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50 SHADES OF SLAVERY

Sexual Assault of Black Male Slaves in Antebellum America

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Male slave owners used sexual assault to dominate, dehumanize, and emasculate male slaves in American Antebellum South. The oppression and violence that characterized the institution of chattel slavery are easily accessible, as well as the sexual assault often inflicted on female slaves. Although many slave narratives and journals address female rape and other forms of sexual assault, the abuse endured by male slaves has been grossly overlooked. The intention of this paper is not to discredit the suffering of female slaves, but the research suggested that the same use of sexual assault as a form of discipline and control was applied to male slaves. There is a general consensus that only women were subjected to the violently lustful assaults of slave owners. A closer analysis of the narratives of Olaudah Equiano, Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglas revealed the underlying issue that male slaves were going through similar situations. All of this was an attempt to increase American wealth through the forced labor of an entire race.

However, the stigmatism of homosexual behavior has kept many accounts of male-on-male sexual assault from being recorded. This exclusion of facts has many explanations, such as language, shame, and acceptance. These exclusions from history do not constitute a lack of validity. In his article, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery," Thomas Foster wrote 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."¹ Since the term homosexual did not enter the English language until the twentieth century, a keener view is required to discover the hidden violations of male slaves.

Although the sources did not explicitly state the term homosexual, it can be inferred that these types of assaults occurred from the author's use of certain words such as sodomy and passion. Shame as a motive not to record incidents of male sexual assault could also explain

¹ Foster. "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery." September 2011.

these omissions. Considering that most slaves were illiterate, a majority of the narratives documented have been done so by the slave narrating the course of events to another person. If the slave narrator was not fully comfortable with the person recording the information, the slave would be too full of shame and fear to accurately detail the true nature of the attack.

Another explanation would be the slave's acceptance of their collective experience. Violence and brutality were woven into the very core of the institution of chattel slavery. Male slaves may not have even been aware that what was happening to them was a violation of their basic human right to safety and security. Even if they were aware of this, the slaves were not able to defend themselves from such advances. Charles Clifton expertly pointed out in "Rereading Voices From the Past: Images of Homo-Eroticism in the Slave Narrative" that in these "unchartered areas of research" in "the realm of slave sexuality," an objective "attempt to read (with varying degrees of difficulty) what was not overtly articulated" could reveal that many of these male slave owner relationships "are not necessarily heterosexual."² The intent is not to imply that these individuals identified as homosexual, but to show that they were subjected to forced homosexual behavior. The sources provided examples of forcible sodomy that occurred during both the Colonial and Antebellum eras of slavery.

Some narratives written in the Antebellum era of slavery suggested homosexual assault. However, narratives written during the colonial period, between 1600 and 1776, suggested homosexual eroticism while omitting the gravity and violation of the act. During the colonial era, slaves were still subjected to the injustices of being deprived of freedom, but slaves were granted more advantages and opportunities for freedom than their future generations would experience in

² Charles. "Rereading Voices From the Past: Images of Homo-Eroticism in the Slave Narrative." 2001. p. 358

the Antebellum era. One such example was Olaudah Equiano, who purchased his freedom from his master at the age of twenty-two. Although he experienced a milder version of the institution of slavery than Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs, Equiano was not exempt from the damage and violation of slavery. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* depicts the story a young Equiano being kidnapped in Africa along with his sister. The siblings were eventually separated and Equiano was sent on a slave ship to America. In the winter of 1762, he was befriended by Daniel Queen, a man twice his age. Equiano discloses that on his passage from Africa, Queen “messed with me on board this ship” and later “became very much attached to me.” Queen tells Equiano that they “never should part.”³ This relationship was clearly unhealthy and based in power. Equiano states that he did not understand the nature of their relationship. Ignoring the fact that Equiano spoke fondly of Queen, the relationship was a violation of Equiano’s innocence considering that Equiano was only seventeen at the time this relationship developed. It can be implied that Queen was taking advantage of Equiano’s situation since by this time, Equiano had been enslaved for more than half his life and was willing to accept any semblance of kindness from a white person.

Another example of male slave child assault in the colonial era was found in the journals of Thomas Thistlewood. He migrated from England to Jamaica in 1750. After a decade, he became an independent land and slave owner. Throughout his time in Jamaica, Thistlewood logged 14,000 pages of journal entries. Several of these entries chronicle the sexual assault of several women. Widely overlooked was the June 11, 1758 entry, “Report of Mr. Watt Committing Sodomy with his Negroe waiting Boy.”⁴ Although other descriptions and dialogue

³ Equiano. *The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, written by himself*. 1789. p. 171.

⁴ Thistlewood. “Diary of Thomas Thistlewood” 11 June 1758.

are recorded, this entry suggested that the occurrence of “sodomy” within the slave-owner relationship was common. The undertones of forcible sodomy by male slave owners suggested an exercise of power and dominance within the institution of slavery.

Antebellum slavery was characterized by brutality and by the ideal of humans as chattel. For system of slavery to be successful, a level of dominance had to be achieved. Dominance was one of the primary pillars in patriarchal system of the United States’ economy and social order. So, white male slave owners sexually assaulted their male slaves to enforce their dominance. The story of a slave named Luke was an example of this brutal dominance. In Harriet Jacobs’ narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she retells this young man’s story. He was owned by a wealthy man who died. Luke was left as the possession of this man’s son. Luke was sometimes “not allowed to wear any thing but his shirt, in order to be in readiness to be flogged” and was “chained to the bedside of this cruel and disgusting wretch.” She described the son’s ideas as “the strangest freaks of despotism” that “were of a nature too filthy to be repeated.” Jacobs used words like “freak” and “filthy” which highlighted the homoerotic undertones of the relationship. Not only was Luke ordered to remain naked from the waist down, but he was required to submit to every whim of his master. If Luke failed “to submit to his orders, the constable was immediately sent for.”⁵ The slave owner used fear along with sadomasochistic violations to dominate his property. Luke was placed in the position of having to decide whether to submit to his master’s despotic sexual requests or face the consequences of dealing with a constable, considering that the constable may not be told the exact nature of the master’s request.

⁵ Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. 1861. p. 179.

The implied sexual assault of Luke is an example of how a slave submission could be achieved using forced sex acts.

Along with establishing a strong sense of dominance over slaves, male owners also used sexual assault to dehumanize slaves. In his 1855 narrative, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, written by himself*, Frederick Douglass chronicled his enslavement to Edward Covey from January of 1834 to Christmas of 1835. Douglass's former master, Thomas Auld, sent him to this slave breaker. Douglass's strong sense of self and defiance was a threat to the oppressive and patriarchal system of chattel slavery. Therefore, "like a wild young animal," Douglass was "to be broken to the yoke of a bitter and life-long bondage."⁶ Within his first month in Covey's possession, Douglass was sent into the woods to collect wood with two oxen. Unexperienced in performing such a task, Douglass damaged the oxen, the wagon, and a gate. Douglass was sent into a secluded part of woods and ordered to strip. Douglass "indicated a stern determination to do no such thing." Covey then "rushed" upon Douglass "with something of the savage fierceness of a wolf, tore off the few and thinly worn clothes" Douglass was wearing and flogged him. In the scope of this type of punishment, there was no need to strip the slave of their clothing. This need for seclusion and forced nudity suggested that an omission of the sexual nature of Covey's tactics have occurred in Douglass's retelling of the events of this flogging. Furthermore, this incident "was less than many which came after it."⁷ The discipline Douglass received at the hands of Covey was not abnormal, but the need to be nude and exposed for the punishment implied that some type of sexual assault occurred in conjunction with beating. Consequentially, Covey succeeded in dimming Douglass's sense of manhood and humanity. The dehumanization

⁶ Douglass. *Life and times of Frederick Douglass, written by himself*. 1892. p. 141.

⁷ Douglass. *Life and times of Frederick Douglass, written by himself*. 1892. p. 147-148

of Douglass as a slave was achieved in great part by the repeated sexual violation he experienced.

After successfully escaping to freedom, Douglass published *The North Star*, an anti-slavery newspaper, in 1847. In a public letter to his former master, Thomas Auld, Douglass alluded to the repeated rapes he experienced. He inquired how Mr. Auld would feel, “were I, some dark night, in the company with a band of hardened villains,” to kidnap and enslave his daughter, Amanda Auld. Douglass continued the scenario, asking what if Amanda was left “unprotected, a degraded victim to the brutal lust of fiendish overseers.”⁸ If read with a more discerning perception, this passage can be interpreted to have a deeper meaning. Throughout the letter, Douglass moves between the use of “I” and “her” suggesting that Douglass was describing the reality of the abuses he suffered at the hands of white male slave owners. Charles Clifton offered a “much more radical stance – one in which he [Douglass] positions the black male body (himself) in the role of female narrator who exposes the white rapist.”⁹ From this viewpoint, the emasculation of male slaves through rape by white men is more pronounced.

The above sources are non-fiction, but some modern fiction authors have also shown a “preoccupation with black male rape”¹⁰ according to Vincent Woodard. In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, a male rape scenario is depicted with brutal accuracy. This story of an African-American family in the 1860’s was written to expose the savagery of slavery. The scene opened with black men being awakened at dawn by the sound of buckshot and then led out of their cages and made to kneel before white chain gang leaders. The chain gang member is asked if they

⁸ Douglass. “To My Former Master.” *The North Star*. September 8, 1848

⁹ Charles. “Rereading Voices From the Past: Images of Homo-Eroticism in the Slave Narrative.” 2001. p. 352

¹⁰ Woodward. *The Delectable Negro*. 2014. p. 219

“want some breakfast.” The breakfast offered is the forced oral sex. The scene ends with, “Occasionally a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus.”¹¹ Morrison only skims the surface of what had been obliterated from historical documentation. However, as Woodard wrote, Morrison’s inclusion of the scene in her novel “indicates the importance of beginning, as Carby suggests, to unearth a deeper, more particularized understanding of black male sexualization, sexual violation, and interior response to sexual brutality.”¹²

These examples of sexual assault among male owners and their slaves has a stronger social implication. Consider the discrimination and racism that permeates modern society due to the dehumanization and perception of an entire race as animals. Now combine the slave owner’s use of sexual assault and there’s no wonder that there is a fear of homosexuals in the male African American community. Although homosexuality is much more acceptable in society today, African American males were subjected to this type of assault for generations. They were made to feel inferior, emasculated, and unhuman. Like the idea of color blind racism, how can society expect these unforgivable deeds to simply be forgiven in a few decades. The forcible sodomy experienced by male slaves is a possible explanation for present day homonegativity within the African-American community. Homonegativity can be defined as negative actions or attitudes directed towards queer people. Homonegativity is different from homophobia in that the use of phobia implies an irrational fear of queer people or those perceived as queer. Considering the historical context of the sexual assault of male slaves, homophobia cannot be supported since the irrational fear can clearly be attributed to the shared experiences of male slaves.

¹¹ Morrison. *Beloved*. 1987. p. 110

¹² Woodward. *The Delectable Negro*. 2014. p. 219

There is no gene or cluster of genes that differentiates between race or ethnicity. This means that race is a social construct. This concept of racial differences evolved from the institution of slavery. To perpetuate the patriarchal society of the antebellum United States, white male property owners needed to brainwash their human property to believe that they were innately inferior to the whites. Although the resilience of an entire population countered this idea, there are still remnants of this within our society today. Unlike race, biology does support differences between male and female. However, the ideas in which a specific gender must behave falls within the concept of social construction. The idea that a man must provide security, protection, and finances is generated by what society deems acceptable. Male slaves were stripped of this liberty all the while experiencing further emasculation through forcible sodomy. It is also worth noting that anatomically the male slave owner could achieve the rape without being aroused. This poses the question of whether the slave owner was aroused by the sexual act itself or by the act of dominating and controlling another male. The sources suggested that the latter was the case.

The shame and guilt has been passed down by the ancestors through the socialization of black males as dominant and aggressive, traits that are deemed heterosexual. When constantly forced to defend, and protect their manhood against the ever-present power of their master, any hint of weakness or femininity, which society deems as homosexual traits, could be fatal. The only way to break this cycle and foster a change within the black male community is to bring these injustices and violations of the black male to light. Shame cannot survive in the light. Much more research and analysis must be done to tell the widely-ignored story of the black men who suffered at the hand of their white brothers.

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