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# Resisting Narratives:

## Sexual Abuse Under American Slavery as “Twilight Moments”

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This essay resists Anna Clark’s theoretical framework of using “twilight moments” in order to understand the rape of enslaved peoples. Clark’s framework of twilight moments endeavors to provide a vocabulary that explains prohibited sexual acts that were pursued in private or as an open secret without scrutiny. Based on this framework, she suggests that the rape of enslaved peoples can be understood in such a manner. By looking at the sexual abuses against African-American men under American Slavery, I argue that the conceptualization of twilight moments requires an element of mutual consent—an agreement that could not exist while slaves were considered an owner’s chattel. Rather, I argue that these sexual violations must be considered on their own terms in order to do justice to the grim histories created by American racialized law and sensibilities.

To understand the history of sexuality, Anna Clark argues that there must be differentiation between sexual identities and sexual acts.<sup>1</sup> Sexual acts may occur in a variety of circumstances that are not necessarily part of a person’s sexual identity. She proposes the metaphor “twilight moments” as language to understand prohibited sexual acts and desires that people pursued either in secret or as an open secret.<sup>2</sup> However, these moments suggest that both parties are able to “return to day” and are able to continue living “normally” without coming under scrutiny.<sup>3</sup> This was not the case for enslaved peoples. Contrary to Clark’s assertion that all hidden sexual acts—including the rape of enslaved people— can be considered twilight moments, I insist on the danger in reading sexual abuse through this lens. At its worst, misreading something as sexual acts with enslaved people as “twilight moments” has the potential to sanitize and obscure historical realities of racism and chattel slavery. As demonstrated by Gabriel N. Rosenberg’s blog post, “Where are the animals in the history of sexuality,”<sup>4</sup> as well as Thomas A. Foster’s “The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery,”<sup>5</sup> the language used to describe the sexual abuse of enslaved peoples was comparable to that of animal breeding programs. This language illuminates the extent of subjugation that slaves experienced by their master. While there are moments of relations across the color line that qualify as twilight moments, the sexual abuse of enslaved African-Americans must be considered on its own terms.

To refer to these sexual interactions as twilight moments is to over simplify the grim realities of racism in America.

First and foremost, it is crucial to acknowledge that slaves were legal property under American slavery, an institution protected by law. It is only through this understanding that one can begin to talk about the complicated, and often abusive, sexual histories of slaves in America. “In “The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery,” Thomas Foster argues that enslaved black men were sexually assaulted both by white men and white women, and that gendering rape prevents contemporaries from recognizing the “climate of terror and the physical and mental sexual abuse that enslaved black men also endured.”<sup>7</sup> In addition, he specifically identifies the sexual coercion of enslaved black men as rape.<sup>8</sup> By contextualizing the power dynamics between slave and master, Foster also recognizes that slave-owners were aware that sexual violence was more than desire: it was an intentional demonstration of power and dominion over their property.<sup>9</sup>

Foster’s depiction of desire and power as separate entities differs from Anna Clark’s conflation of the two.<sup>10</sup> Where Foster makes distinct separations between desires and power,<sup>11</sup> Clark asserts that unregulated and hidden sexual acts can be categorized as twilight moments.<sup>12</sup> She writes, “more sinisterly, [a twilight moment could be] when the master crept into slave quarters to rape a woman.”<sup>13</sup> What she fails to mention, is that the master did not just rape a woman, but an enslaved black woman—his legal property under American slavery. By reducing a power

dynamic so unequal that one person had “absolute power over life and limb” over another into a mere individual moment is to discount the widespread targeted violence against enslaved persons.<sup>14</sup> For example, Foster writes that in cases of white women sexually assaulting black enslaved men, white women would specifically target men who were already “emotionally and physically battered.”<sup>15</sup> In an anecdote from Harriet Jacobson, Foster cites that white mistresses would select “the most brutalized [male slave], over whom her authority could be exercised with less fear of exposure.”<sup>16</sup> In doing so, white women actively engaged in systematic choices in order to subjugate and sexually assault black men under American slavery. By categorizing this system of violence as individual twilight moments, Clark ignores slavery as institutionalized law and creates a different narrative of slavery. These hidden sexual acts went unregulated, not because they were done in private, but because masters were brutalizing their property, which the government had no claim to.

In addition to the legal power dynamics masters had over slaves, it is also important to contextualize the everyday social power dynamics between whites and slaves. Just as slaves lacked legal recognition, they were also denied rights of free personhood, as depicted by their dehumanization at the hand of white slave owners.<sup>17</sup> Foster writes, “testimony from a number of former slaves demonstrates how forced reproduction had the dehumanizing effect of labeling certain enslaved men as ‘stock men’ or ‘bulls.’”<sup>18</sup> Slaves could also be “forced off a plantation once the slave owner considered him to be ‘too old for breeding.’”<sup>19</sup> This language of “breeding,” “stock men,” and “bulls” illuminates the dark reality that the enslaved were not treated as people. They were viewed and defined without any rights accorded to free persons by law. It is compelling, then, to consider the parallels between the sexual handling of animals in comparison to the sexual abuses of slaves.

In “Where are the animals in the history of sexuality,” Rosenberg maintains that in the antebellum south, farmers needed to focus “on the controlled and efficient management of hog reproduction through more systematic control over the conditions of reproduction and the animals to be mated.”<sup>20</sup> In addition, some breeders “would literally lend a hand” in order to control a hog’s reproduction as new breeding programs were created to meet the demands of a newly industrialized economy.<sup>21</sup> An un-

fortunately sinister parallel is the coercive sexual abuse of black men in the wake of the antebellum era also increased, or at least, their documentation did.<sup>22</sup> Foster identifies the “early nineteenth century as the period of greatest expansion of [slave breeding], coincided with the growth of the [domestic] slave trade.”<sup>23</sup> He asserts that “forced coupling also placed a premium on young and healthy men,” as “masters could and did force couples to have sexual intercourse, and if ‘either one showed any reluctance, the master would make the couple consummate the relation in his presence.’”<sup>24</sup> Not only were there breeding programs for slaves, but the shared language between animal and slave breeding illustrates the political implications as well as social stratification of lumping slaves and animals together. This intentional dehumanization of enslaved people of African descent through breeding programs demonstrates how the coercive sexual abuse they endured cannot be a twilight moment. A twilight moment suggests hidden consensual desires that are practiced in private. Slave-breeding however, was an institution created to increase the chattel of owners—just as farmers increased their property in livestock. These sexual abuses and violations were demonstrations of power and authority. Referring to it as a twilight moment misrepresents the past, and does no justice to the history of institutional American slavery which implicates both owners and those enslaved.

Although the concept of twilight is incredibly useful and important language for understanding disconnects between identity and actions, it is easy to oversimplify historical contexts. While there may have been some instances of twilight moments across the policed color line, to refer to the sexual abuse of enslaved peoples as “twilight moments” sanitizes the violent context through which they occurred. In addition, the sexual abuses of enslaved peoples were not individual moments. These people were selectively targeted based on their color, gender, health, and physical trauma. Moreover, the unregulated nature of these hidden sexual abuses were much more than society turning a blind eye. The results of rape were evident on every plantation when slaves appeared white in color. Slaves were private property comparable to livestock, to which the government had no claim. To discount such power dynamics obscures America’s grim and complicated racialized legal history.

## Notes

1. Anna Clark, "Twilight Moments," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14 (2005): 140.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Gabriel N. Rosenberg, "Where are the animals in the history of sexuality?" NOTCHES, September 2, 2014, <http://notchesblog.com/2014/09/02/where-are-animals-in-the-history-of-sexuality/>
5. Thomas A. Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20 (2011): 456.
6. Ibid., 448.
7. Ibid., 447-448.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 449.
10. Anna Clark, "Twilight Moments," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14 (2005): 144.
11. Thomas A. Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20 (2011): 459.
12. Anna Clark, "Twilight Moments," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14 (2005): 144.
13. Ibid., 140.
14. Thomas A. Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20 (2011): 459.
15. Ibid., 462.
16. Ibid., 462.
17. Ibid., 455.
18. Ibid., 455.
19. Ibid., 456.
20. Gabriel N. Rosenberg, "Where are animals in the history of sexuality?" NOTCHES, September 2, 2014, [http://notchesblog.com/2014/09/02/where-are-animals-in-the-history-of-sexuality.](http://notchesblog.com/2014/09/02/where-are-animals-in-the-history-of-sexuality/)
21. Ibid.
22. Thomas A. Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (2011): 447.
23. Ibid., 455.
24. Ibid., 455-456.