

Commodification of the Black Body, Sexual Objectification and Social Hierarchies during Slavery

BY IMAN COOPER

The horror of the institution of slavery during the late eighteenth century was not that it displaced millions of African people from their homes to the US, but rather that it laid the foundation for the commodification and dehumanization of the black body that was culturally, socially, and politically maintained for hundreds of years to come. This essay will first explore the commodification of African captives as the foundation of my analysis, in order to later examine the social and political ramifications of the sexual objectification that was rampant during the slavery era, through the analysis of Harriet Jacob's slave narrative. Slavery had long-reaching effects on the conceptualization of the black body, which is later depicted by the emergence of the mulatto class. White slave owners executed their perceived right under the creation of commoditized black bodies to sexually abuse their slaves, producing mixed race (mulatto) children. Social, religious, economic, and political factors allowed the sustained commodification of black bodies to occur. As a result of commodification, black bodies were rendered disciplined subjects; beholden to the will of white men. Simultaneously, white planters' wives were socially conditioned to remain publicly silent in the face of their husband's betrayal and abuse; hence they often executed their anger on the black slave, further rendering the black body an object to be claimed by others to enact their will upon. Commodification of the black body at the start of the era allowed for the objectification of the black female body to continue throughout slavery, as portrayed by the simultaneous abuse of the masters and the subsequent

retribution of the master's wives, which were enacted on the black female body.

Commodification of the Black Body

In order to understand how this discourse of objectification and exploitation operated later on, it is first necessary to explain how the black body was rendered an object. Stephanie Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery* creates a basis of understanding how African captives were systematically turned into transatlantic commodities. Later, we will depart from this foundation to demonstrate how commodification created the basis for the continued abuse and objectification of black bodies later on in slavery, through the abusive relationships by the masters and the wives.

Smallwood points to the intentional, replicated violence of the system that allowed the exploitation to continue, since "only by [the] ceaseless replication of the system's violence did African sellers and European buyers render captives... human commodities to market"²⁵. Over time, the replication of individual choices to capture, buy, and trade African slaves created a societal structure that equalized the value of human life with a market value. The moment that these steps crossed over from simply the process used on a daily basis, to a rigid structural system of oppression was the moment that bodies became objectified for future use in slavery. When lives revolve around market values and are believed to be valuable only for the potential profitability they may bring, the very fabric that

²⁵ Stephanie Smallwood, *Turning African Slaves into Atlantic Commodities.* "Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora." (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007), 34.

holds communities together shifts. Social and cultural ethics are then driven by economics, rather than human interaction. This was exactly what occurred with the commodification of black bodies as market objects. Hence, commodification was primarily driven by economics and rationalized through science where “economic exchange [transformed] independent beings into human commodities whose most ‘socially relevant feature’ was their exchangeability” and “the practices that underwrote African commodification reflected a rationalized science of human deprivation”²⁶. Instead of being valued for the contributions they could make to society, human beings became a means to an end—a means of furthering one’s personal agenda and upward social mobility. Depriving humans of dignity, agency, respect, and basic human rights was also the tool that was later used by slave-owners in order to create and maintain the inferior slave subject. Essentially, the humanity of the black body was ruptured into an object to be bought and sold, in order to satisfy the economic desires of the white slave owners.

Role of the Market

The driving force of the market itself should not be underestimated as the key actor in in shaping how human beings became to be viewed as mere commodities. Smallwood argues “the most powerful instrument locking captives in, as commodities for Atlantic trade, *was the culture of the market itself...* [] buying people who had no evident social value was not a violation or an act of questionable morality, but rather a *keen and appropriate response to opportunity*, for this was *precisely what one was*

²⁶ Smallwood, *Turning African Slaves into Atlantic Commodities.* "Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora," 35.

supposed to do in the market".²⁷ This is an important shift away from the assumed paradigm that analyzes the faults of slavery from a moralistic paradigm, highlighting instead how people acted as rational actors in response to the established market. The market itself then becomes an actor in maintaining structural violence.

The connection between the international, the state, and the market is the very political economy that Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and John Maynard Keynes refer to, where people are grafted into the inevitable power dynamics that the market creates. In *A River of Dark Dreams*, Walter Johnson analyzes the global economy through Adam Smith, who wrote:

Merchant capital was by nature mobile: "it seems to have no fixed residence anywhere, [wandering] from place to place..." Rather than inhabiting space, *merchant capital made it*, fabricating connections and annihilating distances according to rates of [interest rates]...the laws of supply and demand²⁸

The market so thoroughly succeeded in draining humans of social value, that "[captives] were severed from community, [to the extent] that their lives were no longer beyond price: they could be made freely available in exchange for currency"²⁹. The market literally separated people from the families and communities they are embedded in. Equating human lives with

²⁷ Ibid., 56-62.

²⁸ Walter Johnson, *A River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard/Belknap, 2013), 11.

²⁹ Smallwood, *Turning African Slaves into Atlantic Commodities.* "Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora," 63.

economic values was problematic, as that value became the priority for evaluating the worth of someone's life, wherever they went. In the US specifically, this evaluation is created along distinct racial lines, as the black body was rendered valuable only in the economic sense, rather than any other social markers of value. Hence, the commodification discourse was firmly established before African captives even left the African coast. The European framework of understanding economic interactions was then further maintained by the institution of slavery, once slaves were physically delivered to the US.

The commodification discourse was created and maintained by several specific methodologies. First, food rationing was used to deny captives of their most fundamental physiological needs where, “traders reduced people to the sum of their biological parts...scaling life down to an arithmetical equation”³⁰. Strikingly, this mathematical system was later utilized by slave-owners in America to sustain the maximum amount of slaves for the lowest possible cost, while totally disregarding other aspects of provision that would maintain slaves' dignity. Secondly, language was used as a primary tool to render African captives inhuman, where “merchants used a special lexicon to cast their human wares into the mold of the qualities buyers desired...through this designation traders [offered] what the market demanded”³¹. In other words, different words and phrases were specifically utilized to deliver to the buyers the subject that they had in mind already. The market, therefore, not only shaped the language used to disguise the selling of humans, but more importantly, language effectively rendered slaves silent subjects to be acted upon—denying their

³⁰ Ibid, 43.

³¹ Ibid., 52.

agency.

Additionally, by making people commodities, this discourse strategically severed any possible future connection slaves could make with other communities, creating a “nearly impassable gulf between...any community that might claim them as new members...[where any attempts] to return to an alternative place of social belonging, [only demonstrated] time and circumstances were firmly against them” where they were neither able to return to their former community nor fit into their new communities in Western countries³². Essentially, “enslavement robbed [slaves] of the markers of their social existence—the violence of commodification signaled to [the] captives...that they had been doomed to social annihilation”³³. Human beings define themselves by their social interactions and relationships; the denial of these social relationships renders slaves subhuman and abnormal. Social annihilation is a motif that is carried over into the US context, as slaves were discouraged from creating strong relational bonds with those around them, in order to keep them obedient subjects to the white master. The perpetuated separation of slave families, for example, was a blatant disregard for the structure of the black family, which had long-reaching implications and detrimental social, cultural, and political effects. Some common practices included, the sale of family members to different masters in different locations (e.g. selling children away from their parents) and masters creating sexual relationships with married slave women, among other equally destructive tactics.

While black slaves could have an unofficial marriage or partnership, “enslaved people could not legally marry in any

³² Ibid., 52-55.

³³ Ibid., 60.

American colony or state. Colonial and state laws considered them property and commodities, not legal persons who could enter into contracts and marriage was, and is, very much a legal contract”³⁴. Therefore, the black man had no defense, if at any moment the master decided to have sex with his wife. When examining the family structure as a whole, Historian Michael Tadman estimated that, “approximately one third of enslaved children in the upper South states of Maryland and Virginia experienced family separation in one of three possible scenarios: sale away from parents; sale with mother away from father; or sale of mother or father away from child”³⁵. In this way, the separation of the black family through sale was an ever-present possibility for slaves, and played a huge role in the destruction of the black family and of black marriages.

These methods were employed to remind the slave subjects the complete inability they had to control any meaningful relationships that governed their lives. In other words, slaves were denied the agency to make basic life choices, such as who their partner would be, how they spent their free time, or the amount of time they wanted to invest in the relationship with their children; rights that the white masters took for granted. This loss of kinship that was disemboweled from the African people during commodification then becomes the basis by which objectification of the black body in the US was continued. Since black bodies were socially constructed as

³⁴ Heather Andrea Williams, “How Slavery Affected African American Families”, National Humanities Center. Accessed April 1, 2015, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1609-1865/essays/aafamilies.htm>

³⁵ Ibid.

objects to be disciplined and governed, there was no reason for whites to view them in any other social capacity, and thus no motivation to challenge the injustices that were enacted on the black body.

From Commodification to Sexual Objectification and Exploitation

This social conceptualization of the black body helps explain the rationale that allowed sexual exploitation of black slaves to both occur and be widely unchallenged by mainstream society. In hindsight, the objectification of female slaves is obvious, and one may be wondering why no one challenged this system of abuse and exploitation. However, it is important to understand the various social dynamics that were at play during this time period, starting with the role of southern planter's wives.

White plantation culture dictated the behavior of planters' wives; social norms stipulated that women were to be docile, gentle, and turn a blind eye to the infidelities of their husbands, whose existence they were keenly aware of. Under this cultural imperative, families operated under a model where ordered obedience created hierarchy and respect for the patriarch of the family, and produced the appearance of a well-ordered family and thus society. According to Jacequeline Allain's contextualization of the South, "planter-class white women [were guardians of the home] who were responsible for upholding traditional Christian values and keeping peace within the domestic sphere. As such, they were valued for their homemaking abilities, maternal instinct, and, perhaps above all

else, their virtue”³⁶. Female virtue and docility went hand in hand. It is also important to note here that, in contrast to the black woman, white women’s value is determined relative to religion, not by the market. In other words, white women’s character was established on the basis of integral, moral grounds; while black women’s integrity was proven through the external, economic forces of the market that had no room for ethics.

Interestingly, Hegel, a central theorist in postcolonial studies, argues that identity categories must exist in an oppositional structure to each other; for one’s own identity cannot be recognized and validated if there is no coordinating opposite category that affirms the legitimacy of one’s own. For example, one would not claim to be beautiful if there was not the implicit understanding that the opposite identity, ugly, also existed. Identity categories are distinctly oppositional in nature, for one to claim an identity immediately implies negation of the opposite, just as plausible identity---by claiming beauty one inherently reject of the claim of being ugly. Thus identities are always relative to someone else. In this sense, white women’s purity could only be maintained by the simultaneous upholding of the black woman’s impurity.

In this way, white women were also rendered disciplined subjects and were products of their society. Granted, the creation of the white woman as a disciplined subject was crafted and maintained in distinctly different way than that of the black

³⁶ Jacqueline Allain, “Sexual Relations between Elite White Women and Enslaved Men in the Antebellum South: A Socio-Historical Analysis.” Student Pulse, January 1, 2013, Accessed April 5, 2015, <http://www.studentpulse.com/articles/747/3/sexual-relations-between-elite-white-women-and-enslaved-men-in-the-antebellum-south-a-socio-historical-analysis>

subject. In no way I am implying their suffering was equal to that of slave women; however, it is important to examine how they were rendered subjects as well. Since white women were placed on a Christian pedestal and rendered 'pure', they did not appear to have any agency to speak out against the illicit affairs of their husbands. Rather, white women were conditioned into acceptance and docility by social norms and religious values.

While white women were thought to be physically inferior to men, they were still believed to be morally superior creatures, hence the reason why white Southern women's sexual purity and virtue was emphasized. Although men frequently had affairs, either with slaves or with other white mistresses, it was not socially acceptable for white women to do the same. Nor were white women allowed to comment on the affairs of their husbands, regardless of how explicit they might be. Here, one realizes how gender acted as the primary component in this structural system that determined what was admissible and what was not. The different standards of conduct that women were held to, in comparison to men allows for the intervention of the possibility of solidarity between the disciplined bodies of the black slaves and the white women to become a bit clearer. Gender served as the point of similarity between these two groups, as it disciplined women's bodies as subjects to their male counterparts. While white women were in an undeniable superior position to that of black slaves, their bodies and behavior were still disciplined within the regulations of both white society and the male desire for female inferiority. Planter's wives lacked the power and social mobility that their husbands possessed. In this way, white women's sexuality was strictly regulated during the era of slavery.

Regulation, in all forms, was simply the inevitable product of the institution of slavery. The Southern way of life

was defined by white supremacy, slavery, and planter aristocracy, which were, “inextricably linked with the sexual regulation of women, especially upper class women; the purity of white women, when contrasted with the sexually lascivious black Jezebel archetype” essentially “served to highlight the alleged superiority of white womanhood, and by extension, whiteness”³⁷. Again, white women’s value and purity was held in sharp contrast to the supposed lewdness of black women’s bodies. This contrast was innate in disciplining both black and white bodies, as it allowed each to hold the other in contempt. Thus it discouraged both parties from pursuing any future interactions that were outside of this social construction. Consequently, both bodies were accordingly regulated to the assumptions that the other one held.

Historian, Catherine Clinton, observes that regulation of white wives was essential to maintaining the institution of slavery stating, “if [wives] could live above reproach, [then] their husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers could boast of the superiority of their civilization”³⁸. Therefore, it was more than individual purity at stake in this paradigm; it was the very reputation of European civility that hung in balance. Colonialism and imperialism relied upon this notion of superiority, which allowed whites to set themselves in opposition to their inferior ‘uncivil’ nonwhite counterparts, and justify their actions of structural oppression as acceptable. Therefore, the “sullyng influence of slavery must not touch the women of the upper

³⁷ “Sexual Relations between Elite White Women and Enslaved Men in the Antebellum South: A Socio-Historical Analysis”

³⁸ Brooks Higginbotham, Evelyn. “African American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race” *Signs* 17 (1992): 251-274.

class lest the entire structure crumble”³⁹. In this sense, the entire system of white superiority during slavery relied upon the sustained purity of their white women, set in contrast with the impurity of the black woman. Discipline of the body and of one’s thoughts was a means to further highlight the differences between the white planter woman and the commoditized black body.

Fetishization of the Black Female Slave and Mulatto Children

Black women were both fetishized and regarded as impure, when seen in contrast to the modesty of white women; therefore at the height of slavery, relationships with slave women were decidedly culturally unacceptable. However, just because these relationships were frowned upon does not mean that men resisted crossing the line of this social taboo; they did. The violation of this boundary by slave-owners was sometimes shamelessly explicit, while other times they attempted to keep their affairs secretive, for fear of both the societal backlash and the anger of their wives. As a result, the mulatto class grew extensively during the slavery era, becoming a visible marker of the extensiveness of this issue in the society. The skin color of these children served as a visible reminder for the wives and the community of their husband’s infidelity. Masters sometimes took care of their mulatto children and eventually freed them, but more often than not, children either worked on the plantation, or (at their wives’ insistence) were put up for auction and sold into slavery. As the mistress of the plantation, wives

³⁹ “Sexual Relations between Elite White Women and Enslaved Men in the Antebellum South: A Socio-Historical Analysis”

held a degree of power that could either improve the lives of slaves on her plantation, or create further harm and devastating destruction.

Analysis of a Slave Narrative and the Process of Sexual Objectification:

Harriett Jacobs is a woman whose story highlights the relationship between the commodification of the black body and the additional violence suffered at the hands of planters' wives. Her 1861 autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is one of the few firsthand accounts of slavery from an American female writer. Harriet was born a slave; however due to her parents' sheltering she was not aware that she was actually a slave until her parents died when she was six years old. After their death, she was sold to her first mistress where she was promptly made aware of her status as a slave. It was with this mistress that she learned how to read and write, a skill that later enabled her to publish her memoirs. It wasn't until she was sold to the Norcom family that her troubles initiated, where "the war of my life had begun; and though... powerless, I resolved never to be conquered"⁴⁰. It was this fierce determination that later allowed Jacobs to escape the persistent advances of her owner. Jacobs' master, Dr. Norcom, was attracted to her when she was still a young age and began making advances toward her on a regular basis. She recounts:

But I now entered on my fifteenth year--a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul

⁴⁰ Harriet A. Jacobs and Valerie Smith, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New-York: Oxford UP, 1988), 19 .

words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt. He was a crafty man, and resorted to many means to accomplish his purposes. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him.” “My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection?”⁴¹

Jacobs also recalled one particular moment where on “a lovely spring morning...the beauty [of the sunlight dancing here and there] seemed to mock my sadness. For my master, whose restless, craving, vicious nature roved about day and night, seeking whom to devour, had just left me with scorching words; words that scathed ear and brain like fire. O, how I despised him!”⁴². Dr. Norcom’s relentless pursuit of Jacobs and her inability to escape his advances demonstrate the hopelessness that many female slaves experienced when their masters abused them. Female slaves not only had to combat their inferior social

⁴¹ (Quote continued): No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage. [The slave girl] will become prematurely knowing in evil things. Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master's footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave. I longed for someone to confide in. But Dr. Flint swore he would kill me, if I was not as silent as the grave”. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 34.

⁴² *Ibid.*,11.

status because of their race, they also were discriminated against for the sole fact that they were women. Therefore, the gender hierarchy that existed during this time period ensured that women were always regarded as inferior to men—which created a significant asymmetrical power differential.

The Role of Gender

Not only were the bodies of slave women literally disciplined as the means for extracting labor, but as Jacobs demonstrates their bodies were often also subject to the sexual desires of their masters. Jacobs explains the double burden female slaves endured, explaining that “the slave girl is raised in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master...are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped and starved into submission to their will”⁴³. Here, the desire of white men is understood to be superior to all other desires, reinforcing the notion of the importance of the gender hierarchy and the imbalance of power. Sexual violence inflicted by the hands of their masters was the true reality that many slaves faced; she writes that- “when they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women”. Women, especially black slaves, lacked agency to refuse such abuse; power was not on her side. Here, Jacobs is referring to the fact that women have the extra burden of having to defend themselves (or give in to) the sexual advances of the masters, creating an

⁴³ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 16.

important distinction between the stories of slave women and those of men.

As a result of this double burden women carried, female slaves were often forced into making decisions that compromised their personal integrity. Jacobs's strong personality and determination never 'to be conquered' led her to continually refuse Dr. Norcom; instead she entered into a voluntary relationship with another white man—Samuel Treadwell Sawyer, an attorney and Congressional Representative for North Carolina who she later had two children with. Children resulting from such relationships were considered slaves, since slavery followed the mother's lineage. In this context 'conquered' refers explicitly to Jacob's sexual virtue, in contrast with the sense of entitlement the white master had, to control the black body in every manner including sexually. While she still felt shame about deciding to be with another white man instead of the black man she loved, she reasoned that "it seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion"⁴⁴. As mentioned earlier, this example highlights the total disregard for the structure of the black family, as her relationship with a black slave was not even a viable option. In this minor assertion of sexual choice, Jacobs found some sense of agency, even though the cost was despising herself and a loss of self-respect. This poor excuse for a 'choice' highlights the limited amount of options available to black women during this period. This is in regards to having agency to define how they wanted to live their life, including determining their own sexual partners. The inability to have the *freedom to* determine who had access to the most intimate part of their beings undoubtedly had long-term crippling effects on both the internal and external image of the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 52.

black slave in how she viewed herself and how she was viewed by others, but also had long-term implications for the very fabric that knit the black family together. The black body as an individual and as a collective was subject to the racial and economic system that held it permanently in place as an object to be acted upon, through both commodification and sexual exploitation.

Inevitably, black bodies were subjected to the inherently unequal power dynamics operating in slavery. These power dynamics were merely the continuation of the hierarchal social roles that had been established when black bodies were bought and sold on the African coast, where the black body was continually subservient to the white master. This commoditization of the black body laid the foundation for the sexual objectification of its female slaves during the eighteenth century. In the preface of *Incidents of a Slave Girl*, Valerie Smith comments that “the slave codes drew no distinction between the slave's autonomy and the master's property rights; slave women were thus subject to rape and to forced liaisons that both satisfied their masters' sexual desires and increased their capital accumulation”⁴⁵. Jacobs recounts how “he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in everything; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his”, further demonstrating how the black body was expected to be subject to the white patriarchy⁴⁶. Here, the erasure of will and the denial of dignity that is starkly reminiscent of the process used to commodify African captives is clear. These two factors were central to the sustainment of the black body as inferior in every social, moral, cultural, and political plane throughout the

⁴⁵ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Preface.

⁴⁶ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 16.

reign of slavery. The slavery system perpetuates the erasure of agency and denies the slaves the right to have a say in the decisions that affected their own lives. This eradication of agency was implicit ever since the moment slaves were commoditized.

Not only did slave women have to deal with the advances of their masters, they also had to deal with the retaliation of their white mistresses. Since planter's whites were unable to address the problem directly, they often took out their aggression and anger on the object of their husband's attention: the black body. For example, Jacobs recalls Mrs. Norcam's increasing suspicion of her husband's interest in Harriett caused Mrs. Norcam to "watch her husband with unceasing vigilance; but he was well practiced in means to evade it. What he could not find opportunity to say in words he manifested in signs. I had entered my sixteenth year, and every day it became more apparent that my presence was intolerable to [Mrs. Norcom]"⁴⁷. Her mistress also felt that Harriett was the perpetuator of these advances "she felt that her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted; but she had no compassion for the poor victim of her husband's perfidy. She pitied herself as a martyr; but she was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slave was placed"⁴⁸. This speaks to the selfish way that white wives placed themselves at the center of the conflict, refusing to acknowledge her husband's poor behavior, and instead placing the blame squarely on the victim's shoulders.

⁴⁷ Ibid.,32.

⁴⁸ Ibid.,32.

Factors leading to sexual exploitation and contextualizing “consensus” relationships

While sexual violence was a reality that slave women had to endure, there were also notable long-term romantic relationships and concubine style arrangements that have been recorded historically. For example, Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemmings had a long-term relationship until he died, which resulted in six mix-raced children. However, many scholars suggest that the nature of even seemingly romantic master-slave relationships must be contested, since “the enormous imbalance of gender and racial power between the two parties problematizes the notion of a truly consensual romantic relationship between a slave master and his female slave. These so-called consensual sexual partnerships can be seen, like rape, as an exercise in white patriarchal authority”⁴⁹. For instance, Jacobs was not permitted to marry the free black man she fell in love with, so she chose to be in a consensual relationship with Sawyer; however this decision was made out of fear and awareness of the power held by her white master. Traditional white patriarchal authority was set in contrast to the freedom, mobility, and agency that eluded the black body.

Additionally, some people believe the sexual relationships between the master and his slave were a result of the “1808 federal ban on the importation of slaves, and [the increasing influence of] western competition in cotton production” (Boundless). In this paradigm, rape of the black body was explained in economic terms, suggesting rape was used as a means of simply increasing the number of slave

⁴⁹ “Sexual Relations between Elite White Women and Enslaved Men in the Antebellum South: A Socio-Historical Analysis”

bodies on a plantation without having to engage the market directly. Relating the black body to economic viability echoes the language utilized by the slave captors in the process of systematically commodifying the black body as an object. There was also the social assumption that black bodies were exotic and rugged, and this fetishization of the African body might be seen as another reason why relationships of these types occurred. Black females were seen as sexually promiscuous and lustful, thus cases of sexual violence were often viewed as being the fault of the black woman. These cultural assumptions were successful in indirectly reinforcing the notion of the pure white woman, set against the vileness of the black one.

Conclusion

The commodification of the black body at the early turn of the century laid the foundation for the relationships that existed later on between both the slaves and the slave owners, and the slave and the planters' wives. The black body was made an object of the market, a subject whose basic desires were subordinated to those of the slave owners. The rhetoric of commodification was later apparent in how women's bodies were further disciplined during slavery, through the abuse of their masters. Parallels can be drawn between how the black body and the white female body were disciplined by society's cultural, social, and economic imperatives, as they were both confined to a specific role in society. Gender hierarchy plays an important role in the discipline of both bodies. Even though white women's sexuality was strictly regulated in Southern plantation culture, resulting in an inability to prevent their husbands from having affairs with black slaves, the two struggles were still not the same by any means. Nor did the

discipline of the white wives' bodies justify the further violence that was enacted on the black body in revenge. Through the initial commodification process, black bodies were positioned to be subject to the white patriarchal system for the entirety of the slavery era.

Bibliography

Allain, Jacqueline. "Sexual Relations between Elite White Women and Enslaved Men in the Antebellum South: A Socio-Historical Analysis." *Student Pulse*. January 1, 2013. Accessed April 5, 2015.

Clinton, Catherine. *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South*. New York: Pantheon, 1982. Print.

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 1988. Print.

Jacobs, Harriet A., and Valerie Smith. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. New-York: Oxford UP, 1988. Print.

Manfra, Meghan. "A Teacher's Guide To Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl (2008)*: n. pag. Penguins Group and North Carolina State University. Web. 3 Nov. 2014.

Smallwood, Stephanie E. "Turning African Slaves into Atlantic Commodities." *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007. Print.

"On Master's Sexual Abuse of Slaves: Master-Slave Relationship, Enslavement, African American Identity": Vol. I, 1500-1865, Primary Resources." U.S. History and Literature, Toolbox Library, National Humanities Center. January 1, 2007. Accessed Nov 3, 2014.

Johnson, Walter *A River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard/Belknap, 2013).

Williams, Heather Andrea. "How Slavery Affected African American Families", Freedom's Story, Teacher Serve, National Humanities Center. Accessed April 1, 2015.