

Part 2 - Sexual Violence Against African American Slaves And Its Legacy Today

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👤 Dr. Crystal Feimster



This is the second excerpt of a two-part interview. Be sure to read first part [here](#).


Trigger Warning: Discussion of slavery, medical sexual violence, sex trafficking of minors

Note to Readers: The slavery of African Americans in the United States is undeniably one of the most reprehensible parts of American history. The institution of slavery justified, legitimized, and legalized the repeated horrendous abuse against women and children for a century. At NSVRC, we recognize that, as difficult as history may be to learn about, it is our duty to do so. We reached out to Dr. Crystal Feimster for her expertise in the area of sexual violence during the slavery era because we believe her work to be vital to understanding

history and its impact today. Still, we encourage readers to take care of themselves as they engage with this sensitive content.

4. Prejudices existing at the time that Black women were overly promiscuous and Black men were sexually aggressive each justified the mistreatment, abuse, and lynchings of those respective groups. Can we see remnants of those stereotypes prevalent in the Civil War era today? How do they manifest?

I think that oftentimes when we think about the post-war period (1865-1877), the way that we understand and imagine [rape](#)...On the one hand, it's an interracial crime. In the post-war period, the only way people could think about rape in the South was if the assailant was always Black and the victim was always white. So, Black men were these sexual beasts who had uncontrollable sexual desires for white women. We know that's a myth, and that's not true.

The reality was that Black women were the most likely victims of interracial sexual assault, but without much legal recourse even in the [post-war period](#) because the [Lieber Codes](#)  only applied to crimes processed by military court that happened in the context of war. If you know Danielle Maguire's work [At the Dark End of the Street](#), she's really looking at the sexual violence that Black women experienced through the civil rights era into the 70s, and really specifically looking at white men raping Black women and the failure of Black women to get legal justice.

We know that the majority of women who experienced sexual assault, usually experienced sexual assault at the hands of men of their own race and the men that they know. We accept that kind of thing as a reality today. That's not new. Those historical narratives, whether it is Black women suffering sexual assault that went unpunished by white men, Black men being falsely accused...those narratives function to actually mask the way the majority of women experienced sexual assault.

Today, the ramifications of these historical narratives make it difficult for Black women to publicly talk about and speak about the ways in which they are victims of sexual violence by Black men. Many Black women are afraid that it will then feed the narrative that Black men are these sexual beasts.

On the other hand, that narrative of Black men raping white women masked the ways in which white women are vulnerable to sexual assault in their own homes and in their own communities. It makes it difficult for white women to make claims without being vilified as victims. While those narratives don't hold true, throughout time they are powerful enough to continue to mask the realities of how women experienced and how women continue to experience sexual assault. Whether it's in the 1860s or the 1960s or 2023. The problem still exists that it's really difficult for women to [win sexual assault cases](#). It's really difficult for women to get the kind of protection and care that they need from the legal system in the courts.

So yeah, I think they are still powerful narratives that make it really hard for people to accept the reality of how women and girls experience sexual assault today.

5. Was colorism a factor in Black slaves' sexual exploitation?

Of course, yes. Often when we hear the word "[colorism](#)" we think of the ways in which people of color position themselves in relationship to one another based upon whether they're dark-skinned or light-skinned. But we know that in the slave-holding south, white men preyed on women of lighter skin, women who were considered in that period "mulattos" or "quadroons." We know that there was a whole [Fancy Trade](#), and that women of light-skinned complexions were sold into that trade, which was basically a high-class brothel or concubinage. Those women were products of forced sexual relationships between white men and enslaved women. So yes, there was colorism in the sense that someone like [Harriet Jacobs](#) was more likely to be hypersexualized and sold specifically as a sexual slave. That is not to say that Black and dark-skinned women were not the products of sexual violence. But the way that the color caste system worked in the South, Black women who were of whiter complexions were easier and more visible targets.

6. James Marion Sims, a man regarded as the "[father of gynecology](#)," built on his research by experimenting on female slaves through surgery without anesthesia. He is just one example throughout antebellum, and larger American history, that implemented medical sexual violence in the name of "scientific advancement." Does that history still leave its

mark on how we prioritize Black female bodily autonomy and medical treatments for Black women?

I mean, there's a kind of irony there, right? I'm thinking of [Deidre Cooper](#)'s work on enslaved women and the rise of the gynecological profession and the experimentation that happened on Black women. Then, thinking of our current moment where [Black maternal fetal rates](#) are horrible. I think that much of the science and medicine that's emerged out of that kind of [gynecological history](#) hasn't really benefited Black women, even as they were the subjects of that kind of [medical violence](#). I think that one of the things that was painful to bear witness to during the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) was the ways in which the [healthcare system and doctors](#) failed the [African American community](#), brown people and poor people more specifically.

So, I think...yes. Again, it's similar to the legal system. The ways in which these institutions gained prestige and profession, and the ways in which they defined and understood healthcare, it's through patriarchal, white supremacist power. I don't want to overstate things, but if you have in science and medicine an institution that's built on the exploitation and harm to Black people's bodies, it's not a system that's invested in the care, protection, health, and wellbeing of Black people.

So again, how do you undo that? One way is that Black people enter the profession. Black people become lawyers. Black people become doctors. I think in some ways, we're living in a world where it's about training. We're in the Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI) moment where we go, "Hey, some doctors have to be trained in this! Lawyers have to be trained in this!" But in some ways, just training people isn't enough because the [systems and institutions](#) are already [set up in a way](#) to do harm in order to protect power and privilege. I made that argument when I talked about the legal courts. The courts are set up to protect the power and privilege of white manhood. The rest of us are literally set up to fail! So, if you have a medical system that has developed that way, it's not enough just to say "We have to change and rethink the way we do medicine." The civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, all understood the medical profession and those institutions as being bankrupt in some way. So, I think we have a lot of work to do on that front.

7. [Sally Hemings](#) is perhaps the most famous example of an enslaved girl who was sexually

groomed and assaulted (slaves were not able to consent) by an older white man, but there were of course, many others. Do you think this Civil War era practice of forcing Black girls and young Black women to sexually “serve” older men has contributed to an adultification of Black girls still felt today?

Yeah, of course, but I think that system of what we might think of as the sexual economy of slavery emerged right alongside what we would consider the sex trade. Whether we’re looking at the West, the urban North, or the urban South, the sex trade and the slave trade worked hand in hand. For men who didn’t own enslaved women, they could go out and “buy sex.” But also, even within that world, a lot of the research I’m doing now in the [antebellum period](#) and post-antebellum period is the ways in which sex workers tried to bring cases of sexual assault. Even as they did sex work, they understood that they were not allowed to say no, or deny consent, the same way Black women were not allowed to deny consent. I think if we take those two histories together at that time, then it makes it possible for us to understand the ways in which young girls, poor young girls, immigrant young girls, and Black young girls are sex trafficked in this current moment. It gives us a sense of the ways in which sexual assault and sexual violence happen in households and families, like when we think about incest and the ways in which young girls are sexually assaulted or sexually molested. There is a culture, whether we see it as the sex trade or we think of it as the slave trade, in which older men can sexually exploit younger women and girls.

If we go back to the age of consent, there’s a reason [it was 10](#). It allowed men to sexually exploit, rape, groom, what have you, young girls. We know that young girls are not just physically but psychologically vulnerable and dependent, so they become easy targets. We know that young girls have been sexualized since the beginning of time. Very rarely can we make an argument that young girls have been protected from sexual assault. We’ve had to fight for every legal victory on that front.

8. Black women who were enslaved sexual violence survivors were often depicted as passive, or even wanting, in the wake of their

assaults. Can you speak to the women who fought back in spite of living in a society that didn't fight for them?

We can start with [Celia](#), the woman I mentioned who killed her master and made our way to [Harriet Jacobs](#) who had a consensual relationship with another white man to prevent her enslaver from sexually assaulting her, to her escaping and hiding in an attic forever. We can pull that thread even further to someone like [Anita Hill](#) who spoke up against Clarence Thomas in a public hearing. We can think about the women who brought suit against [R. Kelly](#). We can think about the women who spoke up against [Bill Cosby](#). I think that there is a real throughline in the sense that some scholars like [Darlene Clark Hine](#) have argued that Black women disassembled and Black women did not speak about the horrors of their sexual exploitation and harassment. I think yes, many probably did not, but more than enough did and it's just a matter of paying attention and acknowledging that most more often had been ignored or demonized. How long did it take for people to come to terms with folks like R. Kelly and Bill Cosby? A really long time! But everybody knew. It was an open secret. I don't even know why we say it was an open secret...it was just open. But again, there is a way in which it's not that Black women are not believed, but they are not understood as legitimate victims of sexual assault because for so long they were written out of the legal codes. So yes, there is this long shadow that slavery casts over the claims that Black women can make and how they're actually viewed. That shadow casts over white women as well.

I always say to my students, "What's bad for Black women is bad for all women at the end of the day."

9. As an educator who prioritizes educating about sexual violence experienced during slavery by Black people, how would you tell others to have age-appropriate discussions about this facet of history?

I have two boys, a 12-year-old and a 17-year-old. It's this question of, "When is it [age-appropriate](#) to talk to your sons about sexual assault and sexual violence?" I'm always like, "From day one!" I was teaching him about bodily integrity and when mommy says, "No!" Learning to respect other people's boundaries and understanding what consent is. So, in some ways, I believe that as soon as you

start teaching students and young people about the institution of slavery, you have to be prepared to have conversations with them about, “What is enslavement? What does it mean to hold someone in bondage?” It means that you have stripped them of control of their body, control of their parental rights, political rights, and social rights. You don’t have to have explicit conversations about defining terms like rape, but you can begin to talk to them about the ways in which enslaved people were exploited and oppressed. You can start with simple things like, “Families were torn apart. Children were sold away. People didn’t have control over who they were forced to have relationships with and to build a family with.” Eventually, when they get older, they’ll begin to realize, “Oh! So what does that mean about consent? That people were denied consent and self-determination.” I think that you can start doing that work as soon as you are [introducing young people to the history of enslavement](#). You have to introduce that information at the appropriate age level.

10. Is there anything else you’d like to add?

I just think it’s important for us to understand that the history of sexual violence and rape and the laws around it are not merely about the past. When we hear, “the history of this,” that that history actually informs our present moment. We can’t even begin to address the problem of sexual assault and sexual harassment if we don’t actually reckon with this long history and understand the implications for all women. The history of slavery is not just the history of the exploitation of enslaved people. It is about the violence and the ways in which power operated in these societies, how that power continues to operate in our current time, and who benefits from the laws and this long history. Who loses out? All women. We can talk about the disparities. We can talk about the ways in which Black women have suffered longer and whatnot, but in a sense, their suffering has made possible the exploitation of young girls. Their suffering has made possible the sex trade. Sex trafficking impacts us all, regardless of race. We all have to fear for our young daughters and young girls being preyed upon snatched and caught up in that. So, I just want people to understand that the history of Black women is all our history, and it continues to inform our present moment.

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About the Author:



*Dr. Crystal N. Feimster, a native of North Carolina, is an Associate Professor in the Departments of African American Studies and History and the Programs of American Studies and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Yale University. Feimster is the author of [Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching](#) (Harvard, 2009), a history of how black and white women in the US South were affected by and responded to the problems of rape and lynching in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. *Southern Horrors* won the North East Black Studies Association 2010 W.E.B. Du Bois Book Prize and received Honorable Mention for the Organization of American Historians' 2010 Darlene Clark Hine Award. Feimster has published peer-reviewed essays in *The Journal of American History* and *Daedalus*, has co-edited a special issue of *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* on Centennial Anniversary of Woman's Suffrage, and has written numerous book chapters and encyclopedia entries. Her essay "[Keeping a Disorderly House in Civil War Kentucky](#)," in the *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* was awarded the Kentucky Historical Society Collins Award for best article in 2019. Feimster has also published in the *New York Times*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Slate* and has advised and appeared in several documentaries, such as [The Rape of Recy Taylor](#).*
