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The Colonial Roots of the Racial Fetishization of Black Women

Caren M. Holmes
College of Wooster

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The Colonial Era:

The narrative of New World imperialism was eroticized by rhetoric that sexualized the imperialist practices of European colonizers. Documentation of the British conquest is riddled with language that suggests the sexual nature of the land and of its discovery. In his travel logs, Columbus suggested that the earth is shaped like a woman's breast (McLinktok, 2001). The New World was frequently described as "virgin land" by colonizers, wrongly suggesting an empty and uninhabited territory (McLinktok, 2001). This patriarchal narrative of imperialization depicts the New World through rhetoric normally ascribed to women, suggesting the land's passive and submissive nature, awaiting the conquest of men. This romancization was used to validate the conquest of the land itself, precluding the sexualization of the women made victim by these imperialist mindsets. The feminization and sexualization of the European imperialist narrative encouraged the sexual exploitation of black women who were perceived as byproducts of manifest destiny. In modern American, black female bodies continue to experience disproportionate rates of sexual exploitation and abuse. I suggest this continued exploitation is rooted in a colonial imperialist framework maintained through historical reproductive control and hyper-sexualization. In this paper I will begin to untangle the construction of modern racial fetishization as an extension of the sexualization of black bodies during the colonial era.

Prior to the British journey to the New World, epic tales of imperialist travelers probed the minds of Europeans regarding the nature of African people. African men were said to have gigantic penises, and it was rumored that African women engaged in sex with apes (McLinktok, 2001). These tales likely reflected the subconscious fears and Freudian sexual confusion of Europeans. However, these dramatized stories were interpreted as factual, and they informed some of the first European perceptions of African people. When black people were first brought

to the New World as slaves in the early 1600s, it is no surprise that they became part of the erotic narrative of colonial imperialism. The perception of black people as hyper-sexualized and uncivilized paved the road for the dehumanization and sexual exploitation imposed upon black men and women brought to the New World.

The Slave Era and Pseudo-Science:

Colonial “scientific” findings as products of pseudo-scientific investigation suggested the subhuman and inferior sexual nature of black people. Phrenology and other pseudo-scientific fields that studied human difference suggested that black people were subhuman and “less” evolved than white Europeans. These studies scientifically endorsed the dehumanization of black people and were used to justify the enslavement of an entire race; some even believing that the enslavement of black people was a philanthropic attempt to help the “uncivilized savages” of the African continent. Similarly, slave owners of the New World internalized this scientific narrative to validate their inhumane and abusive treatment of black slave women. Unsubstantiated perceptions regarding the sexuality of black people were confirmed through pseudo-scientific investigation and perpetuated by prominent scientists and politicians, including the founding fathers of the United States. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, one of the most influential political documents of the eighteenth century, Thomas Jefferson suggests that black men are “more ardent after their female: but love seems with them to be more eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation” (Jefferson, 1788, pg. 168). His book depicts black people as participating in a primitive and emotionally immature form of sexual intimacy. Jefferson suggests the hyper-sexualized nature of the black woman, not discriminating in her choices of sexual partners. His depiction of black women as having an unlimited and indiscriminating sexual capacity paved the way for a rape culture within the framework of American slavery,

viewing African women as sexual commodities rather than as human beings with sexual agency. Social Darwinism further validated these beliefs. Social darwinistic theory during this time suggested that the sexual inferiority of black people was an innate result black evolutionary defectiveness. The pseudo-science and social darwinistic beliefs surrounding black female sexuality contributed to the dehumanization of black women in colonial American society.

Colonizers perceived black men and women as subhuman byproducts of manifest destiny. Slaves were stripped of their agency and desire; they were dehumanized, morally, physically, intellectually, and sexually. Slaves were sexualized as animals through the institutionalized system of chattel slavery. Slave women considered most capable of producing children were commonly referred to as “breeders,” and were bought and sold based on their reproductive efficiency. The value of black women in the United States evolved contingently to their sexual and reproductive economic worth. Female slaves were often subject to invasive inspections of their reproductive and sexual features on the auction block prior to their purchase (Green, 1936). Mary Grayson, a woman who lived in slavery throughout most of her life, asserted that “large families were the aim and pride of a slave owner, and he quickly learned which of the slave women were breeders and which were not” (Grayson, 1936). The reproductive efficiency of slave women was tied to the economic interests of slave owners who “could always sell a breeding woman for twice the usual amount” (Grayson, 1936). Within institutionalized slavery, the sexual and reproductive productivity of black women could be literally measured in dollar signs.

Slave women were dehumanized not only as economic and reproductive property, but also as a disposable sexual commodity. The subhuman conception of Africans did not deter male slave owners from pursuing sexual relations with their human property. On the contrary, the

power dynamics fostered by U.S slavery encouraged the sexual exploitation and rape of black slave women by white slave owners. Even if a woman seemed to consent to the advances of white owners and overseers, in reality she had no choice (Aikin, 1833). Though laws existed in the country to criminalize sexual relations between blacks and whites in order to maintain racial purity, rape and sexual assault of female slaves by white slave owners was pervasive. Analysis of slave narratives that discuss the lives of black slave women suggest rape was a common occurrence. Laws that existed to protect women from statutory rape were not applied to black women or girls within the American legal frameworks during or after the slave era (Browne-Marshall, 2009). The laws that did exist were made primarily to protect the white male perpetrators. When cases of sexual relations between black women and white men were brought to the courts, black women were perceived as the seducers of white men and were subjected to harsher punishment (Browne-Marshall, 2009). Slaves could not legally testify against whites in court, and therefore had no legal method to pursue justice after experiencing sexual abuse perpetrated by white men. In a practical sense, raping one's slave was legally permissible.

Laws that determined the free or enslaved status of a child were determined by the status of the mother (Browne-Marshall, 2009). While in England common law the legal status of a child had previously been based on the status of the father, this was changed in the US to accommodate for the children born to black women fathered by white slave owners. As a result, a master could receive sexual pleasures in addition to profitable labor from sexual relations with female slaves. Their sexual relations and rape of female slaves were rewarded with the birth of additional free child labor, which resulted in economic profit. The societal acceptance and legal approval of this behavior replicated the pervasive treatment of black women as sexual

commodities. Black women were perceived as the sexual property of their owners, and their reproductive systems as economically profitable infrastructure.

Female slaves who were considered good breeders could be forced into sexual relations with male slaves who were similarly selected for reproductive efficiency in order to produce strong, hardworking offspring for the economic gain of their masters (Green, 1936). This practice should also be understood as sexual exploitation and violence, the masters acting as a coercive force to initiate sexual intercourse between slaves. Male slaves did not have the power to protect their daughters, wives, friends, or mothers from sexual exploitation perpetrated by owners or overseers as slave codes eliminated the ability of black people to assert legal claims (Aiken, 1833). It is evident that slave women lacked agency to choose their sexual partners and were controlled by slave owners based on their reproductive abilities. While sexual violence against women has long existed within the historical female experience, studies suggest that rates of sexual abuse experienced by modern African Americans are not reflective of African tradition but rather a practice resulting from forced Anglo-American assimilation (Browne-Marshall, 2009).

Beyond Abolition:

Following the abolishment of legalized slavery in the United States, the control over black female reproduction was maintained through the eugenics movement and other governmental policies continued throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Building on the pseudo-scientific investigations of race produced in the previous decades, the eugenics movement in America was based on the belief that humans could direct their own evolutionary “progress” through processes of selective breeding, sterilization, and racial purification (Selden, 1999). Forced sterilization became legal and implemented on state-to-state bases, beginning in

1907, and it continued in certain parts of the country until 1977 (Selden, 1999). Men and women of color were targeted for sterilization in the process of racial cleansing, eliminating “bad blood” and promoting the reproduction of the white race. The racially motivated eugenics movement was funded by prominent Americans, including Rockefeller and Warhol, and was largely accepted in American academia well into the 1900’s (Kühl, 2002). Even certain feminists and civil rights activists supported the movement to sterilize those who were deemed “unfit” to reproduce by American society. Black women were sterilized in attempts to control their reproductive agency and regulate the black population. This practice was motivated by the colonial rooted beliefs that suggested black women were indiscriminating of sexual partners and were sex-driven animals. The eugenics movement maintained the sexual debasement of black woman who were considered “unfit” by white male political leaders, to make their own sexual and reproductive choices.

Contemporary Realities:

American perceptions of the hyper-sexualized black woman has manifested in the sexual exploitation and sexual assault perpetrated against this population in the modern era. As Linda Williams writes, “because of the long-standing view of black female sexuality and the historical lack of legal protection of the black female, the black victim is viewed by both rapists and society as a legitimate victim” (Williams, 1986). The idea of the black woman as a ‘legitimate victim’ has manifested in higher rates of sexual assault and rape of black women in the United States (Williams, 1986). In addition, perpetrators of sexual assault against black women are statistically more likely to have their charges reduced as compared to perpetrators who assault white female victims (Williams, 1986). This has established a legal pattern reflecting the inferior societal value placed on black women and black female sexual agency. “The black woman who

becomes the “legitimate victim” as a result of the stereotypes which had their early origins in slavery is denied full protection of the law” (Williams, 1986). It is evident that this ideology, which stems from the slave era, contributes to the validation of legal and societal sexual exploitation and debasement of black women in the modern era. “With slavery and the rape of enslaved black women as originally or foundational in the production of African Americans, the skin of the black women in the context of the slave masters, sexual violation showed no signs of modesty” (McClaurin, 2001). While to some degree, women of all colors are reduced to sexual commodities by a patriarchal system, black women are subjected to the collective historical consequences based on the intersectionality of race, class, and gender that all tie into her continued sexual debasement.

It is still an effort of the white supremacist patriarchal agenda to control and exploit the bodies of black women. Reflecting on her years as a youth, activist and anthropologist, Irma McClaurin says, “from outside my community, my body was racialized in pernicious ways.” She articulates that, “management of the black female body was at the core of my identity” (McClaurin, 2001). Racial fetishization is a practice of reproductive and sexual management of that began before the slave era and has been reproduced in policy and societal norms throughout all of American history.

The stereotype of the hyper-sexualized black woman has become fetishized within modern American media and sex culture. Black female bodies and black sexual practices are essentialized and fetishized as a continuation of their exploitation within the American imperialist narrative. This idea is reflected in popular music, pornography, advertisements, and other popular media. Black female genitalia and secondary sex features are fetishized for their size and shape. Popular song lyrics refer to black female bodies in objectifying terms; being

shaped like an “onion” or even a “loaf of bread.” Within modern American slang, a person of any color could be referred to as having a “black ass,” a phrase that insinuates the voluptuous nature of a person’s buttocks. Sex toys advertise artificial black body parts marketed using names such as “My Big Black Ass.” In this sense, America continues to profit economically from building black bodies into sexual commodities. America continues to sell black female bodies on the modern auction block now called eBay or backpage.com.

While some people perceive racial fetishization as an empowering and respectful form of glorifying black female bodies, it is important to appreciate the historical routes of this phenomenon. Black women have and continue to be sexually sought after for their assumed hyper-sexualized body and behavior, which has been essentialized throughout history by the oppressor. Racial fetishization continues this pattern of cultural and racial essentializing in efforts to control black female bodies and sexuality. Racial fetishization is an extension and reproduction of white supremacist colonial racism. While it has manifested itself in the perceived glorification of black bodies, it is in practice incredibly problematic, since it prevents fostering a culture that permits black women to define their own sexual agency. Racial fetishism also contributes to the existing American rape culture, which tolerates and even validates sexual violence perpetrated upon black female bodies.

Conclusion:

It is evident that from the moment of initial European contact, black women have been sexualized within the imperialist narrative of the United States. The sexual debasement of black bodies and black women has been maintained through stereotypes, laws, and pseudo-science. The bodies of black women have been managed and controlled throughout all of American history; from the slave era to the modern era. While the tactics and legal frameworks have

shifted to adapt to modern standards of political correctness, black bodies are still perceived as having inherently inferior value. The historical intersectionality of race and gender within the context of black female sexuality is incredibly complex. In American history, black women have always been sexually debased and dehumanized. From the auction block to the sex shop, black bodies remain byproducts of an ongoing manifest destiny.

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