BLACK FEMINIST DISCOURSE ON RAPE AND ITS REVISIONS IN BLACK WOMEN’S CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVES OF SLAVERY

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By

Dominique Nicole Swann, B.A.

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In the twenty-first century, Black women writers across the African Diaspora have written neo-slave narratives to intervene in previous conversations within Black feminist literary theory and criticism. Many of them have challenged not only the literary tradition within which they are situated, but they have also sparked a renewed interest within the field’s major critical conversations. Dolen Perkins-Valdez’s *Wench* (2010) and Andrea Levy’s *The Long Song* (2010) are two exemplary texts that take up a longstanding conversation within the field and within its object of study: sexuality. Both novels, published in the early part of the twenty-first century, are directly in conversation with critical texts on sexuality in the lives of Black female subjects. More specifically, Perkins-Valdez and Levy unsettle a rigid divide between master and slave. They consider anew Black feminist criticism’s assumption: a sexual relationship between a white male and an enslaved Black woman is inherently non-consensual because of an inherent power imbalance. In other words, a master owns a slave and a slave is owned by a master; therefore, a consensual sexual relationship between a master and a slave is impossible. However, *Wench* and *The Long Song* feature enslaved Black women as protagonists who, literally and figuratively, consent to and engage in the act of sexual intercourse with their masters. Engaging in sexual relations with white males brings enslaved women sexual satisfaction and affords them opportunities to subvert their subjugation within and outside of domestic spaces. In doing so, contemporary Black women writers have exploded previous assumptions about rape once articulated in Black feminist literary criticism and theory. *Wench* and *The Long Song* critically
intervene in Black feminist discourse when there has been the prevailing assumption that sex between master and slave is ‘always-already’ an act of sexual terrorism.
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When I was an undergraduate student at the University of Maryland, College Park, I once heard Mary Helen Washington say, “The intellectual life is inherently social.” My thesis is proof of that.

I have shared a number of conversations with mentors, colleagues, students, and close friends whose inspirational words and challenging ideas have left valuable impressions on my work. I am indebted to you all for believing in me.

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INTRODUCTION
UNDERSTANDING THE DISCOURSE ON RAPE IN BLACK FEMINIST THEORY AND CRITICISM

[Patsey] back bore the scars of a thousand stripes; not because she was backward in her work, nor because she was of an unmindful and rebellious spirit, but because it had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress. She shrank before the lustful eye of the one, and was in danger even of her life at the hands of the other, and between the two she was indeed accursed.

Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853)

Slavery relied as much on routine sexual abuse as it relied on the whip and the lash.


Can [enslaved women] use or wield sexuality as a weapon of the weak? Do four years and two children later imply submission, resignation, complicity, desire, or the extremity of the constraint?


In *The Butler* (2013) a young Black boy named Cecil Gaines (Michael Rainey Jr.) picks cotton in a vast field, his parents within earshot. A white male, a plantation owner, approaches and grabs Cecil’s mother (Mariah Carey), telling her that he needs her help in the shed. He leads her away, her eyes downturned and her head hung low. Seconds later screams pierce the cotton fields. Though set in 1920s Macon, Georgia, and though the scene takes place in the midst of sharecropping’s decline, America’s dealings in chattel slavery haunt the scene.

The very situation of a Black woman enduring sexual abuse at the hands of a white man harkens back to the depths of what we now refer to as the “Peculiar Institution.” Reiterations of slavery in and across cultural texts have long revealed the extent to which white slavers committed sexual abuses against enslaved Black women and men. Well-known slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative*, Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Hannah Craft’s *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* (2002) describe how enslaved
women were sexually exploited, often bearing their masters’ children. Stories from former
slaves that surfaced in the twentieth-century as a part of the Works Progression Administration
(WPA) Slave Narratives Project are a testament to the prevalence of sexual violence on southern
plantations.¹ Postbellum writers like Gayl Jones, Octavia Butler, Barbara Chase-Riboud, and
Toni Morrison carry on this tradition in their explorations of slavery, stressing how sexual
violence “was as a by-product of slavery” (Clinton 208).

Slaves were legally considered chattel, so crimes committed against them, including rape,
held little to no weight in the courts.² If masters felt so inclined to, they could pursue legal
recourse “for damages to property or criminal charges made against the enslaved” (Hartman,
“Seduction and the Ruses” 540). In the case of rape, “If a rapist was suspected of the sexual
assault of a slave woman, he was charged with ‘assault and battery’ and, in the case of
conviction, damages were paid to her owner, as would be the case in any other ‘property
damage’” (Clinton 207). In Incidents Linda reminds readers, “You never knew what it is to be a
slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition
of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another” (86). Because rape was not considered a
crime and posed no legal or criminal threat, white men in positions of power could do as they
pleased.

Without a doubt, the absence of legal recourse has lead to a historical silence about rape.
Historical accounts of slavery turned a blind eye to the rape of slaves--not considered a crime,

¹ Please see the National Humanities Center’s “On Slaveholders’ Sexual Abuse of Slaves:
Selections from 19th- & 20th-Century Slave Narratives.”
² As Diane Miller Sommerville shows in Rape and Race in the Nineteenth Century South (2004),
contrary to what leading discourse on rape contends whites did pursue legal recourse for the rape
of slave children (65-66). There are isolated cases in which charges were brought against slaves
who raped slaves girls. In George v. George (1859), a male slave was indicted for raping a slave
girl “under a statue making it a crime to have sex with a child under ten years of age” (Hartman,
“Seduction and the Ruses” 554).
rape went largely unrecorded in history books. It would take the work of autobiographical slave narratives and WPA interviews to insert the history of rape back into narratives of slavery (Clinton 207). Black feminist literary criticism and theory as a field has also made slavery’s persistent terrors visible by examining the implications of violence committed against slave women. As notable Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins points out, “A special theme within Black feminist thought was how the institutionalized rape of enslaved Black women operated as a mechanism of social control” (32). In turn, scholars like Collins have pushed against how supporters of slavery defined “rape” and instead insisted that we read forced sex as rape crimes. Scholars in this field have thought through narratives of slavery that portray sexually violent scenes to contest simplistic narratives like those put forward in Plantation Literature as well as those perpetuated in the historiography of the Antebellum South.

Since the late 1970s, Black feminist scholarship has examined and highlighted the prevalence of interracial rape. As a critical project, scholars have countered the silence by laying bare brutal displays of sexual terrorism during slavery. Much of the scholarship examined herein directly responds to the 1970s feminist anti-rape movement that fought against the prevalence of sexual assaults that had been committed against women. Unfortunately, that movement undermined or ignored the complexities of the rape of black women, which had a deeper history than what activists and feminists realized. Moreover, both black and white feminists have carefully examined the prevalence of interracial rape during America’s Reconstruction period, where white supremacists lynched Black men for allegedly raping white women. Black feminists joined the conversation by generating a discourse on rape that

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3 By “interracial rape,” I mean white males (masters, overseers, patrollers, or otherwise) who raped enslaved Black women.
4 As bell hooks explains that “all through American history, black male rape of white women has
highlighted the historical context of rape during slavery as it pertained to Black women. In doing so, Black feminist scholars have contributed to a larger critical project that successfully recovers the history of rape that, in large part, has been lost. For the remainder of this introduction, I will trace the genealogy of this conversation to establish how Black feminist scholarship has appropriately advanced particular conceptions on sexual terrorism and institutionalized rape.

One of the earliest articulations of this ideology is in “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” (1971) by leading Black Feminist scholar Angela Davis. Davis sets up an important conceptual framework for understanding how enslaved women and their bodies constantly faced the threat of sexual abuse. Davis’s articulation would later have a great influence on how scholars approached and theorized about Black women’s subjectivity. To explain how white male slavers would make attempts to deter enslaved women’s possible resistance, she asserts, “The act of copulation, reduced by the white man to an animal-like act, would be symbolic of the effort to conquer the resistance the black woman could unloose” (96). Davis then explains, “In confronting the black woman as adversary in a sexual contest, the master would be subjecting her to the most elemental form of terrorism distinctively suited for the female: rape” (96). “Rape,” Davis would later explain, “was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women’s will to resist, and in

attracted much more attention and is seen as much more significant than rape of black women by either white or black men” (53). Pamela Barnett makes a similar point when she states, “[T]here is no widely recongizable story of white men’s rape of black women” (420). Both critics contend that much of the existing discourse on rape focuses on black-men-on-white-women rape, thereby undermining Black men’s rape of Black women as well as white men’s rape of Black women.
the process, to demoralize their men” (Women, Race, & Class 23). Rape as sexual terrorism, she explains, was necessary because in its extreme abuse it held the power to thwart Black women’s resistance to enslavement as well as functioned as a highly visible threat to the entire slave community, including men, who might venture to revolt against masters and mistresses (“Reflections” 96-97). As a symbolic act, it represented the white patriarchy and its domination. Sexual terrorism was also used as a means to emasculate; for, the enslaved Black man “struck by his manifest inability to rescue his women from sexual assaults of the master, he would begin to experience deep-seated doubts about his ability to resist at all” (“Reflections” 97).

Frances Smith Foster’s “Ultimate Victims: Black Women in Slave Narratives” (1978) and Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives (1979) take issue with the way that slave narratives treat the enslaved woman’s victimage. In this way, Foster might disagree with Davis’s articulation, which deconstructs the many sexualized abuses that enslaved women faced. She writes:

Slave narratives presented black women as so completely victimized that the experiences which slaves engendered and their ability to survive such experiences placed them outside what was accepted as the normal sphere of women. In particular, black women became identified with illicit sexual intercourse so strongly that this remains a dominant image in American literature. (Foster, “Ultimate Victims” 846)

The enslaved woman often lived through repeated intimate violations, and "her submission . . . was not in accord with prevailing notions of that femininity which caused women to die rather than to suffer abuse” (Foster, "Ultimate Victims" 853). Black women were seen as emotionally abnormal, as they continued to live through and live with violence. Foster concludes, "In a genre
centered on victimization [which is the slave narrative genre], the black woman was the ultimate victim” (853). Foster expands her argument later in Witnessing Slavery when she writes, “Allegations of sexual abuse were prevalent not only because such situations did exist, but because the audiences were at once titillated and scandalized by such occurrences” (110). Foster emphasizes how accounts of sexual violence in autobiographical and biographical accounts of slavery were audience-centered in that they supposedly painted an accurate picture of slavery’s horrors and uplifted the slave’s humanity. Foster's argument is at odds with Davis's articulation on sexual terrorism. Like Antebellum slave narrators, Davis and other Black feminist scholars emphasize and analyze sexual violence in the lives of slave women. In doing so, they necessarily position enslaved women as victims in their critical inquiries. Black British writer Andrea Levy best describes why it might be problematic to focus only on victimization: "our slave ancestors were much more than a mute and wretched mass of victims and we do them a great disservice if we think of them as such. These were people who needed strength, talent, guile and humour just to survive" ("Writing" 11).

In Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism (1981), bell hooks advances Davis and Foster’s arguments but focuses on how rape and sexual assault persisted well after slavery. Studies such as Susan Brownmiller’s Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape (1975) presume that the rape of Black women ended at the dawn of emancipation. bell hooks presses readers to acknowledge the continued “devaluation of black womanhood that permeated the psyches of all Americans and shaped the social status of all black women once slavery ended” (52). hooks’ words on Antebellum rape are particularly insightful. She writes, “The designation of all black women as sexually depraved, immoral, and loose had its roots in the slave system” (hooks, Ain’t I a Woman 52). According to hooks, “black women have always been seen by the white public
hooks pinpoints a stereotype that has firm origins in chattel slavery: the Jezebel. Although white slavers were legally entitled to do as they pleased to female slave bodies, female slaves were considered innately lascivious. Proponents of human bondage upheld that slave women “were the initiators of sexual relationships with men” which would later manifest as “the stereotype of black women as sexual savages, and in sexist terms a sexual savage, a non-human, an animal [that] cannot be raped” (hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman* 52). Deborah Gray White, however, argues that the Jezebel stereotype originated during initial voyages to Africa. In *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985) Gray writes:

The idea that black women were exceptionally sensual first gained credence when Englishmen went to Africa to buy slaves. Unaccustomed to the requirements of a tropical climate, Europeans mistook seminudity for lewdness. Similarly, they misinterpreted African cultural traditions, so that polygamy was attributed to the Africans’ uncontrolled lust (29).

Through misinterpretations of African customs and cultural traditions, Europeans established misinformed sexualized stereotypes about Africans who they later enslaved.

Hortense Spillers later picked up where Davis left off on the issue of Black women’s bodies in the hands of white slaveowners in her highly influential essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (1987). In the article, Spillers, like Davis, looks at the slave community but pays close attention to the ways in which slavery literally and figuratively marked the female slave body. How she makes a distinction between “the flesh” and “the body” has been instrumental to understanding the uses of and abuses done to enslaved Black women’s bodies. She makes the point that the body is entrenched in gender whereas the flesh is not. It is evident that in her
argument she wants to make it clear that rape is a direct attack on the gendered body.

Nevertheless, she points out that enslaved women did not just endure attacks to the body; they suffered attacks to the flesh as well:

[T]he African female subject . . . is not only the target of rape- in one sense, an interiorized violation of body and mind- but also the topic of specifically externalized acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of male brutality and torture inflicted by other males. A female body strung from a tree limb, or bleeding from the breast on any given day of field work because the ‘overseer’, standing the length of a whip, has popped her flesh open, adds a lexical and living dimension to the narratives of women in culture and society. (Spillers, “Mama’s Baby” 68)

In a way, we could see how she proves Davis’s point that during slavery rape was the “most elemental form of terrorism distinctively suited for the female.” For, enslaved women were vulnerable to both sexual violence in addition to the physical violence that men endured as well. Rape, in all its terror, marked the body in ways that were not as visible as other forms of violence, and it held the power to terrorize psychically.

Spillers also calls our attention to how slavery was a largely female-centered institution. She explains that during the Middle Passage the African female "as the apparently smaller physical mass, occupies ‘less room’ in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart” (Spillers, “Mama’s Baby” 72). Enslaved women did not take up nearly as much space as men did on slave ships. They could also reproduce and literally generate a labor force for slaveowners, which was more profitable economically. Women on the plantation, she argues later in the essay, were
expected to perform what we would typically call “women’s work” and “men’s work.” Not only could women perform domestic duties, but they could also perform field labor. In terms of monetary value, it was far more lucrative to capture and enslave African females than males because they were smaller and they could do the work of both sexes and they could reproduce to increase plantation labor. Angelyn Mitchell affirms, “The enslavers quickly learned that the fecund enslaved Black woman was the most profitable and economical means by which an enslaver could increase his stock” (25). This line of thinking, at its very core, views females merely as property.

As we have seen, human-as-property reinforced the concept that slave owners had a right to enslaved women’s bodies. The Jezebel stereotype perpetuated the view that Black women were naturally hypersexual and usually sexually aggressive because of their African roots. Although Black feminist critics dispelled the myth of the Jezebel, they had to confront “the elephant in the room” regarding the lasciviousness of white slavers. Convinced that rape was sexual terrorism and not an indication of sexual desire, Davis argues, “It would be a mistake to regard the institutionalized pattern of rape during slavery as an expression of white men’s sexual urges” (Women, Race, & Class 23). In the eyes of white masters, slave women were only that according to Davis. She writes, “Excessive sex urges whether they existed among individual white men or not, had nothing to do with this virtual institutionalization of rape” (Women, Race, & Class 23). The problem with this argument is that it forecloses a nuance that is, in fact, worth considering as we unpack the discourse on rape. Slave women were deemed property. However, it would be a mistake to insist, as Davis does, that white slavers did not sexually desire their slaves. bell hooks explains, “During slavery, it had been a common occurrence for an upper class or middle class white man to take a black woman mistress and live openly with her without
incurring much public disapproval” (61). If the historical record proves that white men desired black women in the Antebellum days, it is worth examining what this might mean for a discourse on rape. In *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction* (2002), Mitchell states, “[O]ne of the greatest dangers for an enslaved Black woman in antebellum America was the abuse and misuse of the enslaved woman’s sexuality because she was so often the object of White male sexual *and* economic desires [emphasis added]” (30).

Aware that they were the objects of white men’s desires and stereotyped as sexually voracious, enslaved Black women made earnest attempts to imitate “the conduct and mannerism of white women” (hooks 55). By examining quintessential slave narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), Black feminist scholars have shown how slave women adopted what Barbara Welter has coined “The Cult of True Womanhood” and its values to both counteract the Jezebel stereotype and to resist the sexual advances of white male enslavers. hooks explains:

> The great majority of enslaved black women accepted the dominant culture’s sexual morality and adapted it to their circumstances. Black slave girls were taught, like their white counterparts, that virtue was woman’s ideal spiritual nature and virginity her ideal physical state, but knowledge of the acceptable sexual morality did not alter the reality that no social order existed to protect them from sexual exploitation. (54)

Black feminist critics have echoed hooks’s claim here to suggest that slave women embodied one of the Cult’s main tenants: purity. Slave women repressed their sexuality to counter prominent stereotypes, ultimately embodying sexual purity and innocence as white women did. But as
hooks makes evident, even if enslaved Black women exemplified sexual purity they did not have the protection of their men and the law as free white women did.

Catherine Clinton’s “‘With a Whip in His Hand’: Rape, Memory, and African-American Women” (1994) echoes a great deal of the discourse on rape that Black feminist critics and theorists articulated. Like Davis, Clinton stresses that rape was a mechanism of control: “Rape can be viewed as a means of social control for women in both the empowered and subordinate groups within the Old South” (209). Much like other Black feminists, she proclaims, “we must see these women as subject to institutionalized sexual abuse—that rape was an integral part of slavery, not an aberration or dysfunction” (Clinton 208). She also echoes a shared claim among Black feminist scholars that by law slave women were denied consent because they were considered property: “Within the Old South, a slave woman was denied the power of consent by legal definition: she could not be raped” (Clinton 206). She later asserts, “Sexual abuse could break a slave woman's will and spirit. She was denied her right of consent and, under the law, her own body” (207). Legally speaking, an enslaved Black woman’s body was not her own; hence, she could not consent to sex. Clinton’s argument overlaps with other Black feminist scholarship. Particularly striking, however, is how she reveals an anxiety, a glaring presumption, within the literature on rape. She questions, “If I characterize all relations between white males and slave females as rape, am I not denying these women consent? What of those African-American who sought these sexual alternatives as a strategy within slavery? And what of those inspired by motives beyond the realm of ‘strategy’?” (Clinton 211). Unfortunately, Clinton does not go on to answer these questions, questions that Black feminist scholars have left unexamined as well. If we insist as the scholars have done that all sexual acts were rape between slave women and
white males during slavery, we deny that slave women had leverage to consent to sex. We also reject that enslaved Black women desired their masters sexually.

Black feminist thought has cemented the fact that women in bondage suffered a number of sexual abuses. It has also presumed that legally under the institution of slavery enslaved women could not consent to sex with their master. This project will examine representations of sexual abuse as well as consensual sex in contemporary narratives of slavery. In particular, I will look at scenes of sexual intimacy and violence from recently published novels set in slavery: Dolen Perkins-Valdez’s debut novel *Wench* (2010) and Andrea Levy’s *The Long Song* (2010). Written by Black women writers from across the Diaspora, these two novels examine the nature of sexual abuse during Transatlantic slavery. *Wench* and *The Long Song* also consider the nature of consensual sex between the enslaver and the enslaved. I focus on the possibility of consensual sex between white male slave owners and enslaved Black women in light of familiar scenes of sexual violence that take place between these two groups. Even though Black feminist scholarship does not adopt the view that the enslaved are strictly slaves and therefore without rights, the fact that scholars have largely analyzed interracial sex as always-already an act of sexual terrorism means that they, in many ways, hold fast to antiquated meanings of the words “master” and “slave.” Recently published novels like *Wench* and *The Long Song* have blurred the invisible line that separates the “master” from the “slave.” Perkins-Valdez and Levy depict scenes of enslaved Black women consenting to--agreeing to--sex with white male masters in their novels, thereby regarding the rigid divide somewhat skeptically. Sex, then, is not merely a one-dimensional scene of brutality. Rather, it is a scene of sexual agency and satisfaction.

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5 I acknowledge the differences between the various critical terms used to describe narratives written in the Postbellum era that take up slavery. Throughout this project, I use the terms “contemporary narratives of slavery” formulated by Arlene Keizer and “neo-slave narrative” formulated by Ashraf Rushdy, as these are the two terms that best describe the texts I examine.
Nevertheless, Black feminist theory has adopted Davis’s notion of “sexual terrorism” as well as how she defines power relations between master and slave. However, I would like to challenge her argument that the white master’s excessive sexual desires “had nothing to do with this virtual institutionalization of rape.” Novels like Wench and Long Song that depict interracial sex not involving assault suggest a master’s sexual desires for an enslaved woman. Davis’s point of contention rules out complexities regarding interracial sex and desire. Well into the twenty-first century, Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman states, “Historically, of course, the most common expression of white men’s desire for black women has been rape, which operates also a weapon of racial terror” (73). I take Abdur-Rahman’s point but would like to stress that perhaps white male masters did not just see enslaved Black women as merely property and/or breeders. Recent narratives of slavery like The Wind Done Gone (2001), The Long Song, and Wench—and even some earlier neo-slave narratives such as Sally Hemings (1979)—take up this familiar representation but also examine sexual intimacy and pleasure between white male masters and enslaved women. It would seem that such a representation calls into question Black feminism’s critical project to highlight slavery’s sexual terrors. However, it would not be productive to insist that during slavery masters always sexually assaulted enslaved Black women. Black women writers, particularly in the twenty-first century, are bringing this conflict to the fore to suggest that these relationships were not always-already bound by strict definitions of “master” and “slave.”

I depart from Black feminist ideology by looking at instances where Black women writers are imagining enslaved women consenting to sexual relations with white male masters. My thesis hopes to offer a more nuanced portrayal of Black women’s sexuality during slavery. It is important to consider incidents that complicate and challenge the existing theoretical
presumption whereby sexual terrorism characterizes interactions between white males and enslaved Black women. Both *Wench* and *Long Song* are directly in conversation with theoretical, critical texts on sexuality in the lives of Black female subjects. My argument does not intend to discount dominant scholarship on enslaved women’s sexual lives. What remains evident is that Black women writers are thinking about sex as well as rape in twenty-first century narratives of enslavement. Within the limits of Black feminist discourse, the very notion of an enslaved woman consenting to sexual relations with an enslaver seems theoretically impossible. I advance, however, that we look at literary moments in which sexual activity between master and slave is *not* forced. Based on its representations in twenty-first century novels, consensual sex is on the minds of living Black women writers. In narratives like *Wench* and *The Long Song*, enslaved female protagonists consent to sexual activity with white male enslavers. Thus, in my project I consider a handful of questions: How can we expand our view of sexuality to make room for the enslaved woman’s sexual agency in light of her own enslavement? To what extent might we challenge Black feminist ideology on sexual terrorism to allow for a lens that takes consensual sex seriously? Getting to the root of the above questions and those related means expanding our view of enslaved women’s sexual relations with enslavers and challenging presumptions that have been perpetuated in prevailing Black feminist scholarship. Doing so would also mean that scholars of slavery might yield a more complex look at sexuality and sex acts. Although I make significant departures from Black feminist scholarship, I contribute to the existing body of work by looking at interracial sex and rape in such a way as to highlight the enslaved woman’s sexual freedom.

“A Review: Depictions of Rape in Antebellum and Postbellum Narratives of Enslavement,” the first chapter of this thesis, traces several quintessential pre- and post-bellum
narratives of slavery to show how they depict rape. In this chapter, I also look at how literary critics have talked about representations of sexual violence and Black women’s sexuality. I conclude that twentieth-century Black women writers largely depict rape between masters and slaves as sexual terrorism. The second chapter titled, “Exploring Sexual Terrorism and Consensual Sex in Dolen Perkins-Valdez’s Wench,” analyzes how the novel’s protagonist Lizzie has a sexual yet emotional relationship with her master Drayle. I consider how part of Perkins-Valdez’s aim in the novel is to think through the complicated meaning of the word “wench” and observe the extent to which an enslaved woman like Lizzie, though forced into her role as a wench, maintains as well as exercises her power to consent to sex with Drayle, a man who legally owns her body. I argue that in Wench enslaved Black women can consent to sex as well as reap benefits from sexual relations with their masters, and I attempt to make sense of how and why Perkins-Valdez represents sexual terrorism to mirror Lizzie’s complicated privilege of consent.

Chapter three’s “Oversexed, Undersexed: Reading the Jezebel in Andrea Levy’s The Long Song” examines how and why Levy explodes sexual stereotypes of Black women in her fifth novel. July, the novel’s female protagonist, is sexually aggressive, and she maintains a loving yet sexual relationship with her master Robert. At the very core of the novel, Levy thinks through the nature of interracial sex and rape by juxtaposing the intimate relationship that July and Robert have with a sexually abusive relationship between Kitty, July’s mother, and her overseer. The novel imagines a sexually aggressive once enslaved but later freed Black woman whose consensual sex with her master makes her a kind of placeholder for the plantation mistress, affording her a number of privileges.
It is my hope that by the end of this project it will become clear how Perkins-Valdez’s *Wench* and Levy’s *The Long Song* are two contemporary narratives of slavery that take up a longstanding conversation on sexuality and rape that Black feminist scholars have had time and time again. Abdur-Rahman writes, “[D]epictions of rape, of coerced concubinage, of forced reproduction—of bereft, sexually abused black girls—serve as truly apt metaphors for the violence and violation of embodied black slavery” (2). Even in the twenty-first century, scholars have insisted that Black women’s narratives on institutionalized rape and other scenes of sexual violence garner “sympathy and compassion for the rape victim, which ultimately emphasize[s] to the reader that rape [is] indeed a traumatic experience” (Field 150). Although it has been widely represented in cultural texts and widely noted and analyzed in Black feminist scholarship, there is hardly any existing scholarship that broaches issues of interracial sex apart from sexual terror. In the pages that follow, I initiate that conversation to at least interrogate some of Black feminism’s key presumptions regarding enslaved Black women, white male slave owners, and the very act of sex that they engage in together.
Every year brings with it multitudes of this class of slaves. It was doubtless in consequence of a knowledge of this fact, that one great statesman of the south predicted the downfall of slavery by the inevitable laws of population. Whether this prophecy is ever fulfilled or not, it is nevertheless plain that a very different-looking class of people are springing up at the south, and are now held in slavery, from those originally brought to this country from Africa; and if their increase do no other good, it will do away the force of the argument, that God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right. If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters.

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845)

It was no secret many of the Northern whites who stayed at the resort disliked slavery. Even more, they disapproved of the slave women staying in the cottages with white men.


In this chapter, I will trace the genealogy of female-authored narratives of enslavement, firmly situating *Wench* and *The Long Song* within a larger literary tradition that has sought to reclaim, reassert, and revise enslaved Black women’s voices in historical narratives on slavery. More importantly, this literary tradition has paid close attention to enslaved women’s sexuality. For quite some time, Black feminist literary criticism and theory, too, has taken strides to unpack commentary on sexuality and sexual acts. Their goal has been to break the silence by calling attention to sexual violence done to Black women’s bodies before emancipation. Black women writers have also charted the ways in which sexual violence and its legacy has been emotionally traumatizing. By and large, female-authored contemporary narratives of slavery have depicted interracial sex as acts of rape. Contemporary narratives of slavery published in the twenty-first
century, however, have complicated scenes of interracial rape by representing consensual interracial sex. I am not advancing, however, that prior to the twenty-first century, Black women writers completely refrained from representing consensual sex between masters and slaves. Black women’s literary fiction published in the early 2000s—and, admittedly, not solely women writers—are re-imagining and confronting the possibility of sexually desiring enslaved women who have sexual relations with their masters. To understand why writers are representing interracial sex in this manner, it is necessary to recount the larger history of Antebellum and Postbellum narratives of enslavement. Why twenty-first century Black women writers confront enslavement is, in many ways, a response to earlier silences in past narratives of slave narratives, both old and new. A number of Postbellum narratives and respective scholarship highlight interracial rape. Insofar as both the scholarship and the fiction function as viable discourses on rape, sexual relations between white males and enslaved women during the Antebellum period are characterized as rape. Black feminist conversations about these narratives are as important as the texts themselves, as both forms are vested in the historiography of slavery and certainly inform each other.

I would like to begin with Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861) which many scholars—Black feminist scholars in particular—have long considered to be an Ur-text in Black women’s fiction. In her book *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction* (2002), Angelyn Mitchell describes *Incidents* as an Ur-text whose narrative is a “constructed discourse of the major concerns and issues that have organized and structured much of the African American woman’s life” (15). Like Mitchell, Robert Patterson comments on how Jacobs’s slave narrative functions as a thematic framework for Black feminist inquiries. He observes, “Jacobs’s text
foreshadows the thematic and formal concerns that persist throughout African American women’s writing” (Patterson 89). Black women’s neo-slave narratives examine and explore the enslaved woman's experience so as to mark their own interest in the Antebellum slave narrative tradition such as *Incidents* and to complicate some of the larger themes that Jacobs and others explore. Jacobs’s *Incidents* certainly sets up an important framework for the treatment of Black women during the height of chattel slavery and how enslavement would haunt their lived experiences well after its abolition. Over the course of many pages Jacobs, Linda Brent, experiences numerous sexual violations, threatened as well as those acted upon.

In her autobiography, Jacobs is largely concerned about her own sexual vulnerability. Jacobs’s master Dr. Flint begins sexually coercing her at a young age. She tells readers that he “whisper[ed] foul words to her and that he “peopled [her] young mind with unclean images” (Jacobs). She later concludes that to be on the brink of womanhood at 15 years old is “a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl” (Jacobs). Dr. Flint sexually harasses Linda repeatedly, but she is able to resist him for quite some time. After he ‘propositions’ her several times, she secretly arranges a relationship with a non-slave owning white man Mr. Sands. Linda chooses to pursue a sexual relationship with Mr. Sands who seems less sexually threatening than her own master. In doing so, she thwarts her master’s imminent, continued sexual violation. *Incidents*, then, marks the beginning of a discourse on sexual terrorism in the lives of Black women. Critics have interpreted Linda’s choice in a number of ways. One question sums up the prevalent critical anxiety: “Is the suitor who allows Jacobs to be seduced into thinking she might free herself and any subsequent children any less brutal than her master who relentlessly pursues her?” (Clinton 210). Catherine Clinton views Jacobs’s selection of Mr. Sands skeptically: “These deals were one-sided, the risks high, the lottery rigged. Yet slave women gambled, driven by desperation”
Mitchell makes a definitive point—Linda “chooses Mr. Sands because he is the lesser of her known evils, but she does choose him” (35). Unfortunately, Mr. Sands, who was once a better alternative to forced concubinage, faults on promises he made to Linda. On one hand, it is important to acknowledge that agency represented in *Incidents* has its limitations. Jacobs’s choices are limited--despite having a choice to pick her suitor, she must be sexually as well as reproductively active. On the other hand, she resisted and ultimately impeded what seemed to be her only fate. Nevertheless, *Incidents* is the beginning of a critical project to understand sexuality, both sexual agency and sexual abuse.

Her narrative sets up a number of Black feminist concerns: the enslaved woman’s sexuality vulnerability, the slave woman’s sexual agency in her encounters with white males, and the slave woman’s conflict with sexual purity. Dr. Flint’s persistence and Linda’s description of it demonstrates how the enslaved woman is highly susceptible to as well as in close proximity to sexual assault. Even as she communicates a number of occasions where Dr. Flint makes sexual passes at her, she is careful with how she describes his advances. She never quite describes in detail Dr. Flint’s “foul” language to show her sexual purity and innocence. In turn, she disassociates herself from a presumed illicit sexuality. What many refer to as the “Cult of True Womanhood” rings true here, shedding light on why Linda represents her own innocence to counter the stereotype that Black women were hypersexual and thus always willing.

Although this project focuses on female-authored narratives, it is worth noting that in his 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass, too, is aware of the sexual terrorism that enslaved women face. The violent incident of Douglass’s Aunt Hester has been a starting point for recent cultural criticism on slavery and sexuality. It is also important to make clear that Douglass’s account is far more graphic than what is portrayed in Jacobs’s *Incidents*. The sexual violence he portrays is so
violent that some critics, most notably Saidiya Hartman, have thought critically about the consequences of continually reproducing violence done to Black bodies in literary texts.\(^6\)

Douglass and Aunt Hester’s master punishes her for sneaking away to see a male slave on another plantation. He beats her brutally, and as some critics have suggested, perhaps rapes her. Douglass recounts witnessing this as a young child, calling it his “entrance to the hell of slavery” (Chapter 1). Douglass communicates the sheer violence of sexual abuse that Jacobs shies away from. Jacobs, on the other hand, observes the negotiations of sexuality in the face of imminent sexual exploitation. Why Captain Anthony rapes her for visiting a slave man is particularly sexually charged and fraught with implications. Perhaps it is his lust for her and her disobedience that riles him to commit such a severe act of violence. Aunt Hester’s rape marks the beginning of literary reiterations where sexualized violence characterizes chattel slavery, and it also points to how witnessed sexualized violence becomes a site of subjection as well as objection. In the twenty-first century, Black women writers would later delve deeper into the complexity and symbolism underlying sexualized violence more than ever before.

Contemporary Black male writers have followed Douglass’s lead in exploring the sexual abuse of enslaved women, but Black women writers have continued to explore the nuances of sexual relations between slave owners and the enslaved.\(^7\) More specifically, they have highlighted the prominence of sexual abuse during slavery. Black women writers who take up slavery might be considered in terms of the literary traditions that bequeathed them, as their texts are primarily invested in Black women's subjectivities. It is this particular thread that helps us to

\(^6\) For an extended discussion of this critical problem, please see Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* and Christina Sharpe’s *Monstrous Intimacies*.

\(^7\) *The Book of Night Women* (2009) by Marlon James and *The Known World* (2003) by Edward P. Jones are two exemplary novels that offer a treatment of Black women’s sexuality but are male-authored.
trace how said tradition persists even as it evolves. Mitchell makes my point clear: “While the male emancipatory narrative and the female emancipatory narrative share similar features in form and content . . . the primary difference between the two arises from gender-related themes, such as the variance in treatments of sexual abuse and parenthood” (9). Why women writers engage “gender-related themes” more frequently than male counterparts can be attributed to the fact that “history still all too often gets written as the story of great men, erasing or veiling the contributions of women” as well as the particular pressing concerns they face as women (Dubey 335). Of particular importance to Black women writers has been the subject of sexual abuse. This discussion was largely borne out of the silences first perpetuated in the historiography and the need to explore what literate enslaved women like Jacobs and Mary Prince simply could not. Thus, sexual terrorism becomes a far more pressing concern for contemporary narratives of enslavement published in the mid-to-late twentieth century.

For a brief moment, I would like to touch on how rape necessitates conversations about interracial relationships in general and miscegenation, or racial mixing, in particular. bell hooks explains that “miscegenation represented the greatest threat to white racial solidarity, a complex system of laws and social taboos were enacted to maintain separation of the races” (60). As such, at the dawn of Jim Crow interracial marriage was illegal in many states (hooks 60). It would take the Loving v. Virginia (1967) decision to repeal such legislations, concluding that bans on interracial marriage were, in fact, unconstitutional. Negative attitudes about interracial marriage, then and now, reflect white supremacy’s successful attempts to thwart racial mixing and in turn

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8 States, particularly those in the American South, enforced anti-miscegenation laws. Of the 50 states, 37 states have instituted anti-miscegenation statutes (“Anti-Miscegenation Laws”). Jim Crow segregation instituted the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, establishing the “one-drop rule” doctrine to prove that any person born with African blood was to be considered biologically colored.
preserve racial purity. Mass lynchings of Black men who allegedly raped white women during Reconstruction is evidence of the lengths to which white supremacists will go to preserve racial purity. Anti-miscegenation laws prohibited interracial marriage and in some statues it prohibited interracial sex (“Anti-Miscegenation Laws”). Oddly enough, hooks claims that “inter-racial sex was both encouraged and condoned as long as it did not lead to marriage. By perpetuating the myth that all black women were incapable of fidelity and sexually loose, whites hoped to so devalue them that no white man would marry a black woman” (61). Interracial relations leading to marriage were condemned whereas sex, when covert, was acceptable. A sanctioned union between an interracial couple might have openly legitimated racial amalgamation, thereby acknowledging the racial impurity of both races. Linking whites to sexual impurity would align them with the very sexual impurity that they had long associated with blacks. If sexual relations between the races persisted, whether by force or consent, it would reveal that whites were not racially pure.

Slave narratives and neo-slave narratives have long sought to represent miscegenation prevalence. Considerations of racial mixing have been widespread. In the 1845 Narrative, Douglass recounts learning that his father is his master at a young age and then goes on to comment on the widespread ‘epidemic’ that is miscegenation. Incident’s Linda forges an interracial relationship with Mr. Sands and engages in interracial sex with him, boring children who are categorically mixed-race. In Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives (1979), Frances Smith Foster argues that slave narratives often commented on miscegenation in ways that devalued the enslaved woman; for, “[t]he designation of a slave as a mulatto meant the union of a white man and a black woman” (131). She notes, “[E]vidence shows that interracial sexual relationships were not confined to that arrangement” yet slave
narratives “presented the slave woman as the unwilling and distraught victim. Emphasis upon the mulatto encouraged, therefore, the popular notion that sexual exploitation was frequent in slave quarters” (Foster, *Witnessing* 131). Depictions of interracial rape and miscegenation in African American literature later resulted in the tragic mulatto plot and narratives of passing like that taken up in Frances Smith Foster’s *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) and Nella Larsen’s novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). Contemporary texts considered in this chapter and in later chapters on *Wench* and *The Long Song* all comment on amalgamation. For example, in Levy’s *Long Song* July’s daughter passes for white and is subsequently kidnapped by her former mistress and overseer-turned-lover and then taken to Europe. Like many enslaved women whose children were taken from them and sold, July never sees her daughter again.

Miscegenation, then, functions as a way to comment on white supremacist efforts to preserve racial purity as well as to make known the prevalence of interracial relationships.

Sexual violence overwhelms the “neo-slave narrative” genre beginning with Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966). Most scholars have credited *Jubilee* as the first Postbellum slave narrative. *Jubilee* is epic in scope, exploring generations of slaves before and after slavery’s abolition. Walker decides against referring to historical records as the primary source for learning about slavery’s true horrors, which had long been a preferred method in historiography. Instead, Walker draws from oral testimony passed down from her ancestors to understand slavery and its legacy. The ways in which neo-slave writers approach slavery is varied. Some choose to present an accurate or realist account of slavery like Walker’s *Jubilee*, like Morrison’s

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9 Foster also claims that in slave narratives mulatto narrators perpetuate racial inferiority in that white blood “made a more intelligent and aggressive person, one who was less likely to accept enslavement” (*Witnessing* 131).

10 Prior to 1966, some novels did invoke slavery. However, as critics have argued, Walker’s *Jubilee* is the first of its kind to thoroughly engage American slavery in a post-emancipation world. See Madhu Dubey’s “Neo- Slave Narratives.”
Beloved, or even Chase-Riboud’s Sally Hemings. Others like Phyllis Alesia Perry with Stigmata (1998) are influenced by the history but turn to the fantastic or the experimental to explode what we might consider as an evident truth about slavery (Dubey 343). Jubilee is concerned with rape and miscegenation—an effect of interracial rape—early on in the novel. Jubilee’s protagonist Vyry is living proof of a forced sexual relationship between a master and a slave woman. While Walker does not portray the horrors of sexual violence of this relationship, she does acknowledge that Vyry’s mother Sis Hetta was forced into sexual relations with her master.

Barbara Chase-Riboud’s Sally Hemings (1979) comes the closest to the kind of work that twenty-first century writers Perkins-Valdez and Levy are doing. The novel, however, focuses on the relationship that Thomas Jefferson has with his slave Sally Hemings. To that end, it focuses on issues of love and family but shies away from any direct discussion about or vivid depiction of interracial rape. In fact, the narrative describes the first time that Sally has sex with Thomas while in Paris. It is a sexual experience that Sally has longed for and desired: “My fifteen-year-old heart burst with pride. I could pale that face with longing. I could part that beautiful mouth with desire. I could fill those eyes with agony or joy” (Chase-Riboud 116). For Sally, sex with Thomas is a moment of passion that immerses her into womanhood, not an experience of sexual terror. In Chase-Riboud’s novel, I see her setting the framework for the possibility of love that can be shared between a master and a slave. This is crucial for later neo-slave narratives as they depict characters who feel sentiments of love despite being slave-owners or slaves. Wench is one such example that is directly in conversation with Sally Hemings based on plot and particular tropes. I will touch on this conversation in later, but suffice it to say that this neo-slave narrative touches on interracial sex and romance and consequently precipitates a later literary response.
Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1979) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) explore the prevalence of forced sex during slavery and the legacy of psychological trauma left in its wake. These two novels offer vivid and disturbing portrayals of rape in the neo-slave narrative genre. Both novels feature enslaved female protagonists who are haunted by the unfortunate legacy of rape, an act firmly rooted in slavery. Much of the scholarship on *Corregidora* and *Beloved* explores the theme of rape but does not comment on the very possibility of consensual sex in master-slave relations. Instead, the scholarship concentrates on the historically grounded narrative of slave-owning men who sexually violate enslaved Black women and how that history has larger implications in the present moment. About *Corregidora*, Arlene Keizer writes that the past “paralyzes the Corregidora women, fixing them in the past with the injunction to ‘make generations’ who can bear witness to the evil that was perpetrated upon them” (167). Likewise, Mitchell contends that Jones’s novel “show[s] the lingering effects of slavery on the lives of contemporary Black women, who have not themselves experienced slavery” (148). The critical attention shows how past sexual brutalities haunt the present and sheds important light on the cultural work performed in female-authored neo-slave narratives.

*Corregidora* follows the life of Ursa, a Black woman who must reconcile her past with her present as a survivor of domestic violence. She struggles to make sense of how her identity is somehow connected to, and perhaps distanced from, the legacy of slavery in which her ancestors were often victims of sexual and physical abuse. Ursa suffers a miscarriage because of a violent altercation with her husband Mutt. Later in the novel she pieces together and grapples with her family history passed down to her orally. She learns that a Portuguese slave owner
named Corregidora forces her enslaved ancestors into prostitution. It is clear that Jones is attentive to the legacies of rape and physical violence that have given way to sexual stereotypes and misconceptions about Black women’s bodies that would persist well after emancipation. Madhu Dubey writes that neo-slave narratives like *Corregidora* feature “contemporary individuals who are haunted by family secrets that can be uncovered only by delving into the unofficial history of slavery” (337). The “shameful family secret,” she explains, “usually has to do with the rape of a female slave ancestor by her master” (Dubey 337). Jones’s depiction of rape falls in line with as well as confirms predominant theories in Black feminist criticism and theory that privilege just one view of master-slave sexual encounters. This is the view of sexual terrorism where sexual acts are forced. Dubey concludes that “the history of rape and miscegenation informs the sexual and racial sensibilities of late twentieth-century individuals” like Ursa (338).

Morrison’s *Beloved* portrays rape in a strikingly similar fashion but adds degrees of complexity. The novel’s central “premise,” if you will, involves a former slave Sethe who kills her daughter Beloved to rescue her from slavery’s ills. When Beloved comes back to haunt her, Sethe must reconcile her past with her present. Her past is marred by sexual violations of slave-owning white men exploiting her body sexually and taking her breastmilk. Psychologically traumatized and physically scarred because of repeated sexual violations, a freed Sethe must come to terms with her violent history to heal fully in a post-emancipation world. As one critic reminds us, writers "continue to use the legacy of slavery to interrogate the past and its tells to

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11 I acknowledge that Corregidora is a Portuguese slave owner and not American. This difference adds a complexity to my argument, as it suggests that sexual terrorism was not uniquely American in character. Nevertheless, the portrayal of Corregidora certainly echoes how American slave owners use sexual violence to satiate their sexual appetites and fulfill economic greed.
investigate black women and ways of ensuring her healing" (Williams 77). By novel’s end, Sethe has confronted her past head-on through the help of those around her.

As it functions in Beloved and Corregidora, rape is a synecdoche for the legacy of sexual violence passed on from chattel slavery and the hold it has on the identities of women marked as Black and female. Morrison and Jones take great pains to understand, then, the impact that rape has on identity. The work that scholars have done and the literary fiction that novelists produce certainly advances the discourse on rape in instrumental ways. For one, and perhaps most importantly, the novels and the criticism on them resurrect a past of sexual violence that has its roots in slavery, and these texts initiate a difficult conversation that many shied away from or that others, particularly those perpetuating racist and sexist paradigms, simply ignored or outright denied. Without a doubt, Black feminist scholars and Black women writers laid important groundwork--scholars and novelists seemed to be in conversation with each other and on the same page--that would persist into the twenty-first century and make an impression on later novels like Wench and The Long Song. Perkins-Valdez and Levy would later grapple with these initial and widely accepted articulations on interracial rape because the dominant narrative on rape precluded other complexities and possibilities.

Octavia Butler’s neo-slave novel Kindred (1979) also grapples with the sexual vulnerability of Black women and interracial rape. The protagonist Dana is summoned by a slave-owning white male Rufus and transported from 1970s California to Antebellum Maryland. The novel remains closely tied to a history of rape. When she travels back in time, she meets her free ancestor Alice. Alice, in many ways, becomes a placeholder for commentary on forced and

12 Well-cited documents like John Blassingame’s The Slave Community (1972) and Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (1965) are two such examples.
coercive sex. After one of Dana’s travels back to slavery, Rufus has raped Alice. Alice’s husband beats Rufus in revenge. Alice and her husband then attempt to run away but are soon captured and enslaved. Rufus forces Alice into concubinage. He fathers two of her children, one of whom is Alice’s great grandmother. Rufus even attempts to rape Dana at the end of the novel, but this is not the first time Dana faces an attempted rape. Luckily, both times she escapes after putting up a fight. Butler’s depiction of rape falls in line with what Jones and Morrison do in their novels. Taken together, they grapple with the vulnerability of Black women and how coming to terms with a history of slavery means coping with the persistence of rape that enslaved ancestors endured. This conundrum makes it particularly difficult for Black women to have cohesive identities, as their past is burdened by the psychological traumas of rape that impinge on the present. It is quite compelling that Dana resists attempted rape even though she is literally and figuratively enslaved. Whereas some might argue that she is a placeholder for the contemporary generation that is long removed from the lived experience of interracial rape, Dana becomes a powerful trope for enslaved women’s strength and resistance. Even though Dana kills Rufus at the end of the novel, it is crucial to consider why Dana, when summoned back to slavery, helps Rufus on so many occasions. It is also worthwhile to consider why after Rufus sexually coerces Alice, she is jealous of Dana’s relationship with him. Perkins-Valdez’s Wench and Levy’s The Long Song respond to the prevalence of forced concubinage first explored in late twentieth century narratives. They explore this in light of relationships where love and desire complicate and even challenge the representations of interracial sexual relations as instances of either rape or forced concubinage. For example, Wench comments on the shared sentiment of love that exists between Lizzie and her master Drayle. Yet, even as they love each other, Lizzie’s friends who are also slave women have been forced to be concubines. Kindred is a
novel that certainly begins to question the nature of sexual coercion and the extent to which an enslaved woman can care and perhaps loves the white male who owns her body.

Popular neo-slave narratives by Black women have thus used their texts as a means to bring the history of rape to the fore by depicting enslaved female characters who are raped by male masters, overseers, patrollers, and otherwise. In doing so, they have perpetuated the widely held view that interracial sex is largely an act of sexual terrorism. In exposing this, they have produced important cultural work to recover a history that historians ignored for quite some time. Nevertheless, recent fiction has expanded on earlier articulations—consensual sex and non-consensual sex are equally important considerations when thinking about the sexual relations of slave owners and the enslaved. These novelists no longer have to lay the groundwork to understand the history that haunts women’s bodies. The next logical step, then, has been to think through the complexities of interracial sex. To suggest that sexual affairs were consensual before attesting to the sexual violence committed against enslaved women would have been problematic, as it undermines the legitimacy of sexual abuse and confirms sexual stereotypes. In a world where reclaiming voices and combating racism and sexism was of the utmost importance in a post-emancipation society, insisting on consensual sex between white males and enslaved women would be counterproductive, theoretically as well as practically. The literary past had to reclaim enslaved women’s voices and bodies, and it was absolutely necessary to do so. To reclaim their voices and bodies meant re-imagining intimate, sexualized violence where white slavers sexually exploited and utterly violated women in bondage. But would it have been possible for slaves and masters to engage in sexual acts that were not forced? Twenty-first century Black women writers would go on to take up this very question.
CHAPTER II
EXPLORING SEXUAL TERRORISM AND CONSENSUAL SEX IN DOLEN PERKINS-VALDEZ’S
WENCH

In them times white men went with colored gals and women bold[ly]. Any time they saw one and wanted her, she had to go with him, and his wife didn’t say nothin’ ’bout it. Not only the men, but the women went with colored men too. That’s why so many women slave owners wouldn’t marry, ’cause they was goin’ with one of their slaves. These things that’s goin’ on now ain’t new, they been happenin’. That’s why I say you just as well leave ’em alone ’cause they gwine [going] to do what they want to anyhow.

Unnamed former slave, enslaved in Georgia, interviewed ca. 1937 [WPA Slave Narrative Project]

Hortense Spillers’s influential essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” sheds light on the ways in which enslavement marked Black women’s bodies both literally and figuratively. She places particular emphasis on how enslaved women’s bodies were treated as capital. In explaining this condition, Spillers briefly touches on a crucial moment in Frederick Douglass’s Narrative when he reveals that his father is also his master. She observes:

Whether or not the captive female and/or her sexual oppressor derived ‘pleasure’ from their seductions and couplings is not a question we can politely ask. Whether or not ‘pleasure’ is possible at all under conditions that I would aver as non-freedom for both or either of the parties has not been settled. Indeed, we could go so far as to entertain the very real possibility that ‘sexuality’, as a term of implied relationship and desire, is dubiously appropriate, manageable, or accurate to any of the familiar arrangements under a system of enslavement, from the master’s familial to the captive enclave. Under these arrangements, the customary lexis of
sexuality, including ‘reproduction’, ‘motherhood’, ‘pleasure’, and desire are thrown into unrelieved crisis. (Spillers 76)

According to her, the question of whether or not Douglass’s enslaved mother and his white master-turned-father could derive pleasure from sex is a challenging question to ask. Spillers’s commentary implies that under the institution of slavery it is troubling to discuss the terms of sexuality. What does the word “pleasure” mean when the extent to which pleasure arises is within a exchange where one party enslaves another? Bound by an oppressive system that constitutes them, can a white male master and a slave woman please each other? Like Spillers, Davis contends, “[T]here can hardly be a basis for ‘delight, affection and love’ as long as white men, by virtue of their economic position, had unlimited access to Black women’s bodies” (Women, Race, & Class 26). In Narrative, Douglass’s mother remains Captain Anthony’s physical property. If she were to find pleasure in their sexual encounter, this would “throw into unrelieved crisis” her status as a slave, for we would have to reconsider her freedom to feel desire and satisfaction for her master. We would also have to think about whether or not an enslaved mother like Douglass’s can even be considered sexual and if we can talk about her ‘sexuality’ in the context of slavery since she is legally property.

I find that in asking the question that Spillers does and answering it accordingly, however “dubiously appropriate,” leads us to reconceptualize the very sexual agency of an enslaved woman. The master needs the slave to reinforce his power as a master. The circumstances by which sexuality operates necessarily assumes freedom. As Catherine Clinton explains, “Within the Old South, a slave woman was denied the power of consent by legal definition: she could not be raped” (206). Another critic Valerie Smith writes, “If black women are understood always to be available and willing, then the rape of a black woman becomes a
contradiction in terms” (8). Because an enslaved woman is legally considered property, she has no rights. Because she has no rights, this also means that she cannot consent to sex with her master even if she so chooses. Sexuality, however, implies that both parties have the “relationship and desire” for each other to an extent. Yet, within the bounds of slavery’s constitution and the master-slave dialectic they both are not free to have a relationship characterized by desire and pleasure in the first place because conflicting power relations complicate their freedom to carry on a relationship distinguished by desire. Put another way, a white male master is always-already sexually entitled to his enslaved since she is legally considered property.

It would be considered near implausible to deny this generally accepted theory. Black feminist theory supports the division of power between master and slave whereby “to be a slave is to be under the brutal power and authority of another” (Hartman 3). Both parties are beholden to the master-slave dialectic in this way. A master like Captain Anthony depends on a slave to be slave to uphold his own position of dominance. If Douglass’s mother challenges this power by assuming some degree of sexual freedom, then the meanings behind each status no longer hold. The theory, in its validity, presumes that the legal terms make it impossible for both a master and slave to derive pleasure from sex together. In this way, the theory rules out that interracial sex can be consensual because the law, when deconstructed, always-already defines it as non-consensual. The issue at hand is that critics undermine and overlook exceptions to the law, instances where enslaved women were not taken by force, instances in which they welcomed sex with their masters.

Dolen Perkins-Valdez’s Wench (2010) is novel of historical fiction that challenges upholding this legal divide of power. Perkins-Valdez depicts sexual terrorism as it played out
historically, but she also explores sexual relations that are not defined by sexual violence. In her review of *Wench*, Adele S. Newson-Horst writes that the novel "echoes, revises, and/or enlarges upon resistance and neoresistance narratives by Mary Seacole, Linda Brent, Shirley Anne Williams, Beryl Gilroy, Toni Morrison, Barbara Chase-Riboud, and Alice Walker, among others" (69). One of Perkins-Valdez’s most important revisions has been her attempt to add degrees of complexity to interracial sex and to challenge the existing dominant narrative on interracial rape. Without a doubt, Perkins-Valdez works within the paradigms of Black Feminist criticism and theory as well as within the female-authored neo-slave narrative tradition. She is also, however, complicating these paradigms in representing an enslaved woman who consents to sex with her master. In this chapter, I explore how Perkins-Valdez's debut novel *Wench* intervenes in an old but familiar conversation on Black women’s sexuality that has guided and at times defined Black feminist inquiry. Because of its textual ambivalence, the novel seems to be at odds with itself. Perkins-Valdez re-imagines sex between a master and enslaved woman as sex that is consensual; yet, at the same time she re-imagines sexual violence between masters and slave women. That the writer depicts both sexual relationships, both consensual and non-consensual ones, signals that she perhaps has reached a theoretical crossroads of sorts. *Wench*, in this light, draws attention to the very discursive limits of Black feminist scholarship advanced during its critical peak. It would seem that she resurrects the theoretical paradigm that the scholarship has upheld and continues to do so. Perkins-Valdez explores the nuances of the enslaved wench to suggest that the master-slave relations and the boundaries it presumes may be far less rigid than scholars have argued. Whereas late twentieth century novels, particularly in the 1990s, examined Black women's sexuality in a post-civil rights moment, *Wench* and other twenty-first century neo-slave narratives like Andrea Levy’s *The Long Song* reevaluate Black
women’s sexuality at its most vulnerable moment in history, Transatlantic slavery. Twenty-first century writers like Perkins-Valdez who re-imagine slavery pay close attention to interracial rape so characteristic of earlier neo-slave narratives, but they are also attempting to re-conceptualize, re-theorize the very foundations of Black women's sexuality.

*Wench* begins in 1852, a year when America’s abolitionist movement was in full swing and the possibility of freedom hangs in the air. Four slave women--Lizzie, Mawu, Sweet, and Reenie--experience a taste of freedom when they are chosen to accompany their masters to a summer vacation resort called Tawawa House. The resort is in free-territory Ohio, and over the course of four summers, the women get a glimpse into what freedom might look like. The masters’ wives do not join them on these vacations. The book is divided into four sections and also gives a vivid glimpse into the women’s lives on the plantation where they reside. Perkins-Valdez portrays a narrative of slavery that is attentive to these women’s experiences of rape and other sexual abuses. In doing so, she paints a realistic picture of what slave women endured, as they were often prey to sexual advances by white male masters. As the novel is sexually charged, Perkins-Valdez undercuts the meaning of the word “wench.” Whereas the word suggests that Black slave women were often sexual servants because they were wanton women, a number of occasions arise in the novel where the Woman of Tawawa House are victims and survivors of sexual abuse and are not sexually voracious.

It comes as no surprise that *Wench* is largely about the complexities of sexual servitude during chattel slavery. The title alone gestures at nuances about Black women's sexuality that are both familiar and unfamiliar to neo-slave narrative readers as well as Black feminist scholars. Before the narrative begins, Perkins-Valdez includes a brief etymology of the term "wench" in the epigraph. In the fourteenth century, the term "wench" meant "a wanton woman; a mistress."
But the nineteenth century United States definition uses "wench" to refer to "[a] colored woman of any age; a negress or mulatress, especially one in service" (Perkins-Valdez). These two definitions taken together explain how "wench" became a term that signified sexual and racial codes entrenched in American slavery. Both definitions taken together refer to a hypersexualized Black woman who provides sexual services. Including an etymology underpins the degree to which Perkins-Valdez's novel and its characters conform to or work against the word, its meanings and its nuances. The term “wench” holds a particular resonance that literally invokes the stereotype of the slave woman labeled as hypersexual or lascivious and then used as a sexual servants to the master class. The master class labeled Black women as overly sexual, perhaps because of biased scientific studies that examined African female bodies that concluded that they were different. The myth of the Hottentot Venus is a case in point.

The most gruesome yet oddly familiar scene of rape occurs when Mawu’s master, Tip, rapes her publicly. When he learns about her plan to escape, he decides to punish her by first whipping her then raping her. The narrator relays the brutality of the scene: “Tip showed them who he really was. He stripped off Mawu’s clothes, tearing her dress into shreds until she was lying flat naked” (67). He demands that witnesses, slaves and “two white women,” look at him: “‘I won’t stop until every eye is on me’” (67). Mawu lies on the ground and appears unconscious to Lizzie, but once Tip begins to rape her Mawu she screams “like an animal” (68). The scene, in all of its monstrosity, affects Lizzie: “Lizzie knew that he had done something unnatural. And he had done it in front of all of them.” (68). Before he leaves, he reminds them, “‘If I hear word that any of you other niggers is thinking about escaping, I swear as God is my witness I will do that and worst to every last one of you. I will make you wish you was dead. And I won’t leave a mark’” (68). Perkins-Valdez makes this a public rape to spell out how rape
was used as a mechanism of control to further subjugate not only the victim, but also to instill fear in those who witness the very act. That Tip chooses to rape Mawu in plain sight shows how public rape did more than satisfy a white male’s sexual urges. Public rape was a symbolic act that thwarted further attempts of resistance. The slaves who are forced to witness Mawu’s rape see first-hand what could happen should they conspire to escape like Mawu. Catherine Clinton describes precisely what Perkins-Valdez achieves here: “Rape can be viewed as a means of social control for women in both the empowered and subordinate groups within the Old South” (208).

Perkins-Valdez, like Black feminists, depicts sexual terrorism to show how white male masters employed forced sex as tool of oppression. Angela Davis explains, “Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women’s will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men” (Women, Race, & Class 23). Clinton contends that the prevalence of rape establishes the Antebellum South that embraced a “penarchy” as opposed to a patriarchy. She defines “penarchy” as a “system whereby the males of the elite use sexual terrorism to control women of all classes and races, as well as men within the subordinate classes” (Clinton 208). In this regard, Perkins-Valdez upholds literary convention to make known the prominence of forced sex during chattel slavery. Tip’s final warning demonstrates that the very visibility of his act literally fears the enslaved into further submission and demonstrates before the white women the extent of superiority. Whereas lust might drive white slavers to seek out sexual relations with their slaves, the visibility of his sexual force reinforces domination. The scene itself calls into question Mawu’s presumed hypersexuality as an enslaved Black woman; for, the narrator represents her as the extension of Tip’s power as a master and his power over his sexual and physical property. Black women novelists turn to
depicting sexual violence in the twenty-first century to support the idea that the Peculiar Institution upheld penarchy as one of its most effective systems of domination.

Tip raped slave women like Mawu long before visiting Tawawa House. The narrator describes this vividly: “He barely waited for the young girls to stain their pallets red before he took them” (40). Mawu, fortunately, “held him off longer than most” (40). On his first attempt she bites him and kicks him (40). Her resistance is even more prominent the second time when she “dropped an iron on his foot that broke a toe” (40). The narrator describes what happens next:

After that, he brought her down to the barn for her first beating. When he told her to strip off her clothes, she refused. Even though he was smaller than the average man, she was even smaller. He took her afterwards while she was still sick in bed healing from the lashes. The more Mawu fought, the more determined he became to have her over and over again. He had her strapped to the bed on more than one occasion. (40)

Despite Mawu’s attempts to resist him, Tip continues raping her. Like the other women, she bores a number of children by him, most of whom he sells. Each of these scenes paint a familiar history where rape and incest prevails. These moments in the text also work against Angela Davis’s disregard for white male lasciviousness. Angelyn Mitchell challenges Davis’s argument and asserts that the slave woman’s body “became the site of White male licentiousness and economic desire” (25). The sexual violation that Mawu, Reenie, and Sweet all experience does attest to the prevalence of systematic rape, but it also shows the very licentiousness of their masters. Very little has been written about the sexual urges of masters and their desire for slave
women. It is not simply that they desired to increase their labor commodity, as novels like *Wench* reveal.

Other women in bondage at Tawawa live in close proximity to sexual abuse. They are also survivors of repeated sexual attacks that are far less visible than Mawu’s. The omniscient narrator focalizes two other women, Reenie and Sweet, who have experienced numerous sexual violations by white men at the resort and back home on their respective plantations. Reenie, the eldest of the slave women, is forced to be a prostitute to Tawawa’s manager. The masters host a dinner party and invite the enslaved women to accompany them. During the dinner, Lizzie notices the hotel manager as he enters the room: “She knew that look in the manager’s eyes, and she did not want to be the object of it” (49). Lizzie is all too familiar with the look of the manager’s desire. The manager has a brief conversation with Reenie’s master Sir and then tells her to go with the manager. As Reenie leaves the room, Lizzie thinks, “She had the look. The look of a woman who is done fighting” (53). The women, familiar with the sexual exploitation of slavery, all know what will happen next. Mawu refuses to sit in silence and even attempts to protect Reenie but immediately fails. Reenie then leaves with the manager. In this moment, resistance fails and submission prevails.

Unfortunately, the manager’s sexual exploitation is not short-lived, as Lizzie notices that she makes “long walks to the hotel each evening” (69). After witnessing Reenie’s forced prostitution, Lizzie asks Reenie about her life back home. Reenie tells a story that is plagued with a history of rape and sexual violation. Her story begins, “‘He my brother’” (56). Sir is Reenie’s brother. Not only has she endured rape, but she has also experienced incest. “‘Sir’s daddy took my own mammy,’” she says (57). In an attempt to thwart incest, Reenie attempted to “fix” herself, but that proved ineffective. When Lizzie asks her if Sir still physically violated her,
Reenie replies, “‘Sho, honey. Ain’t nothing change. Ain’t nothing gone ever change about that’” (57). The case of Reenie comments on the extent to which a history of rape is also tied to histories of incest and forced prostitution. Perkins-Valdez, with the words “ain’t nothing change,” suggests these intertwining legacies persist in the wake of failed resistance.

Sweet, another slave woman at Tawawa, experiences a life similar to Reenie’s. When Mawu meets Sweet for the first time, she immediately senses that Sweet has been the victim of interracial rape and will have to deal with the “circumstance” of mothering a child that could be potentially sold or forced to the unfortunate fate of a slave even though having “white blood.” She gives birth to a child while at the resort. During Sweet’s difficult childbirth, the women consider fetching her master, the father. The narrator channels Lizzie’s thoughts, “He was far from being a worried father. His celebration would be less over a newborn child and more over a newly acquire piece of property.” “Tomorrow, he would sit with the other men and debate over when would be too soon to put the child to work,” she thinks (73). When Mawu meets Sweet for the first time she looks at her “swollen stomach with a pitying look” and “lifted a hand to her crotch, as if to warn off the misfortune that had resulted in Sweet’s circumstance” (4). Perkins-Valdez calls to mind another major tenet in Black feminist scholarship on slavery: the master who values his slave offspring merely as economic profit.

As I have shown, there are a number of sexually violent scenes in Wench. With these depictions, Wench falls in line with other neo-slave narratives by Black women writers. Perkins-Valdez takes a significant point of departure from literary tradition when she explores a relationship that should conform to existing narratives on interracial rape but does not. Lizzie and Drayle’s relationship crosses the line between master and slave, and does so in a way as to suggest that sex is regarded consensually. Whereas Mawu, Sweet, and Reenie all face and
endure sexual force by their masters, Lizzie does not. Perkins-Valdez establishes a complexity in the text to make room for a different narrative of Black women’s sexuality during slavery.

In a recent interview with Perkins-Valdez, Catherine Delors asks, “Would you call [Lizzie’s] relationship with Drayle, her master/owner, love?” (“Women of Tawawa House” 6). Perkins-Valdez proclaims, “I can’t answer it. If I say to you that the concept of love must be taken in the context of the period, then you could possibly answer that any concept of ‘love’ must be contextualized. So there is no easy answer for that. All I can say is that their relationship is a complicated one” (“Women of Tawawa House” 6). I read Lizzie and Drayle’s relationship in light of Perkins-Valdez’s words—their relationship, both its physical aspects and its emotional ones, is deeply complicated. Given the contextual and theoretical bounds existing between the words “slave” and “master,” love seems implausible when freedom is denied to one party, which echoes Spillers’s skepticism on pleasure. This particular depiction of interracial sex question, though, poses interesting queries and problematics for Black feminist literary theory and criticism.

Readers learn that Lizzie's relationship with her master Drayle is more than what it seems and what it should be early on in the novel. When Lizzie meets Mawu, Mawu asks her if she likes coming to Tawawa and Lizzie responds, “I like having vacation like the white folks. And I like getting to spend time with my man” (15). Surprisingly, Lizzie undercuts the boundary set between her and Drayle by referring to him as her “man” and not her “master.” Mawu is quick to correct what she presumes is Lizzie’s mis-speaking and replies, “He not your man, you know” (15). Lizzie tells her, “Course I know that. But I don’t mind spending time with him” (15).

Perkins-Valdez goes on to paint their relationship as more than mere concubinage. Still curious about Lizzie’s admission Mawu asks, “You think you love him?” (16). The narrator then
tells readers: “Lizzie felt the ‘course’ rise in her throat, but stopped herself as she registered
Mawu’s disapproving tone. She felt if she answered no, she would be betraying Drayle. If she
answered yes, she would betraying something else” (16). In asking her this question, Mawu
reads Lizzie--she recognizes that Lizzie might consider herself more than or something other
than a slave. “Betraying something else,” for Lizzie, would mean that she has betrayed the legal
limits of the Peculiar Institution in how it has set out to create a boundary and distinction
between masters and slaves. I do not make this point to say that Lizzie has an allegiance to
slavery by nature of her constitution as “slave” or "wench," but I would like to make it clear that
Lizzie betrays and undermines the very structure that seemingly constitutes her. She fails to
register herself as a "slave" or "wench." Instead, she situates herself as Drayle's "woman." This
relationship that they share is not one merely of sexual servitude, as Perkins-Valdez makes
clear.

Later when Mawu declares, “I ain’t never loved Tip,” Lizzie asks her boldly, “So why are
you with him?” (16). Naively, Lizzie registers Mawu’s relationship with Tip as one that does not
abide by the master-slave boundary. Mawu looks "at her as if she were plain stupid” and says,
“Cause I belongs to him [emphasis added]” (16). Their exchange calls to mind two theoretical
positions. Whereas Mawu abides by the rigid line that separates the enslaved woman from the
slave owner, Lizzie relationship with Drayle troubles this strict delineation. Ironically so,
Perkins-Valdez calls attention to a concept that on the surface seems to be neatly defined. The
narrative, in pitting these two views against each other, introduces an interesting problematic.
Mawu, following suit with a conventional understanding of “slave,” stresses that she “belongs”
to her master, that she is his property. In other words, she does not have a choice in being with
Tip. She is, instead, Tip’s property. Therefore, marked as an enslaved woman, Mawu will not
and cannot be anything other than Tip’s enslaved woman, his wench. Lizzie, on the other hand, seems to displace her belonging to Drayle. Lizzie refuses to see herself as Drayle’s slave. She defines their relationship as one in which he is her “man,” and she is his “woman” despite her enslavement to him. To her, she is not merely human property. Perkins-Valdez sets up a complicated framework by which to read two plausible relationships that might ensue between white male masters and enslaved Black women.

Lizzie and Drayle’s sexual relationship began on their plantation when Lizzie was younger. The narrator notes, "She had been owned by the Drayles for six full crop cycles before her master finally followed up on his incessant staring" (87). Drayle first visits Lizzie at night while she is sleeping in the kitchen's storeroom. He first gets her attention by buying her books and teaching her to read (92). Most striking in Drayle’s encounters with young Lizzie is that he “asked to touch her” (92). To Lizzie, “Each touch was like a payment for his kindesses” (92). It would seem that Drayle coerces her sexually. Critics have pointed out how sexual coercion was often a tactic that masters used to tempt slave women. As Sharon Block’s Rape and Sexual Power in Early America (2006) explains, “Because sexual coercion was often a running series of propositions, masters might purposefully alternate between persuasion and force” (73). Davis writes, “Sexual coercion was, rather, an essential dimension of the social relations between slavemaster and slave” (175). We could read their early sexual encounters as coerced. Drayle offers her gifts in exchange for a sexual relationship. However, as the language makes clear Lizzie does consent to his requests insofar as she can. Lizzie’s consent might look different than what we might consider consent in our contemporary moment where both parties are legally free. Lizzie’s consent, her refusal to resist his attempt, affords her a greater freedom while in bondage. Although Lizzie fears Drayle at first, “with each reading lesson she allowed him to take one
more step with her” (92). Lizzie “believed him and permitted him an extra touch” when he promised her that she could visit her sister on another plantation (93). Big Mama, Lizzie’s mother figure on the plantation, explains to her that she should “prepare for a life in which she would be violated: *it hurt the first time . . . but you get used to it*” (93). Violation, as we have seen it play out for the other slave women in the novel, is a part of slave woman’s lived experience on a plantation. For Lizzie, however, sexual violence remains at a reasonable distance. Lizzie eventually has two children with Drayle. Their sexual relationship persists, and Lizzie continues to maintain her power to say no to his sexual advances. When she asks Drayle to free a fellow slave Phillip, he does not give her an immediate answer. Because he does not answer her Lizzie withholds sex: “But for the first time since she could remember, she refused him. And that was the way it was that night. And that was the way it would be for a few nights more” (203)

Of all the women in the novel, Lizzie seems to inhabit the “wench” stereotype the most. She is sought out for her sexual servitude and certainly fulfills that role accordingly. However, Perkins-Valdez resists painting her merely in that light. Lizzie and Drayle’s sexual encounters turn into a romantic relationship later in the novel. After learning about Reenie’s violent relationship with her master, Lizzie thinks, “So different from what she had with Drayle. She loved him. He loved her. And even more, he was good to her” (57). When Drayle fears that Lizzie considered running away with Mawu, the narrator focalizes his thoughts: "He loved her,

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13 Lizzie is unable to avoid rape completely. As Lizzie, Drayle, and Phillip travel to the resort for the first time, an unknown man on the ship rapes Lizzie. It is important to distinguish between this scene of rape and interracial rape between masters and slaves. This moment is important because it helps juxtapose rape and her consensual sexual relationship with Drayle. Lizzie tries desperately to fight back, but “she’d had no choice but to acquiesce to the violence and pray it would end quickly” (160).
and he was afraid she would leave him, too. That was what made him so upset. Her leaving. His
beloved Lizzie. The mother of his children” (66). I want to emphasize that their relationship is
more than strictly sex, that Drayle in some ways sees Lizzie as more than sexual property for him
to consume. He also does not resort to treating her as a mere breeder. The reason why their
relationship takes on a different shape is because they start to develop feelings for each other.
This is not to say that the sex between them is without complication. At key moments in the text,
Lizzie’s frustration about whether Drayle will free the children or not rises to the surface and is a
longstanding source of tension between them. When Drayle does not meet Lizzie’s demands,
she questions his masculinity and his ability to be an adequate father. Drayle slaps her and calls
her nothing but a “slave woman” when he feels that Lizzie has too much power (215). Drayle
sometimes feels insecure sexually (249). When he asks her for particular sexual favors and she
resists, he reminds her that other slave women would gladly replace her (132-133). Drayle in
this light is not simply the predatory master who uses rape as a device to satisfy his sexual
desires. On a similar note, Lizzie is not the victimized slave woman who simply submits to her
master’s sexual advances. These are all moments that complicate their romantic relationship as
well as their sexual one. Perkins-Valdez explores a relationship that surpasses the conventional
depiction of master-slave encounters that usually consists of sexual force. She draws this with a
complexity that is directly in conversation with Chase-Riboud’s Sally Hemings and the very
historical reality and accompanying controversy surrounding it.

In Wench, Lizzie welcomes Drayle’s company. Clinton, however, has argued that “[t]o
suggest that slave women ’preferred’ the sexual favors of white men is folly. Slave women may
have had choices, but the circumscription of slavery denied them ‘free-dom’ in any meaningful
sense” (211). A novel like Wench imagines a world in which an enslaved woman does prefer
and desire the sexual favors of white men. According to Sharon Block, “scattered records suggest that enslaved black women also engaged in sexual relations--perhaps forced, perhaps nominally consensual--with their masters” (65). In her novel, Perkins-Valdez makes limited consent possible, allowing both readers and critics to push against past depictions that have relied on a history of slavery that privileges interracial rape.

There is, of course, a fine line in fleshing out such a representation as Perkins-Valdez does. By the time readers reach the end of the novel, there is a strong sense that Lizzie’s love for Drayle has faded, if not disappeared entirely. Because he holds absolute power over the children’s fate, it is difficult to love him unconditionally. In turn, she begins to gain a renewed sense of herself: "[Lizzie] was more than eyes, ears, lips, and thigh. She was a heart. She was a mind" (290). Nevertheless, this does not undercut the fact that Lizzie and Drayle have consensual sex. Because Perkins-Valdez depicts a slave woman who consents, it harkens back to earlier historiography of slavery steeped in racism and sexism. One of the most prevailing stereotypes that Black feminist scholarship has fought hard to disprove has been Black women’s presumed innate sexual voraciousness. In accounting for and examining a character like Lizzie we have to consider the extent to which she perpetuates the stereotype of hypersexual black women and the degree to which she is complicit in her own sexual subjugation. On this point Hazel Carby has stated, “Rape has always involved patriarchal notions of women being, at best, not entirely unwilling accomplices, if not outwardly inviting a sexual attack (39). But as we have seen not all sexual relations between masters and slaves are necessarily attacks. Unlike Andrea Levy in Wench, Perkins-Valdez does not reinscribe stereotypes of old, but she does an exceptional job at urging readers to think critically about the prevailing narratives of interracial rape and to consider enslaved women’s sexual agency and desire. Mitchell contends, “Denied
the right to own herself or her offspring, the enslaved mother had little or no control in choosing her sexual partner” (25). In Wench, an enslaved mother successfully negotiates sexual encounters with her partner who happens to be her master. Although she has some control in their relationship, it is that limited control that opens the door for necessary critical inquiry.
CHAPTER III
OVERSEXED, UNDERSEXED: READING THE JEZEBEL IN ANDREA LEVY’S WENCH

The unsexed black female and the supersexed black female embody the very same vice, cast the very same shadow, inasmuch as both are an exaggeration—at either pole—of the uses to which sex might be put.

“Interstices: A Small Drama of Words” Hortense Spillers (1981)

So much of the violence that takes place in neo-slave narratives, especially those that focalize enslaved Black women, is both sexual and sexually charged. Representations of sexual acts have been largely one-dimensional. Reiterations of sexual acts involving enslaved women are often represented as extremely intimate and extremely violent. White male masters and overseers are depicted as rapists. Historical reality has confirmed the authenticity of these depictions: “We know that during slavery the master (and other white men) raped and otherwise had sexual relations with the black women whom they held in captivity. We know too that sometimes these men had sexual relations with their own black daughters and sisters” (Sharpe 18). Neo-slave fictions attempt to represent this history of rape and incest accurately. In turn, Black feminist critics have analyzed these representations to show how enslaved Black women were victims and survivors of sexual terrorism.

This chapter will examine the sexual politics in Andrea Levy’s fifth novel The Long Song (2009). In Long Song, Levy explores an interracial relationship between the novel’s protagonist and her overseer like what we see in Perkins-Valdez’s Wench. Unlike Wench, The Long Song is a bolder representation of Black female sexuality, as Levy portrays an enslaved woman who is hypersexual. In this way, Levy associates Long Song’s protagonist July with the Jezebel stereotype. Black feminist literary studies has upheld the argument, whether implicitly or explicitly, that, theoretically speaking, consensual sex cannot take place between an enslaved woman and master. Long Song, however, challenges the existing theory on this matter, making a
consensual sexual relationship possible when it once was, and perhaps still is, considered impossible. Levy directly throws into confusion the Jezebel figure because she boldly affixes sexuality to its enslaved Black female protagonist. The enslaved woman, however, does not become merely a sexual commodity for white male masters to abuse and consume sexually. Sexual acts are not re-imagined as just reiterations of sexual violence. Levy, instead, portrays sexual expression and desire as a site of resistance and agency for enslaved Black women. How can Black feminist literary theory and criticism make room for sexually desiring enslaved woman and her troubling relationship with her male overseer, and what can be gained from doing so? More importantly, what can Black feminist scholars learn about the enslaved Black women’s sexuality from analyzing her sexual desires for and sexual acts with her master?

“The Cult of True Womanhood,” as I discussed in chapter one, gained traction during the nineteenth century in America and Great Britain. This formulation prefigured ‘proper’ sexual prescriptions for women. Women of color, principally enslaved Black women, were treated as if they existed outside of these prescriptions. The Cult upheld the notion that white women were to exhibit four values: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness to be considered proper women of society (Welter). White women were to uphold sexual purity as a virtue: “perceived sexual immodesty—and any expression of overt sexuality might qualify as such—could banish one from the realm of womanhood entirely” (Jenkins 7). Enslaved women appropriated this virtue, hoping to stave off licentious slave owning white men.

It would be considered unfeminine—and in many ways animalistic (non-human)—for ‘real’ women to exhibit sexual desire. In Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy (2007), Candice M. Jenkins traces stereotypes of Black women dating back to the Jezebel figure to show the origins of Black women’s presumed racial and sexual pathologies.
The Jezebel, she explains, is the catchall for hypersexual Black women whose excessive sexual appetites situated them “outside of antebellum prescriptions for feminine behavior” defined by the Cult of True Womanhood, which later doomed “the larger black population to depravity and disease” (Jenkins 8). She concludes, “this fantasy of the black Jezebel helps to justify white male sexual exploitation of enslaved women” (Jenkins 8). Mitchell makes a similar point: “Thus, the agents of slavocracy constructed the myth of lewdly sensuous enslaved Black woman--the Jezebel--who animalistically and uninhibitedly acted upon her sexual urges when in reality her body became the site of White male licentiousness and economic desire” (25). The slave woman was and would be considered a Jezebel, a woman so sexually desiring and so sexually active that it marked her as inhumane. To read the stereotypical Jezebel figure in light of a deconstructed reading of master-slave sexual relations would mean confronting unsettling Black feminist theoretical paradigms about Black women's sexuality like the Jezebel. Jenkins and Mitchell, like many scholars, rely on Davis’s early articulation and assume that sex between a master and enslaved Black woman is always-already an act of sexual terrorism.

Beaulieu’s *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* (1999) makes significant contributions to neo-slave narrative studies in general and Black feminist scholarship in particular. In her study, she explores how popular neo-slave narratives re-imagine enslaved women in ways that speak to and challenge gender stereotypes. Of the many claims that Beaulieu makes, the one most striking is about sexuality and sexual violence: "[E]nslaved women suffered dual oppression--they worked in the fields alongside their male counterparts, but they were vulnerable to sexual terrorism as well, labeled 'breeders' by lascivious, avaricious masters" (11). Channeling Deborah Gray White, Beaulieu adds that the enslaved woman’s body was “[t]reated as a commodity” and “frequently colonized by the white
master, both to satiate the male's lust and to increase the labor force, since any resultant would by law follow the condition of their enslaved mother" (Beaulieu 11). Venetria Patton echoes Beaulieu’s argument in _Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction_ (2000) when she shows how the institution of slavery marked women in bondage as breeders but this mark alone failed in degendering as some Black feminists have claimed (1-27). Beaulieu’s concept on “dual oppression” elaborates on the acute ramifications of labeling enslaved women as sexually degenerate. In many ways, the captive female body was a sexual commodity and a labor commodity. According to Black feminist scholarship like Beaulieu’s and contemporary scholarship in cultural studies like Jenkins’s, this would be treated as the familiar double bind that enslaved Black women faced.

In this way, Beaulieu and Patton expand Spillers’s claim first articulated in “Mama’s Baby” and claim that there was no division between an enslaved woman’s work and an enslaved man’s work, especially in the field. Specific to women, however, and all critics mentioned thus far highlight this in varying degrees, was how they were more vulnerable to sexual violence or forced sexual acts, what Davis, Beaulieu, and others call “sexual terrorism.” Beaulieu considers enslaved Black women to be at the sexual mercy of white male masters who merely see Black women as sexual objects and as a means to further their financial stability and stimulate personal economic growth. Masters are depicted as nothing more and nothing less than hypersexual and financially minded. If scholars were to withdraw this presumption, then this fact will reveal a complexity about how and why writers imagine enslaved Black women’s sexuality. I do not mean to assert that critics should do away with the already deconstructed analyses about Black women’s sexualities or even to call into question the perpetuation of such stereotypes. What I am advancing, however, is that scholars pay careful attention to the circumstances in which the
supposed rigid line between master and slave is not “always-already” true. Under a Black feminist theoretical framework, it is clear that sexual desire and sexual satisfaction are only experienced by masters in their sexual relations with enslaved Black women. Upon further examination, it is clear that the sexual stereotypes are mis- and dis-placed—white men are assumed to be sexually voracious meanwhile Black women’s sexuality is aligned with the sexual prescriptions of true womanhood. This view rules out completely the chance that enslaved women may have had sexual freedom even though the legal definition states otherwise. Black feminist scholarship’s theoretical presumption reconstitutes enslaved Black female subjects as situated within true womanhood’s terms of sexual purity. Such a view denies enslaved women any right to sexual freedom, thereby re-constructing them as sexless beings. It is important to see slavery as a site where Black women writers have imagined and re-imagined sexuality as well as sexual freedom. Undermining this view only reinforces the line between master and slave, a line that has been crossed literally and figuratively in Black women’s writing. Therefore, it would be theoretically productive to consider the broader implications of crossing the line.

Levy crosses many lines in *The Long Song*, and several reviewers attributed this to the novel’s relative success. At the time of publication, *Long Song* was well-received. Several reviews have a tendency to situate the novel within the larger neo-slave narrative tradition. African American writer Tayari Jones calls *The Long Song* “insightful” and notes:

Though Levy's sparkling voice is all her own, she still covers familiar ground.
The biracial heroine's love triangle with her mistress and her mistress's husband bears an echo of Alice Randall's ‘The Wind Done Gone.’ Further, the caste system of the house and field servants has been a mainstay of neo-slave narratives since Margaret Walker's ‘Jubilee.’ Even the fact that July is called "Marguerite"
by her mistress brings to mind the renaming of Kunta Kinte in Alex Haley's
‘Roots.’ (“Book Review”)

In a similar vein, The Observer’s Kate Kellaway likens the novel to Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987) and Valerie Martin’s Property (2003) but notes that such neo-slave narratives might lead to “over-serious writing,” not characteristic of Levy’s oeuvre. Levy, she concludes, depicts slavery “in an entertaining way without ever trivialising it” (“The Long Song”). Another reviewer comments, “Readers of ‘The Long Song’ will find little here of the maddened grief of Toni Morrison’s ‘Beloved’ or the deep melancholy of Edward P. Jones’s ‘Known World’” (Eberstadt). Jones and Kellaway, like other reviewers, are mindful of how Levy’s novel fits within the popular neo-slave narrative genre. Jones, in particular, points to how the novel is full of intertextual gestures to other well-known neo-slave narratives. Like Black feminist scholars, Jones and Kellaway notes Black women writers' aims to both re-imagine and revise history and the neo-slave narrative tradition to further understand Black women's enslavement. Enslaved women's history has become a central focal point through which to grapple with the historical realities of slavery.

Levy herself has made some interesting statements about her fifth novel, which calls into question the very nature of re-imagining slavery. In a reflection titled, “The Writing of The Long Song,” she boldly states, “[T]he last thing I wanted to do was to write a novel about slavery in Jamaica” (Levy). A single question was on her mind when she crafted the novel: “[H]ow could anyone write about slavery without it turning into a harrowing tale of violence and misery?” (Levy “The Writing”). Levy touches on a crucial point about the neo-slave narratives: the genre has been largely dark and violent. The Long Song, then, takes a markedly different approach. It does depict slavery but does so in such a way that diverges from the darkness and
violence. Although it is clear that Levy's critical project conjures up many familiar tropes and motifs of the neo-slave narrative genre, the most striking is how she chooses to handle enslaved Black women's sexuality without writing about it in a way that is not a "harrowing tale of violence and misery." For her, slavery has been a global conversation that has been immersed in profound sadness, which leads Levy to conclude:

Writing fiction is a way of putting back the voices that were left out. Not just the wails of anguish and victimhood that we are used to, although that is very much part of the story, but the chatter and clatter of people building their lives, families and communities, ducking, diving and conducting the businesses of life in appallingly difficult circumstances. ("The Writing")

For a representation of slavery to be convincing, she implies, it is necessarily harrowing, and the neo-slave narrative genre has proven this fact. However, as she cleverly points out, there are consequences for representing slavery only in this way, crippling consequences that depict Transatlantic slavery as a history that people are so ashamed of that they undermine or even outright disregard those moments, re-imagined or historical reality, that are worthy of admiration--moments of survival, stints of freedom, and spaces of resistance within bondage. Like Frances Smith Foster who saw the err in narratives of victimization, Levy argues that the genre’s stake in communicating slavery’s horrors was necessary, but to insist on portraying suffering does little to show how slave ancestors resisted victimage and survived and how they “built a [British] culture that has come all the way down through the years to us” (11).

*The Long Song* adds a degree complexity to the neo-slave narrative genre. In the novel, an unnamed female narrator (who readers later find out is July) tells of a time when slavery was the largest institution in the world. The narrator’s son Thomas Kinsman, who happens to be a
publisher, wants her to write about slavery so that the “fable would never be lost and, in its several recitals, might gain a majesty to rival the legends told whilst pointing at the portraits or busts in any fancy great house upon this island of Jamaica” (Levy 3). In writing her account of slavery, the narrator writes about July, a woman who was born into slavery at Amity plantation in the tumultuous years leading up to emancipation. Set in Jamaica, the narrator tells of the last days of slavery and the first days of British emancipation in the 1830s. Surprisingly, Jamaica, with its tropical climate and its greatest commodity being cane sugar, has been a relatively under-examined setting in neo-slave narratives. The genre is heavily focused in the United States, so Levy does approach slavery from a different angle because she inserts British involvement in the history of the Transatlantic slave trade and in the neo-slave narrative genre. Ironically, Great Britain spearheaded the abolition even as it had been one of the leading powers to advocate for slavery’s institution (Walvin). Levy shows this paradox as well as other particularities that made the British West Indies a driving force in chattel slavery.

Baby July spends her days in the sweltering heat amidst the many cane fields alongside her field slave mother Ms. Kitty. One day as her and her mother are walking along the plantation’s main road, the master’s sister demands that July be her “companion” in the big house, and renames her Marguerite (Levy 40-41). July fares well as a companion to her mistress Caroline Mortimer. She lives out most of her days in the big house even in the midst of the Baptist War and the later imminent emancipation.

The July’s explicit tales about sex reflect two narratives that are odds with each other that should be familiar to the Black feminist critic. July has a rather active sex life with one of her masters, and her mother Kitty endures sex against her will from her master. These two narratives work against yet speak to each other in such a way as to comment on depictions of sexual
terrorism in neo-slave narratives. *Long Song’s* unnamed narrator, oddly enough, begins her own slave narrative with a rape scene:

> It was finished almost as soon as it began. Kitty felt such little intrusion from the overseer Tam Dewar’s part that she decided to believe him merely jostling her from behind like any rough, grunting, huffing white man would if they were crushed together within a crowd. Except upon this occasion, when he finally released himself from out of her, he thrust a crumpled bolt of yellow and black cloth into Kitty’s hand as a gift. This was more vexing to her than that rude act— for she was left to puzzle upon whether she should be grateful to this white man for this limp offering or not. (9)

For a story that intentionally resists the harrowing tale of slavery and sexual terrorism, there is an allusion to sexual violence that characterizes much of the earlier neo-slave narratives. July’s birth is the result of the plantation’s overseer raping her mother. It would seem that Levy makes light of the obvious sexual violence that Kitty endures. The “rude act,” the act of non-consensual sex that Tam commits, is much less offensive to her than his “offering” of the cloth. Levy undermines the violence and focalizes Kitty’s thoughts about being left a cloth after being forced into sex unwillingly. Denied sexual satisfaction, Kitty is left with what seems to be a worthless parting gift. Even a moment of her facing non-consensual sex hints at her longing for sexual satisfaction. Kitty does not embody the Jezebel figure. She is constantly referred to in terms that emphasize her hypermasculine appearance. Described as a “mighty black woman,” July’s “mother’s arms . . . were as robust as the legs of a horse in full gallop. Her thick neck looked to be crafted from some cleverly worked wood” (13-14). At one point in the text, July describes Kitty as “favouring more beast than woman” (149). What could seemingly take on the narrative
of sexual terrorism diverges from that portrayal. For readers, Levy begins to set up a theory that, unlike previous Black feminist scholarship and its object of study, restores sexuality to the enslaved Black woman. It is through Kitty that Levy diverts readers’ attention away from an act that is seemingly one of intimate violence to question the presence and absence of her sexuality.

When July resists being haunted by her past, a past in which her own mother suffered sexual assault, two narratives of interracial sex converge. Shortly after the Baptist War (1831-1832), a slave uprising, July becomes a casualty when she stands up for a free Black man named Nimrod who is framed for killing July’s master, when in fact he has committed suicide. July’s father Tam attempts to kill her, but Kitty intervenes. While no one sees Kitty beating Tam violently, he dies from severe wounds only two days after the altercation (148). Nevertheless, Kitty is charged with Tam’s murder and is then hanged while July stands by as a witness (151). July’s own mother has been assaulted by an overseer repeatedly, but July, without fear, pursues a sexual relationship with Amity’s new overseer quite aggressively. Levy crafts a narrative that, unlike some neo-slave narratives such as Jones’s *Corregidora*, puts an enslaved woman’s violent sexual past at a distance. As a result, the slave woman can be sexually free with a white male despite the historical context that situates her.

July’s relationship with Robert Goodwin, her overseer-turned-owner, shows no signs of sexual violence or sexual terrorism whatsoever. Their relationship turns intimate fairly early on when July, not Robert, makes an overt and explicit sexual pass. The narrator’s first description of Robert paints him as “neither a ruffian nor a drunkard; he was a gentleman, the son of a clergyman with a parish near Sheffield” (182). It is his gentleman-like manners that attract July. Robert even has sympathy for "negroes." The two share their first romantic encounter as Robert hands her a picture book on Scotland. Suddenly, Robert grabs her “with a ferocity like anger"
and kisses her (221). July then takes charge in their physical encounter: "The swelling of his private part began pressing hard upon July, and she knew that what she must do now was lead this tender young white man around by it" (221). Robert resists July's advances and tells her, "'My father . . .' has the highest contempt for white men who abuse their position with negroes" (222). July replies, "'Me is a mulatto, not a negro. It not be wrong, massa'"(222). Engaging in interracial sex, to July, is not wrong because she has white blood. Still, he demands that she leave his cottage, but just as she is about to leave he calls her "beautiful" (222). The narrator then notes, "It was now July's turn to feel all her breath leave her. For this white man thought her beautiful. This white man thought her good. She lunged at him to catch him about the shoulders, for this prize was just too close to give up upon it now. But he pushed her off so fiercely that she nearly fell" (222). Levy imagines an enslaved woman who, despite being marked as a mulatto slave, actively attempts to fulfill her own sexual desire with her overseer. She even refers to Robert as her "prize." July feels sexually free enough to pursue her overseer and even forces herself on him in an attempt to seduce him into engaging in physical intimacy with her. Whereas some critics might argue that Robert initiates the sexual encounter because he grabs July first, she clearly demonstrates her sexual desire for him. Levy instead depicts Robert in this moment as not merely a hypersexual white male master principally driven by his lasciviousness and avariciousness. Instead, he rejects July’s passes. Master-slave power dynamics, at least as they have been figured in Black feminist literary scholarship, might imply otherwise. Yet, Robert seems quite aware that he has the upper-hand and resists a wanton July. He does not assume that she is ripe with sexual excesses ready for his taking. Levy unsettles Black feminist scholarship’s previous assumptions by re-imagining a master-slave relationship not predicated on sexual violence. Instead, she restores sexual desire and agency where it has been largely denied.
theoretically to show that it is possible to challenge the depiction of enslaved women as merely sexless and victims of sexual exploitation.

The two share more than that single encounter together. When the desire proves to be too much for July and Robert, they finally have sex together, which not only initiates their sexual relationship, but it also initiates their emotional relationship. Robert even confesses his love for her: "It is against everything. . . . 'But, Miss July, you must know that I have come to love you. I love you’" (226--227). Feeling guilty that he cannot legally marry July, Robert marries Caroline just so that he can be with July symbolically. Although he is married to Caroline, he calls July his wife. After the wedding, July and Robert share a room together located under the big house and literally delight in their sexually satisfying relationship, to the point where if Caroline “were ever forced by circumstance to pass by July’s abode, she would have neared the lime-washed wooden door of that intimate room under the house with her eyes closed tight shut and her ears blocked by her fists” (271). July's sexual desires do not mark her as hypersexual or as animalistic (nonhuman). Rather, humanity is restored to her through her sexual longing. She has consensual sex with Robert and does not reveal herself to be just a commodity. To insist on her asexuality, while politically powerful, adopts sexually repressive, and perhaps Victorian, sexual politics.

July's sexual relationship with Robert is also a site of resistance. It is important to note, however, that sex is not a necessarily a means to an end. July and Robert’s relationship is predicated on what we could consider to be love. In any case, July escapes the daily tortures of the big house because of her relationship with Robert. She is allowed to eat with him and Caroline and is also addressed as "Miss July" and not "Marguerite" (240). Robert demands that July’s room has the finest furnishings, a nice mattress to sleep on and even a dinner table (244-
245). She is not expected to work endlessly or as hard as the other house slaves. Instead, she becomes and remains that head of the big house, giving orders as she wishes (245-246). Like we saw in Perkins-Valdez's *Wench*, sex affords enslaved Black women privileges, privileges that help them resist the many threats they are faced with as slaves.

It is a familiar trope in neo-slave narratives to pit white mistresses against enslaved women, which illustrates a kind of domestic terrorism of sorts. *Incidents* establishes this issue as Linda must cope with Mrs. Flint’s frequent torment, as she is motivated by jealousy and anger because of Dr. Flint’s extramarital affairs with slave girls. Because July has sexual leverage, she does not suffer the same fate as other house slaves. July quite literally resists domestic terrorism, and Caroline is depicted as a character who denies that her husband has an affair with her companion. July also resists being thrown into a sexually domineering relationship on the grounds that her master owns her: “Him lying so heavy upon her that she could not even inhale breath, while his manhood rose up thick and strong between them, was what she required” (245). She maintains sexual agency in her intimate moments with Robert, thereby refusing sexual violation and being labeled as a sexually conquered enslaved woman. Even when July is pregnant, Caroline “staggered back away from that protrusion, desperate to escape its bitter meaning” (272). Caroline’s denial of her husband’s sexual, romantic relationship suggests the degree to which their relationship is so rare that it seems impossible, and she has no choice but to be incredulous. Levy, in drawing July as a sexual being who receives sexual satisfaction in her relationship with her master Robert, subverts the Cult of True Womanhood’s prefigured sexual and domestic prescriptions. Not only does she depict an enslaved woman who is sexual, but she also depicts her in an unusual role as a wife: "Husband was July's favoured name for Robert Goodwin--for every time she said it, 'Come sit, husband . . . please start nyam, husband . . . oh,
hush now, husband,' he responded obediently by calling her wife. 'You are my real wife', he told her" (244). Levy implies that enslaved Black women could possibly transgress their degendered status as merely enslaved breeders through their relationships with white males.

Although July and Robert’s relationship seems stable, it falls apart after slavery’s abolition. The former slaves who later work as Amity’s field laborers demand that Robert pay them fairly and improve their working conditions. In a fit of anger, he refuses to grant their wishes and even destroys their land. With nothing left, the laborers leave Amity for good. Robert falls into a deep depression. Caroline decides it would be best if she and Robert move to Europe. As they leave, Caroline takes Robert and July’s daughter Emily with them (299). July learns about their deceit when it is far too late. She remains at Amity for years and possibly rescued from there, terrors and destitution surrounding her. She, however, refuses to spend time recounting this at any length (306-308). Rather, she imagines an ending where she becomes a local island vendor, insisting that “July’s story will have only the happiest endings and [readers] must take my word upon it” (336) Even relatively recent criticism on the novel has made the same assumptions about master-slave relationships. Maria Helena Lima, for instance, calls July and Robert’s relationship an "illusion" that is "shattered very soon" (47). To call their relationship merely a brief illusion outright dismisses what Levy does suggest about sexual relationships between white males and enslaved women. Regardless of how long July and Robert’s relationship lasts, there are larger theoretical implications that need to be acknowledged and addressed. Afforded privileges and satisfied sexually, July finds comfort in her relationship with Robert. Unfortunately, their relationship dissolves, and like many other neo-slave heroines July is separated from her child. The demise of their relationship might be best articulated by an Amity laborer: "A white man is a white man, no matter how friendly he believed himself to be
with God” (262). Yet, such an interpretation reduces their relationship to a narrative of sexual exploitation and undermines July’s agency and Robert’s genteel way with her. We might do better to read their relationship in light of the unnamed narrator’s warning: "So reader, do not feel pity for the plight of our July, for my tale did not set forth to see her so wounded" (306). Sexual relations between white males and enslaved women, then, can be considered in terms that are not strictly violent.

My argument, as it is unfolding, certainly begs the question of how we begin to talk about enslaved Black women’s sexuality without resorting back to the Jezebel stereotype as it is typically reinscribed--the Black woman portrayed as oversexed as well as sexually dangerous. Levy’s *The Long Song* is in direct conversation with dated Black feminist scholarship, picking up where it left off and challenging its presumptions. Returning to Black female sexuality where it was once denied takes up a political project that certainly has Black feminist aims and implications. Levy’s revision of Black women’s sexuality takes up stereotypes and well-cited Black feminist paradigms as well as initiates a necessary conversation about enslaved Black women and their sexual encounters with white male masters. Levy’s intellectual project recovers moments during chattel slavery that are not harrowing, moments that are predicated on survival and not victimization. This angle allows her to embody prevailing stereotypes about Black women--what Spillers calls the “unsexed female” and the “oversexed female.” Levy successfully dissects these stereotypes to reject Black women writers and Black feminists’ past insistence on highlighting the enslaved woman’s virtuous, innocent character, particularly her sexual modesty, to disassociate her from negative characterizations.
This thesis has shown that Black feminist theory and criticism has had a vested critical interest in rape as it figured into the lives of enslaved Black women and how it haunted later generations. Black feminist critics’ interest compelled them to intervene in the discourse on rape, as white feminists had explored it in the 1970s. White feminists who backed the anti-rape movement often neglected to examine how rape figured and continues to figure centrally in the lives of Black women, beginning with the Middle Passage, carrying on to enslavement in the New World, and then persisting onward into the days of freedom.

It was absolutely necessary to bring to light the prominence of sexual assault that occurred during slavery and to show how it was not treated as assault based on legal definitions. Ultimately, what we would later deem sexual violence and the larger institutionalization of rape was initially a lawful use of property in the time of slavery. And only in cases where the assault was so brutal that it could be considered misuse or damage of property would it enter the courts and amount to further legal recourse. As such, the woman in bondage could not be raped, as the word “rape” was defined legally. These women were denied the right to call rape, “rape,” and they were also denied legal protection. Cases such as State of Missouri v. Celia (1855) further validated that slaves were, indeed, property and could not rely on legal recourse (Hartman, “Seduction and the Ruses”). In turn, Black women bore physical scars and suffered psychological trauma. Such circumstances resulted in a widespread historical silence--many years later Black feminist scholars and Black women writers worked endlessly to break the silence by critically examining what had been left unspoken. Unfortunate legacies of rape, other forms of physical violence, and emotional trauma would haunt Black women well after freedom came.
Critics have also had to work against the historiography of slavery and historical accounts of slavery that have painted Black women as desiring white male masters. As Black feminists would go on to show, early historiographies of slavery perpetuated the myth of the hypersexual Black woman known as the Jezebel. Because of this, Antebellum and Postbellum writers like Jacobs, Walker, Butler, Jones, and Morrison turned away from sexuality as it did more to confirm a prevailing stereotype than to depict upstanding images of Black women, or to convey the many abuses they faced during slavery. In their attempts to reject hypersexuality from the moral characters of Black women, Black feminists maintained that slave women were, in fact, sexually modest, taking after Victorian paradigms perpetuated by white mistresses. Stephanie L. Phillips writes, Black feminist scholars have deployed such paradigms to “demonstrate that black women’s sexuality has made us peculiarly vulnerable to white racist oppression, rather than [sexuality] being a source of privilege” (452).

When Barbara Chase-Riboud’s debut novel Sally Hemings (1979) was published, it marked the beginning of a critical attempt to recover the enslaved Black woman’s sexuality and how she negotiated sexual relations with her master. Chase-Riboud’s novel captured readers’ attention with its historically-informed portrayal of a romantic relationship between America’s third president and his mistress. At the same time as the success of Sally Hemings, leading Black feminist scholars Angela Davis, bell hooks, Frances Smith Foster, Hortense Spillers, Deborah Gray White, Catherine Clinton, insisted, however, that we qualify sexual relations between white males and enslaved women as rape.

When the case of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson sparked national attention in America, it interrogated the conclusions reached about the history of rape by Black feminist circles roughly around the same time. In 1998 British scientist Eugene Neil put an end to all of
the questioning and speculations when his study confirmed through DNA testing that Jefferson was the father of at least one of Hemings’s children (duCille, “Where in the World” 446). Later, historians conceded that the affair was factual. It is alarming that the Hemings and Jefferson controversy as well as William Wells Brown’s novel Clotel (1853) that mirrors this relationship has done little, in my opinion, to affect Black feminist commentary on rape. Critics and scholars, as they read and interpreted these stories, largely concluded that Chase-Riboud’s novel and/or the history that is the Hemings and Jefferson affair are narratives that represent coerced concubinage, not ones that concretely demonstrate the slave woman’s proclivity to negotiate and navigate sexual affairs (Phillips). The discussions, then, were largely unsuccessful in provoking scholars to reconsider their own paradigms regarding interracial sex and the subject of rape during chattel slavery.

My intent has been to show first that Black women writers well into the twenty-first century are just as preoccupied with the neo-slave narrative genre as their literary mothers have been. Indeed, the many intertextual gestures alone suggest that Perkins-Valdez and Levy have “searched their mother’s gardens,” as Alice Walker would put it. They have also tilled these gardens, uprooting older paradigms and questions left unanswered in literary texts and criticism. Cultivated just so, they have shown that there is certainly a need for Black feminist and criticism, as it is still “informs a politics that measures a society and its culture by the place that the poorest women and girls occupy within it” (Griffin 502).

Perkins-Valdez and Levy, despite being on two opposite sides of the Atlantic, have made immense contributions to the Black women’s literary tradition. In Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered (1999), Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu makes a compelling point:
Each African American woman writer who has taken as her project the creation of a neo-slave narrative discovers paradox, ambiguity, and contradiction as she probes the implications of enslaved motherhood; each brings alive the woman who is her enslaved ancestor and the woman who is herself. The result is literature that is personally driven and socially charged, literature that simultaneously honors tradition and creates it. (25)

Although Beaulieu only highlights the African American women’s literary tradition, her remark lends itself well to evaluating Black women writers throughout the Diaspora and the work they have done. Perkins-Valdez and Levy with Wench and The Long Song, respectively, have taken on the neo-slave narrative genre to explore and address at length what their (literary) ancestors have not and perhaps could not relay in stories about enslaved mothers who had sexual relations with white males, sometimes desired and other times forced or coerced. While the literature on rape mostly focuses on rape in the Antebellum South, texts like The Long Song authored by Black British woman writer Andrea Levy conveys the far reaches of rape and other forms of sexual assault across the Atlantic in ways that welcome a discussion on how these violences formed Black British subjectivity. Black women’s writing and Black feminist theory here in America has gained the attention of Black women around the world and has influenced their critical reflections on sexuality.

In their contemporary narratives of slavery, writers like Perkins-Valdez and Levy have made it their task to further their literary predecessors' aims by re-imagining a relationship so complicated and so paradoxical that they have unsettled the Black feminist theoretical terrain in fruitful ways. They, too, have not been afraid to depict slavery's ironies and its humors. As Beaulieu contends, "[W]omen writing neo-slave narratives are indeed concerned both with the
past and with the future; their special talent rests in their ability to use the past and the treasures they have uncovered there to evoke the promise of the future" (156). Levy and Perkins-Valdez, as I have shown, are highly interested in the past and its treasures, but they are certainly not afraid to confront its darker secrets. In this way, they do not exactly highlight the promises of the future but are interested in troubling the illusions that the future might promise.

I have also made an attempt to directly respond to the recent widespread charge that Black feminism simply "faded away" (duCille, “Happy Life” 33). Prominent Black feminist scholar Ann duCille explains that Black feminism merely “folded into the cultural imperatives and interpretative strategies of a new millennium in which black women and their literature are no longer in vogue in the academy or anywhere else” (duCille, “Happy Life” 33). Yet, the contemporary literary scene, though, has been ripe with exhilarating Black women’s fiction. Particularly striking is that this recent wave of fiction is highly interested in Transatlantic slavery. Fiction like *Wench* and *The Long Song* poses some rather challenging questions to Black feminist literary theory and criticism in ways that call for critical attention. This is not to say that recent scholarship is not already interrogating past Black feminist discourse, but it is to say that recent Black women’s fiction challenges central paradigms that critics rely on and draw from.

Perhaps it is the generated silence from the scholarship that has prompted Black women writers throughout the Diaspora to prod this subject and even, if you will, “take it to task.” Twenty-first century writers Perkins-Valdez and Levy imagine enslaved female characters who live in close proximity to sexual violence and experience the physical and psychic pain that lies in the wake of an intimate violation such as rape. It would seem that as they have remained true to the history of rape that Black feminist commentary rescued, littering their novels with overtly sexual and sexualized violence. Perkins-Valdez and Levy, moreover, call our attention to the
Hemings-Jefferson scandal. What we would identify as “interracial rape” before is immediately complicated as we read about Lizzie and Drayle’s strained but nevertheless romantic relationship. And in Long Song readers are introduced to a slave woman named July whose aggressive sexuality overwhelms the text at times as she carries on with her master Robert. In how they incorporate sexual intimacy in light of sexual violence, both novels strongly suggest that Black feminist theoretical presumptions on rape preclude consensual sex. Perkins-Valdez and Levy have marked their own departures from prevailing Black feminist theories while at the same time expanding on them. If we are to move away from an insistence that the Black woman could only be raped, we have to consider what it would mean for her to comply willingly to seduction or to look to her master for sexual satisfaction.

In Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects, Christina Sharpe looks at how the subjugation of slaves and the violence that they endured resulted in a repetition of violent subjections that would figure centrally in the lives of post-slavery subjects. Sharpe defines “monstrous intimacies” as “the production of a fundamental familiar violence, of multiple subjections, the tolerance for and the necessity of them within the spaces and the forms of intimacy that I am calling monstrous” (2). She also illustrates how “forcible sex” like what happens to Aunt Hester in Douglass’s Narrative of 1845 is an “ongoing processes of subjectification during slavery” that persisted into the post-slavery moment (Sharpe 3). She then goes on to warn readers to be wary of “master narratives of violence and forced submission that are read or reinscribed as consent and affection” (Sharpe 4) like how Douglass revises Aunt Hester’s narrative in My Bondage, My Freedom (1855) and how this revisionist narrative influences and sustains a later historical account of the Strom Thurmond controversy by Essie Mae Washington-Williams in Dear Senator: A Memoir by The Daughter of Strom Thurmond
What she channels and suggests in her words is the prominence of violence during the Antebellum period: how it was a violence that was in many ways intimate and is at times not so visible as well as how that violence would affect post-slavery Black subjectivity.

Sharpe’s *Monstrous Intimacies* responds to a contemporary conversation in cultural studies that possibly constitutes a counter argument to what I have proposed in my thesis. Saidiya Hartman iterates this point in an article that precipitates her own study *Scenes of Subjection* and Sharpe’s later analysis:

> The confusion between consent and coercion, feeling and submission, intimacy and domination, violence and reciprocity constitute what I term the discourse of seduction in slave law. For the discourse of seduction obfuscates the primacy and extremity of violence in master-slave relations and in the construction of the slave as both property and person. (“Seduction and the Ruses” 538)

To Hartman, focusing on consent in master-slave relations veils a narrative of seduction where familiar violences are still situated at the core. It is the narrative of seduction that when advanced in Plantation Literature and early historiographies of slavery, for example, it substantiates a pro-slavery agenda that obscures the very violence of slavery as an institution. In saying that twenty-first century Black women writers revise “interracial rape” as “interracial sex,” I run the risk of re-reading a revision of master-slave sexual relations as “consent and affection,” neglecting to highlight the relations of power within such relations that perpetuates its own

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14 Sharpe lays bare how in *My Bondage, My Freedom* Douglass revises the Aunt Hester story—he renames her Ester and then revises the story to flesh out her feelings for Ned Roberts and to emphasize her blatant disobedience of Captain Anthony’s order to stay away from Ned. She probes how this revision can be read as a scene of “consent and affection” in that we now highlight her agency and determination to repeatedly disobey Captain Anthony despite his commands and instead champions her romance. In reality, however, this narrative undermines the frequent violence that ensues because of her insubordination (Sharpe 8-9).
narrative of submission, coercion, and force. Thinking through consensual sex and other ways of negotiating sexual affairs in the lives of enslaved Black women means interrogating spaces where visible prints of freedom in the Antebellum era seem much less apparent. In examining sexuality and sex acts as nuanced—as scenes of terror and/or passion—we not only further attune ourselves to the Black woman’s transgressive possibilities, but we also see how the words “master” and “slave” are thrown into confusion in a display of complicated intimacies.

My intervention goes beyond literary representations of interracial sex in master/slave relationships. This is an inquiry that has a place in cultural texts, particularly visual texts like films. There has been a widespread popularity with films that are either set in slavery or resonate deeply with its history. The Butler and 12 Years a Slave (2013) are contemporary films that challenge the discourse on rape as Black feminists have defined it. That initial scene in The Butler where Cecil’s mother is brutally raped, where she is heard but not seen, urges spectators to acknowledge the larger historical legacy of rape in the lives of Black women that has its most formative roots in slavery. Spectators see and understand what happens to Hattie without actually seeing it. The very cues such as Hattie’s scream to the lustful yet determined facade of the plantation owner to Cecil’s father’s helplessness suggest an all too familiar history where white males have their way with Black women, further instating the social hierarchy and reinforcing the hegemony. When a young bewildered Cecil asks his father (David Banner), “What you gon’ do, Pop?” as the plantation owner whisks Hattie away, we see something familiar here as well. We see the helplessness of a Black man to defend the already denied rights of his wife’s body and mind. When Cecil’s father literally stands up to the plantation owner after he rapes Hattie, he is shot. Black feminist scholarship familiarizes us with this scene of sexual terrorism, as a Black man is emasculated and then killed for daring to protect his wife, and his
wife Hattie is constituted as victim who succumbs to the white man’s sexual and economic terrorism. We see Hattie later in the film suffering from severe physical and emotional trauma (perhaps mentally disabled), and unable to work. Though seemingly removed from slavery, Hattie is haunted by it as the plantation owner assumes his right to her body. It is this narrative that rings most true to us.

In Steve McQueens’s *12 Years a Slave*, viewers see multiple instances in which Master Epps (Michael Fassbender) repeatedly rapes and sexually violates an enslaved woman named Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o). When the film’s protagonist Solomon (Chiwetel Ejiofor), also a slave on the Epps plantation, is ordered to go and get Patsey from a nearby plantation owned by Master Shaw (Scott Michael Jefferson), an unexpected event happens. Solomon meets Master Shaw’s Black wife (Alfre Woodard) and learns, along with the viewers, that she was once his slave. As Solomon sits down for tea with Patsey and Mistress Shaw, she imparts some ‘advice’ to Patsey who has taken to resisting the master’s lasciviousness. To Solomon and Patsey she explains, “I know what it like to be the object of master’s predilections and peculiarities.”

Mistress Shaw tells Patsey in plain terms that she does have a limited choice in the matter, warning her that for many enslaved women it is either “a lusty visit in the night or a visitation with the whip.” She makes sure to tell them both that it has been a long time since she felt the pain of a lash, having learned to negotiate her sexuality and thus having benefitted from Master Shaw’s affections. McQueen complicates and revises the white-male-slave-woman rape narrative by re-imagining a former slave woman’s sexual agency. His approach to rape situated in its own contemporary moment fleshes out the eponymous slave narrative’s conception of Black female sexuality.
Traditional representations of sexual violence in *The Butler* compared to representations of interracial sex in other cultural texts such as *12 Years a Slave*, *Wench*, and *The Long Song* stand in opposition to one another. Two conflicting narratives stand at the fore of this issue. How these texts interrogate Black feminist theory suggests another narrative on interracial sex worth heeding. Under the rubric of Black feminist theory and criticism, we have a harder time accounting for a scene like when Miss July seduces Robert in *Long Song*. How can we make sense of how a slave would look to her master for sexual and romantic satisfaction while at the same time saying that supremacist discourse has stereotyped her as a jezebel? How can we make sense of women who lived within such close proximity to sexual violence, in a community of women and men who were routinely violated sexually, but proceeded to pursue affairs, sexual or otherwise, with their masters? Did they feel guilty? Did they see themselves as privileged? Is there a way for us to see the slave woman who had sexual affairs and romantic relationships as more than a coerced concubine? Black feminist theory has certainly shown how the lives of female slaves were concrete manifestations of resistance. Unfortunately, the groundwork has yet to be laid for how resistance plays a vital role in slave women’s sexual affairs with white males.

*Wench* and *The Long Song* rest at the core of the work that Black feminist theory has done and will continue to do, even when as of late the field has been less visible. These texts, though unsettling, call out to Black feminist theory in hopes of rethinking the critical foundations with which twenty-first century contemporary narratives of slavery rest on and wrestle. How *Wench* and *The Long Song* invoke slavery make it perfectly clear that in the many revisions and re-imaginings of Transatlantic slavery, Black women of the African diaspora are right at the very center of this history, across time and across space. Even as I examined the enslaved Black women’s transgressive sexuality, I have maintained that the sexual threats and assaults that Black
women endured, enslaved or free was, too, a lived reality. Black women in the history of
Transatlantic slavery and well after have been some of the best agents under the most oppressive
circumstances. That they have survived and resisted victimage is enough to signal that they have
made likely circumstances out of unlikely ones.
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