



Violence, Domestic

See Conflict, Intra-racial

Violence, Racial

Many enslaved women experienced a lifetime of racial violence. Due to the social and historical constructions of race, black women often endured physical violence, sexual assault (including rape, forced breeding, and the manipulation of their reproductive lives), and even race-based medical experimentation.

Racial violence against enslaved women began during the Middle Passage. From 1518 to the mid-nineteenth century, between ten and eleven million Africans, not including those who died in transit, were forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean to plantations in the Caribbean and Americas. Captives were tightly packed onto ships, chained together in spoon fashion, and forced to lie in their bodily waste during a transatlantic journey that lasted from 1 to 3 months or longer. Enslaved women who survived the journey were stripped naked, examined to determine their reproductive capacities, and then sold on the auction block to the highest bidder. Once sold, slaveholders and overseers immediately began a behavior modification process, referred to as “seasoning,” which was designed to break the spirits and obliterate the cultural identities of their newly acquired bond-people. For example, Africans were forced to adopt new names, denounce their former religious practices, learn a new language, and accept their status as chattel property in a new land. Consequently, any action that enslaved women made to assert their independence was criminalized.

“Misconduct,” including failure to complete assigned tasks or perceived disrespect toward white authority figures, resulted in brutal punishment. Slaveholders, slave traders, and overseers administered severe whippings, which were often public spectacles used to reinforce white racial domination and male patriarchy. For example, enslaved women were tied down or faced against a tree or wall, stripped of their tattered clothing, and given 50 to 100 lashes with a leather whip. Sometimes salt or pepper was rubbed into their open wounds (called “pickling”) to prolong the pain. Moreover, punishment was meted out regardless of infirmity or pregnancy. According to eyewitness accounts, slaveholders dug holes to

accommodate pregnant bondwomen's swollen abdomens and then proceeded with the whippings. If convicted of a capital crime, such as murder, in some states, pregnant bondwomen had their executions delayed until after giving birth to preserve the health of the enslaved offspring. Yet for the longest time, slaveholders could maim or kill their slave property without consequence in many jurisdictions.

Moreover, plantation mistresses also subjected domestic enslaved girls and women to severe abuse. Even though many of them knew of their husband's infidelities, the sexually victimized enslaved women became targets of the mistresses' wrath. As a result, some irate mistresses whipped or disfigured enslaved women or sold away their mixed-race children, who were fathered by the mistresses' adulterous husbands. The threat of selling a bondperson away from loved ones and family members was perhaps one of the most powerful weapons available to slaveholders.

Throughout the South, some able-bodied white males acted as slave patrollers, who were formal and informal officials charged with reinforcing white domination over a black underclass. They broke up large gatherings of bondpeople, suppressed slave revolts, inflicted impromptu punishments, and randomly searched slave quarters, often at night. In addition, they apprehended runaways—both male and female. Escape attempts often resulted in brutal punishment, including cutting off of one's ears, branding on the cheek, and hamstringing or cutting the tendons in the back of the legs to prevent the victim from walking.

The purpose of this frequent and horrific violence was to entrench white power, ensure obedience, and to dehumanize the victim and the entire enslaved community. Some slaveholders found sadistic pleasure in the violence that they inflicted. In his 1850 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, the author recalled statements made by the man who whipped his wife: "He had rather paddle a female than eat when he was hungry" (Bibb, p. 105).

Virtually every known nineteenth-century female slave narrative contained a reference to the ever-present threat and reality of sexual exploitation and coercion. For instance, in her narrative, *Incidence in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs (2001), who spent years eluding the unwanted sexual advances of her North Carolina master, wrote: "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (66). Embedded in her bold pronouncement was the recognition that enslaved women faced a unique threat and danger—primarily the threat of sexual assault. More specifically, enslaved women were often coerced, bribed, ordered, and, of course, violently forced to have sexual relations with white slaveholders, his male family members, and by extension, his friends, and other male employees. Historian Darlene Hine estimated that at least 58 percent of all enslaved women between the ages of 15 and 30 had been sexually assaulted by white men.

In fact, bondwomen's reproductive lives were highly regulated by slaveholders, who had an economic stake in producing more a stable cadre of workers. On the

auction block, enslaved women endured crude gynecological examinations, believed to help determine her capacity for childbearing. Once they were purchased, various strategies, ranging from manipulation to overt coercion, were used to encourage frequent childbearing. For example, women who did not produce were whipped or sold off to unsuspecting buyers as “damaged” goods. Other planters offered a reduction in arduous field labor, additional rations of food and clothing, and even monetary rewards. Although there is considerable debate about the extent of slave breeding, there are indeed documented cases of slaveholders who paired healthy bondpeople with the goal of producing more enslaved property. Mixed-race enslaved women, sometimes referred to as “fancy girls,” were bred and sold, often for staggering prices, to wealthy slaveholders as concubines.

Regardless of the method—incentives, threats, rape, or forced breeding—on average enslaved women began childbearing about two years earlier than their white southern counterparts. More specifically, the average bondwoman became sexually active in her mid- to late teens, conceived her first child around age 19, and had a total of eight or nine pregnancies over the course of her reproductive life, resulting in an average of four or five miscarriages and four live births. The collective toll of this racial and reproductive violence on enslaved women was evident. Bondwomen’s fertility decreased, miscarriage rates rose, and slave infant mortality averaged twice that of white infants. Surviving children, similar to farm animals, could be sold, which then separated families and created unimaginable grief.

During slavery, bondwomen were forced participants in medical experiments. For example, Dr. J. Marion Sims, hailed as the “Father of Modern Gynecology,” performed surgery on 30 unanesthetized enslaved women on the assumption that black women did not feel pain to the same degree as white women. Some women endured multiple operations before he successfully perfected a method to repair vesio-vaginal fistulas, which are tears in the vaginal walls that allow a continuous leakage of urine to flow into the vagina. Other surgeons performed risky and painful medical procedures, such as cesarean sections, on enslaved women before attempting them on white women.

Some slave jurisdictions developed elaborate systems of laws, which condoned and promoted violence against enslaved blacks. These were generally known as “slave codes.” For example a 1705 Virginia law stated: “If any slave resist his master correcting such slave, and shall happen to be killed in such correction the master shall be free of all punishment as if such accident never happened.” In addition, it was a criminal offense, punishable by 30 lashes, for an enslaved person to strike a white person, even in self-defense. Furthermore, these slave codes applied equally to bondmen and bondwomen.

Ultimately, enslaved women used many techniques to resist racial violence. During the Middle Passage, they participated in shipboard revolts. In the antebellum South, they poisoned their masters and their masters’ families, ran away,

shirked work, and simply fought back. For example, in 1835, Harriet Jacobs hid in her grandmother's attic crawlspace for seven years to escape her master's sexual advances. After she endured five years of brutal sexual assaults, Celia, a Missouri bondswoman, killed her master in self-defense and burned his body in a fireplace. Similarly, black women resisted control of their reproductive lives as well. They used medicinal herbs or chewed roots of the cotton plant to prevent or terminate pregnancies and, in extreme cases, committed infanticide. When faced with recapture and the return to slavery, Margaret Garner, the mother of four, made a fateful decision. She killed her two-year-old daughter and attempted to kill her other three children in a barn. Although she loved her children, in a single, tragic act of defiance, she decided to destroy her master's "property" rather than see her children suffer a life of slavery and servitude.

Historian Nell Irvin Painter argued that "soul murder" resulted from the habitual abuse and harassment of enslaved women and manifested itself as depression, low self-esteem, and anger. Despite the occurrences of ceaseless racial violence, black women actively resisted their victimization and became resilient survivors.

Carolyn West

See also Concubinage; Contraception; Domestic Slave Trade; Fancy Girls; Breeding; Garner, Margaret; Health, Disabilities, and Soundness; Infanticide; Jezebel Stereotype; Laws; Medical Experimentation and Surgery; Middle Passage; Overseers; Owners; Plantation Mistresses; Punishment; Representations; Resistance; Violence, Sexual; "Wench Betty," Murder of.

Suggested Reading

Ira Berlin, S. F. Miller, and M. Favreau, *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk about Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Freedom* (New York: New Press, 1998); Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Published by the Author, 1850); Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2001); Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985).

Enslaved Women in America

AN ENCYCLOPEDIA

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