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Genna Murray

Professor Kenzer

1 May 2009

The Inheritance of Lawless Passion:
An Examination of Interracial Relationships through Slave Narratives

“The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear . . . When she is fourteen or fifteen, her own master, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will.”¹ According to Harriet Jacob’s famed slave narrative, this was the fate of many slave girls in the antebellum South. For years Jacobs had to thwart the sexual advances of advances of her master and, later, her master’s son, she endured constant torment from her mistress whose obsessive jealousy prevented her from realizing Jacobs’ innocence, and she was compelled to forsake true love because her master refused to give her up. She does not record any laboring in the fields, going hungry or even being whipped, and yet her life was so tortured that she chose to hide in an attic for seven years rather than continue living under the constant sexual exploitation of her master. While the institution of slavery came with many evils, it may be argued that the worst of this was experienced by the women who fell victim to the lust of their masters.

¹ Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written By Herself* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 51.

For many years, historians disregarded Jacobs' slave autobiography as a false narrative written by abolitionists as propaganda. While research has recently verified much of Jacobs' account by identifying many of the persons and events which Jacobs discusses, many still believe that her story was embellished to gain support for the anti-slavery cause. Jacobs' case was extreme and it may be that she exaggerated certain aspects of her narrative for dramatic effect. However, if one examines other slave narratives, they will discover that Jacobs' sufferings were not entirely unique. It is the sad truth that many women suffered under the same conditions as Jacobs under slavery. It is now very well known and accepted that it was fairly common for white men to have sexual relations with slave women. Many of these affairs were loveless relationships in which the slave was simply being exploited by her master. However, as historians like Joshua D. Rothman have pointed out, there were a somewhat surprising number of loving and mutually respectful relationships.²

The slave narratives that were compiled as a part of the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration uphold this conviction by explaining the vast variety of interracial relationships that occurred before the Civil War. Not only do the narratives discuss the relationships themselves, but also how such relationships affected families and the beliefs of the entire slave community. Furthermore, although the biases of the interviewers and the present-day beliefs of the ex-slaves being interviewed

² Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1789-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 4.

may be considered a flaw to many, they can also be used and examined to convey information about race relations during the 1930s.

The WPA slave narratives have been both acclaimed and criticized by historians. The interviews were conducted between 1936-1938 and contain over 2,300 narratives.³ While historians like George P. Rawick heavily rely on these narratives, many others like John Blassingame reject the narratives as “hopelessly impaired.”⁴ It is certainly true that the WPA slave narratives contain numerous flaws. Peter Kolchin has pointed out that many of the ex-slaves who were interviewed highly exaggerated the strength of the U.S. slave community. C. Vann Woodward, on the other hand, finds that ex-slaves were compelled by the white interviewers to give answers which would uphold the leading belief of the time—that slavery was a benevolent institution.⁵ The very time in which the interviews were conducted undermines their reliability. These ex-slaves were being interviewed during the Great Depression. For those who were living in poverty, they truly may have been nostalgic for the days of slavery when they at least had a roof over their heads and food in their stomach. Additionally, the interviews were conducted during the peak of racism in the United States.⁶ Although lynching was on the decline by the 1930s, there were fifteen recorded lynchings in 1935 alone.⁷ Clearly the pathetic

³ C. Van Woodward, “History from Slave Sources,” *American Historical Review* (April 1974): 470.

⁴ Donna J. Spindel, “Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Autumn 1996): 250.

⁵ Woodward, “History from Slave Sources,” 473.

⁶ Norman R. Yetman, “The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection,” *American Quarterly* (Autumn 1967): 537.

⁷ *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk about Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Freedom*, ed. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, (New York: The New Press, 1998), viii.

state of race relations in the 1930s influenced the issues that ex-slaves even dared to discuss.

Based on these numerous flaws, some may argue that the narratives are entirely useless. However, despite their imperfections, the WPA slave narratives still offer historians a rare look into the ante-bellum world of slavery that may have been forever lost. The worth of the slave narratives is directly related to the topic of slavery that one is researching. If one is researching something definitive, such as the profitability of the slave trade, then the estimation of individual slaves would not be very reliable. However, for topics relating to social history, such as interracial sex, the narratives are extremely valuable. Psychological studies show that while the elderly have trouble remembering the day-to-day experiences of their youth, they can specifically recall “life markers” and unusual events.⁸ So, the aging ex-slaves who were interviewed may no longer accurately remember something as mundane as all the crops that were grown on their plantation, but they would certainly remember a scandal between their master and a slave, especially if that slave was a close friend or family member. Unfortunately, the subject of interracial sex remained so taboo during the 1930s that it is likely that a great deal of slaves refrained from discussing such a topic. However, a considerable number of narratives do discuss the various interracial relationships that occurred during slavery and therefore, their contribution is priceless.

⁸ Spindel, “Assessing Memory,” 254.

The slave narratives do reveal a number of horror stories that can be considered nothing short of rape. A master could have his way with any number of slave women without suffering legal consequences. Just as Jacobs' autobiography insisted, women who refused or resisted could be beaten, tortured or even killed.⁹ As a result, the majority of women were forced to give in to their master's desire.¹⁰

Some narratives imply that enslaved women would sometimes calculatedly engage in sexual relations with their master in exchange for preferential treatment.¹¹ It may be argued that this was one of the only ways for a slave woman to gain a level of autonomy and some slave women certainly realized this and sacrificed their bodies in hope of better conditions for themselves or loved ones. In Anthony Christopher's interview he admitted that he and his immediate family only performed light chores because his sister was the master's "gal."¹² However, it was ultimately up to the master how he would treat his slave mistress and it was frequently the case that these women would receive nothing in return for their "affections." James Green accounts that slave women on his plantation who had affairs with his master were treated no better, or even worse, than the other slaves. Such masters considered these women to be expendable and if they grew tired of their slave mistress, they could solve this problem by simply selling her away from their friends and family.¹³ Like all aspects of slave life,

⁹ Minnie Fulkes in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938* (17 vols.), XVII, 11-15.

¹⁰ Nancy Anderson, in *Born in Slavery*, 49-52.

¹¹ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 20.

¹² Anthony Christopher, in *Born in Slavery*, 719.

¹³ James Green in *Born in Slavery*, 87-89.

the master could exercise unrestrained domination over the course of these relationships.

As was the case with all slaves, these slave women were not offered any legal protection. Although neighbors might gossip and disapprove of a master who was sexually abusing his slaves, they rarely took any action to step in. So long as a master did not make his actions public, the white community would turn a blind eye and he did not have to fear any outside intervention.¹⁴ Victimized women could not seek help from their own slave community which was even more incapable of protecting such women. Without any natural rights or capable defenders, many of these women were forced to endure a life of pain and suffering to which there was no escape.

While the abused women certainly endured the most suffering, such offenses had adverse ramifications for the male slave population. For enslaved males, the inability to protect their wives, daughters and sisters from their master's lust was especially painful and degrading. Jacob Aldrich recalls how his master would make a husband wait outside the slave quarters while he raped his wife.¹⁵ Any man who tried to defend his wife could face being sold away, severely beaten or even killed. To avoid the threat of jealous husbands or lovers, some masters would simply forbid their slaves to engage in any intimate relationships with each other. One narrative explains that the

¹⁴ Rachel Moran, *Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race and Romance* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press. 2001), 23.

¹⁵ Jacob Aldrich in *Born in Slavery*, 23-36.

slave men on his plantation did not dare speak or even look at any of the slave women that the master was involved with.¹⁶

Sexually exploiting female slaves without consequence was just one more way in which masters could display their total supremacy over the black male population. Not knowing how to react to such demeaning circumstances, some black males would take out their pent up aggression on the innocent slave woman or the woman's illegitimate children.¹⁷ The consequences of these sexual transgressions were far-reaching and could sometimes result in the destruction of a previously-loving slave family. The lingering resentment that black males felt towards white slave owners who so mercilessly abused their loved ones is evident in the narratives and has done much to shape the beliefs on post-slavery interracial relationships.

Despite the known consequences and lack of protection, various narratives mention that there were women who made great efforts to resist their master's sexual advances. Unfortunately, many times when this happened the woman would be severely punished. For example, when Martha Allen's mother refused her master she was beaten with a piece of wood.¹⁸ John Aldrich recollected that the standard punishment for women who refused their master was to be whipped,¹⁹ whereas on John Henry Kemp plantation, such women were hanged by their wrists for half a day.²⁰ Other masters favored more long-term punishments, like Minnie Fulk's master who

¹⁶ Winston Davis, in *Born in Slavery*, 90.

¹⁷ Julia King, in *Born in Slavery*, 61.

¹⁸ Martha Allen in *Born in Slavery*, 13-15.

¹⁹ Jacob Aldrich, in *Born in Slavery*, 23-36.

²⁰ John Henry Kemp, in *Born in Slavery*, 184-189.

tortured her mother for years because she refused to give in to him.²¹ As a result of the physical torture that could ensue, most of a master's sexual advances towards his slave women were met without resistance.

However, some women successfully thwarted their master's advances. One way to do this was by running away. Anna Baker's mother successfully did this to avoid sleeping with her master.²² However, running away was not an option for everyone because it usually required outside assistance and leaving one's family behind. Other women took a different approach and actually fought their masters back. When Fannie Berry's master attempted to rape her, she claimed that she scratched his face until he stopped. She also recalled another slave girl who poured boiling soap all over the overseer who tried to attack her.²³ Fannie's narrative does not reveal if she or the other slave woman faced any repercussions for their actions, but it can be assumed that others did. Richard Macks told of a young girl who murdered her slave trader when he tried to rape her. She was immediately charged with murder and would have faced the death penalty, but was taken pity on by a General Benjamin Butler.²⁴ Unfortunately, these women were the exception to the rule. Most women were forced to submit to their masters because the risk of fighting back was too great.

While masters were able to exploit their female slaves however they pleased, other men, such as overseers and neighbors, could be penalized for sleeping with a

²¹ Minnie Fulkes, in *Born in Slavery*, 11-15.

²² Anna Baker, in *Born in Slavery*, 11-17.

²³ Fannie Berry, in *Born in Slavery*, 1-6.

²⁴ Richard Macks, in *Born in Slavery*, 51-56.

slave woman. Cambell Armstrong recalled that his master would run a white man out of town if he saw him go near any of his slave women.²⁵ Overseers lived and worked in close proximity with the slave women, and thus, it was somewhat common that they had forced or consensual relationships with the slave women. Viney Foster admitted that she was a “product of the cotton house” when her mother fell victim to the overseer.²⁶ While Foster did not note her father being reprimanded in anyway for this, other overseers were. Jessie Pauls told the interviewer that when his master found out that his mother was pregnant by the overseer he threatened to fire that overseer if he ever touched another slave woman.²⁷ Lu Lee’s master did not even give a warning. He immediately ran his overseer out of town when he learned that he got one of his slaves pregnant. Additionally, the master proceeded to lock up the pregnant slave.²⁸ It is likely that the master chose to do this because he did not want people to think that he was sleeping with his slave women and had produced a mulatto child.

A master may decide to punish an overseer or any man who had relations with one of his slaves for a variety of reasons. Of course some may have been genuinely concerned about the general well-being of their slave or considered the rape of any woman, even a slave, to be morally repugnant. Despite the fact that interracial sex was prevalent in the South, it was never acceptable and some masters may have been acting on the belief that interracial sex was fundamentally wrong because it could lead to the

²⁵ Campbell Armstrong, in *Born in Slavery*, 68-74.

²⁶ Viney Foster, in *Born in Slavery*, 716.

²⁷ Jessie Pauls, in *Born in Slavery*, 031.

²⁸ Lu Lee, in *Born in Slavery*, 2,298.

deterioration of the white race.²⁹ However, due to the fact that most of a master's decisions concerning his slaves were primarily based on their economic worth, it is likely that masters punished men who fornicated with their slaves because it was a violation of their property. A master controlled every aspect of a slave's life from where they lived to what they ate. Therefore, most would certainly want to control with whom their slaves slept.

It is doubtful that the masters were motivated by a commitment to uphold the law because although interracial sex was illegal in a few states, most just drew the line on interracial marriage.³⁰ In the majority of states, the very few charges that were brought against white males for engaging in interracial sex were done so under anti-fornication laws, which punished all pre-marital sex.³¹ However, as the narratives indicate, if a master wished to penalize a man for philandering with one of his slave women, he usually did so on a personal level rather than involve the authorities.

Although men who slept with their slaves rarely faced any legal trouble, they could certainly be judged poorly by their community. Ministers preached against masters who slept with their slave women and those men who did were often frowned upon or sometimes even ostracized from "good" society.³² Because mulatto children

²⁹ Peter W. Bardaglio, "Shameful Matches: The Regulation of Interracial Sex and Marriage in the South before 1900," in *Sex, Love, Race*, ed. Martha Hodes, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 125.

³⁰ Peggy Pascoe, "Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of 'Race' in Twentieth-Century America," in *Sex, Love, Race*, ed. Martha Hodes, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 468.

³¹ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 57.

³² Louis Evans, in *Born in Slavery*, 35.

were often the sign of an affair between a slave and her master, plantations without any mulatto children were markedly free of the stain of any interracial liaisons.³³ Simuel Riddick boasted to the interviewer that there were no half-white children on his master's plantation because his "white folks were fine people."³⁴ Ellen Bates also noted that her master "had no use for mixing black and white."³⁵ Some masters even went out of their way to insure that there were no mulattoes on their plantation. Georgia Baker's master refused to buy her mulatto aunt because he had a rule against keeping mulattoes on his plantation.³⁶ It is likely that Baker's master was so adamant about not keeping mulattos because he was unmarried and did not want people to speculate that he was sleeping with his slaves.

Appearance was extremely important in Southern society, especially among the elite. Although sexual relations certainly occurred between master and slave, they were by no means accepted by Southern society.³⁷ So long as men did not publicly flaunt their interracial affairs, they could avoid serious social and legal repercussions. However, no matter how discrete one was with their affair, in close-knit communities where both blacks and whites exchanged rumors, it was very difficult to stay out of the weekly gossip. While such gossip was usually never addressed publicly, it could still serve as a major source of private humiliation for those involved.

³³ Lewis Evans, in *Born in Slavery*, 30-33.

³⁴ Simuel Riddick, in *Born in Slavery*, 207-211.

³⁵ Ellen Bates, in *Born in Slavery*, 7.

³⁶ Georgia Baker, in *Born in Slavery*, 37-57.

³⁷ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 22.

In any slave institution, where the power was clearly unbalanced, it was extremely difficult to claim that mutually loving relationships between slave and master could flourish. However, while the slave narratives do uphold that atrocities occurred during the sexual relationships between masters and their slave women, it seems that most of these relationships were not so depraved.³⁸ Of course by today's standards depraved could be used to explain any non-consensual relationship, but for this study's purpose it will be used to describe the behavior of master's who went out of their way to physically or emotionally hurt the slave women they were sexually involved with.

According to the narratives, interracial relationships most frequently took the form of cohabitation between an unmarried slave owner and a slave woman whom he chose to live with.³⁹ In many of these cases, it can be assumed that the slave woman was offered little choice in the decision to live with her master as his mistress. Ethel Daughtery recalls his master having a number of slave women who lived in his house and "kept them similar to Mormanism."⁴⁰ Four narratives recount their master buying an attractive slave woman, usually mulatto, for the sole purpose of keeping her as a mistress.⁴¹ This practice became increasingly popular overtime and the slave trade even catered to the needs of white men by creating specific markets for attractive mulatto

³⁸ Of the 44 narratives which discuss the treatment of slave women involved in interracial relationships with their master, only eight report cases of physical abuse or other deliberately-cruel behavior.

³⁹ There are fourteen narratives which discuss cohabitation between a master and one of his slaves. All but one of these relationships were seemingly monogamous relationships.

⁴⁰ Ethel Daughtery, in *Born in Slavery*, 63.

⁴¹ Mary Reynolds, in *Born in Slavery*, 235-245.

women who had been essentially trained to serve as concubines.⁴² Some of these women were allegedly treated quite well by masters who doted on them by buying them expensive clothes and building them a comfortable living space.⁴³ While this might seem preferable to being a field hand, it is unlikely that these women were content with their harem-like living situation. However, they were confined to slavery and did not have a choice in the matter.

Two narratives which discussed women who left the master they were romantically involved with after emancipation indicate that many slave women were unhappy with, and likely forced into, their quasi-marriage like relationships. Both Sarah Allen and Olivier Blanchard's mothers left their white fathers after the Civil War. Allen's father seems to have treated her and her mother well and she cited no reason for why her mother made them move.⁴⁴ It seems that, despite her father's kind treatment, her mother simply did not love him and left once she was free to. Blanchard's mother left his father in order to marry another ex-slave.⁴⁵ As previously discussed, slave women who were sexually involved with their master were often prohibited from engaging in relationships with other men. This practice would have kept many couples apart and it is no surprise that after the war such couples would finally unite once the restrictions had been lifted. Based on these narratives one can conclude that although some masters may have treated their black mistress very well, and perhaps even loved her,

⁴² Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 131

⁴³ Mary Reynolds, in *Born in Slavery*, 242.

⁴⁴ Sarah Allen, in *Born in Slavery*, 12-13.

⁴⁵ Olivier Blanchard, in *Born in Slavery*, 90-92.

the feeling was not always mutual and these women were being bound to loveless unions by slavery.

However, the interviews also show that there clearly were white slaveholders and slave women who formed lifelong partnerships in which both parties seem to have been content.⁴⁶ Such relationships were not uncommon and were even somewhat accepted, especially among lower class farmers.⁴⁷ Phannie Corneal's described the relationship between her slave mother and slave-owning father to be mutually loving and marriage-like. Her mother could have left her father after emancipation, like many other slave women, but chose to stay with him, perhaps indicative of her feelings.⁴⁸ The slave narratives uphold that it was possible for masters and slave women to defy the laws and social mores of their time and form lifelong relationships.

While society sometimes tolerated marriage-like relationships between white men and black women, they were never acceptable. The state generally turned a blind eye when it came to the issue of interracial sex between white men and black woman, but legislators were very sure to prohibit any legitimate marriages. Colonial lawmakers intentionally supported the slave institution when they diverted from the precedent of their English forbearers to establish that a mulatto child followed the status of the mother.⁴⁹ These men knew that the overwhelming majority of mulatto children were conceived by a white man and black woman and so by enacting that a child followed the

⁴⁶ Ten of the narratives discuss marriage-like relationships between master and slave.

⁴⁷ Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 1.

⁴⁸ Phannie Corneal, in *Born in Slavery*,.

⁴⁹ Moran, *Interracial Intimacy*, 21.

status of the mother they were ensuring an increase in the slave population. By regulating marriage, but not sex, legislatures made it possible for men to have affairs with black women without the social and economic responsibility that came with legally-sanctioned marriages.⁵⁰

The need to forbid interracial marriage was crucial because through marriage, blacks could improve their economic and social standings, and thus, inevitably undermine the racial hierarchy. Consensual interracial relationships, like the one Phannie Corneal's parents were engaged in posed a threat to the slave institution because, through these relationships slave women could achieve unprecedented levels of autonomy. Many masters who became emotionally involved with their slaves understandably wished to protect them in their wills, but this was complicated by the fact that slaves were denied property rights. In such inheritance cases, courts were conflicted between upholding the rights of property owners and the racial hierarchy.⁵¹ In Stearlin Arwine's case, the latter prevailed. Despite the fact that his parents had engaged in a life-long monogamous relationship, the courts refused to honor the will of Arwine's father because it sought to leave his inheritance to his mulatto family.⁵² Other masters who knew that their slave mistress and children would not be considered legitimate by the state and so they went to great lengths to provide for their loved ones. This was the case with John C. Elder's father who made his brother promise to take care

⁵⁰ Peggy Pascoe, "Miscegenation Law," 469.

⁵¹ Adrienne D. Davis, "The Private Law of Race and Sex: An Antebellum Perspective," *Stanford Law Review* (Jan 1999): 285.

⁵² Stearlin Arwine, in *Born in Slavery*, 31-33.

of his family after he died.⁵³ Not everyone was as accommodating as Elder's uncle was to assist an interracial family. Oftentimes, it was the white family who contested the will of their family member who wished to leave money to their illegitimate family. However, without strong obligation from white family members, the courts tended to honor the property rights of the deceased and award the illegitimate family inheritance.⁵⁴

The courts may have shown compassion when it came to slaves receiving an inheritance, but they were far more concerned with the freeing of slaves. Fearing that interracial relationships might lead to the emancipation of many black mistresses and their mulatto children, legislatures made manumission increasingly difficult over time. Virginia led the way in 1806 by declaring that any slave who was freed would have to leave the state within one year.⁵⁵ Knowing that a man would not like to see his mistress or mulatto children expelled from the state, legislators were able to prevent slave owners from freeing their loved ones. The consensual relationships between slave women and their masters that were previously stated may be undermined by the fact that these women remained in slavery until freed by the Civil War, but it is important to understand the restrictions that were strategically made to prevent the emancipation or any empowerment of slave women.

While laws may have been established to hinder sexual liaisons between white men and black women, they pale in comparison to the measures taken to prevent

⁵³ John C. Elder, in *Born in Slavery*, 315.

⁵⁴ Davis, "The Private Law of Race and Sex," 286.

⁵⁵ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 43.

relationships between white women and black men. In addition to undermining racial ideology, sexual relationships between white women and black men directly threatened the slave institution because children resulting from such unions could not be enslaved.⁵⁶ However, despite the best attempts by white males, there were white women who slept with their black slaves. Historians like Martha Hodes argue that sexual encounters between white women and black men were far more common and tolerated than previously thought and the narratives uphold this argument for the most part.⁵⁷ In his interview Edmund Bradley admitted that he was born free because his mother was white, as it was the law that all children born to a white woman be free.⁵⁸ Despite varying degrees of toleration, both men and women involved in such affairs could face dire consequences. Georgia Baker claimed that her uncle had to run away because he “got in trouble” with a white woman. Even at the time of the interview, Baker refused to name the woman who was involved with her uncle because it was such a scandal.⁵⁹ The fact that the identity of the white woman remains unknown may indicate that she was from the planter-class and her family went to great lengths to conceal the affair.

Based on historical records, Hodes indicates that such affairs were usually between poor white women and black men.⁶⁰ However, this may simply be the result

⁵⁶ Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 4.

⁵⁷ Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 1.

⁵⁸ Edmund Bradley, in *Born in Slavery*, 190.

⁵⁹ Georgia Baker, in *Born in Slavery*, 37-57.

⁶⁰ Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 5.

of the elite's ability to make certain indiscretions disappear from court records. The other two narratives which venture to discuss the taboo topic of sex between black men and white women also talk of women who belonged to slave owning families, which indicates a degree of wealth. Adora Rienshaw's tells the tragic story of her mother whose abusive husband nearly beat her to death when he found out that she had been sleeping with one of their black coachmen.⁶¹ It may come as a shock that Rienshaw's mother was not divorced by her husband. But, as Rothman points out, it was not a husband's immediate reaction to divorce his wife once he discovered that she was committing adultery with a black man. Rothman argues that this is because a white woman sleeping with a black man was not considered to be so deplorable that it would warrant an immediate divorce.⁶² However, it must also be considered that the husband could not afford legal fees, wanted to conceal his wife's affair from the public or knew how difficult it was to procure a divorce at the time. It was so difficult, in fact, that of the twenty-three men who petitioned for a divorce on the grounds that their wife committed adultery with a black male between 1786-1851, only sixteen were granted a divorce.⁶³ While petitioners accusing their wife of fornication with a black man were far more likely to receive a divorce than on any other grounds, the numbers still indicate how difficult it was to procure a divorce at the time.⁶⁴ It is possible that a white man

⁶¹ Adora Rienshaw, in *Born in Slavery*, 212-215.

⁶² Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 179.

⁶³ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 193.

⁶⁴ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 194.

would rather stay married than suffer the humiliation of publicly admitting that his wife slept with a black man, only to have his divorce petition denied.

Relationships between black men and white women were often exposed by pregnancy. Such was the case for Lewis Jenkins' mother who had an affair with one of her slaves. When she became pregnant her parents hid her in the attic for her entire pregnancy. After she gave birth, her parents sent her child away and did not disclose his whereabouts for many years.⁶⁵ Jenkins' narrative explores the extreme measures that the planter-class would take to conceal a sexual affair between white woman and a black man. Poor women, who had to work every day and could not afford to have the child sent away, were unable to cover up such pregnancies and so their stories are more prevalent in the public record.⁶⁶ However, the narratives reveal that elite women certainly did engage in sexual relations with their black slaves. While it was somewhat accepted that men sleep with their slaves, when women did so it upset not only their expected role as a paradigm of virtue and chastity, but it also empowered black men. In a slave society this could not occur and so white men went to great lengths to "protect" their women.

Naturally, children were frequently the result of the varying interracial relationships and master's treated their illegitimate children in a variety of ways. It seems that the majority of masters who had children with their slaves were either

⁶⁵ Lewis Jenkins, in *Born in Slavery*, 189-195.

⁶⁶ Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 52.

caring or indifferent towards them. Some were very cruel despite their paternity.⁶⁷ John Henry Kemp was so ashamed of his father's cruelty that he did not even want to discuss it with the interviewer.⁶⁸ Some master's simply handled the situation of their unwanted mulatto children by selling them off. Three of the interviewees experienced this harsh rejection from their white father. In most cases this was at the behest of a resentful wife, but in others it seems to have been purely out of convenience.⁶⁹ To some this was an especially appealing solution to their "problem" because mulatto children, especially girls, could be sold as expensive house slaves.⁷⁰ Charlotte Martin's master found this to be so profitable that he slept with his female slaves for the sole purpose of producing mulatto children to sell.⁷¹

Less appalling, but still unsettling, were the fathers who did not go out of their way to hurt their own children physically or emotionally, but whose indifference could be almost as painful. Hulda Williams was never told who her father was, but was left to assume that it was her master.⁷² Candis Goodwin, on the other hand, knew that her master was her father, but lamented the fact that he never acknowledged her.⁷³ Luckier children at least received the "privilege" of becoming a house slave rather than a field laborer. Even so, such children almost always had to call their father "master,"

⁶⁷ Of the eighteen ex-slaves who admitted to being the child of their master, five report being treated cruelly by their father.

⁶⁸ John Henry Kemp, in *Born in Slavery*, 184-189.

⁶⁹ Hannah Allen, in *Born in Slavery*, 14.

⁷⁰ Nancy Anderson, in *Born in Slavery*, 49-52.

⁷¹ Charlotte Martin, in *Born in Slavery*, 166-167.

⁷² Hulda Williams, in *Born in Slavery*, 389.

⁷³ Candis Goodwin, in *Born in Slavery*, 17-20.

especially when others were around.⁷⁴ According to the customs of Southern elite, this was the most “respectable” way to treat one’s illegitimate family.⁷⁵ Southern society clearly tolerated the indiscretions of white males, but only so long as they were concealed. To acknowledge one’s mulatto family and treat them equally would be a serious violation of the social order and could have major social repercussions.

Even if a father refused to acknowledge his slave children, it was very hard for white family members to ignore the lineage of these children and in some cases their familial bonds transcended race. This was usually the cases with grandmothers and their illegitimate grandchildren. It was common that young planter men “started with slave women” before settling down with a suitable, white bride and obviously children would sometimes result.⁷⁶ Although it is likely that mothers did not approve of their son’s actions, many could not resist the instinct to care for their grandchildren, despite their race. Adalaine Montgomery recalled that even though her father never acknowledged her, her grandmother secretly taught her how to read.⁷⁷ Ervin E. Smith stated how “the best friend [he] ever had was an old white grandmother.”⁷⁸ To some children, like Jake Maddox, whose mother was sold and whose father abandoned him, his grandparents were all he had. As a result, he continued to stay with them after emancipation and until they passed away.⁷⁹ Grandparents also became very attached to their mulatto grandchildren. When Lucretia Alexander’s white father tried to beat

⁷⁴ Dora Franks, in *Born in Slavery*, 49-56.

⁷⁵ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 41.

⁷⁶ Victor Duhon, in *Born in Slavery*, 307-308.

⁷⁷ Adalaine Montgomery, in *Born in Slavery*, 1,514-1,519.

⁷⁸ Ervin E. Smith, in *Born in Slavery*, 187-191.

⁷⁹ Victor Duhon, in *Born in Slavery*, 307-308.

her, her grandmother had him thrown out of town and took Lucretia in.⁸⁰ While Southern etiquette may have called for these children to be renounced, the narratives exhibit that some family members, especially grandmothers, could not resist the urge to show at least some affection for their enslaved grandchildren.

Still, many slave-owners defied the racial hierarchy and freely acknowledged their unlawful children.⁸¹ The narratives show that some slaves became very close with their father and master. George Davis refused the opportunity to run away to Canada because he enjoyed life with his slave-owning father.⁸² Such scenarios were more common amongst lower class farmers, but even some elite men ignored social stigma associated with acknowledging one's slave children. This was the case for James Calhart James, whose prominent father, Franklin Pearce Randolph, was exceptionally caring towards James and his mother. James and his mother both lived in the Randolph house and did not have to perform any slave work. James was educated by a private tutor and baptized in the same church as the other Randolph children.⁸³ While it is evident that Randolph did care about his son's wellbeing, this was still a far from ideal situation for a child. Children like James often led very conflicting lives. Harriet Gresham recalled realizing that she was neither fully accepted by her father's white family, but was discouraged from freely associating with the slaves on her mother's side.⁸⁴ At the end

⁸⁰ Lucretia Alexander, in *Born in Slavery*, 32-39.

⁸¹ Fourteen of the ex-slaves had white fathers who treated them as his legitimate children.

⁸² George Davis, in *Born in Slavery*, 70.

⁸³ James Calhart, in *Born in Slavery*, 34-36.

⁸⁴ Harriet Gresham, in *Born in Slavery*, 156-164.

of the day, these children were still legally slaves and no matter how well they were treated, it was inevitable that they eventually realized this truth.

Despite the legislative barriers that one would have to cross, some fathers were able to free their slave children.⁸⁵ Alice Freedman refused to reveal her father's identity, but admitted that he was a wealthy planter who freed his mulatto children once they reached a certain age and left them a plot of land.⁸⁶ The fact that Freedman concealed her father's identity indicated that her planter-class father probably never publicly acknowledged his children, but at least felt enough compassion to free them. In states that required freed slaves to leave the state, some fathers were so devoted to their children that they moved to another state in order for them to be free. Such was the case for Florida Clayton whose grandfather moved from Washington, D.C. to Florida in order to free and openly live with his black mistress and their children.⁸⁷ In certain areas of the Deep South, where mulattos were treated as a separate race which was entitled to special privileges, some fathers would not only emancipate their children, but also give them a considerable amount of land and money.⁸⁸ Sam T. Stewart revealed that in some rare cases fathers would even give their freed mulatto children slaves of their own once they were of age.⁸⁹ These narratives show that while the law

⁸⁵ Three of the ex-slaves were freed by their white father before emancipation.

⁸⁶ Alice Freedman, in *Born in Slavery*, 398.

⁸⁷ Florida Clayton, in *Born in Slavery*, 62-64.

⁸⁸ Bardaglio, "Shameful Matches," 119.

⁸⁹ Sam T. Stewart, in *Born in Slavery*, 316-324.

and tradition encouraged men who fathered slave children to disregard their heredity and forsake them to slavery, some abandoned society's expectations and treated their children with equality.

The ways in which a father acted towards his mulatto children often depended on whether or not he had a legal wife and how she reacted to the fact that he was having children with another woman, particularly a slave woman. Unfortunately for many white married women, it was an unspoken rule that men could sleep with their slave women.⁹⁰ While it was considered socially taboo, many wives were forced to look the other way when it came to their husband's liaisons. It became increasingly difficult for wives to ignore this fact when their slave women started giving birth to mulatto children, but still some managed to do this.⁹¹ In her memoir, plantation mistress Mary Chestnut wrote, "Every lady tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household, but those in her own she seems to think drop from the clouds."⁹² Mary Reynolds' narrative upholds Chestnut's conviction. Despite the fact that Reynolds' master built a separate house for the plantation "seamstress" and her mulatto children who just happened to resemble the master, his wife denied the fact that her husband was committing adultery. The wife's denial continued even after the master's mulatto children announced the identity of their father. Reynolds further

⁹⁰ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 172.

⁹¹ Nancy Anderson, in *Born in Slavery*, 49-52.

⁹² Mary Boikin Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905), 23.

added that the seamstress continued to have many children by the master, while the wife stopped shortly after the arrival of his mistress.⁹³ In this sad situation, it is fairly certain the wife knew that her husband was having an affair and was continuing to do so, but women had few options then and many must have found it easier to act oblivious than admit that their husband preferred the company of a slave woman.

Other women were openly aware of their husband's liaisons, either because they could no longer realistically ignore it or they found such behavior to be tolerable in males. After John Henry Kemp's mother was raped by her master, she sought help and protection from the master's wife. However, the mistress of the house advised Kemp's mother that if she did not do as the master ordered, he might kill her.⁹⁴ As painful as it must have been for this woman to tell one of her slaves to continue having sexual relations with her husband, some women lived in such fear of their. Short of murder and extreme physical torture, the law allowed men essentially to do whatever they wanted to their wives. As a result, it is likely that many white women could personally relate to a slave woman who had been raped by her husband. However, it does not appear that all of these cases were driven by fear. Amy Elizabeth Patterson recounted that her mistress, Mrs. Street, openly knew that Amy was the result of an affair between her master and her slave mother. However, instead of confronting her husband or taking her anger out on Amy's mother, Amy claimed that Mrs. Street "knew the facts

⁹³ Mary Reynolds, in *Born in Slavery*, 235-245.

⁹⁴ John Henry Kemp, in *Born in Slavery*, 184-189.

and respected [her mother] and her child.”⁹⁵ Clearly, some women like Mrs. Street, must have correctly realized that it was their husbands, and not their slave women, who were at fault for such affairs. While historians like Rothman argue that men and women entered marriage with the same expectations of loyalty,⁹⁶ the slave narratives indicate that most women were upset by their husband’s infidelity, but that tradition encouraged them to tolerate this behavior. All southern women had heard of interracial affairs and some may have even witnessed their father or brother’s affairs before they entered their own marriage.⁹⁷ As a result, some women may have felt such behavior to be unfortunate, but allowable. Regardless of the reasoning, there was little a woman could do about a cheating husband and so some women simply grew to accept it.

Unable to control their husbands, many wives took their pain and aggression out on the helpless slave women. According to the narratives, a common reaction to discovering that one’s husband was having an affair was to have the slave woman or her mulatto offspring sold away.⁹⁸ Both Mandy Billings and Elvira Boles were sold at very young ages because their master’s wife refused to come face to face every day with her husband’s illegitimate offspring.⁹⁹ However, it was the man’s decision to sell his slaves and if he refused to or the wife was too afraid to even approach her husband she would sometimes resort to emotionally or physically abusing their husband’s lover. Jack

⁹⁵ Amy Elizabeth Patterson, in *Born in Slavery*, 150-152.

⁹⁶ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 186.

⁹⁷ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 20.

⁹⁸ Five narratives discuss mulatto children being sold away at the behest of the plantation mistress.

⁹⁹ Mandy Billings, in *Born in Slavery*, 162-163.

Elvira Boles, in *Born in Slavery*, 106-108.

Maddox recalled that when his master brought home a beautiful mulatto “seamstress,” the wife immediately realized his intentions and attacked her with a pair of scissors.¹⁰⁰ Richard Macks remembered a very similar situation in which the wife nearly beat to death the slave woman his master was sleeping with.¹⁰¹ Such wives did not realize that these slave women rarely had any choice in the matter and instead of taking their anger out on their husbands they did on the only people they had control over—their slaves. There are no interviews which mention a wife seriously confronting her husband and only one where the wife actually left her husband for having an affair. Even in that one case the wife only abandoned her husband after their child drowned and she blamed his death on her husband’s sins.¹⁰²

While white southern women were not subject to slavery, they were bound by their marriages which could make life considerably miserable and lonely if they were deceived and neglected by an unfaithful husband. As the narratives indicate, most women could not reprimand their husband for being unfaithful and it was extremely rare for a woman to leave her husband. Most women were still economically dependent on their husbands due to the lack of jobs available to single women, especially in rural areas.¹⁰³ As previously stated, since divorce was extremely rare this was not an option for most women. However, there were some who fought the odds and filed for divorce. If a woman had any chance at achieving a divorce from her

¹⁰⁰ Jack Maddox, in *Born in Slavery*, 2,531.

¹⁰¹ Richard Macks, in *Born in Slavery*, 51-56.

¹⁰² John Henry Kemp, in *Born in Slavery*, 184-189.

¹⁰³ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 109.

husband she would have prove not only that her husband committed adultery with a slave, but that he failed as a husband in other ways. A woman's most effective complaints were that their husband was so abusive that death was imminent or that their husband failed to provide for them. This argument held considerable weight if the woman brought a substantial amount of money into the marriage.¹⁰⁴ The woman would also have to prove that they were dutiful and obedient wives who had had desperately tried to convince their husband to end his interracial affair.¹⁰⁵ However, a woman could not place too much emphasis on her husband's miscegenation because it was very possible that this practice was accepted by at least one of the men she was testifying before.¹⁰⁶ Rothman's study found that, of the twenty women who even attempted to obtain a divorce on the grounds of interracial fornication between 1786-1851, only eleven were granted their request.¹⁰⁷ Thus, according to these records, while nearly 70% of men were granted a divorce on these grounds, only 55% of women were able to persuade the court.¹⁰⁸ The fact that men were more frequently allowed to divorce a spouse who had crossed the line further demonstrates the antebellum south's double standard.

In addition to the women who were directly affected by such exploitations, children too suffered the consequences. No matter how discreet an affair was it was, practically impossible for children to be oblivious to their father's liaisons if they came

¹⁰⁴ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 183-184.

¹⁰⁵ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 187.

¹⁰⁶ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 171.

¹⁰⁷ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 194.

¹⁰⁸ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 193-194.

face to face with their half-siblings every day.¹⁰⁹ With the gradual realization of their father's affair, white children would often experience feelings of disillusionment toward their father. On top of feeling betrayed, many children would eventually realize that this could be a major source of embarrassment for the family.¹¹⁰ As a result, some children might be so angered by their father's actions that they came to condemn interracial relationships. For boys, this would sometimes encourage them that it was acceptable to engage in interracial relationships of their own. For girls, it might teach them to be tolerant of white men's transgressions. Despite their emotions, children at this time were taught to be very respectful of their parents, especially their father, and it would be very rare that a child dare confront his or her father about his interracial relationship.

The recognition of their father's affair not only complicated a child's relationship with his or her father, but also the relationships between white and black half-siblings. In rural areas, where the only children one could frequently associate with were the ones on your farm or plantation, it was very common for young white plantation children to play with the slave children. Often, such children may not realize that they shared the same father with their enslaved playmate until they reached adolescence. Such was the case of James Calhart James who recalled being very close with his master's legitimate children until they realized that he was their half-brother, at which

¹⁰⁹ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 45.

¹¹⁰ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 50.

point he believed they began to hate him.¹¹¹ It was understandably very troubling for such children to understand that their father had other children, who were still technically slaves. In addition to feeling that their father had betrayed their mother, many children must have felt personally betrayed and confused.

It is not surprising that, similar to wives who took out their missed-placed aggression on their husband's lover, children would do the same against their enslaved half-siblings. As previously stated, a child could not disrespect their father by being openly angry with him and so their defenseless sibling might receive the blame. Rebecca Hooks was a victim of such antagonism. Hooks so closely resembled her white half-sister that in an effort to conceal her heredity, she was forced to cut her hair very short. As Rebecca grew older she eventually refused to cut her hair. Shortly after, her half-sister realized her identity and they began to hate and torment each other.¹¹² Such resentment would grow as children were instilled with the racial ideology of southern society. Once friends, relationships between white and black half siblings often strained over time whether they were fueled by anger, jealousy, confusion, or pure racism.

However, the narratives illustrate that not all half-siblings resented each other so much despite their different races and status in society. Ervin E. Smith recounted that his father's half-brother secretly taught him to read as children and continued to provide for him after emancipation.¹¹³ Similarly, Ed Domino told the interviewer that his mother's half-sister always made sure that they did not have to work too hard and that

¹¹¹ James Calhart James, in *Born in Slavery*, 34-36.

¹¹² Rebecca Hooks, in *Born in Slavery*, 171-177.

¹¹³ Ervin E. Smith, in *Born in Slavery*, 187-191.

they were never sold away. After the war, his mother refused to leave her half-sister and so they continued to live with her.¹¹⁴ Some of these children were clearly able to defy the social order and go on to be life-long friends.

While white children would certainly experience emotional distress as a result of their father's affair, this usually paled in comparison to what their mulatto half-siblings endured. Such children were rarely fully embraced by their white family and even if they were, the racial statues of the time prevented them from enjoying many of the same privileges that legitimate white children would.¹¹⁵ On top of this, no matter how they were treated by their slave owning father and his family, mulatto children were often not fully accepted into the black community either. For mulatto slave children who were acknowledged by their white family, they were frequently considered to be superior to black slaves and were thus forbidden to even associate with the black slave children.¹¹⁶ Even if their white family did freely allow them to associate with the black community or did not take enough interest in them to care, they were not always met by the other slaves with welcome arms. Dora Franks recalled being harassed by the black slave children on the plantation who would chase her around and call her a "yellow nigger" because she was mulatto.¹¹⁷ Such childish antics were probably a result of jealousy because mulatto children would often receive better treatment. However, these children were targeted by adults as well.

¹¹⁴ Ed Domino, in *Born in Slavery*, 1,219.

¹¹⁵ Davis, "The Private Law of Race and Sex," 221.

¹¹⁶ Victor Duhon, in *Born in Slavery*, 307-308.

¹¹⁷ Dora Franks, in *Born in Slavery*, 49-56.

One would hope that such children would at least be accepted by their black families. Sadly, this was not always the case and sometimes even their own families resented them. Mrs. Thomas Johns recalled that there was a woman on her plantation that had several mulatto children, but would openly declare that she thought more of her child who was fully black.¹¹⁸ Although it seems cruel to disfavor one's own children, this was sometimes the unfortunate response of rape victims to associate their innocent children with their rape. Mandy Billings documented being treated with even more inequality by her black family. After emancipation, her grandfather refused to send her to school with all of her black brothers and sisters because she was mulatto.¹¹⁹ For the black community, mulattos were a constant reminder of the sexual exploitations that slave women often faced and unfortunately this caused some of them to begrudge their own innocent children.

Facing such rejection from both the black and white community, many mulattos experienced self-hatred. Even as an elderly woman when the interview was conducted, Ethel Daughtery admitted that she was still ashamed that she was mulatto, and particularly hated her blue eyes. However, over time she had realized that it was not her sin.¹²⁰ Unfortunately, others could not disassociate mulattos from the conditions of their conception. The narratives demonstrate that the forced and consensual mixing of the races during slavery had already caused a divide between blacks and mulattos before the Civil War even begun.

¹¹⁸ Mrs. Thomas Johns, in *Born in Slavery*, 205-207.

¹¹⁹ Mandy Billings, in *Born in Slavery*, 162-163.

¹²⁰ Ethel Daughtery, in *Born in Slavery*, 63.

During slavery it had become common knowledge that pureblooded blacks could work harder and stand more labor than mulattos.¹²¹ For this reason mulattos tended to work as house slaves while blacks were field hands and the two groups began to identify each other in this way. Henry Banner proudly stated in his interview that blacks sold for a higher price than mulattos because they could work harder.¹²² It was, in fact, true that light-skinned males were less expensive than black because they could more successfully run away and blend into white society. Mulatto women, on the other hand, had become revered for their beauty and were in high demand to work as house slaves and seamstresses.¹²³ In her interview, Carrie Pollard reminisced about, and probably romanticized, the adoration that came with being an attractive mulatto girl. She too boasted that mulattos sold for more.¹²⁴ As house slaves, mulattoes lived in close proximity to their masters and, in many cases, considered themselves to be of a higher class than the black field hands. The blacks, on the other hand, began to increasingly resent the mulattos as a “half-breed” population.¹²⁵

This caused a clear divide in both the free black and slave population. In many states like South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana, mulattos were considered by the white population to be part of a separate, superior race that were entitled to more than the purely black population.¹²⁶ Many theorists of the time even believed it to be a scientific truth that mulattos were mentally, physically and morally

¹²¹ Rebecca Hooks, in *Born in Slavery*, 171-177.

¹²² Henry Banner, in *Born in Slavery*, 104-106.

¹²³ Moran, *Interracial Intimacy*, 54.

¹²⁴ Carrie Pollard, in *Born in Slavery*, 318-319.

¹²⁵ Adeline Marshall, in *Born in Slavery*, 2,578.

¹²⁶ Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 12.

superior to blacks, and some would even advocate to whites.¹²⁷ As a result of their supposed superiority and that they were more likely to be freed because of their white ancestry, it is no surprise that mulattoes made up a substantial percentage of the free black population. For example, in North Carolina almost half of the state's mulattos were free, while only three percent of the black population was free.¹²⁸ Free black populations, which were mostly comprised of mulattos, and the black slave population were frequently at odds with each other. Louis Joseph Piernas explained that he lived in a settlement of free mulattos. While they sometimes associated with the whites, they always distanced themselves from the blacks. On the other hand, Clay Bobbit and "Uncle Jackson," both of full African decent, asserted that they did not have anything to do with the "shim shams" [mulattos].¹²⁹

These prejudices partially explain why blacks tended to marry other blacks whereas mulattos tended to marry mulattos during slavery and in the years after.¹³⁰ In North Carolina, 74.1% of black men married black women and 94.2% of mulatto men married mulatto women in 1860. Although the numbers did change by 1970, after the slaves had been emancipated, 95.6% of black men still married black women and 67.4% of mulatto men married mulatto women.¹³¹ While other factors were at work here, such as economic standing, it is clear that skin color played a major role in spousal

¹²⁷ R. Edward Lee, "Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races Applied to the American White Man, and the Negro," (1864), 24.

¹²⁸ Robert Kenzer, *Enterprising Southerners: Black Economic Success in North Carolina, 1865-1915* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 109.

¹²⁹ John H. Jackson, in *Born in Slavery*, 1-6.
Clay Bobbit, in *Born in Slavery*, 117-119.

¹³⁰ Vera Roy Bobo, in *Born in Slavery*, 194.

¹³¹ Kenzer, *Enterprising Southerners*, 110.

selection.¹³² The divide between the black and mulatto communities lessened over time, but lingering resentment is evident in the ex-slave narratives. This resentment is rooted in the sexual exploitation of black females, which unfortunately did not end with slavery.

By the 1930s, when these WPA slave narratives were completed, black women were still the victims of white men's lust. Some would even argue that black women were even more vulnerable after slavery. At least in the antebellum years slave women usually only had to thwart their master's advances, but with freedom they were exposed to an entire community of men.¹³³ It is ironic that slavery trapped some women in abusive relationships, but protected others from outside sexual exploitation. The remainder of this thesis will compare the interracial sex that occurred during slavery with that of the early twentieth century as recalled by African Americans in the WPA slave narratives and the narratives in *Remembering Jim Crow*.

The interviews which are included in *Remembering Jim Crow*, were conducted in a similar fashion to those of the Federal Writers Project. As a part of Duke University's "Behind the Veil Project" in the 1990s, historians traveled across ten southern states to interview 1,200 elderly African Americans who experienced the segregation of the Jim Crow South. While these narratives certainly contain many of the same flaws that the WPA slave narratives have, the vast improvement in race relations between the 1930s and 1990s is evident in these more recent narratives and advocates the narratives'

¹³² Kenzer, *Enterprising Southerners*, 111.

¹³³ Moran, *Interracial Intimacy*, 27.

legitimacy. Unfortunately, the narratives indicate that race relations remained very poor in the 1930s and it seems that black women faced many of the same obstacles that they did during slavery.

Ann Pointer's memoir she discussed how white men would frequently have a slave mistress or mistresses. While the man would not publicly acknowledge this woman, this did not stop the community from gossiping. However, there would be no serious legal or social repercussions for the white man. Some of these women were rewarded with expensive clothes, spending money, and separate living quarters, but these were by no means a condition in exchange for their affections. His wife was forced to act oblivious to the affair, even when the mulatto children that were being born were clearly his. In some cases, the wife would even be forced to take care of her husband's illegitimate children while his mistress labored in the fields. It did not matter if the black woman was married. Her husband would be forced to endure this violation of marriage and if he punished anyone, it would be his helpless wife or her mulatto child.¹³⁴ If the word "tenants" were replaced with "slaves" in this narrative, it could undoubtedly pass as an interview from the Federal Works Project. According to Pointer, even though black women had technically achieved their freedom, they still suffered from the same sexual exploitation that they experienced during slavery.

As Pointer's account suggests, black women who worked as tenant farmers and maids often fell prey to white males because of the close proximity in which they

¹³⁴ Ann Pointer, in Paul Ortiz, ed., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South* (New York: New Press, 2001), 52-55.

worked. Arthur Searles, George Kenneth Butterfield Jr. and Cleaster Mitchell both discussed the endeavors that maids faced working in the homes of white families. In order to maintain white supremacy after the end of slavery, black domestic servants were demoralized by being required to enter homes through the back door and were forced to ride in the back when being driven by a white person. Men were especially careful to make sure that black women rode in the back of the car because, despite the fact that a man might very well be having an affair with his black maid, he certainly did not want to publicly expose his emotions by allowing her to sit in the front.¹³⁵ Once in the home, these women were often exposed to sexual abuse from their male employer, his sons or other acquaintances. Compared with slave masters, post-emancipation employers were not as possessive or as concerned with the general wellbeing of their housemaids. Therefore, if a housemaid was raped by an outside visitor, it was unlikely that this man would face any serious repercussions from the employer.¹³⁶

Generally, these women could not simply quit. Working as a domestic servant was one of the very few jobs available to single black women in the early twentieth century. Women who lived in cities could work in factories, but such women were also vulnerable to sexual exploitation from their boss. As a result, some women turned to prostitution. As degrading as this could be, prostitutes usually at least had some choice over their partner, they could make more than a domestic servant or factory girl, and this was the only business that was not exclusively controlled by men. Women usually

¹³⁵ Merlin Jones, in *Remembering Jim Crow*, 150.

¹³⁶ Moran, *Interracial Intimacy*, 27.

entered this business as a temporary career and would hope seek a more respectable profession once they had saved enough money. Others were not so lucky and their career could end in imprisonment, venereal disease or even death.¹³⁷ The fact that many women were forced to turn to prostitution, demonstrates the abusive conditions that they were forced to work under.

One of the narratives discussed women who did fight their sexual assailants and there certainly were other such women. When Author Searles' mother was sexually approached by a white salesman, she pressed a hot iron into his back. There is no indication that she was punished for this and so it can be inferred that she was not. Another woman was able to prevent a sexual advance by effectively arguing the immorality of sexually pursuing black women, when black men get hanged for crossing the color line.¹³⁸ However, these cases were abnormalities and white men who were assaulted by black women could certainly bring charges against them which would likely result in harsh penalties. Comparatively, it was rare that black women in the early twentieth century could seek any legal defense or justice for the crimes committed against them by white males.¹³⁹

As numerous narratives indicate, women could not seek protection from the police, and in some cases, it was the police who they needed protection from. Stine George despondently recalled that when his nine year-old-sister was raped by a group

¹³⁷ Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 109.

¹³⁸ Arthur Searles, in *Remembering Jim Crow*, 28.

¹³⁹ Diane Miller Sommerville, *Rape and Race in Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 17.

of white teenage boys, the sheriff did nothing to prosecute them for this appalling crime.¹⁴⁰ Cora Eliza Randle Flemming explains, “in those days you didn’t rape. You just took what you wanted from the women.”¹⁴¹ In Ferdie Walker’s chronicle she admitted to being harassed by a police officer who exposed himself to her. Even more deplorable, she told of an eleven-year-old black girl who was raped by two police officers. The narratives offered the sad truth that the victims of these rapes were not only black women, but were sometimes young girls. This can be upheld by the statutory law of the time. Beginning in the 1880s, a moralistic movement began to sweep the nation which advocated raising the age of consent, which was currently ten. Many of the southern states refused to do so, realizing that young women could use the revised statute to prosecute white men.¹⁴² With no laws or enforcement officers to protect them, many black women and girls in the Jim Crow South constantly had to be weary of white male aggressors.

Unable to turn to the law, black women could not turn to the wives of their assailant either. Cleaster Mitchell explains that sometimes a black woman could thwart the advances of a white man by threatening to tell his wife, but frequently this did not stop him. This was because even if the black woman did tell the wife, his wife could do nothing about it and would rather not hear about it. Similar to the antebellum years, white women’s’ alleged oblivion was not altered even with the birth of mulatto children and sometimes the white wife would be obligated to look after these children along

¹⁴⁰ Stine George, in *Remembering Jim Crow*, 14.

¹⁴¹ Cora Eliza Randle Flemming, in *Remembering Jim Crow*, 70.

¹⁴² Sommerville, *Rape and Race*, 252.

with her own.¹⁴³ This did not improve relations between white women and their husband's coerced mistress. While these relationships took a variety of forms, many white women could not contain their jealousy and so black domestic servants or tenant farmers were further terrorized by their assailant's wife.

The narratives from the Jim Crow South reveal that black women in this time were still enduring the same sexual exploitation from white men that their enslaved grandmothers had over fifty years earlier. Although they were no longer slaves, many of these working class women were frequently in close proximity to their male employers, who maintained a level of superiority through their race and executive working position. Unlike slaves, these women could quit, but that may result in long-term unemployment which was not an option for women who had to support themselves or their families. Just as during slavery, there were some exceptional women who risked their lives to fight back against their pursuer. White males who were rejected by black women could not resort to the same forms of torture that some slave masters practiced without risking legal repercussions. However, they could likely press charges against a black woman who assaulted them, even if it was in self-defense, and so the number of black women who physically resisted their assailants remained very low. Even though they were free, the law did not protect them and the rest of the black community remained fairly helpless to protect them as well. While the narratives may not uphold Rachel

¹⁴³ Cleaster Mitchell, in *Remembering Jim Crow*, 214.

Moran's argument that conditions for black women living in the Jim Crow South were even more grim than during slavery, for many women they had certainly not improved.

Despite emancipation, interracial relationships, of any kind, were more intolerable in the early twentieth century than they had ever been during slavery. Even if a white man did love his black mistress, anti-miscegenation statutes were revised as to ensure that blacks and whites did not marry. With the abolishment of slavery, it became increasingly difficult for whites to maintain their dominance over blacks. One way for white men to guard their racial superiority was to forbid interracial relationships that had been tolerated in the past.¹⁴⁴ Although white men certainly still slept with black women, they had to do so more discretely. While during slavery, such affairs demonstrated a master's absolute control over his slaves, these relationships now showed a white man's lack of self-control.¹⁴⁵

By the time reconstruction ended, all anti-miscegenation statues were reinstated to prohibit interracial marriage and, in some states, interracial sex. As it became increasingly difficult to uphold this law due to the blending of the races, Virginia amended the law by passing the "Act to Preserve Racial Integrity" and other southern states followed in Virginia's example.¹⁴⁶ Previously, a person was considered black so long as they were at least one-sixteenth black. However, the new act introduced the

¹⁴⁴ Pascoe, "Miscegenation Law," 467

¹⁴⁵ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender & Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 71.

¹⁴⁶ Pascoe, "Miscegenation Law," 475.

“one-drop rule” which deemed that so long as a person has any trace of African blood in their lineage, they are to be considered black.¹⁴⁷ This allowed white men to avoid all social and economic responsibility for the black women they were involved with.¹⁴⁸ As a result, interracial marriage actually dropped after the Civil War.¹⁴⁹ Therefore, it is no surprise that not a single one of the narratives discuss interracial marriages, or even interracial cohabitation.

Despite the fact that interracial marriage and cohabitation decreased after the war, the number of mulatto children being born actually increased—another indication that white men continued to exploit black women after the war. This continuation of sexual abuse further shaped the divide between blacks and mulattoes. This disparity sometimes stemmed from the superior status that mulattos enjoyed. William J. Coker Jr. remembers that in elementary school children were seated according to their complexion. The light-skinned students would sit in the front where they would receive the most attention from their teacher, while the black children would be seated in the back rows. Coker notes that sometimes the wealth of a child’s family played a role in his or her seating, but most of the wealthier families were mulattoes anyway.¹⁵⁰ However, in other cases it was the mulattos who suffered because they were not embraced by the black community. Kenneth Young admits that he broke up with a girl solely because her skin was very light and he did not like the looks he received when he went out with

¹⁴⁷ Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 199.

¹⁴⁸ Pascoe, “Miscegenation Law,” 469.

¹⁴⁹ Moran, *Interracial Intimacy*, 26.

¹⁵⁰ William J. Coker Jr., in *Remembering Jim Crow*, 158.

her.¹⁵¹ Just as during slavery, much of the resentment that blacks had towards mulattos stemmed from the fact that they were a constant reminder of the white man's continued oppression.

With the strict laws in place to bar interracial marriage, there were few options available for a black woman who gave birth to a white man's child. While a few states adopted bastardy statutes which obligated white men to support their illegitimate children, their use was extremely rare and they were eventually repealed.¹⁵² Therefore, as Cleaster Mitchell points out in his narrative, men could easily avoid making any contact with their illegitimate offspring if they chose to do so.¹⁵³ Just as during slavery, white men were able to sexually exploit black women free of any consequences. Even if a man wanted to legitimize his mulatto children, states like North Carolina enacted laws which explicitly prevented them from doing so.¹⁵⁴ While most states did not take such extreme measures, strict anti-miscegenation laws and social dogma actually made it more difficult to for interracial relationships to flourish in the early twentieth century than it had been during slavery.

It is seems illogical that interracial couples would actually face more obstacles after both races were deemed to be constitutionally "equal," but unfortunately this was the case throughout the South and much of the country. It was not until 1967 that that

¹⁵¹ Kenneth Young, in *Remembering Jim Crow*, 185.

¹⁵² Moran, *Interracial Intimacy*, 27.

¹⁵³ Cleaster Mitchell, in *Remembering Jim Crow*, 214.

¹⁵⁴ Bardaglio, "Shameful Matches," 127.

the Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional to prohibit interracial marriage.¹⁵⁵ For almost an entire century, states were able to circumvent the Fourteenth Amendment by arguing that marriage was a social right, not a political one, and they were therefore these anti-miscegenation statutes were not denying African Americans of any political rights.¹⁵⁶ They further argued that these laws were not discriminatory because the criminal punishment for miscegenation was allegedly applied to both races.¹⁵⁷ However, as history has repeatedly shown us, a statute's declaration does not always reflect the actions of society and that was certainly the case with the anti-miscegenation statutes. While white men could sleep with black women without any fear of legal repercussions, black men frequently paid with their lives for crossing the color line.¹⁵⁸

Willie Harrell alludes to this disparity in the legal system by stating that "you couldn't even look at a white woman . . . You would get hung . . . But whites could look at blacks all they wanted. Ain't going to be nothing done about it."¹⁵⁹ Unfortunately this was the case for black men living in the Jim Crow South and thousands of men lost their lives to vigilante mobs for the "rape" of a white woman. Between 1899 and 1922 there were 3,436 recorded lynchings.¹⁶⁰ While the number of lynchings began to decrease by the 1930s, there were fifteen recorded in 1935 alone and continued to be a threat to

¹⁵⁵ Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 1.

¹⁵⁶ Moran, *Interracial Intimacy*, 77.

¹⁵⁷ Bardaglio, "Shameful Matches," 124.

¹⁵⁸ Sommerville, *Rape and Race*, 17.

¹⁵⁹ Willie Harrell, in *Remembering Jim Crow*, 40

¹⁶⁰ D. Marvin Jones, *Race, Sex, and Suspicion: The Myth of the Black Male* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 20.

black males through the 1940s.¹⁶¹ When looking at these numbers, it must be considered that because lynching was technically illegal, not all went recorded and the actual numbers would be considerably higher. The white community validated these lynchings by creating the myth of the black rapist.¹⁶² In reality, sexual assault of a white woman was the cause for less than thirty percent of recorded lynchings.¹⁶³

The lynching craze that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century was an unprecedented phenomenon in the United States. Before the Civil War, in the very few cases in which a white woman accused a slave or free black of rape, the case was brought to court, rather than left to the discretion of an angry mob.¹⁶⁴ In court, the white community did not automatically side with the white female, especially if she was poor or had a less-than-perfect reputation. Whites sometimes even testified in defense of a black man accused of rape or use their influence to ask for a pardon if he was found guilty.¹⁶⁵ The motivation behind some of these actions was certainly monetary. A slave owner might defend his slave simply because he did not want to suffer the financial loss of a slave if he was imprisoned or hanged. However, many of the defense testimonies must have been motivated by compassion for the slave or the belief that he truly was innocent and that justice must be served.

By the end of reconstruction, the social climate had so drastically changed that being accused of the rape of a white woman was almost certainly a death sentence for a

¹⁶¹ Berlin, Favreau, Miller, *Remembering Slavery*, viii.

¹⁶² Sommerville, *Rape and Race*, 21

¹⁶³ Sommerville, *Rape and Race*, 24.

¹⁶⁴ Sommerville, *Rape and Race*, 4.

¹⁶⁵ Sommerville, *Rape and Race*, 9.

black man. As Harrell recalls, “rape” could be considered anything as innocent as staring at a white woman for too long.¹⁶⁶ However, what seemed to be the most common scenario was that a white woman and black men had consensual sex, sometimes repeatedly, but once the woman became pregnant she claimed she had been raped. There was no longer a question of innocence and members of the white community no longer rallied to defend the accused black male, despite the woman’s reputation. Merlin Jones asserted that he knew a man who was lynched for sleeping with a white woman, despite the fact that she pursued him and had slept with several other black men.¹⁶⁷ Unlike ante-bellum Southern society which tended to hold poor white women in disdain, in an effort to maintain racial superiority after slavery, all white women were considered pure and virtuous. As a result, white women no longer had to prove their innocence because it was considered unthinkable that any white woman would even consider having sex with a black man. If any sexual interaction did occur, it must have been rape.¹⁶⁸

Such convictions about the threat of black males were upheld by the popular fiction, news and even “science” of the time. Thomas Dixon, one of the most popular writers of the 1920s and 30s, wrote various novels which characterized black males as sexual deviants whom were obsessed with white women. In an effort to absolve southern men of guilt for the ever growing mulatto population, Dixon characterized

¹⁶⁶ Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 203.

¹⁶⁷ Merlin Jones, in *Remembering Jim Crow*, 19.

¹⁶⁸ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender & Jim Crow*, 72.

black women as lustful “Jezebels,” who sought to seduce normally faithful white men.¹⁶⁹ Although Dixon’s stories were fictional, they had a profound impact on race relations in the South. Ferdie Walker maintained that white men justified their actions by calling black women Jezebels who supposedly enjoyed being raped.¹⁷⁰ Journalists further supported these stereotypes by filling the newspapers with embellished stories of black criminality, especially rape.¹⁷¹ Scientists of the time, influenced by Eugenics and Darwinism, went even further to assert that black men were innately sexually aggressive. Not only did this support the black rapist theory, but it also justified slavery as a benevolent institution which prevented black men from raping white women.¹⁷² While all interracial relationships became less acceptable after slavery, nothing was considered more deplorable than relations between white women and black men because of the threat it posed to white supremacy.

The white community was not alone in its effort to condemn miscegenation. The WPA narratives demonstrate that the overwhelming majority of ex-slaves in the 1930s were strongly opposed to interracial relationships. In all twenty interviews in which the subject of current-day interracial relationships came up, only one ex-slave admitted that he was not opposed to interracial relationships. Charlie Sandles admitted that he was in favor of interracial marriage because it was the only way to improve race relations.¹⁷³ All nineteen of the other interviewees claimed being against interracial

¹⁶⁹ Gilmore, *Gender & Jim Crow*, 68.

¹⁷⁰ Ferdie Walker, in *Remembering Jim Crow*, 9.

¹⁷¹ Sommerville, *Rape and Race*, 235,

¹⁷² Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 203.

¹⁷³ Charlie Sandles, in *Born in Slavery*, 48.

relationships. In fact, most were strongly against them. Sylvia Watkins even went as far to assert that blacks and whites that marry should be whipped.¹⁷⁴ Frances Batson exclaimed that he “wouldn’t marry [a white woman] if it would turn [him] gold.”¹⁷⁵ However, the majority of interviewees were less extreme in their answers and simply stated that they thought interracial relationships were wrong or they should not be allowed. Some believed that racial mixing was against God’s wishes,¹⁷⁶ whereas others noted that such relationships allowed white men to continue to exploit black women.¹⁷⁷

It is likely that many of these interviewees were truly opposed to interracial relationships. However, it must be considered that some may have simply given the answer which they thought their white interviewer wanted to hear. After all, miscegenation was still illegal in all the states where interviews were conducted. For an ex-slave to assert that they condoned interracial relationships would have been in direct defiance of the statutory law. Furthermore, in a society where a black man could be lynched for so much as touching a white woman, it is unlikely that a black man would conceivably risk his life by arguing that blacks and whites should be able to marry. As a result, it is no surprise that so many of the ex-slaves expressed their disregard for interracial relationships.

While these ex-slaves may have reached the same conclusions as their white contemporaries on anti-miscegenation, their justifications could not be more different.

¹⁷⁴ Sylvia Watkins, in *Born in Slavery*, 76-79.

¹⁷⁵ Frances Batson, in *Born in Slavery*, 1-2.

¹⁷⁶ Cecelia Chappel, in *Born in Slavery*, 5-8.

¹⁷⁷ John McAdams, in *Born in Slavery*, 2,447.

The black community had suffered for hundreds of years because of the liberties that white men took over slave women. As the Jim Crow narratives establish, this suffering did not end with emancipation. For many blacks, it must have been difficult to view even the most loving interracial relationship without associating it with the sexual exploitation of black women. In a sense, interracial relationships at this time, even the consensual ones did remain exploitative on some level. Because interracial marriage was not allowed, black women could not obtain any legal responsibility from their white lover. White men may have no longer been able to get rid of a black mistress by selling her, but they could certainly abandon her without any repercussions. Even if an interracial couple was truly devoted to each other, the white male still consciously or unconsciously maintain legal, social and economic dominance over his black lover. The black community was fully aware of this and thus discouraged women from entering interracial relationships. Furthermore, many blacks looked down on such women because they believed these unequal interracial relationships threatened whatever respectability they had gained since slavery.¹⁷⁸

Overall, the WPA narratives uphold that during the institution of slavery there was a wide variety of interracial relationships that ranged from the most brutal rapes to the most loving relationships. While some white slave owners took sadistic pleasure in torturing their slave women, others jeopardized their social standing and career to be with the woman they loved. Therefore, it is difficult to make vast generalizations about interracial relationships during slavery and they should really be examined on a case-

¹⁷⁸ Moran, *Interracial Intimacy*, 65.

specific level. However, it can be argued that most interracial relationships fell somewhere in the middle of the two previously stated extremes. Most of these women did not have to endure fierce beatings from their master and many were actually treated quite well. Nevertheless, even if the master did not physically force himself the institution of slavery provided all the force needed to coerce these women into loveless relationships. The narratives from the Jim Crow era reveal that this sexual exploitation continued long after emancipation. In some ways, black women living during the early twentieth century were actually more vulnerable to the advances of white men. As a result, it is no surprise that interracial relationships continued to be condemned by the black community through the 1930s. Although anti-miscegenation statutes were deemed unconstitutional almost half a century ago and remarkable progress has been made in U.S. race relations, the white man's sexual exploitation of black women during and after slavery has had a lasting impact on future generations.

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