Me Too?: Erasure of Sexual Assault in Slave Narratives

By Laney Jolley Smith

Abstract:

With the Hollywood led Times Up and co-opted #Meton movements, sexual assault is part of the every day conversation in a way not seen before. However, these narratives do not always give voice to further marginalized groups within these movements. Unfortunately, this neglect of black female sexual assault victims is nothing new. In early African American literature, primarily slave narratives, sexual assault is omitted even as other acts of violence are told in truth. Harriet Jacobs, under the synoym Linda Brent, recounts her life of slavery in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, while begging for forgiveness and understanding for her sexual transgressions. While Brent insists that her sexual encounters are all consensual, scholars have suggested that she was indeed raped, but hides, or as Novian Whitsitt suggests 'masks,' this fact from the potential white Christian readers. In Frederick Douglass's narratives, he does not shy away from violence, but he also does not address sexual violence and rape in th same explicit tone. I propose that this is part of a systemic silencing of sexual assault, particularly in the cases of slaves and black women. Through the use of literary scholarship, slave narratives, and sexual assault stories this research project seeks to establish the intersectional understanding that it is hard enough for women to be believed, but especially so when their truth is dissected through a colored lens.

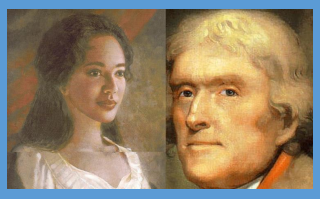
Cape Slave Assault Narrative: Reading the Blank Space

Because slavery was not isolated to the United States, we can look outside of the United States and other places of captivity to shed light on the systemic violence enacted on black female bodies. In her study "Gender and violence in Cape Slave Narratives and Post-Narrative," Jessica Murray looks to court records and neo-slave narrative fiction to help uncover the previously silenced stories of slave women. Also, she is exploring stories of slavery from the 18th century South Africa whereas most of the slave narratives in the U.S. take place much closer to emancipation in the 19th century.

- Thesis: "By reading selected eighteenth-century criminal records from the Cape of Good Hope, in which women's experiences are briefly voiced (albeit under exceptional, often violent, circumstances, I will show how these texts 'prise open hidden worlds of interior landscapes of pain and oppression'"(Murray 445).
- Cape of Good Hope:
  - Slave women were outnumbered, overpowered, and double marginalized by their race and gender. They experienced violence from both their white masters and male slave counterparts.
- Court records have to be scrutinized for gaps and silences, since these stories of gendered violence are filtered first through the testimony of the perpetrators, and then through presumably white men who record the testimonies.
- Researchers such as Murray and Yvette Christianse read these documents by looking "sideways" and reading the silences or gaps in the stories.
- "Trauma, with its temporal elusiveness, is not something that is available to the victim as coherent, linear narrative…The very nature of trauma, however, renders it antithetical to causality and linearity.

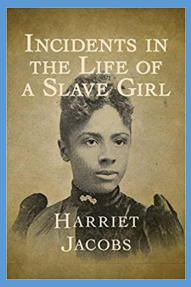
A Historical Precedent of Silence

- One of the ways we trivialize or erase the violence and rape enacted around the black female body is through the romanization of Master/Servant relationships and the sexualization of the black female body. One of the most prominent and notorious cases of this involves one of our founding father's Thomas Jefferson who fathered children with his slave Sally Hemings.
- "If, as a nation, we regard Jefferson as a founding father, then what might it mean if we permitted ourselves likewise to consider the relation between Jefferson and Hemings as a founding violence, an inaugural racial an sexual encounter, complicated to be sure, but suggestive o the violent subject formation blacks in the American republic?"(Spencer 507).
- "It is critical that scholars attend to the structuring absences that archives can (re)present, and interrogate in turn, what such silences might signify and how they impact the questions and arguments we advance about historical persons"(Spencer 509).



Masking and Selective Violence in Incidents in the Life and Narrative of the Life

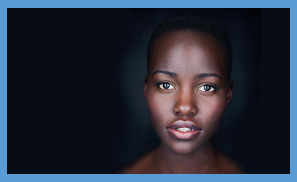
- *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*
  - Just as we have to read some of the "facts" of slavery and gendered violence sideways , the victims of that violence also have to portray their stories covertly. This can be done through omission, metaphor, or what Whitsitt characterizes in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl as "masking." Whitsitt see's Jacob's omission of sexual assault in her story told under the pseudonym of Linda Brent as utilizing an African tradition rather than lying or bending the truth for the audience and in a way, reclaiming her own agency: "While characterizing the multiple realities of abuse of other not-so-fortunate slave women, and portraying herself as coming perilously close to the subject of exploitation, Jacobs can now safely reconstruct herself as a heroine without sidestepping the crucial fate of rape, something central to many black women's lives"(85-86).
  - While this is a partial explanation of Jacobs' omission of sexual assault in her narrative, it is also important to consider the audience and their expectations based on their own experience. Presumably written for a predominantly white, female audience, Jacobs is continuously excusing herself to the audience for being indelicate and asking them to forgive her transgressions with Mr. Sands. This adherence to white virtue prevented Jacobs from being explicit in her detail of abuse under the bondage of slavery.
- *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
  - "I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood…I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood- stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it" (Douglass, 5).
  - While Douglass recounts this act of violence the numerous murders he witnessed during his time as a slave, he only alludes to any sexual violence. We see Aunt Hester being whipped and are told of her screams, but we are not told that as a favored slave, she was probably subject to other types of violence at the hands of her master.



"The felon's home in the penitentiary is preferable. He may repent, and turn from the error of his ways, and so find peace; but it is not so with a favorite slave. She is not allowed to have any pride of character. It is deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous."- Jacobs

Invisibility Continued: Contemporary Stories of Sexual Assault and Black Erasure

- Despite bringing attention to long standing traditions of sexual abuse,
- In 2005, A black Women's Health Imperative study found that African American women are raped more than their white counterparts and are less likely to report it.
- In a 2009 Study done by the Bureau of Justice Statistics they found that
  - Black females historically have experienced intimate partner violence at rates higher than white females.
  - Black females experienced higher rates of rape or sexual assault in 2008 than white females or females of other races.
  - Black females were four times more likely than white females to be murdered by a boyfriend or girlfriend.
- "It is critical to understand that rape and sexual assault against Black women under slavery were acts of torture, and these practices of sexual torture continue to be used against Black women today...When the US state officially codified Black people as chattel rather than human, Black women were constructed as unrapeable under the law. While slavery has officially ended (except in case of imprisonment), the rape and sexual torture of Black women and the justification for this torture--and sense of impunity among state and none-state perpetrators--still continue"-Farah Tanis of Black Women's Blueprint
- Although Tarana Burke inspired the #MeToo movement, it's use by Alyssa Milano, a white actress, pushed it into viral status. Because of this, and other high-profile white actresses co-opting the phrase, there was an increase in talk around sexual assault, but also the faces representing said talks were mainly white.
- While many actresses came out in this movement against Harvey Weinstein, his team only forcefully pushed back when black actress Lupita Nyong'o penned her account in a New York Times article.

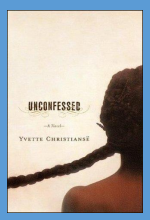


Jim Crow Era Erasure

- Ruth Thompson Miller and Leslie H. Picca used data from 92 interviews conducted with African Americans who were children and young adults during Jim Crow, discussing sexual assaults against black women and girls by white men in post-Reconstruction south until the 1960s.
- "There were rapes! The white man would rape girls...If a white man see a half-way decent woman, if he wanted her, he went up and just grabbed her an start doing whatever he wanted to her. You know, she would fight, and say no, but he would beat her up, slap her, knock her down, and just, just take her…"-Bessie Bolden
- "The lady's name was Elizabeth Smith and she was going to the sanctified church around the corner from Mr. Carmel Church. And she got kidnapped by a white guy, and he took her out into the woods and sodomized her and raped her...He never served a day in jail"-Herman Griffin

Neo-Slave Narratives: Fiction Revealing Truth

- Several of my sources that I found throughout this process used fictional neo-slave narratives to unfold an understanding of sexual assaults against black women previously untold through systemic silencing, cultural pressure, and trauma.
- "It is in historical fiction that authors are able to question notions o linear teleology and causality and thus gain a deeper understanding o the experiences of women who were traumatized by both the broader system of slavery by the threat and reality of violent bodily assaults"(Murray 456)
- Concerning Chase-Riboud's narrative: "By including a actual scholarly bibliography, an afterword "concrete" historical events, and her own personal motivations of penning this narrative, Chase-Riboud exposes her labor's skeletal frame: she openly concedes to her narrative's risks, its creative license, an spaces of uncertainty. In doing so, she unmasks historical conceit with a noteworthy caveat: the impossibility of certain recovery in any historical project that attempts to reconstruct or represent the interior lives of enslave black women who were structured into invisibility and silence"(Spencer 513).



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