with whomever he chose, to reproduce or suffer the consequences, to limit the time spent with their children, and even to sell them and their children.”³⁸ Masters could and did force couples to have sexual intercourse, and if “either one showed any reluctance, the master would make the couple consummate the relation in his presence.”³⁹

Testimony from a number of former slaves demonstrates how forced reproduction had the dehumanizing effect of labeling certain enslaved men as “stock men” or “bulls.” As Thelma Jennings explains with one example, “On Mary Ingram’s plantation, the master made the decision on who could and could not get married.” Or, in the words of Mary Ingram herself, “Him select de po’tly and p’lific women, and de po’tly man, and use sich for de breeder an’ de father ob de women’s chillums.”⁴⁰ In another example,

³⁷ *Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson* (Chicago, 1857), 24.

³⁸ Jennings, “‘Us Colored Women,’” 46.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 50. See also, for example, Berry, “*Swing the Sickle*,” 76–103.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Jennings, “‘Us Colored Women,’” 50.

one former slave recollected how “Joe was ’bout seven feet tall an’ was de breedings’ nigger in Virginia.” He continued: “Once ole Marsa hired him out to a white man what lived down in Suffolk. Dey come an’ got him on a Friday. Dey brung him back Monday mo’nin’.”⁴¹ Another former slave similarly noted how his master had prevented him from engaging in sexual relations with only one woman, forcing him to reproduce with about fifteen women and to father dozens of children.⁴²

Forcing some enslaved men to reproduce with many different women denied to them a fatherly role even while it prevented their children from bonding with them. A Texas woman who had been enslaved attested to this result when she noted that “half of us young negroes didn’t know who our fathers were.” Similarly, one slave named Mary Young remarked: “We never hardly knew who our father was.” Another slave, Millie Williams, also commented: “Shuck’s nobody knows who der father waz.”⁴³ It is possible that African and African American men would have viewed this violation differently than Anglo-Americans, given Anglo-American norms of monogamy and traditional West African matrilineal kinship practices, although these differences would have become lessened within long-enslaved populations. Nonetheless, men from both cultures shared the values of male independence and mastery in a broad sense.⁴⁴

Forced coupling also placed a premium on young and healthy men and implied the lesser value of men who were beyond years thought suitable for reproduction. As Thelma Jennings explains, the former slave Lulu Wilson noted that her father was forced off her plantation once the slave owner considered him to be “too old for breeding.”⁴⁵ Other men who might be young enough to reproduce but were deemed undesirable were prevented from fathering children. One Tennessee slave woman remarked that a “scrubby man” would not be permitted to father children. Another slave woman, Polly Cancer, noted that her suitor was forced by her master to discontinue seeing her and told “to git coz he didn’t want no runts on his place.”⁴⁶

The scholarly focus, reflecting the sources, has generally viewed these forced couplings from the point of view of the assaulted woman, often wholly neglecting the male participant. Thus, for instance, despite the very rich testimony she mobilized to explain the sexual exploitation of enslaved women when discussing miscegenation, Thelma Jennings concludes that

⁴¹ Quoted in Brenda E. Stevenson, “Slave Marriage and Family Relations,” in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality: Documents and Essays*, ed. Kathy Peiss (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 169.

⁴² Jennings, “‘Us Colored Women,’” 51.

⁴³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Daniel P. Black, *Dismantling Black Manhood: An Historical and Literary Analysis of the Legacy of Slavery* (New York: Garland, 1997); and Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Vintage, 1977).

⁴⁵ Jennings, “‘Us Colored Women,’” 51.

⁴⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*

“only the bondwomen could be subjected to the white man’s passion,” overlooking the broader power that white men also held over enslaved black men’s bodies and sexuality.⁴⁷ Still, the sources can provide that evidence. In one example, a slave woman named Rose Williams of Texas fought off a slave man, Rufus, despite their owner’s decision to place them together. Rose described Rufus as a “bully” and explained, “I don’t like Rufus.” Accordingly, when he attempted to “crawl in” bed with her, she argued with him. He never responded with physical force but instead pleaded with her that she should “hush” and said to her: “Dis am my bunk, too.” Rose used physical violence to discourage Rufus from being intimate with her, giving him a “shove” and taking a “poker,” with which she “lets him have it over de head.” Rufus did not respond with force but did let her know that “dey’s gwine larn you somethin’,” indicating the punishment that would await her for disobeying their owner’s intentions. The account as told by Rose rightly positions her as a victim, but we should not overlook that Rufus himself was placed in a position of powerlessness by his owner. Rufus did not retaliate physically even after being assaulted. In the end, however, Rose capitulated after being threatened by her mistress.⁴⁸

In addition to being forced into sexual situations with women they did not choose, enslaved men could also face the emotional withdrawal and resentment of the women they were then supposed to seduce and marry. Rufus, for example, faced the physical resistance of Rose Williams. After the freeing of the slaves, she was able to leave Rufus, with whom she bore only two children, which some have taken to suggest a resistance to him throughout their “marriage.” Jennings’s observations on the psychic trauma of forced marriage for women should also be applied to men. Forced marriage, she argues, caused both “physical and mental anguish” and “may have even caused greater humiliation than concubinage . . . since marriage was long term.”⁴⁹ A level of resentment and even hatred could more easily be aimed at the enslaved male husband than at the slave master or white overseer. One woman, Mary Gaffner, told her interviewer: “I just hated the man I married . . . but it was what Master said do.”⁵⁰ In forced coupling, the levels of victimhood were multilayered.

Men such as Joe in Virginia who were forced to have children with many women might also have found themselves unwanted within the slave community. These unions might have led to children who would have been desired by the white planter class but certainly not always by enslaved women. Some slave women, for example, rejected husbands and lovers because of their promiscuity, as did one woman “on account of his having so Many

⁴⁷ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁸ Rose Williams interview, in *When I Was a Slave: Memoirs from the Slave Narrative Collection*, ed. Norman R. Yetman (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002), 146–49.

⁴⁹ Jennings, “‘Us Colored Women,’” 49.

⁵⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 47.

Children.”⁵¹ Deborah Gray White notes in one example that after a slave named Molly lost her husband because he ran away, she was “given” a new husband—meaning forced into another arrangement to produce children. Despite having nine children together, however, Molly later rejected this man and exclaimed that he was not her “real” husband despite their years of cohabitation. “In Molly’s heart her *real* husband was the man sold away by their master.”⁵² For such men the rejection and resentment of their forced wives would have further compounded their dehumanized situation.

Records from the period immediately after slavery indicate the desire of former slaves both to find family members who had been sold away and to remove themselves from forced spouses. Men and women found themselves able to extricate themselves from sexual partners they had not selected and, in many cases, not wanted. The Florida General Assembly, for example, created legislation for those who sought to legalize their chosen families and spouses but came under fire for failing to address the problem of those who had previously been forced into marriage and who were “opposed to being regularly joined in the bonds of matrimony” with these unwanted spouses.⁵³

The forced coupling of enslaved men and women denied the individuality of both. Continuing to overlook the victimization of men in such sexual assaults not only denies the full extent of that sexual abuse but also continues dangerously to draw on long-standing stereotypes of black male sexuality that positions black men as hypersexual. In some instances of forced coupling, undoubtedly, some men took pleasure, as did some women. In other instances, for both partners, it may have been a last resort to avoid punishment from masters or overseers. In all such cases, white men controlled the bodies of both black men and women.

WHITE WOMEN

The traditional denial of white women’s sexual agency has contributed to our obscured view of those white women who sexually assaulted and exploited enslaved men. Indeed, the abuse of black men at the hands of white women stands on its head the traditional gendered views of racialized sexual assault. Yet as historians have demonstrated, despite the legal and cultural prohibitions against sex between black men and white women in early America, occurrences were far from rare. Many examples, from a wide range of sources, demonstrate no outright violence or threat of physical harm to the black men (enslaved and free) but highlight that it was well

⁵¹ Quoted in White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 156–57.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵³ Untitled letter from 1st Lt. F. E. Grossman to the Actg. Asst. Adj. General, 1 October 1866, quoted in *Families and Freedom: A Documentary History of African-American Kinship in the Civil War Era*, ed. Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowland (New York: New Press, 1997), 171.

understood that white women did at times take the initiative in these interactions. As with relations between white men and enslaved women, sexual contact between white women and enslaved men ranged from affectionate to violent. Even presumably affectionate and long-term relationships must be reconsidered given the context of slavery. As scholars remind us, the apparently affectionate relationships of enslaved women and white men took place within the context of absolute power over life and limb and therefore must not be viewed as consensual. Few scholars, however, have viewed the relationships of enslaved men and free white women through the lens of sexual abuse in part because of gendered assumptions about sexual power.

White women's desire for sexual intimacy with black men was noted by more than one early American observer, sometimes in the form of derisive attacks against the women involved. For example, in 1731 one white woman declared about another woman that she "would have Jump't over nine hedges to have had a Negroe."⁵⁴ One Maryland planter commented in 1739 that a white woman who had heard about a slave rebellion from one of her slaves did nothing because "perhaps She had a mind for a black husband."⁵⁵ In 1769, after giving birth to a black child, one woman in Maryland was condemned in the newspaper for "pollut[ing]" her husband's bed.⁵⁶ Another woman in 1785 in Virginia was punished by her church for "committing fornication by cohabiting with a negro."⁵⁷ Thomas Thistlewood's eighteenth-century diary denounced a white woman in Jamaica who was "making free" with male slaves.⁵⁸ His comment, although brief, indicated her agency in the matter and reminds us that in such cases it is wrong for us to assume that the enslaved man would be necessarily perceived as the sexual aggressor in such encounters.

Philip Morgan's research on the eighteenth-century Chesapeake and Lowcountry regions of the American colonies revealed numerous instances of white women engaged in sexual relationships with enslaved men. In early eighteenth-century Maryland, for example, one woman who lived with an enslaved man had seven children, although Morgan emphasizes the man's agency in this instance by noting that *she* "bore *him*" seven children.⁵⁹ The divorce case of Dorothea and Lewis Bourne, a focus of Hodes's study and mentioned above, reveals another instance that tells us that such cases were far from rare. In this 1825 divorce, testimony from neighbors and friends revealed that Dorothea had enjoyed a long-term

⁵⁴ *Anne Batson v. John Fitchet and Wife Mary* (1731), quoted in Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 401–2.

⁵⁵ Stephen Bordley to Matt Harris, Annapolis, Maryland, 30 January 1739, quoted in Jordan, *White over Black*, 154.

⁵⁶ *Maryland Gazette*, 12 October 1769, quoted in Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 402.

⁵⁷ Hartwood Baptist Church, 25 June 1785, quoted in Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 402.

⁵⁸ Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny and Desire*, 216.

⁵⁹ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 400, emphasis added.

relationship with a neighbor's slave, Edmond, with whom she had probably had several children. Neighbors revealed themselves to be well aware of her conduct and, perhaps more surprisingly, did not frame it as wholly unusual. Martha Hodes argues that this incident provides yet more evidence that black men were not necessarily assumed to be the initiators in such relationships and that the figures of the aggressive black man and the sexually passive white woman had not yet emerged as cultural stereotypes. Indeed, Judith Richardson, who owned Edmond, testified that Dorothea was often seen "lurking about her negroes houses."⁶⁰

Abolitionist literature also occasionally drew attention to white women's agency in depictions of interracial intimacy. Harriet Jacobs noted in her account that sex between white women and black men was not all that unusual, as did another former slave named J. W. Lindsay, who said: "There are cases where white women fall in love with their servants."⁶¹ Martha Hodes explains that one African American told the AFIC that when he had worked as a steward on the Mississippi River, it was common for black men who worked on the river to exchange information about "the desires of certain white women to 'sleep with them.'"⁶² Another told the AFIC that during his time in Tennessee he observed that "planters here in Tennessee have sometimes to watch their daughters to keep them from intercourse with the negroes. This though of course exceptional, is yet common enough to be a source of uneasiness to parents."⁶³

That it was understood that white women at times took the initiative in interracial sex is not, of course, in itself evidence of the sexual abuse of enslaved men, although it is worth repeating that the enslaved status of black men in such interactions made them necessarily vulnerable. Other evidence more clearly points to instances of coercion and sexual exploitation and should lead us to conclude that white men were not the sole perpetrators of sexual coercion or the sexual abuse of enslaved black men and women. Hinton told the AFIC that one slave recounted to him a story of being "ordered" "to sleep with" his mistress within a year of her husband's death, something that he said had happened "regularly."⁶⁴ Testimony from Hinton before the AFIC also told of hearing that "colored men on that river knew that the women of the Ward family of Louisville, Kentucky, were in the habit of having the [black] stewards, or other fine looking fellows, sleep with them when they were on the boats."⁶⁵ There is hint of the men's coercion in these comments, and certainly much more than a hint of the women's agency.

⁶⁰ Bourne divorce petition, 165–67. See also Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 68–95.

⁶¹ Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 133; Lindsay interview in *ibid.*, 400–401.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 128–29.

⁶³ Testimony of Maj. George L. Stearns, Nashville, Tennessee, 23 November 1863, quoted in *ibid.*, 127.

⁶⁴ Hinton testimony in *ibid.*, 131.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

Hinton's testimony also revealed something about the variety of tactics that women employed toward the men in such circumstances, many of them strikingly similar to the strategies employed by white owners against black women. "I have generally found that, unless the woman has treated them kindly, and won their confidence, they have to be threatened, or have their passions aroused by actual contact."⁶⁶ Here we see that direct threats or indirect manipulation, with a more subtle threat of violence, accompanied some of these relationships. Even in the physical contact and arousal that Hinton mentioned, once made, the man would have little recourse to resist.

Other sources supported the testimony before the AFIC and show the possibility of the exploitation of enslaved men by white women, even in seemingly benign relationships. Court testimony from an 1841 Kentucky case likewise involved an enslaved man and a white woman who lived together as husband and wife and whose case had come to court over the woman's ability to sell her own land. The court declared that their relationship was not marriage but was instead one of "concubinage," given the power imbalance between them. Moreover, the case included testimony that revealed the power dynamic within the relationship, since it was reported that the white woman "*sometimes threatened to sell*" her concubine, James.⁶⁷

As Hodes argues, white women of the planter class were certainly able to wield power over black men, although all white women could coerce enslaved black men given the legal and social setting in which they lived. Planter-class women might more easily and more believably have persuaded the community to view them as innocent victims of their sexual contact with black men. One black man who recruited black Union soldiers told the AFIC that another black man had told him how white women could assume the mantle of white female purity to facilitate the sexual assault of black men. Even women who may have been physically smaller and weaker than their victims thus wielded a powerful threat. The recruiter testified about "a young girl" who "got him out in the woods and told him she would declare he attempted to force her, if he didn't have connection with her." Others testified that this sort of coercion was not unusual, and one Patrick Minor, for example, told Hinton that he knew of "several cases of the same kind."⁶⁸

As an alternative to or in conjunction with threats of retribution, some white women may have wielded the purse as a means of coercing enslaved men to have sex with them. That is to say, some men may have been paid for their sexual services to white women. One black steward reported that a white woman from Louisville, Kentucky, "offered him five dollars to arrive at her house in Louisville at a particular time."⁶⁹ The words suggest that she was negotiating a way to discretely engage in sex with him. Others

⁶⁶ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁷ *Armstrong v. Hodges*, from Franklin County, Kentucky (1841), quoted in *ibid.*, 133–34.

⁶⁸ Hinton testimony in *ibid.*, 135.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 130.

may have done the same. Enslaved men, like enslaved women, may well have negotiated opportunities that sex under slavery presented them to their advantage. One black man testified to the AFIC precisely how such encounters might have begun: "I will tell you how it is here. I will go up with the towels, and when I go into the room the woman will keep following me with her eyes, until I take notice of it, and one thing leads to another. Others will take hold of me and pull me on to the sofa, and others will stick out their foot and ask one to tie their boot, and I will take hold of their foot and say 'what a pretty foot!'"⁷⁰

Regardless of the circumstances that prompted these varied arrangements, many of them clearly took place in the context of servitude and highlighted the power of the slave-owning mistress over the enslaved man. Harriet Jacobs, in her mention of a white woman who preyed on a male slave, wrote that she had picked a man who was "the most brutalized, over whom her authority could be exercised with less fear of exposure."⁷¹ Anecdotes such as these suggest that some white women initiated sexual encounters and made clear what they wanted, knowing that their cultural role, the sexual innocence expected of them, helped to hide their actions. Jacobs's account noted that she was personally familiar with this household, and she suggested that the woman preyed on more than one man, saying that the woman "did not make advances . . . to her father's more intelligent servants" but singled out for sexual assault instead a man "over whom her authority could be exercised with less fear of exposure" because he was so traumatized. Such a man, it is suggested, had been terrorized into submission on the plantation, and she took advantage of his state of mind to force herself upon him—with the threat of additional punishment if he did not accept her assault and if he did not keep it clandestine.

Wives and daughters of planters who formed these sexual relationships were simply taking advantage of their position within the slave system. Having sex with their white counterparts in the insular world of the white planter class, if exposed, would certainly have risked opprobrium, and even gossip about their public actions might have marred their reputations. Daughters of planters could use enslaved men in domestic settings, however, and retain their virtue and maintain the appearance of passionlessness and virginity while seeking sexual experimentation. In other words, one of the ways that some southern women may have protected their public virtue was by clandestine relations with black men. Hinton also told the AFIC that a white doctor reported to him that in Virginia and Missouri, "white women, especially the daughters of the smaller planters, who were brought into more direct relations with the negro, had compelled some one of the men to have something to do with them."⁷²

⁷⁰ Redpath testimony in *ibid.*, 130.

⁷¹ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, quoted in *ibid.*, 133.

⁷² Hinton testimony in *ibid.*, 131.

Sons of planters also engaged in such conduct, as Hinton also noted, even suggesting that young women imitated the behavior of their brothers. Daughters of wealthy individuals on the American frontier, he explained, where interaction with male suitors was also relatively limited as it was for planters' daughters given social constraints, noted that they "knew that their brothers were sleeping with the chambermaids, or other servants, and I don't see how it could be otherwise than they too should give loose to their passions."⁷³ Another man reported that the conditions of slavery brought about not only the "promiscuous intercourse among blacks, and between black women and white men," but also created a context that encouraged white women to be "involved" in the "general depravity."⁷⁴ Harriet Jacobs wrote that daughters "know that the women slaves are subject to their father's authority over men slaves" and use their example to coerce certain male slaves into being their sexual partners. Although Hinton and Jacobs perhaps could not conceive of women taking the initiative on their own and so understood them as following the example set by their fathers and brothers, we should note that the women seem to have engaged in the same behavior as the men, if not perhaps as many women as men.

As historians have often pointed out, the widespread presence of persons of mixed racial ancestry across the American South in the era of slavery has stood as firm evidence, in the face of denials, that sex between white men and black women took place on plantations. Madison Jefferson, for example, who was himself a slave in Virginia, pointed out already in 1841 that "the proof" of the rape of enslaved black women by white men was that "a very considerable portion of the slaves are of the mixed race."⁷⁵ One major difference between white male exploitation of enslaved women and white female exploitation of enslaved men is that white women, including daughters of planters, risked giving birth. We do know that some white women became pregnant, as did Dorothea Bourne. To be sure, white women risked less than their black female counterparts, with their far greater control over their sexual partners and greater access to contraceptive information and technologies. Still, the risks were there. Although by law the status of a child followed that of its mother, in many cases when a white woman had a child who was fathered by an enslaved man, the child was taken away and placed with the local slave community or sold into slavery elsewhere. Lewis Jenkins, for example, was raised as a slave although his mother was a white woman. As he told his family's story, when his mother became pregnant, she was "taken away from her playmates and kept in the attic hid. They took me soon as I was born from her."⁷⁶

⁷³ Ibid., 132.

⁷⁴ Samuel Gridley Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West: Report to the Freedmen's Inquiry Commission* (1864), quoted in *ibid.*, 132.

⁷⁵ Madison Jefferson interview (1841), quoted in Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 221.

⁷⁶ Lewis Jenkins interview, quoted in Yetman, *When I Was a Slave*, 77.

CONCLUSION

The sexual assault of enslaved black men was a component of slavery and took place in a wide variety of contexts and in a wide range of forms. Given the current and historical obstacles to documenting and recognizing the abuse, the examples described here should be seen as the tip of the iceberg and the abuse as far from rare. In addition to the direct physical abuse of men that happened under slavery, this sexual exploitation constituted a type of psychological abuse that was ubiquitous. Without recognizing male sexual abuse, we run the risk of reinscribing the very stereotypes used by white slave owners and others who reduced black men to bestial sexual predators and white women to passionless and passive vessels. The cases discussed here show that the use of physical force and direct threats of violence as well as implicit power imbalances worked against enslaved men as well as enslaved women. The documentary record confronts our own gendered perceptions of rape and creates a moral imperative for historians to recognize the sexual assault of enslaved black men. The cases here should also help us to rethink male sexual abuse in general not only in the antebellum American South but also elsewhere, and future research could further refine these findings along geographic and chronological lines of examination. This article, therefore, is offered as a contribution to our understanding of the experience of black masculinity in early America.