
WOMEN,
RACE
& CLASS

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11 Rape, Racism and the Myth of the Black Rapist

Some of the most flagrant symptoms of social deterioration are acknowledged as serious problems only when they have assumed such epidemic proportions that they appear to defy solution. Rape is a case in point. In the United States today, it is one of the fastest-growing violent crimes.¹ After ages of silence, suffering and misplaced guilt, sexual assault is explosively emerging as one of the telling dysfunctions of present-day capitalist society. The rising public concern about rape in the United States has inspired countless numbers of women to divulge their past encounters with actual or would-be assailants. As a result, an awesome fact has come to light: appallingly few women can claim that they have not been victims, at one time in their lives, of either attempted or accomplished sexual attacks.

In the United States and other capitalist countries, rape laws as a rule were framed originally for the protection of men of the upper classes, whose daughters and wives might be assaulted. What happens to working-class women has usually been of little concern to the courts; as a result, remarkably few white men have been prosecuted for the sexual violence they have inflicted on these women. While the rapists have seldom been brought to justice, the rape charge has been indiscriminately aimed at Black men, the guilty and innocent alike. Thus, of the 455 men executed between 1930 and 1967 on the basis of rape convictions, 405 of them were Black.²

In the history of the United States, the fraudulent rape charge stands out as one of the most formidable artifices invented by racism. The myth of the Black rapist has been methodically conjured up whenever recurrent waves of violence and terror against the Black community have required convincing justifications. If Black women have been conspicuously absent from the ranks of the contemporary anti-rape movement, it may be due, in part, to that movement's indifferent posture toward the frame-up rape charge as an incitement to racist aggression. Too many innocents have been offered sacrificially to gas chambers and lifer's cells for Black women to join those who often seek relief from policemen and judges. Moreover, as rape victims themselves, they have found little if any sympathy from these men in uniforms and robes. And stories about police assaults on Black women—rape victims sometimes suffering a second rape—are heard too frequently to be dismissed as aberrations. “Even at the strongest time of the civil rights movement in Birmingham,” for example,

young activists often stated that nothing could protect Black women from being raped by Birmingham police. As recently as December, 1974, in Chicago, a 17-year old Black woman reported that she was gang-raped by 10 policemen. Some of the men were suspended, but ultimately the whole thing was swept under the rug.³

During the early stages of the contemporary anti-rape movement, few feminist theorists seriously analyzed the special circumstances surrounding the Black woman as rape victim. The historical knot binding Black women—systematically abused and violated by white men—to Black men—maimed and murdered because of the racist manipulation of the rape

charge—has just begun to be acknowledged to any significant extent. Whenever Black women have challenged rape, they usually and simultaneously expose the use of the frame-up rape charge as a deadly racist weapon against their men. As one extremely perceptive writer put it:

The myth of the black rapist of white women is the twin of the myth of the bad black woman—both designed to apologize for and facilitate the continued exploitation of black men and women. Black women perceived this connection very clearly and were early in the forefront of the fight against lynching.⁴

Gerda Lerner, the author of this passage, is one of the few white women writing on the subject of rape during the early 1970s who examined in depth the combined effect of racism and sexism on Black women. The case of Joann Little,⁵ tried during the summer of 1975, illustrated Lerner's point. Brought to trial on murder charges, the young Black woman was accused of killing a white guard in a North Carolina jail where she was the only woman inmate. When Joann Little took the stand, she told how the guard had raped her in her cell and how she had killed him in self-defense with the ice pick he had used to threaten her. Throughout the country, her cause was passionately supported by individuals and organizations in the Black community and within the young women's movement, and her acquittal was hailed as an important victory made possible by this mass campaign. In the immediate aftermath of her acquittal, Ms. Little issued several moving appeals on behalf of a Black man named Delbert Tibbs, who awaited execution in Florida because he had been falsely convicted of raping a white woman.

Many Black women answered Joann Little's appeal to support the cause of Delbert Tibbs. But few white women—and certainly few organized groups within the anti-rape movement—followed her suggestion that they agitate for the freedom of this Black man who had been blatantly victimized by Southern racism. Not even when Little's Chief Counsel Jerry Paul announced his decision to represent Delbert Tibbs did many white women dare to stand up in his defense. By 1978, however, when all charges against Tibbs were dismissed, white anti-rape activists had increasingly begun to align themselves with his cause. Their initial reluctance, however, was one of those historical episodes confirming many Black women's suspicions that the anti-rape movement was largely oblivious to their special concerns.

That Black women have not joined the anti-rape movement en masse does not, therefore, mean that they oppose anti-rape measures in general. Before the end of the nineteenth century pioneering Black clubwomen conducted one of the very first organized public protests against sexual abuse. Their eighty-year-old tradition of organized struggle against rape reflects the extensive and exaggerated ways Black women have suffered the threat of sexual violence. One of racism's salient historical features has always been the assumption that white men—especially those who wield economic power—possess an incontestable right of access to Black women's bodies.

Slavery relied as much on routine sexual abuse as it relied on the whip and the lash. Excessive sex urges, whether they existed among individual white men or not, had nothing to do with this virtual institutionalization of rape. Sexual coercion was, rather, an essential dimension of the social relations between slavemaster and slave. In other words, the right claimed by slaveowners and their agents over the bodies of female slaves was a direct expression of their presumed property rights over Black people as a whole. The license to rape emanated from and facilitated the ruthless economic domination that was the gruesome hallmark of slavery.⁶

The pattern of institutionalized sexual abuse of Black women became so powerful that it managed to survive the abolition of slavery. Group rape, perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist organizations of the post-Civil War period, became an uncamouflaged political weapon in the drive to thwart the movement for Black equality. During the Memphis Riot of 1866, for example, the violence of the mob murders was brutally complemented by the concerted sexual attacks on Black women. In the riot's aftermath, numerous Black women testified before a Congressional committee about the savage mob rapes they had suffered.⁷ This testimony regarding similar events during the Meridian, Mississippi, Riot of 1871 was given by a Black woman named Ellen Parton:

I reside in Meridian; have resided here nine years; occupation, washing and ironing and scouring; Wednesday night was the last night they came to my house; by "they" I mean bodies or companies of men; they came on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday; on Monday night they said they came to do us no harm; on Tuesday night they said they came for the arms; I told them there was none, and they said they would take my word for it; on Wednesday night they came and broke open the wardrobe and trunks, and committed rape upon me; there were eight of them in the house; I do not know how many there were outside....⁸

Of course, the sexual abuse of Black women has not always manifested itself in such open and public violence. There has been a daily drama of racism enacted in the countless anonymous encounters between Black women and their white abusers—men convinced that their acts were only natural. Such assaults have been ideologically sanctioned by politicians, scholars and journalists, and by literary artists who have often portrayed Black women as promiscuous and immoral. Even the outstanding writer Gertrude Stein described one of her Black women characters as possessing "... the simple, promiscuous unmorality of the black people."⁹ The imposition of this attitude on white men of the working class was a triumphant moment in the development of racist ideology.

Racism has always drawn strength from its ability to encourage sexual coercion. While Black women and their sisters of color have been the main targets of these racist-inspired attacks, white women have suffered as well. For once white men were persuaded that they could commit sexual assaults against Black women with impunity, their conduct toward women of their own race could not have remained unmarred. Racism has always served as a provocation to rape, and white women in the United States have necessarily suffered the ricochet fire of these attacks. This is one of the many ways in which racism nourishes sexism, causing white women to be indirectly victimized by the special oppression aimed at their sisters of color.

The experience of the Vietnam War furnished a further example of the extent to which racism could function as a provocation to rape. Because it was drummed into the heads of U.S. soldiers that they were fighting an inferior race, they could be taught that raping Vietnamese women was a necessary military duty. They could even be instructed to "search" the women with their penises.¹⁰ It was the unwritten policy of the U.S. Military Command to systematically encourage rape, since it was an extremely effective weapon of mass terrorism. Where are the thousands upon thousands of Vietnam veterans who witnessed and participated in these horrors? To what extent did those brutal experiences affect their attitudes toward women in general? While it would be quite erroneous to single out Vietnam veterans as the main perpetrators of sexual crimes, there can be little doubt that the horrendous repercussions of the Vietnam experience are still being felt by all women in the United States today.

It is a painful irony that some anti-rape theorists, who ignore the part played by racism in instigating rape, do not hesitate to argue that men of color are especially prone to commit sexual violence against women. In her very impressive study of rape, Susan Brownmiller claims that Black men's historical oppression has placed many of the "legitimate" expressions of male supremacy beyond their reach. They must resort, as a result, to acts of open sexual violence. In her portrayal of "ghetto inhabitants," Brownmiller insists that

(c)orporate executive dining rooms and climbs up Mount Everest are not usually accessible to those who form the subculture of violence. Access to a female body—through force—is within their ken.¹¹

When Brownmiller's book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* was published, it was effusively praised in some circles. *Time* magazine, which selected her as one of its women of the year in 1976, described the book as "... the most rigorous and provocative piece of scholarship that has yet emerged from the feminist movement."¹² In other circles, however, the book has been severely criticized for its part in the resuscitation of the old racist myth of the Black rapist.

It cannot be denied that Brownmiller's book is a pioneering scholarly contribution to the contemporary literature on rape. Yet many of her arguments are unfortunately pervaded with racist ideas. Characteristic of that perspective is her reinterpretation of the 1953 lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till. After this young boy had whistled at a white woman in Mississippi, his maimed body was found at the bottom of the Tallahatchie River. "Till's action," said Brownmiller, "was more than a kid's brash prank."¹³

Emmett Till was going to show his black buddies that he, and by inference, *they* could get a white woman and Carolyn Bryant was the nearest convenient object. In concrete terms, the accessibility of *all* white women was on review.... And what of the wolf whistle, Till's 'gesture of adolescent bravado?' ... The whistle was no small tweet of hubba-hubba or melodious approval for a well-turned ankle.... It was a deliberate insult just short of physical assault, a last reminder to Carolyn Bryant that this black boy, Till, had in mind to possess her.¹⁴

While Brownmiller deplors the sadistic punishment inflicted on Emmett Till, the Black youth emerges, nonetheless, as a guilty sexist—almost as guilty as his white racist murderers. After all, she argues, both Till and his murderers were exclusively concerned about their rights of possession over women.

Unfortunately, Brownmiller is not the only contemporary writer on rape who has suffered the influence of racist ideology. According to Jean MacKellar, in her book *Rape: The Bait and the Trap*,

Blacks raised in the hard life of the ghetto learn that they can get what they want only by seizing it. Violence is the rule in the game for survival. Women are fair prey: to obtain a woman one subdues her.¹⁵

MacKellar has been so completely mesmerized by racist propaganda that she makes the unabashed claim that 90 percent of all reported rapes in the United States are committed by Black men.¹⁶ Inasmuch as the FBI's corresponding figure is 47 percent,¹⁷ it is difficult to

believe that MacKellar's statement is not an intentional provocation.

Most recent studies on rape in the United States have acknowledged the disparity between the actual incidence of sexual assaults and those which are reported to the police. According to Susan Brownmiller, for example, reported rapes range anywhere from one in five to one in twenty.¹⁸ A study published by the New York

Radical Feminists concluded that reported rapes run as low as five percent.¹⁹ In much of the contemporary literature on rape, there is nevertheless a tendency to equate the "police blotter rapist" with the "typical rapist." If this pattern persists, it will be practically impossible to uncover the real social causes of rape.

Diana Russell's *Politics of Rape* unfortunately reinforces the current notion that the typical rapist is a man of color—or, if he is white, a poor or working-class man. Subtitled *The Victims' Perspective*, her book is based on a series of interviews with rape victims in the San Francisco Bay Area. Of the twenty-two cases she describes, twelve—i.e., more than half—involve women who have been raped by Black, Chicano or Native American Indian men. It is revealing that only 26 percent of the original ninety-five interviews she conducted involved men of color.²⁰ If this dubious process of selection is not enough to evoke deep suspicions of racism, consider the advice she offers to white women:

... (I) f some black men see rape of white women as an act of revenge or as a justifiable expression of hostility toward whites, I think it is equally realistic for white women to be less trusting of black men than many of them are.²¹

Brownmiller, MacKellar and Russell are assuredly more subtle than earlier ideologues of racism. But their conclusions tragically beg comparison with the ideas of such scholarly apologists of racism as Winfield Collins, who published in 1918 a book entitled *The Truth About Lynching and the Negro in the South* (In Which the Author Pleads that the South Be Made Safe for the White Race):

Two of the Negro's most prominent characteristics are the utter lack of chastity and complete ignorance of veracity. The Negro's sexual laxity, considered so immoral or even criminal in the white man's civilization, may have been all but a virtue in the habitat of his origin. There, nature developed in him intense sexual passions to offset his high death rate.²²

Collins resorts to pseudo-biological arguments, while Brownmiller, Russell and MacKellar invoke environmental explanations, but in the final analysis they all assert that Black men are motivated in especially powerful ways to commit sexual violence against women.

One of the earliest theoretical works associated with the contemporary feminist movement that dealt with the subject of rape and race was Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case For Feminist Revolution*. Racism in general, so Firestone claims, is actually an extension of sexism. Invoking the biblical notion that "... the races are no more than the various parents and siblings of the Family of Man,"²³ she develops a construct defining the white man as father, the white woman as wife and mother, and Black people as the children. Transposing Freud's theory of the Oedipus Complex into racial terms, Firestone implies that Black men harbor an uncontrollable desire for sexual relations with white women. They want to kill the father and sleep with the mother.²⁴ Moreover, in order to "be a man," the Black man must

... untie himself from his bond with the white female, relating to her if at all only in a degrading way. In addition, due to his virulent hatred and jealousy of her Possessor, the white man, he may lust after her as a thing to be conquered in order to revenge himself on the white man.²⁵

Like Brownmiller, MacKellar and Russell, Firestone succumbs to the old racist sophistry of blaming the victim. Whether innocently or consciously, their pronouncements have facilitated the resurrection of the timeworn myth of the Black rapist. Their historical myopia further prevents them from comprehending that the portrayal of Black men as rapists reinforces racism's open invitation to white men to avail themselves sexually of Black women's bodies. The fictional image of the Black man as rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous. For once the notion is accepted that Black men harbor irresistible and animal-like sexual urges, the entire race is invested with bestiality. If Black men have their eyes on white women as sexual objects, then Black women must certainly welcome the sexual attentions of white men. Viewed as "loose women" and whores, Black women's cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy.

During the 1920s a well-known Southern politician declared that there was no such thing as a "virtuous colored girl" over the age of fourteen.²⁶ As it turns out, this white man had two families—one by his white wife and another by a Black woman. Walter White, an outstanding anti-lynching leader and Executive Secretary of the NAACP, rightfully accused this man of "... explaining and excusing his own moral derelictions by emphasizing the 'immorality' of women of the 'inferior race.'"²⁷

A contemporary Black writer, Calvin Hernton, unfortunately succumbs to similar falsehood about Black women. In the study *Sex and Racism*, he insists that "... the Negro woman during slavery began to develop a depreciatory concept of herself, not only as a female but as a human being as well."²⁸ According to Hernton's analysis, "(A)fter experiencing the ceaseless sexual immorality of the white South,"

... the Negro woman became "promiscuous and loose," and could be "had for the taking." Indeed, she came to look upon herself as the South viewed and treated her, for she had no other morality by which to shape her womanhood.²⁹

Hernton's analysis never penetrates the ideological veil which has resulted in the minimizing of the sexual outrages constantly committed against Black women. He falls into the trap of blaming the victim for the savage punishment she was historically forced to endure.

Throughout the history of this country, Black women have manifested a collective consciousness of their sexual victimization. They have also understood that they could not adequately resist the sexual abuses they suffered without simultaneously attacking the fraudulent rape charge as a pretext for lynching. The reliance on rape as an instrument of white-supremacist terror predates by several centuries the institution of lynching. During slavery, the lynching of Black people did not occur extensively—for the simple reason that slaveowners were reluctant to destroy their valuable property. Flogging, yes, but lynching, no. Together with flogging, rape was a terribly efficient method of keeping Black women and men alike in check. It was a routine arm of repression.

Lynchings did occur before the Civil War—but they were aimed more often at white abolitionists, who had no cash value on the market. According to William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*, over three hundred white people were lynched over the two decades following 1836.³⁰ The incidence of lynchings climbed as the anti-slavery campaign gained in power and influence.

As the slaveholders saw the fight going against them, despite their desperate struggle to check these forces, they more and more resorted to the rope and the faggot.³¹

As Walter White concludes, "... the lyncher entered upon the scene as a stalwart defender of the slaveowners' profits."³²

With the emancipation of the slaves, Black people no longer possessed a market value for the former slaveholders, and "... the lynching industry was revolutionized."³³ When Ida B. Wells researched her first pamphlet against lynching, published in 1895 under the title *A Red Record*, she calculated that over ten thousand lynchings had taken place between 1865 and 1895.

Not all nor nearly all of the murders done by white men during the past thirty years have come to light, but the statistics as gathered and preserved by white men, and which have not been questioned, show that during these years more than ten thousand Negroes have been killed in cold blood, without the formality of judicial trial and legal execution. And yet, as evidence of the absolute impunity with which the white man dares to kill a Negro, the same record shows that during all these years, and for all these murders, only three white men have been tried, convicted and executed. As no white man has been lynched for the murder of colored people, these three executions are the only instances of the death penalty being visited upon white men for murdering Negroes.³⁴

In connection with these lynchings and their countless barbarities, the myth of the Black rapist was conjured up. It could only acquire its terrible powers of persuasion within the irrational world of racist ideology. However irrational the myth may be, it was not a spontaneous aberration. On the contrary, the myth of the Black rapist was a distinctly political invention. As Frederick Douglass points out, Black men were not indiscriminately labeled as rapists during slavery. Throughout the entire Civil War, in fact, not a single Black man was publicly accused of raping a white woman.³⁵ If Black men possessed an animalistic urge to rape, argued Douglass, this alleged rape instinct would have certainly been activated when white women were left unprotected by their men who were fighting in the Confederate Army.

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, the menacing specter of the Black rapist had not yet appeared on the historical scene. But lynchings, reserved during slavery for the white abolitionists, were proving to be a valuable political weapon. Before lynching could be consolidated as a popularly accepted institution, however, its savagery and its horrors had to be convincingly justified. These were the circumstances which spawned the myth of the Black rapist—for the rape charge turned out to be the most powerful of several attempts to justify the lynching of Black people. The institution of lynching, in turn, complemented by the continued rape of Black women, became an essential ingredient of the postwar strategy of racist terror. In this way the brutal exploitation of Black labor was guaranteed,

and after the betrayal of Reconstruction, the political domination of the Black people as a whole was assured.

During the first great wave of lynchings, propaganda urging the defense of white womanhood from Black men's irrepressible rape instincts was conspicuous for its absence. As Frederick Douglass observed, the lawless killings of Black people were most often described as a preventive measure to deter the Black masses from rising up in revolt.³⁶ At that time the political function of mob murders was uncamouflaged. Lynching was undisguised counterinsurgency, a guarantee that Black people would not be able to achieve their goals of citizenship and economic equality. "During this time," Douglass pointed out,

... the justification for the murder of Negroes was said to be Negro conspiracies, Negro insurrections, Negro schemes to murder all the white people, Negro plots to burn the town and to commit violence generally ... but never a word was said or whispered about Negro outrages upon white women and children.³⁷

Later, when it became evident that these conspiracies, plots and insurrections were fabrications that never materialized, the popular justification for lynching was modified. During the period following 1872, the years of the rise of such vigilante groups as the Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of the White Camellia, a new pretext was concocted. Lynchings were represented as a necessary measure to prevent Black supremacy over white people—in other words, to reaffirm white supremacy.³⁸

After the betrayal of Reconstruction and the accompanying disfranchisement of Black people, the specter of Black political supremacy as a pretext for lynching became outmoded. Still, as the postwar economic structure took shape, solidifying the superexploitation of Black labor, the number of lynchings continued to rise. This was the historical juncture when the cry of rape emerged as the major justification for lynching. Frederick Douglass' explanation of the political motives underlying the creation of the mythical Black rapist is a brilliant analysis of the way ideology transforms to meet new historical conditions.

The times have changed and the Negro's accusers have found it necessary to change with them. They have been compelled to invent a new charge to suit the times. The old charges are no longer valid. Upon them the good opinion of the North and of mankind cannot be secured. Honest men no longer believe that there is any ground to apprehend Negro supremacy. Times and events have swept away these old refuges of lies. They were once powerful. They did their work in their day and did it with terrible energy and effect, but they are now cast aside as useless. The lie has lost its ability to deceive. The altered circumstances have made necessary a sterner, stronger and more effective justification of Southern barbarism, and hence we have, according to my theory, to look into the face of a more shocking and blasting charge than either Negro supremacy or Negro insurrection.³⁹

This more shocking and blasting charge, of course, was rape. Lynching was now explained and rationalized as a method to avenge Black men's assaults on white Southern womanhood. As one apologist for lynching insisted, it was necessary to find "... a way of meeting the extraordinary condition with extraordinary means—hence lynching in order to hold in check the Negro in the South."⁴⁰

Although the majority of lynchings did not even involve the accusation of sexual assault, the racist cry of rape became a popular explanation which was far more effective than

either of the two previous attempts to justify mob attacks on Black people. In a society where male supremacy was all-pervasive, men who were motivated by their duty to defend their women could be excused of any excesses they might commit. That their motive was sublime was ample justification for the resulting barbarities. As Senator Ben Tillman of South Carolina told his Washington colleagues at the beginning of this century,

(w)hen stern and sad-faced white men put to death a creature in human form who has deflowered a white woman, they have avenged the greatest wrong, the blackest crime ...⁴¹

Such crimes, he said, caused civilized men to "... revert to the original savage type whose impulses under such circumstances have always been to 'kill, kill, kill.'"⁴²

The repercussions of this new myth were enormous. Not only was opposition to individual lynchings stifled—for who would dare to defend a rapist?—white support for the cause of Black equality in general began to wane. By the end of the nineteenth century the largest mass organization of white women—the Women's Christian Temperance Union—was headed by a woman who publicly vilified Black men for their alleged attacks on white women. What is more, Frances Willard went so far as to characterize Black men as especially prone to alcoholism, which in turn exacerbated their instinctual urge to rape.

The grogshop is the Negro's center of power. Better whisky and more of it is the rallying cry of great, dark-faced mobs. The colored race multiplies like the locusts of Egypt. The grogshop is its center of power. The safety of women, of childhood, the home, is menaced in a thousand localities at this moment, so that men dare not go beyond the sight of their own roof-tree.⁴³

The characterization of Black men as rapists wrought incredible confusion within the ranks of progressive movements. Both Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells point out in their respective analyses of lynching that as soon as the propagandistic cry of rape became a legitimate excuse for lynching, former white proponents of Black equality became increasingly afraid to associate themselves with Black people's struggle for liberation. They either remained silent or, like Frances Willard, they spoke out aggressively against the sexual crimes indiscriminately attributed to Black men. Douglass described the catastrophic impact of the fabricated rape charge on the movement for Black equality in general:

It has cooled (the Negro's) friends; it has heated his enemies and arrested at home and abroad, in some measure, the generous efforts that good men were wont to make for his improvement and elevation. It has deceived his friends at the North and many good friends at the South, for nearly all of them, in some measure, have accepted this charge against the Negro as true.⁴⁴

What was the reality behind this terribly powerful myth of the Black rapist? To be sure, there were some examples of Black men raping white women. But the number of actual rapes which occurred was minutely disproportionate to the allegations implied by the myth. As already indicated, during the entire Civil War, there was not a single reported case of a white woman suffering rape at the hands of a slave. While virtually all the Southern white men were on the battlefield, never once was the cry of rape raised. Frederick Douglass argues that the leveling of the rape charge against Black men as a whole was not credible for the simple reason that it implied a radical and instantaneous change in the mental and moral character of Black people.

History does not present an example of a transformation in the character of any class of men so extreme, so unnatural and so complete as is implied in this charge. The change is too great and the period for it too brief.⁴⁵

Even the real circumstances of most lynchings contradicted the myth of the Black rapist. The majority of mob murders did not even involve the charge of rape. Although the cry of rape was invoked as the popular justification for lynching in general, most lynchings took place for other reasons. In a study published in 1931 by the Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching, it was revealed that between 1889 and 1929 only one-sixth of the mob victims were actually accused of rape: 37.7 percent were charged with murder, 5.8 percent with felonious assault, 7.1 percent of theft, 1.8 percent of insulting a white person and 24.2 percent were accused of miscellaneous charges—the majority of which were astoundingly trivial. According to the Commission's figures, 16.7 percent of lynch victims were accused of rape and 6.7 percent of attempted rape.⁴⁶

Although their arguments were disputed by the facts, most apologists for lynching claimed that only white men's obligation to defend their women could motivate them to commit such savage attacks on Black men. In 1904 Thomas Nelson Page, writing in the *North American Review*, placed the entire burden of lynching on the shoulders of Black men and their unchecked propensity toward sexual crimes.

The crime of lynching is not likely to cease until the crime of ravishing and murdering women and children is less frequent than it has been of late. And this crime, which is well-nigh wholly confined to the negro race, will not greatly diminish until the negroes themselves take it in hand and stamp it out.⁴⁷

And white men in the South, said Ben Tillman in the U.S. Senate, would "... not submit to (the Negro's) gratifying his lust on our wives and daughters without lynching him."⁴⁸ In 1892, when Senator Tillman was governor of South Carolina, he had declared, on the spot where eight Black men had been hanged, that he would personally lead a lynch mob against any Black man who dared to rape a white woman. During his term as governor, he turned over a Black man to a white mob even though the lynch victim had been publicly absolved by the white woman who had cried rape.⁴⁹

The colonization of the Southern economy by capitalists from the North gave lynching its most vigorous impulse. If Black people, by means of terror and violence, could remain the most brutally exploited group within the swelling ranks of the working class, the capitalists could enjoy a double advantage. Extra profits would result from the superexploitation of Black labor, and white workers' hostilities toward their employers would be defused. White workers who assented to lynching necessarily assumed a posture of racial solidarity with the white men who were really their oppressors. This was a critical moment in the popularization of racist ideology.

If Black people had simply accepted a status of economic and political inferiority, the mob murders would probably have subsided. But because vast numbers of ex-slaves refused to discard their dreams of progress, more than ten thousand lynchings occurred during the three decades following the war.⁵⁰ Whoever challenged the racial hierarchy was marked a potential victim of the mob. The endless roster of the dead came to include every sort of insurgent—from the owners of successful Black businesses and workers pressing for higher wages to those who refused to be called "boy" and the defiant women who resisted white men's sexual abuses. Yet public opinion had been captured, and it was taken for granted that lynching was a just response to the barbarous sexual crimes against white womanhood. And an important question remained unasked: What about the numerous women who were

lynched—and sometimes raped before they were killed by the mob. Ida B. Wells refers to

... the horrible case of the woman in San Antonio, Texas, who had been boxed up in a barrel with nails driven through the sides and rolled down a hill until she was dead.⁵¹

The *Chicago Defender* published this article on December 18, 1915, under the heading “Rape, Lynch Negro Mother”:

Columbus, Miss., Dec. 17—Thursday a week ago Cordella Stevenson was found early in the morning hanging to the limb of a tree, without any clothing, dead ... She was hung there from the night before by a bloodthirsty mob who had gone to her home, snatched her from slumber, and dragged her through the streets without any resistance. They carried her to a far-off spot, did their dirt and then strung her up.⁵²

Given the central role played by the fictional Black rapist in the shaping of post-slavery racism, it is, at best, irresponsible theorizing to represent Black men as the most frequent authors of sexual violence. At worst, it is an aggression against Black people as a whole, for the mythical rapist implies the mythical whore. Perceiving the rape charge as an attack against the entire Black community, Black women were quick to assume the leadership of the anti-lynching movement. Ida B. Wells-Barnett was the moving force behind a crusade against lynching which was destined to span many decades. In 1892 three acquaintances of this Black newspaperwoman were lynched in Memphis, Tennessee. They were murdered by a racist mob because the store they opened in a Black neighborhood was successfully competing with a white-owned store. Ida B. Wells hastened to speak out against this lynching in the pages of her newspaper, *The Free Speech*. During her trip to New York three months later, the offices of her paper were burned to the ground. Threatened with lynching herself, she decided to remain in the East and to “... tell the world for the first time the true story of Negro lynchings, which were becoming more numerous and horrible.”⁵³

Wells’ articles in the *New York Age* motivated Black women to organize a support campaign on her behalf, which eventually led to the establishment of Black women’s clubs.⁵⁴ As a result of her pioneering efforts, Black women throughout the country became active in the anti-lynching crusade. Ida B. Wells herself traveled from city to city, issuing appeals to ministers, professionals and workers alike to speak out against the outrages of lynch law. During her trips abroad, an important solidarity movement was organized in Britain, which had a marked impact on U.S. public opinion. The extent of her success was such that she incurred the wrath of the *New York Times*. This vicious editorial was published after Wells’ 1904 trip to England:

“Immediately following the day of Miss Wells’ return to the United States, a Negro man assaulted a white woman in New York City ‘for the purposes of lust and plunder.’ ... The circumstances of his fiendish crime may serve to convince the mulatress missionary that the promulgation in New York just now of her theory of Negro outrages is, to say the least, inopportune.”⁵⁵

Mary Church Terrell, the first president of the National Association of Colored Women, was another outstanding Black woman leader who was devoted to the fight against lynching. In 1904 she answered Thomas Nelson Page’s virulent article on “The Lynching of

Negroes—Its Cause and Prevention.” In *the North American Review*, where Page’s article had appeared, she published an essay entitled “Lynching From a Negro’s Point of View.” With compelling logic, Terrell systematically refuted Page’s justification of lynching as an understandable response to alleged sexual assaults on white women.⁵⁶

Thirty years after Ida B. Wells had initiated the anti-lynching campaign, an organization called the Anti-Lynching Crusaders was founded. Established in 1922 under the auspices of the NAACP and headed by Mary Talbert, its purpose was to create an integrated women’s movement against lynching.

What will Mary B. Talbert do next? What next will the colored American women do under her leadership? An organization has been effected by colored women to get ONE MILLION WOMEN of all kinds and colors united by December, 1922 against lynching.

Look out, Mr. Lyncher!

This class of women generally get what they go after.⁵⁷

This was not the first time Black women had reached out to their white sisters. They were struggling in the tradition of such historical giants as Sojourner Truth and Frances E. W. Harper. Ida B. Wells had personally appealed to white women, as had her contemporary, Mary Church Terrell. And Black clubwomen had collectively attempted to persuade the white women’s club movement to direct some of their energies toward the anti-lynching campaign.

White women did not respond to these appeals en masse until the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching was founded in 1930 under the leadership of Jessie Daniel Ames.⁵⁸ The Association set out to repudiate the claim that lynching was necessary for the protection of Southern womanhood:

The program of the Southern women has been directed to exposing the falsity of the claim that lynching is necessary to their protection and to emphasize the real danger of lynching to all the values of home and religion.⁵⁹

The small group of women, who attended the Atlanta meeting where the Association was formed, discussed the role of white women in the lynchings of the recent period. Women were usually present at the mob gatherings, they pointed out, and in some instances, were active members of the lynch mobs. Moreover, those white women who permitted their children to witness the murders of Black people were indoctrinating them into the racist ways of the South. Walter White’s study of lynching, published the year before the women’s meeting, argued that one of the worst consequences of these mob murders was the warping of Southern white children’s minds. When White traveled to Florida to investigate a lynching, a little girl of nine or ten told him about “... the fun we had burning the niggers.”⁶⁰

Jessie Daniel Ames and her co-founders of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching resolved in 1930 to recruit the masses of Southern white women into the campaign to defeat the racist mobs bent on killing Black people. Eventually they obtained over forty thousand signatures to the Association’s pledge:

We declare lynching is an indefensible crime, destructive of all principles of government, hateful and hostile to every ideal of religion and humanity, debasing and degrading to every person

involved.... (P)ublic opinion has accepted too easily the claim of lynchers and mobsters that they were acting solely in defense of womanhood. In light of facts we dare no longer to permit this claim to pass unchallenged, nor allow those bent upon personal revenge and savagery to commit acts of violence and lawlessness in the name of women. We solemnly pledge ourselves to create a new public opinion in the South, which will not condone, for any reason whatever, acts of mobs or lynchers. We will teach our children at home, at school and at church a new interpretation of law and religion; we will assist all officials to uphold their oath of office; and finally, we will join with every minister, editor, school teacher and patriotic citizen in a program of education to eradicate lynchings and mobs forever from our land.⁶¹

These courageous white women encountered opposition, hostility and even physical threats on their lives. Their contributions were invaluable within the overall anti-lynching crusade. Without their relentless petition drives, their letter campaigns and their meetings and demonstrations, the tide of lynching would not have been reversed so swiftly. Yet the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching was a movement that was forty years late in coming. For four decades or more, Black women had been leading the anti-lynching campaign, and for just about as long, they had appealed to their white sisters to join them. One of the major weaknesses of Susan Brownmiller's study on rape is its absolute disregard of Black women's pioneering efforts in the anti-lynching movement. While Brownmiller rightfully praises Jessie Daniel Ames and the Association of Southern Women, she makes not so much as a passing mention of Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell or Mary Talbert and the Anti-Lynching Crusaders.

While the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching was a belated response to their Black sisters' appeals, these women's far-reaching achievements dramatically illustrate white women's special place in the struggle against racism. When Mary Talbert and her Anti-Lynching Crusaders reached out to white women, they felt that white women could more readily identify with the Black cause by virtue of their own oppression as women. Besides, lynching itself, as a terrifying tool of racism, also served to strengthen male dominance.

Economic dependence, contacts with none save "polite, refined, womanly" pursuits, mental activities in no other field than home life—all these man-imposed restrictions have borne more heavily upon women in the South and have been maintained more rigidly, than in any other part of the country.⁶²

Throughout the anti-lynching crusade, the critics of the racist manipulation of the rape charge did not intend to excuse those individual Black men who actually committed the crime of sexual assault. As early as 1894 Frederick Douglass warned that his pronouncements against the myth of the Black rapist were not to be misconstrued as a defense of rape itself.

I do not pretend that Negroes are saints and angels. I do not deny that they are capable of committing the crime imputed to them, but utterly deny that they are any more addicted to the commission of that crime than is true of any other variety of the human family.... I am not a defender of any man guilty of this atrocious crime, but a defender of the coloured people as a class.⁶³

The resurgence of racism during the mid-1970s has been accompanied by a resurrection of the myth of the Black rapist. Unfortunately, this myth has sometimes been legitimized by white women associated with the battle against rape. Consider, for example, Susan Brownmiller's concluding passage of the chapter of her book entitled "A Question of Race":

Today the incidence of actual rape combined with the looming spectre of the rapist in the mind's eye, and in particular the mythified spectre of the black man as rapist to which the black man in the name of his manhood now contributes, must be understood as a control mechanism against the freedom, mobility and aspirations of all women, white and black. The crossroads of racism and sexism had to be a violent meeting place. There is no use pretending it doesn't exist.⁶⁴

Brownmiller's provocative distortion of such historical cases as the Scottsboro Nine, Willie McGee and Emmett Till are designed to dissipate any sympathy for Black men who are victims of fraudulent rape charges. As for Emmett Till, she clearly invites us to infer that if this fourteen-year-old boy had not been shot in the head and dumped into the Tallahatchie River after he whistled at one white woman, he would probably have succeeded in raping another white woman.

Brownmiller attempts to persuade her readers that the absurd and purposely sensational words of Eldridge Cleaver—who called rape an "insurrectionary act" against "white society"—are representative. It seems as if she wants to intentionally conjure up in her readers' imaginations armies of Black men, their penises erect, charging full speed ahead toward the most conveniently placed white women. In the ranks of this army are the ghost of Emmett Till, the rapist Eldridge Cleaver and Imamu Baraka, who once wrote, "Come up, black dada nihilismus. Rape the white girls. Rape their fathers. Cut the mothers' throats." But Brownmiller goes further. Not only does she include men like Calvin Hernton—whose book is unequivocally sexist—but also, among others, George Jackson, who never attempted to justify rape. Eldridge Cleaver's ideas, she argues,

... reflect a strain of thinking among Black male intellectuals and writers that became quite fashionable in the late nineteen sixties and was taken on with astonishing enthusiasm by white male radicals and parts of the white intellectual establishment as a perfectly acceptable excuse of rape committed by black men.⁶⁵

Susan Brownmiller's discussion on rape and race evinces an unthinking partisanship which borders on racism. In pretending to defend the cause of all women, she sometimes boxes herself into the position of defending the particular cause of *white* women, regardless of its implications. Her examination of the Scottsboro Nine case is a revealing example. As Brownmiller herself points out, these nine young men, charged and convicted of rape, spent long years of their lives in prison because two white women perjured themselves on the witness stand. Yet she has nothing but contempt for the Black men and their defense movement—and her sympathy for the two white women is glaring.

The left fought hard for its symbols of racial injustice, making bewildered heroes out of a handful of pathetic, semi-literate fellows caught in the jaws of Southern jurisprudence who only wanted to beat the rap.⁶⁶

On the other hand, the two white women, whose false testimony sent the Scottsboro Nine to

prison, were

... corraled by a posse of white men who already believed a rape had taken place. Confused and fearful, they fell into line.⁶⁷

No one can deny that the women were manipulated by Alabama racists. However, it is wrong to portray the women as innocent pawns, absolved of the responsibility of having collaborated with the forces of racism. In choosing to take sides with white women, regardless of the circumstances, Brownmiller herself capitulates to racism. Her failure to alert white women about the urgency of combining a fierce challenge to racism with the necessary battle against sexism is an important plus for the forces of racism today.

The myth of the Black rapist continues to carry out the insidious work of racist ideology. It must bear a good portion of the responsibility for the failure of most anti-rape theorists to seek the identity of the enormous numbers of anonymous rapists who remain unreported, untried and unconvicted. As long as their analyses focus on accused rapists who are reported and arrested, thus on only a fraction of the rapes actually committed, Black men—and other men of color—will inevitably be viewed as the villains responsible for the current epidemic of sexual violence. The anonymity surrounding the vast majority of rapes is consequently treated as a statistical detail—or else as a mystery whose meaning is inaccessible.

But why are there so many anonymous rapists in the first place? Might not this anonymity be a privilege enjoyed by men whose status protects them from prosecution? Although white men who are employers, executives, politicians, doctors, professors, etc., have been known to “take advantage” of women they consider their social inferiors, their sexual misdeeds seldom come to light in court. Is it not therefore quite probable that these men of the capitalist and middle classes account for a significant proportion of the unreported rapes? Many of these unreported rapes undoubtedly involve Black women as victims: their historical experience proves that racist ideology implies an open invitation to rape. As the basis of the license to rape Black women during slavery was the slaveholders’ economic power, so the class structure of capitalist society also harbors an incentive to rape. It seems, in fact, that men of the capitalist class and their middle-class partners are immune to prosecution because they commit their sexual assaults with the same unchallenged authority that legitimizes their daily assaults on the labor and dignity of working people.

The existence of widespread sexual harassment on the job has never been much of a secret. It is precisely on the job, indeed, that women—especially when they are not unionized—are most vulnerable. Having already established their economic domination over their female subordinates, employers, managers and foremen may attempt to assert this authority in sexual terms. That working-class women are more intensely exploited than their men adds to their vulnerability to sexual abuse, while sexual coercion simultaneously reinforces their vulnerability to economic exploitation.

Working-class men, whatever their color, can be motivated to rape by the belief that their maleness accords them the privilege to dominate women. Yet since they do not possess the social or economic authority—unless it is a white man raping a woman of color—guaranteeing them immunity from prosecution, the incentive is not nearly as powerful as it is for the men of the capitalist class. When working-class men accept the invitation to rape extended by the ideology of male supremacy, they are accepting a bribe, an illusory compensation for their powerlessness.

The class structure of capitalism encourages men who wield power in the economic and political realm to become routine agents of sexual exploitation. The present rape epidemic

occurs at a time when the capitalist class is furiously reasserting its authority in face of global and internal challenges. Both racism and sexism, central to its domestic strategy of increased economic exploitation, are receiving unprecedented encouragement. It is not a mere coincidence that as the incidence of rape has arisen, the position of women workers has visibly worsened. So severe are women's economic losses that their wages in relationship to men are lower than they were a decade ago. The proliferation of sexual violence is the brutal face of a generalized intensification of the sexism which necessarily accompanies this economic assault.

Following a pattern established by racism, the attack on women mirrors the deteriorating situation of workers of color and the rising influence of racism in the judicial system, the educational institutions and in the government's posture of studied neglect toward Black people and other people of color. The most dramatic sign of the dangerous resurgence of racism is the new visibility of the Ku Klux Klan and the related epidemic of violent assaults on Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and Native Americans. The present rape epidemic bears an extraordinary likeness to this violence kindled by racism.

Given the complexity of the social context of rape today, any attempt to treat it as an isolated phenomenon is bound to founder. An effective strategy against rape must aim for more than the eradication of rape—or even of sexism—alone. The struggle against racism must be an ongoing theme of the anti-rape movement, which must not only defend women of color, but the many victims of the racist manipulation of the rape charge as well. The crisis dimensions of sexual violence constitute one of the facets of a deep and ongoing crisis of capitalism. As the violent face of sexism, the threat of rape will continue to exist as long as the overall oppression of women remains an essential crutch for capitalism. The anti-rape movement and its important current activities—ranging from emotional and legal aid to self-defense and educational campaigns—must be situated in a strategic context which envisages the ultimate defeat of monopoly capitalism.

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45. Mary Heaton Vorse, *A Footnote to Folly: Reminiscences* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1935), pp. 3–4.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
47. Flynn, *op. cit.*, p. 232.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
- Ibid.* See also Foster, *History of the Communist Party*, p. 116.
50. Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker*, p. 198.
51. Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*. See editor's note, p. 10.
52. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "1948—A Year of Inspiring Anniversaries for Women," *Political Affairs*, Vol. XXVII, No. 3 (March, 1948), p. 264.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 262.
54. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Alderson Story: My Life As a Political Prisoner* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), p. 9.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
56. *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
60. *Ibid.*
61. North, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
62. This article was reprinted in *Political Affairs*, Vol. LIII, No. 3 (March, 1974).
63. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
64. *Ibid.*
65. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
66. *Ibid.*
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
70. Flynn, *The Alderson Story*, p. 118.
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5. See Angela Davis, "JoAnne Little—The Dialectics of Rape." *Ms. Magazine*, Vol. Ill, No. 12 (June, 1975).

6. See Chapter 1.

7. Aptheker, *A Documentary History*, Vol. 2, pp. 552ff.

8. Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, pp. 185–186.

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10. Eisen-Bergman, *op. cit.*, Part I, Chapter 5.

11. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), p. 194.

12. "A Dozen Who Made a Difference," *Time*, Vol. 107, No. 1 (January 5, 1976), p. 20.

13. Brownmiller, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Jean MacKellar, *Rape: The Bait and the Trap* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1975), p. 72.

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39. *Ibid.*, p. 502.
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CHAPTER 12

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23. Mass, *op. cit.*, p. 27.