

THE LIBERAL RAPE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALES

By

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As I write this acknowledgment at 2 am on a Wednesday, listening to RY. I am not entirely sure how to put my feelings into words as this is a very difficult thing to do. I was in between topics of what my thesis should be, this or how childhood trauma affects early adulthood. However, I would be revisiting memories of my childhood that I do not want to revisit at all. If I do decide to do that inside a dissertation or a thesis during my Masters, I possibly would do it as I think it is important to recognize the fact that childhood trauma does affect early adulthood.

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“It would be a mistake to regard the institutionalized pattern of rape during slavery as an expression of white men’s sexual urges, otherwise stifled by the specter of white womanhood’s chastity. That would be far too simplistic an explanation. 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”¹

- Angela Davis (Women, Race, & Class 1981)

II. ABSTRACT

Liberal theorists such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau have all advocated for the importance of individual rights in their respective writings. Hobbes emphasized “The right of nature...is the liberty each man hath to use his own power as he will himself for the preservation of his own nature.”² Locke, on the other hand, posited that individuals possess inherent natural rights, such as “life, health, liberty, or possessions.”³ Rousseau further emphasized the concept of individual freedom, arguing that “man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”⁴ As a collective, these scholars have acknowledged liberalism’s essential function of individual rights in promoting personal autonomy. Despite claiming to uphold these rights and values, liberalism is in fact intertwined with a legacy of slavery, racial capitalism, and sexual exploitation, as evidenced by the experiences of enslaved African-American women and girls. By examining the narratives of enslaved African-American women and girls, it becomes clear that liberalism fails to extend these rights and values to African-American women and girls. African-American women and girls were victims to the systemic rape by white colonists for forced reproduction, as

¹ Davis 23

² Locke 133

³ Rousseau 1

⁴ Hobbes 99

they were seen by a patriarchal system that viewed them as property rather than human beings with inherent dignity and autonomy. The principal aim of this paper is to analyze the relationship between liberalism, racial capitalism, and slavery through a historical analysis and feminist research in slave narratives. Through this analysis, I will argue that liberalism and capitalism, which are often classified as value-neutral systems, create racialized systems of enslavement that dehumanize African-American women and girls for the exploitation of their bodies.

III. INTRODUCTION

Liberal theorists such as Hobbes Locke, and Rousseau have all advocated for the importance of individual rights in their respective writings. Hobbes emphasized “The right of nature...is the liberty each man hath to use his own power as he will himselfe for the preservation of his own nature.”⁵ Locke, on the other hand, posited that individuals possess inherent natural rights, such as “life, health, liberty, or possessions.”⁶ Rousseau further emphasized the concept of individual freedom, arguing that “man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”⁷ As a collective, these scholars have acknowledged liberalism’s essential function of individual rights in promoting personal autonomy. Despite claiming to uphold these rights and values, liberalism is in fact intertwined with a legacy of slavery, racial capitalism, and sexual exploitation, as evidenced by the experiences of enslaved African–American women and girls.

By examining the narratives of enslaved African-American women and girls, it becomes clear that liberalism fails to truly extend these values to African-American women and girls. African-American women and girls were particularly to the systemic rape by white colonists or forced reproduction, as they were seen by a patriarchal system that viewed them as property rather than human beings with inherent dignity and autonomy. The principal aim of this paper is

⁵ Hobbes 99

⁶ Locke 133

⁷ Rousseau 1

to analyze the relationship between liberalism, racial capitalism, and slavery through a historical analysis and feminist research in slave narratives. Through this analysis, I will disprove that liberalism and capitalism are value-neutral systems that ignore the overwhelming racialized system of slavery when it comes to the dehumanization of African-American women and girls for the exploitation of their bodies.

While the tenets espoused by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau emphasize the salience of individual rights in fostering personal autonomy, self-determination, and a just society that recognizes the inherent dignity of all individuals. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the realization of these rights have not been universally extended to all members in society, as it is evident through the systemic oppression and exploitation of African-American women and girls. The concept of racial capitalism provides insight into the racialization of capitalism, and how race functions as a central organizing principle in capitalist economics where individual rights and freedoms are limited to African-American women and girls. Cedric Robinson's work on racial capitalism provides a critical lens through which to examine the relationship between race and capitalism. Robinson defines racial capitalism as “the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions.”⁸ As Robinson notes, this system is not a natural or inevitable outcome of capitalist development but rather a result of deliberate policies and practices that have been used to create and maintain racial hierarchies within capitalist societies.

According to liberal philosophers, including John Locke. John Locke claims that “men being ... by nature, all free, equal, and independent.”⁹ Yet, these values are often selectively applied to maintain the economic and political power of white male elites in liberalism’s origins

⁸ Robinson 2

⁹ John Locke 186

that symbolize and endorse a white vigilante view that degrades African-American women and girls. Liberalism supported the expansion of racial capitalism, a system that relies on the exploitation of racialized labor to generate wealth for enslavers through the reproductive capabilities of enslaved African-American women and girls. Feminist scholars such as Angela Davis, Jennifer Morgan, and Carole Pateman have argued on the contradictions of the “patriarchal social order,”¹⁰ stating that “the class structure of capitalism encourages men who wield power in the economic and political realm to become routine agents of sexual exploitation.”¹¹ African-American women and girls are routinely raped and exploited by white colonist since African-American women and girls are viewed as “breeders,”¹² “jezebels”¹³ or “mammies.”¹⁴

According to Collins, the “breeder women image provides an ideological justification for efforts to harness Black women’s fertility.”¹⁵ This image justified the reoccurring notion that enslaved women and girls were subjected to various forms of sexual exploitation, including rape, and forced pregnancies by their enslavers. Enslavers saw these women as ‘jezebels’¹⁶ who use their sexuality to manipulate her white master with her lustful and sensual demeanor. The jezebel stereotype further reduces the African-American women and girls with the white male gaze, asserting their ownership of the bodies of African-American women and girls in the devaluation into a single dimension where she is treated as a tool that only exists for the pleasure of others.

The two stereotypes go hand in hand with one another with the social control of the Black body as they are treated as sexual objects based on racist and sexist ideologies. These ideologies

¹⁰ Pateman 1

¹¹ Davis 214

¹² Collins 78

¹³ Collins 81 also see Davis 196

¹⁴ Collins 109

¹⁵ Collins 78

¹⁶ Collins 81 and Davis 196

are referred as liberalism and capitalism, that “harbors an incentive to rape”¹⁷ of an enslaved Black body. During America's era of slavery, masters believed that sexual engagement with their enslaved was their lawful entitlement. This phenomenon was partly due to the erroneous portrayal of the enslaved women and girls as sexual objects and promiscuous beings, where Davis argues that it “encourages men who wield power in the economic and political realm to become routine agents of sexual exploitation.”¹⁸ Sadly, this depiction was one that slave masters embraced and relied on to fulfill their sexual desires without facing legal consequences. The consensus among these masters was that they had a right to use the bodies of their slaves for their own pleasure, and this sense of entitlement was supported and reinforced by broader societal paradigms that ultimately validated the master's actions.

The erroneous portrayal of African-American women and girls as hypersexualized and promiscuous individuals played a significant role in justifying their ownership by white men during the Antebellum South. This depiction served to satisfy the predatory impulses of the slaveholders, facilitating the assertion of their possession over the enslaved women and girls and their “natural reproduction”¹⁹ as Davis reminds us. Consequently, white men were legally permitted to disregard the sanctity of these women's bodies and exploit them to satisfy their desires. This state of affairs was, in no small part, a consequence of the patriarchal system, prevalent in the South at the time, which had been influenced by European monarchs' practices. Said systems endorsed the violent disposition of slaveholders towards their property.

White colonists of America were heavily influenced by the practices of European monarchs and subsequently claimed legal ownership over the bodies of enslaved African-American women and girls within their control. This sense of ownership provided slave

¹⁷ Davis 214

¹⁸ IBID 214

¹⁹ IBID 6-7

owners with the power to force their women into sexual activity with them without facing legal or social retribution. Resultantly, many slave women and girls were forced to endure incessant sexual coercion and brutal rape by their masters. These abuses were made possible by prevailing rape laws that afforded the slave master the overarching power to exercise complete control over the bodies of their enslaved without fear of any legal consequences. As stated by Davis, “rape laws as a rule were framed originally for the protection of men of the upper classes.”²⁰ These law governing rape during the Antebellum period in the United States limited the agency of enslaved African-American women and girls to accuse their perpetrator of rape and deprived them of legal protection against the sexual violence from their enslaver, further exacerbating their marginalization within a system that sanctioned their abuse. Cases such as *Celia, A Slave*²¹ further invalidate slaves while reducing them to property, which will be detailed later on in this thesis.

As Roberts points out, “slaves were at the disposal of their masters”²² as this was the chilling reality that rape of enslaved woman or girl was not only a common occurrence but was also not acknowledged by Southern states. Enslaved women and girls had no legal rights or protection against rape, and white colonists took full advantage of their power and control over Black bodies. While each state had laws prohibiting enslaved men from committing rape, however, these laws “failed to recognize the rape of a slave woman.”²³ Basically, laws protected females who are white and determined that enslaved women and girls were incapable of being protected by the law.

²⁰ Davis 156

²¹ Melton A. McLaurin; *Celia, A Slave* (1991)

²² Roberts 56

²³ Davis 55

This law is connected to liberalism and its power to control enslaved women and girls through sexual brutality under colonialism, which has perpetuated a system of rape and slave breeding. This system is a part of liberalism's colonial archetype, which defined rape as Roberts would call it as "primarily a weapon of terror that reinforced whites' domination over their human property."²⁴ Being considered as property, women were found at the intersection of liberalism's degrading values such as rape, forced reproduction, and sexual domination in the form of power. The domain of liberalism facilitated the subjugation of African-American women and girls by oversimplifying their negation of human rights through the denial of constitutional rights. Their bodies were legally claimed by their owners, as well as the state that labeled and circulated them as commodities that white could own and use for their own prescribed purposes, perpetuating the dehumanization of Black women and girls to maintain a white supremacy hierarchy that "relied on as much on routine sexual abuse."²⁵

The pernicious system of slavery in America relied on rape and sexual control as key components, which underscored the ideological underpinnings of liberalism and constituent parts of capitalism. The oppression of African-American women and girls ensued, as a result of these practices, which began with restrictions on their freedoms, rendering them little more than objects. Within this system, these women and girls were constantly threatened with, and often subjected to sexual exploitation, harassment, and rape, while that their status as property was enforced by acts of violence. Unfortunately, the sexual exploitation of enslaved women and girls was not uncommon, with enslavers often utilizing it "to reassert authority over the women"²⁶ and girls in order to control their reproductive capacities. Enslaved women and girls had little or no recourse to combat these heinous acts, and this status quo ensured that many were subjected to

²⁴ Roberts 55

²⁵ Davis 189

²⁶ Morgan 152

these abuses for the entirety of their lives. Not only this fulfilled enslavers sexually, but their economic exploitation of enslaved women and girls' reproductive labor benefited them financially. As Roberts refers to this method as "*slave-breeding*:"²⁷: It refers to "compelling slaves they considered 'prime stock' to mate in the hopes of producing especially suited for labor or sale."²⁸ Enslaved women and girls would not only do labor on the farm, but their children would be considered as valuable to the enslavers. In accordance with Collins, "exploiting Black women as breeders objectified them as less than human because only animals can be bred against their will"²⁹ made them susceptible to the rape from their perpetrators as they were considered as property that belong to their owners.

Enslaved African-American women and girls were central to this system of racial slavery, as their forced labor and exploitation to generate profits for their enslavers. Slavery was an economic institution that operated within liberalism and capitalism, which was driven by the desire of economic wealth and the obscured treatment of enslaved people, including sexual violence. As Morgan notes that "Africans were, like silver or gold, symbols of and for exchange."³⁰ Slaves are viewed as commodities that can be used as collateral in business transactions, this is an integral part of the British colonial experience, which contributed to their further oppression in liberal thought. In all cases, liberal values justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved African-American women and girls, which translated as the legal ownership of enslaved African bodies from their owners as this includes acts of rape.

These acts of rape is evident in the ambiguities of the political paradigm known as liberalism, revealing the obscure history of bodily regulation, exploitation of African-American

²⁷ Roberts 52

²⁸ IBID 52

²⁹ Collins 135

³⁰ Morgan 2021, 46

women and girls, colonialism, and capitalism where John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacque Rousseau have justified the “racial slavery and aboriginal expropriation”³¹ of enslaved African-American women and girls. Throughout this thesis, I will analyze the relationship between liberalism, racial capitalism, and slavery through a lens of historical examination, complemented by a study of slave narratives in feminist discourse.

Slave narratives discussed the lives of enslaved Black women and girls, suggesting that rape was a common occurrence that existed through Antebellum rape laws. As explained by Davis, “rape laws as a rule were framed originally for the protection of men of the upper classes”³² in order for white colonists to maintain a racialized hierarchy that contains racial purity and sexual assault of enslaved women and girls. Slaves could not testify against white male elites in courts, presuming that Black women and girls are hypersexualized animals that are subjected to rape, and therefore had no capability to pursue justice after experiencing sexual abuse from their enslaver.

The overall structure of these narratives that can be identified in the works of Angela Davis, Bell Hooks, Dorothy Roberts, and Jennifer Morgan that show that autonomy and power are intertwined with the liberal ideology in the continuous actions of rape. These slave narratives tend to have common characteristics that specifically speak about the sexual violence and the loss of autonomy that they have endured during their time of being in captive which will be analyzed through exegetical readings. First, an autobiography from Harriet Jacobs that documents her experience of being an enslaved woman or girl. During 1861, “*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*” became the first slave narrative in the United States that directly confronts the issue of the sexual abuse of enslaved women and girls, a topic that is not studied about in the

³¹ Mills 27

³² Davis 186

nineteenth-century. In *“Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl”*, Jacobs uses the autobiographical “I” to expose Antebellum South’s patriarchal system that renders them helpless animals, while enslaving and abusing African-American women and girls. Jacobs’ dialogue reconstructs the power dynamics between herself and Dr. Flint, who is forced to defend herself from her master's sexual taunts. Secondly, a biography from Melton A. Mclaurin takes into account the cruel reality of legalization of rape surrounding an enslaved African-American girl’s life. In 1991, Melton A. Mclaurin wrote *“Celia, A Slave”* which heavily relied on records of judicial proceedings in Callaway County Court in Fulton, Missouri. While Mclaurin depicts Celia as being a fourteen year old enslaved African-American girl who is owned and raped by Robert Newsom, there is “practically nothing is known about Celia’s life and her arrival at the Newsom farm.”³³ Lastly, a 1979 romance novel from Barbara Chase-Riboud that discusses the sad truth of enslaved women and girls. *“Sally Hemings: A Novel”* explores the complex and controversial relationship between Thomas Jefferson, and his enslaved mistress, Sally Hemings. *“Sally Hemings: A Novel”* delves into the life of Sally Hemings while unpacking exploitation and sexual domination from Jefferson, as well as the objectification and dehumanization of the female Black body.

This thesis is mostly focused on Antebellum slave narratives that emphasize on their desire for political inclusion, freedom, and reproductive rights. African American women and girls, both literally and figuratively, argued for the right to be freed, equal, and to have access to equality under the liberal and capitalist structure that prohibits their rights. I propose that the original aim of liberalism, which emphasizes “life, health, liberty, or possessions”³⁴ has transformed into a new form of oppression that disregards the humanity of African-American women and girls. This form of oppression provides white colonists an erotic conquest of

³³ Mclaurin 22

³⁴ Locke 133

perpetual bondage, which allows the rendition of African-American women and girls in liberalism's patriarchal domain through the analysis of three genres in slave-narratives. These slave narratives provide insight on the sexual violence, power, and rape of their masters, the poor conditions that these slaves have lived through, and the master-slave relationships.

IV. Methodology

The methodology employed in this thesis is centered on a historical and feminist analysis of the intricate relationship between capitalism, the shortcomings of liberalism, and slavery. Through this, I will examine the "particular forms of intersecting oppression"³⁵ such as "race and gender"³⁶ through selected texts such as, "*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," "*Celia, A Slave*," and "*Sally Hemings: A Novel*," which collectively highlight the intersection between liberalism, capitalism, and slavery. Additionally, this analysis will investigate the intersection of race, class, and gender through a feminist lens of the colonial era and the ways in which they have shaped the experiences of African-American women and girls under slavery through these selected slave narratives.

To begin with the choice of these texts, primarily due to their historical and literary significance concerning slavery in the United States, each of the following texts offers a different perspective on the experiences of enslaved African-American women and girls during the colonial period. "*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" is an autobiography that details the life of Harriet Ann Jacobs, an enslaved woman who escaped to freedom in 1861. This text is a seminal work of Black feminist literature as it "charts in vivid detail precisely how the shape of her life and the choices she makes are defined by her reduction to a sexual object, an object to be raped, bred, or abused."³⁷ It also offers a unique and deeply personal perspective on the complex

³⁵ Collins 18

³⁶ IBID 18

³⁷ Roberts 48-49

experiences of Black women and girls against the idealizations of liberalism during the period of American slavery. In the book, Jacobs tells the story of her life under slavery, using the pseudonym "Linda Brent" to protect herself and her loved ones from retaliation. Her primary motive for writing the book was to address white women in the North, urging them to take action and fight against the sexual exploitation and degradation of Black women and girls that occurred so frequently under the Southern patriarchy.

Jacobs' autobiography serves as a powerful indictment of the brutal realities of slavery, particularly the ways in which Black women were made to suffer under its oppressive system. Her narrative highlights the ways in which slavery was not only an economic and political institution, but also a gendered one, where the bodies of Black women and girls were particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, coercion, and exploitation. Despite the incredible trauma and pain she endured, Jacobs' *"Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl"* is ultimately a story of resistance and agency, as she employs various strategies to resist the violence and oppression of slavery. She uses her voice, her intelligence, and her creativity to find moments of freedom and autonomy, even in the face of cruelty.

Authored by Melton A. McLaurin, *"Celia, A Slave"* is a historical account of the life and trial of a profoundly oppressed enslaved girl named Celia. It narrates the tragic story of a young African girl, Celia, who was forced into slavery and sold to a white Missouri farmer named Robert Newsom, for the sole purpose of using her as a sexual object. Celia's story is a record of the intersection of liberalism and capitalism's justification of rape and dehumanization towards enslaved women and girls by white colonists in the mid-19th century.

After suffering in silence for a year, being subjected to daily sexual abuse and rape by her master, Celia found herself at a crossroads. With feelings for her slave lover, George, growing

stronger every day, she finally decided it was time to take a stand against her oppressor. One fateful night, Newsom visited her cabin and demanded sex, but Celia refused. The situation quickly escalated into violence, with Newsom's disregard for Celia's warnings,³⁸ who warded off his sexual advances with a stick.³⁹ In a fit of rage, Newsom was struck twice and fell dead at Celia's feet, leaving her with the overwhelming realization that she had just killed a white man: Celia's immediate reaction was fear, fear of the reprisals that she thought would surely follow, fear of the injustice that she knew she would face. In desperation, she did the unthinkable, and burned Newsom's body, hoping that it would erase any trace of his presence in her cabin. Unfortunately, her actions were discovered, and she was subsequently arrested, tried, and convicted of murder. She was sentenced to death by hanging, and in December of 1855, Celia was executed for the murder of her master, Robert Newsom.⁴⁰

The story of Celia illustrates the brutality of the slave system, where white slave owners consistently used and abused their Black slaves as if they were no more than animals. It is a testament to the strength and resilience of the human spirit, as Celia was forced to endure the most terrible forms of human suffering, and yet was able to summon the courage to resist and fight back.

“Sally Hemings: A Novel,” romanticizes the relationship between Hemings and Jefferson. In 1979, the author, Barbara Chase-Riboud, depicts their relationship as a passionate and consensual one, with Hemings providing Jefferson consent. Given the power dynamics that existed at the time, it disregards it while perpetuating the myth of the happy slave and erasing the agency of enslaved individuals in resisting their exploitation. The relationship between Hemings and Jefferson constitutes a problematic practice that obfuscates the fundamental power dynamics

³⁸ Mclaurin 42

³⁹ Mclaurin 43

⁴⁰ Mclaurin 114

and exploitation inherent in slave relations. As the system of slavery is predicated on the ownership and control of the Black body, slavery necessitate the deprivation of agency, autonomy, and freedom from enslaved African-American women and girls who were subjected to sexual violence and the exploitation from their enslavers. In spite of Hemings and Jefferson relationship as being depicted as consensual and passionate, Chase Riboud's novel romanticizes the sexual violence that were at the centre of the exploitation against African-American women and girls.

The portrayal of enslaved African-American women and girls as "jezebels"⁴¹ who are willing to participate sexual relationships with their enslaver serves to perpetuate the myth of the 'happy slave,' a stereotype that was used to justify the rape of African-American women and girls. Due to this representation that Chase-Riboud delivers, it erases the agency of African-American women and girls, but serves to reinforce that these enslaved women and girls accepted their subjugation without resistance.

In the context of literary and historical analysis, "*Sally Hemings: A Novel*" exemplifies the distorted and incomplete representation of enslaved Black women and girls as it presents an idealized and unrealistic narrative of the enslaved, and portrays Hemings as a passive figure who submits to Thomas Jefferson. Such distortions can misrepresent the reality of African-American women and girls and their resistance against their enslavers, despite the restraints placed upon by the system of slavery.

With that being said, enslaved women and girls faced numerous atrocities during their captivity such as "a devaluation of black womanhood" as Hooks points out that "occurred as a result of the sexual exploitation of Black women during slavery."⁴² Despite all of this, the

⁴¹ Collins 81 also see Davis 196

⁴² Hooks 53

narratives of their experiences are often overlooked or omitted entirely. Instead, the accounts of their ordeals are written from the perspectives of their owners or other male figures, without including their own voices or experiences.

In the collective narratives of enslaved women and girls, as encapsulated in literary works such as *"Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," "Celia, A Slave,"* and *"Sally Hemings: A Novel"* underscore the dehumanization and trauma that these women and girls have faced by their white enslavers. Despite being deprived of their basic human rights and subjected to unimaginable atrocities such as rape and exploitation, these women refused to surrender their intrinsic humanity, instead finding ways to survive the brutal confines of slavery. Moreover, their narratives offer crucial insights into "the reality that no social order existed to protect them from sexual exploitation"⁴³ and forms of oppression that enslaved women and girls faced, as well as the ways in which their voices and experiences have been historically marginalized and silenced. For too long, the discourse around slavery has been dominated by the ideals of liberal discourse and voices of men, which has stripped women and girls out of their "essential human qualities"⁴⁴ and leaving the stories and legacies of enslaved women relegated to the shadows.

V. Literature Review

Enslavement, in concept, denies persons of freedom and autonomy over their own body. Black feminist scholars such as Angela Davis, Bell Hooks, Dorothy Roberts, Patricia Hill Collins, and Deborah White noticed that rape during enslavement is a common occurrence in liberalism's domain by providing in-depth context on the experiences of enslaved women and girls. These scholars have identified the concepts of women's agency, racial regard, and white supremacy under liberalism's regime by questioning the morals of liberalism in terms of

⁴³ Hooks 54

⁴⁴ Hooks 111

dominance and exploitation of African-American women and girls in their much cited literature while exposing the history of the political paradigm.

In 1981, Angela Davis published *Women, Race, and Class*. Davis explicitly focuses on the experiences of Black women and girls, the struggle for racial and gender justice, and Black liberation while focusing on the hegemonic structures of liberalism. She wrote, “women were victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous mistreatment”⁴⁵ in the apparatus of slavery. Particularly, in the sedimented history of the colonial period where enslaved women and girls were exploited, objectified, and stripped away of their dignity.

The colonial period essentially dehumanized and exploited enslaved African-American women and girls by subjecting them to brutality, sexual abuse, and forced labor, while simultaneously denying them of their autonomy. Enslaved African-American women and girls are treated as property, and their bodies were used to cultivate wealth for their enslavers. Dorothy Roberts’ 1956 work, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and The Meaning of Liberty* is very much similar to Angela Davis’ work. Both Davis and Roberts focus primarily on the intersection of racism, sexism, and liberalization in America, which has shaped the meaning of Black reproductive freedom and reproductive rights. They have argued that the legal institution of chattel slavery has muted the voices of enslaved women and girls, and that the theoretical paradigm removed them from existing in these legal and political institutions. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and The Meaning of Liberty* explores how racism and sexism intersect with liberalism and capitalism in regulating Black reproductive systems. As indicated by Roberts, “reproductive politics in America inevitably involves racial politics,”⁴⁶ as oppressive

⁴⁵ Davis 9

⁴⁶ Roberts 9

societal ideals and prejudices are used to monitor, restrict, and violate the reproductive autonomy of enslaved women and girls.

Similar to Roberts and Davis, Bell Hooks has also contributed to the dialogue surrounding the oppression of African-American women and girls in her 1981 thesis, ‘Ain’t I A Woman’. ‘*Ain’t I A Woman? Black Women and Feminism*’ is titled after Sojourner Truth’s speech. Hooks concentrates on Black feminism theory, which challenges power structures. She does so by dissecting the political paradigm through an “intersectionality”⁴⁷ lens where race, gender, and sex orientation often intersect to create systems of domination and oppression. Hooks states, “in an imperialistic racist patriarchal society that supports and condones oppression, it is not surprising that men and women judge their worth.”⁴⁸ White supremacist liberalization has specifically targeted Black women and girls in the historic exploitation of them, which is used to promote the idea that all white men have predatory tendencies. Hooks then urges that the contradictions of racist, classist feminism “should not lead woman to ignore feminist issues”⁴⁹ as she continues to outline why Black women and girls need feminism in the devaluation of African-American women and girls through systems of slavery and colonialism by stating, “feminism offers a blueprint for change that would lead to the elimination of sexist oppression or a transformation of our society.”⁵⁰

Along with Hooks, Jennifer Morgan has provided research on the oppression of African-American women and girls. Morgan cites Robinson’s argument that “capitalism and racism emerged, simultaneously, from European feudal order”⁵¹ which she builds on by

⁴⁷ A term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw to often describe the intersecting oppression of race, gender and class

⁴⁸ Hooks 144

⁴⁹ Hooks 195

⁵⁰ Hooks 257

⁵¹ Morgan 19

investigating the categories of race, labor, and social hierarchy. Morgan has centralized key themes in both of her works; *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, & Capitalism and Laboring Women*. Morgan identifies reproductive rights, slave breeding, and body politics.

Rape under slavery differs profoundly from rape in other forms of female oppression. Slavery was a legally established system that explicitly permitted the sexual exploitation of enslaved Black women and girls, depriving them of any viable means to report rape. On the contrary, in other forms of female oppression, African-American women and girls are often subjected to sexual violence as a byproduct of patriarchy. Sexual violence against enslaved Black women and girls under slavery was institutionalized, with their bodies treated as property, subjugated to the sexual abuse of their enslavers, who had the legal right to use them for sexual pleasure. Liberalism has played a significant role in displaying the Black body as a sexual commodity that is used and valued as frugality in the global marketplace. As stated by Morgan, “white men routinely, and possibly systematically, raped the women they claimed as property,”⁵² specifying that women and girls were dehumanized in slavery’s racialized structures.

Comparable to Morgan, Patricia Hill Collins’ literature, *Black Feminist Thought* has made awareness of the dialogue of female oppression. Collins first presents us with two concepts; “controlling images”⁵³ and “self-definition.”⁵⁴ For Collins, “controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable.”⁵⁵ Controlling images are “dynamic and constantly changing”⁵⁶ to give African-American women and girls a false narrative to subjugate them in liberalism’s white misogyny.

⁵² Morgan 13

⁵³ Collins 69

⁵⁴ IBID 36

⁵⁵ IBID 69

⁵⁶ IBID 72

This white misogyny is fabricated into an ideology of racial domination, slavery, and sexual exploitation. African-American women and girls were forced into a system that is designed by white society to maintain “intersecting oppression.”⁵⁷ These controlling images distort the reality of Black women and girls’ lives during the Antebellum period since slavery has established a rapport with liberalism, and gained control over the Black body. As a result, Black women and girls were subjected to oppression, with their bodies and labor exploited for the benefit of white society. The legacy of this systemic oppression, which Collins turns to “breeders”⁵⁸, “jezebels”⁵⁹ or “mammies”⁶⁰ stereotypes in the racialization, sexualization, and degradation that are associated with Black women and girl’s reproductive labor in the Antebellum South. The trope of these stereotypes provide a symbolic representation of liberalism’s acquisition in Southern patriarchy that characterizes the domestic slave-relations, and the emergence of capitalist structures.

The emergence of capitalist structures in the American South conceded with the development of the “mammy”⁶¹ stereotype, which was used “to justify Black women’s bad treatment.”⁶² The “mammy”⁶³ is viewed as the “faithful, obedient domestic servant”⁶⁴ who epitomized obedience for her enslaver. This portrayal served to reinforce the oppression of the between Black women and girls and power dynamics of the patriarchal order in a sexist and racist society. Enslavers who have benefited from the system of slavery attempted to present it as a paternalistic and benevolent institution, obscuring the brutal realities of exploitation and

⁵⁷ IBID 69

⁵⁸ IBID 69

⁵⁹ IBID 72

⁶⁰ IBID 69

⁶¹ IBID 72

⁶² IBID 109

⁶³ IBID 72

⁶⁴ IBID 72

dehumanization that were central to the enforcement of abuse on African-American women and girls.

This followed with the “breeder woman image”⁶⁵ where Collins describes “this image provides an ideological justification for efforts to harness Black women’s fertility.”⁶⁶ Black women and girls were used to justify the exploitation of their reproductive labor. Enslaved women and girls are subjected to forced reproduction, with their children serving as a source of economic wealth for their enslavers. African-American women and girls are viewed as factories of property and producers, which reflects on the dehumanizing nature of slavery, reducing them to commodities for the production of children.

This disregard for the personhood and agency of African-American women and girls was highlighted by Collins through the jezebel stereotype. The jezebel stereotype was created under slavery, and operates at the center of intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality to characterize Black women and girls as hypersexual and aggressive. As Collins points out, “jezebel’s function was to regulate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men.”⁶⁷

Collins also provides the concept of “self-definition.”⁶⁸ As mentioned by Collins, these “self-definitions are seen as a journey from internalized oppression to the ‘free mind.’”⁶⁹ In relation to Black liberation, Bell Hooks gives an example of self-definitions through Sojourner Truth’s speech. Within the context of a society that sought to exert control over them, African-American women and girls were the subject of systemic oppression perpetuated by centuries of harmful and discriminatory practices. However, Sojourner Truth's powerful "Ain't I

⁶⁵ IBID 78

⁶⁶ IBID 78

⁶⁷ IBID 81

⁶⁸ IBID 36

⁶⁹ IBID 112

a Woman" speech served as a transformative moment in which she redefined traditional notions of womanhood, providing an indication to the need for a strong self-definition in the face of oppressive societal forces.

Although Angela Davis, Bell Hooks, Dorothy Roberts, Jennifer Morgan, and Patricia Hill Collins all published their works throughout the 1980-1990s, they have opened up a discussion surrounding reproductive rights, body politics, and the Black body under slavery. This conversation highlights the way in which Black bodies have been historically commodified and exploited, particularly in the context of reproductive labor. Scholars such as Frantz Fanon, whose work *Black Skins, White Masks* relied on the theorization of race in an anti-Black society. Fanon viewed liberalism as a pessimistic ideology that sees African-Americans as inherently incapable of wielding rights, sustaining inequality and oppression for them. Through his analysis of racialization in anti-Black societies, Fanon highlights the intimate relationship that liberalism has with the colonial world. He argues that “the Negro is a toy in the white man’s hands”⁷⁰ as this quote underscores the universal nature of the systemic inequalities experienced by African-Americans who are inextricably linked to the legacy of colonialism that created a system of racism that legitimizes the oppression of Black bodies.

Along with Fanon, Brenda Stevenson also focuses on the narrative of the Black body and its historical exploitation. In her work, *Women, Slavery, and the Atlantic World* offers a thorough analysis of the intersection between race, gender, and slavery in the Antebellum South, particularly in the context of sexual violence against enslaved African-American women and girls. Stevenson’s work holds particular significance in the context of systematic sexual violence and exploitation prevalent in the Antebellum South, where Black bodies were routinely subjected

⁷⁰ Fanon 140

to degradation and oppression. She states, it is “daunting research”⁷¹ to find scholarship on enslaved women and girls due to the fact there is an abundance of literature on enslaved males. Stevenson also indicates in *Life in Black and White Family and Community in the Slave South* that for many of these women, liberalism has perpetuated fear onto them while inciting silence. Stevenson identifies the complexity in the representation of enslaved women and girls’ voices in these spaces “patriarchal privilege”⁷² where the commodification of enslaved women and girls is highly palatable for white Englishmen.

Parallel to Stevenson, Walter Johnson provides us with an ambiance of the internal slave trade in the nineteenth-century New Orleans through the relationship between slavery and race in his literature titled *Soul By Soul*. As mentioned by Johnson, “the purposes that slaveholders projected for slaves’ bodies were thus translated into natural properties of those bodies.”⁷³ The distinctive appearances of Black individuals helped traders decide what tasks the slave was good for, and therefore, relied on biological racism to further oppress them. Johnson then continues the oppression of Black women and girls as they were “interrogated, manipulated, and claimed in this process.”⁷⁴

In regards to liberalism within the context of slavery, Charles Mills has referred to liberalism as an inclusionary ideology with values that rationalize oppression with its “moral foundations of the state and the ultimate basis of people’s rights.”⁷⁵ Charles Mills, in accordance with Carole Pateman, have recognized the disadvantages of liberalism in both of their writings; *Black Rights/ White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism, Contract & Domination, and*

⁷¹ Stevenson 1

⁷² Stevenson *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* XII

⁷³ Johnson 149

⁷⁴ Johnson 83-144

⁷⁵ Mills 28

The Sexual Contract. Mills scrutinized liberalism and its pioneers; John Locke, Rousseau, and Thomas Hobbes who viewed colored individuals as inherently different from Europeans.

Liberalism devotes itself to race and racial divisions of humanity where Mills claims that the formation of liberalism is profoundly white, and that “equality in nature should somehow translate into egalitarian socio-political institutions.”⁷⁶ As Mills pointed out the inequalities produced by hierarchical tendencies, African-American women and girls were represented as a morally degraded group in the United States. Similar to Mills, Carole Pateman has reconfirmed the racial and gender inequalities surrounding liberalism. Pateman has maintained a critical stance against “the patriarchal, racial, and imperial structures that have shaped the modern world.”⁷⁷ Liberalism’s political order has arbitrary and authority over enslaved African-American women and girls, their subordination in modern patriarchy is conceived as natural.

VI. “Liberalism upholds Patriarchy”: Harriet Jacobs

“It seemed not only hard, but unjust, to pay for myself. I could not possibly regard myself as a piece of property. [...] I knew the law would decide that I was his property, [...]but I regarded such laws as the regulations of robbers, who had no rights that I was bound to respect.

“⁷⁸

- Harriet A. Jacobs (1857)

Building on the recent scholarship by Angela Davis, Bell Hooks, Dorothy Roberts, Jennifer Morgan, and Patricia Hill Collins who all highlight enslaved women and girls’ resistance to liberalism’s premise by encouraging an analysis of oppression grounded in liberal theory. Its arguments emphasize free liberty and equality, is difficult to achieve for African-American women and girls considering that liberalism views men as equal “in the sense

⁷⁶ Mills 29

⁷⁷ Pateman and Mills 2

⁷⁸ Jacobs 215

that they are by nature free,"⁷⁹ but this ideal has not been realized for African-American women and girls. I suggest that liberalism is linked to a patriarchal system, which is to "privilege men's genetic desires and objectify women's procreative capacity"⁸⁰ that must be challenged by temperate feminist theories to display the limited possibilities offered in oppressive societies. To convey this, I start this chapter with remarks from Harriet Ann Jacobs' much cited narrative, *'Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl'*, which reveals a narrative of liberalism's brutal domination in the institution of slavery, the heritability of enslavement, and expanded wealth for the Southern economy.

The narrative of domination, heritability enslavement, and expanded wealth for the Southern economy was eroticized by liberalism's rhetoric of domination that is fetishized by European imperialism and patriarchy. This narrative perpetuates the idea of exploitation of enslaved females for economic prosperity of the South, and those who have benefited from the brutal institution of chattel slavery have ascribed to Black women and girls, suggesting that the romanticization of their body was to validate the sexual exploitation of these Black women and girls who are perceived by white colonists as byproducts of the slave trade. Throughout American history, enslaved African-American women and girls were subjected to the brutal reality of "unrestrained reproductive control."⁸¹ Their bodies were exploited and abused, as they were viewed as mere objects to sustain the economic interests of their oppressors. The systematic and calculated exploitation of their reproductive capabilities served as a means of perpetuating the slave trade and ensuring its long-term sustainability. These women and girls were robbed of any agency in their own bodies, as they were forced to bear children or have their reproductive

⁷⁹ Locke's liberalism 1

⁸⁰ Roberts 274

⁸¹ Roberts 49: Dorothy Roberts claims that racism was created for white slaveowners for the control of enslaved women and girls reproductive systems

organs harvested for the profit of white plantation owners. Dorothy Roberts suggests that “the control of Black women’s reproduction has shaped the meaning of reproductive liberty in America,”⁸² which validated the inhumane and abusive treatment of enslaved Black women and girls.

Enslaved Black women and girls are viewed by white colonists as “loose women” and whores,⁸³ suggesting that the hyper-sexualized nature of Black women and girls paved the way for rape culture in American slavery as they are considered as sexual commodities rather than human beings. Enslaved women and girls are stripped away of their agency and desire; considered as “dehumanized objects”⁸⁴ that are sexualized as animals through “the pattern of institutionalized sexual abuse”⁸⁵ that forced them to perform and submit to sexual exploitation through a system of power.

By referring to Angela Davis, Bell Hooks, Dorothy Roberts, Jennifer Morgan, and Patricia Hill Collins, enslaved women and girls were the most capable of producing offspring for their enslaver. Enslaved women and girls’ value was primarily determined by their ability to bear children and increase Southern wealth. African-American women and girls were often referred to as “breeders,”⁸⁶ and forced to have intimate relationships with their owners or other enslaved men for the purpose of “producing human chattel for their masters.”⁸⁷

English traders viewed African-American women and girls as promiscuous “jezebels,”⁸⁸ seeing them as women with insatiable sexual desires. According to Collins, “Jezebel’s function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a

⁸² IBID 32

⁸³ Davis 195

⁸⁴ Collins 45

⁸⁵ Davis 189

⁸⁶ Collins 78

⁸⁷ Roberts 74

⁸⁸ Collins 81 also see Angela Davis 196

powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women.”⁸⁹ This controlling image served as a function to portray African-American women and girls as “having excessive sexual appetites,”⁹⁰ giving white males an opportunity to force these women into sexual labor “to support their own economic interests”⁹¹ within institutionalized slavery.

Institutionalized slavery built a foundation of how African-American women and girls are perceived by white male elites, rendering them as submissive victims. In addition, this established a legal pattern of dehumanization and degradation of African-American women and girls, essentially placing a societal value on them and their sexual agency. Liberalism, as an ideology stems from the slavery era and contributes to the validation of legal sexual exploitation of enslaved Black bodies. As stated by Davis, “rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression”⁹² while simultaneously reducing African-American women and girls to sexual commodities in a patriarchal system. African-American women and girls are at an intersection of race, gender, and class, which ties them to being subjected to sexual abuse.

Rape as a “weapon of domination”⁹³ she explains, “rape was an institutionalized ingredient of the aggression carried out against the Vietnamese people, designed to intimidate and terrorize the women, slaveowners encouraged the terroristic use of rape in order to put Black women in their place”⁹⁴ in liberalism’s patriarchal agenda to gain control and exploit the bodies of African-American women and girls. Davis articulates that, “white men, by virtue of their economic position, had unlimited access to Black women’s bodies.”⁹⁵ Fetishization of the Black

⁸⁹ Collins 81

⁹⁰ IBID 81

⁹¹ Roberts 67

⁹² Davis 38

⁹³ IBID 38

⁹⁴ IBID 38

⁹⁵ IBID 39

body is a practice of reproductive and sexual control that enslavers were able to harness to reduce African-American women and girls to objects, rather than recognizing them as individuals that have their own agency and autonomy. As a symbolic act, dominant ideologies treated enslaved women and girls as economic and reproductive property within the institution of chattel slavery to assert white patriarchy and domination over them. Through this dehumanizing treatment, enslavers stripped their enslaved women and girls' dignity and worth, to reduce them to commodities.

The fetishization of the Black body raises a number of important questions about power, agency, and the nature of oppression. It is a stark reminder of the ways in which systems of power can be used to subjugate and dehumanize certain groups of people, reducing them to mere objects for the pleasure and benefit of others. Certainly, the practice was used by enslavers to exert reproductive and sexual control over Black women and girls, treating them as nothing more than “valuable human property.”⁹⁶ As a result, the systemic oppression and control of enslaved African-American women and girls reinforced a subhuman and inferior conception of their personhood, as defined by the dominant societal structures of their time. This discriminatory practice was further perpetuated by the system that established them as property, rather than realizing that they are human beings. As this allowed men to claim “the bodies of female slaves”⁹⁷ in order to codify enslaved African-American women and girls as legal property to rape them by relying on power dynamics fostered by liberalism's acquisition, which is evident in Jacobs' narrative.

Slave narratives, including Jacobs' work portray the experience of enslaved Black women and girls were marked by sexual violence and exploitation, suggesting that rape was a

⁹⁶ IBID 103

⁹⁷ IBID 186

common occurrence that existed through Antebellum rape laws. As explained by Davis, “rape laws as a rule were framed originally for the protection of men of the upper classes”⁹⁸ in order for white colonists to maintain a racialized hierarchy that contains racial purity and sexual assault of enslaved women and girls. In accordance with Davis, Roberts states that the “criminal code did not recognize the rape of a slave.”⁹⁹ Slaves could not testify “against a white person”¹⁰⁰ in court, presuming that Black women and girls are hypersexualized animals that are subjected to rape, and therefore had no capability to pursue justice after experiencing sexual abuse from their enslaver. In particular, Harriet Jacobs was subjected to the abuse from Dr. Flint through systems of power oppression that operate in legal and institutional frameworks.

In her autobiography, Harriet Jacobs, who has documented her time as a slave under a pseudonym Linda Brent, in her narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Her narrative distinguishes between the law of the Antebellum period and the concept of bodily ownership from the perspective of a freedwoman reflecting on Southern slavery and liberal hegemony including the ill-conceived conception about the meaning and value of Black women or girls’ labor within a patriarchal system. Bell Hooks states that the patriarchal system “encourages men to use violence as way to”¹⁰¹ humiliate and objectify their enslaved woman or girl.

Before Jacobs begins narrating the details of her life, she immediately identifies herself as a slave, stating, “I was born a slave.”¹⁰² Since she was ‘born’ a slave, her status is inherited by her mother’s enslavement. This allows the reader to be aware of her inheritance, in which she was forced through her mother’s enslavement. Within the context of her identity as a slave, Jacobs introduces the vicious acts of her enslaver, Dr. Flint and his subtle sexual harassment.

⁹⁸ IBID 186

⁹⁹ Roberts 57

¹⁰⁰ IBID 57

¹⁰¹ Hooks 106

¹⁰² Jacobs 9

Jennifer Morgan maintains that in the eighteenth and nineteenth century “the abuse and manipulation of enslavement was saturated in sexual violence”¹⁰³ as is evident through Jacobs’ life.

Her story begins as she reminds the readers of “six years of happy childhood,”¹⁰⁴ which strikes as a contrast between relative freedom and happiness in her early years, and the oppression and dehumanizing circumstances of her life as an enslaved woman. Jacobs lived with her mother and father who were seen as being ‘well off slaves,’ this detail gives us an indication of the complexity of the legal institution of chattel slavery, and the ways power and privilege were distributed unevenly.

Jacobs’ recollection of her early life provides a poignant narrative of the ways a patriarchal system impacted the lives of enslaved women and girls. Her mother died when she was six, and Harriet was sent to live with her mother’s mistress who was Margaret Horniblow. Margaret Horniblow taught her how to read and treated her well. However, after Horniblow’s death, Jacobs was directed to live with Dr. Flint, who initiated sex from Jacobs. In Jacobs’ narrative, Dr. Flint is described as a “vile monster”¹⁰⁵ who constantly reminded her that she “belonged to him,”¹⁰⁶ highlighting his lack of acknowledgement of her humanity. His dehumanizing treatment reinforces the idea that enslaved women and girls are not viewed as human beings, but rather as objects to be bought, sold, and owned.

Capitalism, liberalism, and slavery were deeply intertwined with the economic valuation of enslaved women and girls. Enslaved women and girls were “degraded by the system”¹⁰⁷ that subjected them to various kind of sexual abuse and forced labor as part of slavery’s justification

¹⁰³ Morgan 135

¹⁰⁴ Jacobs 14

¹⁰⁵ IBID 38

¹⁰⁶ IBID 26-27

¹⁰⁷ IBID 25

of dehumanization. For Jacobs, she identifies herself as property that has an economic value assigned to her. This economic valuation is a constant reminder of slavery's dehumanized nature as enslaved women and girls are bought, sold, and treated like 'chattel', with no regard for their autonomy. Enslavers "wield economic power"¹⁰⁸ in the valuation of an enslaved person was an asset to slavery's history, it stripped enslaved women and girls away from their humanity to justify their exploitation and mistreatment. Capitalism and liberalism's economic systems reinforced this notion, as it was designed to maximize Southern wealth by creating a power dynamic between masters and their enslaved person.

Jacobs viewed herself as a domestic servant embodied the manners of a loyal one. However, it was difficult for her to become this version of an obedient slave with Dr. Flint around her. Dr. Flint embodied liberalism's groundwork for the epidemic of rape and sexual violence on Black women and girls, which is the system of slavery. The system of slavery was designed to benefit white society economically, and exploit the bodies of enslaved Black women and girls. Dr. Flint, an enslaver, embodied a patriarchal dominance of this system. In chapter five, *The Trials of Girlhood*, solidifies the duality of an African females' reproductive labor in liberal structures. Jacobs describes her entry into her "fifteenth year— a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl"¹⁰⁹ as she begins to describe the sexual harassment from Dr. Flint. Dr. Flint begins to whisper vulgar words into Jacob's ear, which she immediately understands his intentions. Jacobs does not attempt to stop Dr. Flint, as she fears the possible consequences, "He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things."¹¹⁰

Dr. Flint relied on his masculinity, power, and sexual violence encouraged by the class structure of liberalism to oppress Harriet Jacobs while taking away her agency. Jacobs

¹⁰⁸ Davis 189

¹⁰⁹ Jacobs 38

¹¹⁰ IBID 45

experienced the dehumanizing effects of slavery where it branded her as legal property of Dr. Flint, she got abusive treatment from her slaveholder in order to make her mentally and emotionally surrender to him. She had to confront the sexual abuse which psychologically drove her to a state of hatred as she stated that:

“My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt. The master’s age, my extreme youth, and the fear that his conduct would be reported to my grandmother, made him bear this treatment for many months. He was a crafty man, and resorted to many means to accomplish his purposes. Sometimes he had stormy, terrific ways, that made his victims tremble; sometimes he assumed a gentleness that he thought must surely subdue. Of the two, I preferred his stormy moods, although they left me trembling. He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature.”¹¹¹ Jacobs reveals that she is a victim of Dr. Flint’s sexual harassment through Flint’s corrupt remarks, his “foul words”¹¹² that controlled Jacobs due to her status as an enslaved woman, she, as a woman and a slave, had to submit to Dr. Flint and leave her dignity.

The sustained sexual harassment by Dr. Flint towards Harriet Jacobs is indicative of the endemic culture of sexual exploitation prevalent in the Antebellum South. Despite being subjected to persistent harassment, Jacobs employs various means to resist Flint’s advances. Her narrative offers a discourse of white patriarchy in America that serves as a social system in

¹¹¹ IBID 38

¹¹² IBID 38

liberal theory, in which enslavers mimic liberal's values to control their enslaved woman or girl. The discourse of white patriarchy in America existed to continue to shape America's ideas on gender and race. As a result, enslaved African-American women and girls are greatly oppressed by the dominant patriarchal system.

Harriet Jacobs evokes her own commentary on the oppression of enslaved women and girls. She writes, "no rights I was bound to respect"¹¹³ specifically marks Jacobs' understanding of the foundation for racial slavery, along with other things, categorized African-American as "free Negroes,"¹¹⁴ indicating that enslaved women and girls were essentially individuals who did not wield citizenship, human-like characteristics unlike their white male elites, and was "bound to respect"¹¹⁵ their white enslavers. As her thesis unmask the institution of slavery that was built upon the exploitation of Black women and girls, the denial of their autonomy, gestures of slave ownership, and the heritability of enslavement perpetrated by the alienation of the bodily ownership of African-American women and girls during the Antebellum period of slavery (1832-1860)¹¹⁶ Jacobs suggests that the Black body **cannot** be owned.

Jacobs' exploration of the notion of 'ownership' is underpinned by her first-hand account as a formerly enslaved woman, which lends itself to a redefinition of the concept. In Jacobs' narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs' life was defined by ownership and control by Dr. Flint. Jacobs expressed an enslaved women's subjugation, and "yet sometimes oppositional with regard to retaining some control over their bodies."¹¹⁷ Jacob admits that not

¹¹³ IBID 215

¹¹⁴ IBID 52

¹¹⁵ IBID 215 ** did not want to use the actual spelling in her book.

¹¹⁶ Antebellum history and importation of slaves during the civil war

¹¹⁷ Collins 301. Collins defines subjugated knowledge as a knowledge that is generated by oppressed groups to resist the oppression from oppositional knowledges.

only she has to live with a “vile monster,”¹¹⁸ who was “forty years [her] senior,”¹¹⁹ but more tragically because he “was [her] master,” she “was compelled to live under the same roof” being abused “daily” by his “violating the most sacred commandments of nature.”¹²⁰ Her enslaver, Dr. Flint had “money and power on his side”¹²¹ that allowed him to further exert his control over her. Dr. Flint’s ownership of Harriet Jacobs was justified by Antebellum law and was considered as an acceptable practice. However, despite her rebuttals, Dr. Flint remained relentless in pursuing Jacobs and she continues not to submit to him.

Jacobs told Dr. Flint “you have no right to do as you like with me!”¹²² Jacobs recognizes the importance of controlling her own body, Jacobs sought to reclaim this agency by stating, “It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. It was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way.”¹²³ Despite the significant power imbalance between her and Dr. Flint, Jacob was able to successfully make her own choice regarding her bodily autonomy.

Regarding the issue of bodily autonomy for enslaved women and girls, Angela Davis notes that the “expediency governed the slaveholders’ posture toward female slaves: when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men ... they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles.”¹²⁴ Davis suggests that the intersectionality of rape, racism, and sexism are equally powerful and harmful in various forms of oppression such as rape.

¹¹⁸ Jacobs 38

¹¹⁹ IBID 38

¹²⁰ IBID 38

¹²¹ IBID 38.

¹²² IBID 39

¹²³ IBID 55

¹²⁴ Davis 20

While rape is a sexually violent act to sustain power held over African-American women and girls, and racism along with sexism to even further the dehumanization, objectification, and fetishization against African-American women and girls. As believed by Davis, “the pattern of institutionalized sexual abuse of Black women became so powerful” that it became a normal experience that was justified by liberalism’s domain. African-American women and girls were regulated to “second-class class citizenship”¹²⁵ that the rapist or slaveholder believed that they were entitled to violate the Black body.

Their status induced white enslavers to “rob them of a history that placed them at the side of their men.”¹²⁶ The prevalence of these acts allowed for white men to exploit enslaved women and girls’ sexuality and sexual reproduction within slavery’s means as enslavers relied on enslaved women and girls’ sexual reproduction was normalized behavior for enslavers to affirm their ability to conceive of enslaved women and girls as property. This process of commodification, allowed enslavers to execute heinous practices on their enslaved person, including the sexual abuse. Although some enslavers may have demonstrated an ability to recognize the humanity of their enslaved person, it does not change the fact that the system of slavery was built on a foundation of exploitation of the reproductive capabilities of African-American women and girls.

Harriet Jacobs’ experience serves as a lens for seeing how the effects of sexual dominance persisted across centuries of adversity and oppression in Southern society. As an enslaved woman, Jacobs recounts how sexual dominance and the power dynamics between master and slave in the antebellum South allowed men to exploit enslaved women and girls with impunity. Dr. Flint was able to abuse Jacobs without any consequence and without her having any

¹²⁵ Mills 125

¹²⁶ White 21

recourse to protect herself. Considering that Dr. Flint embodied liberal patriarchy to oppress enslaved African American women and girls, further exacerbated by the fact that Jacobs' enslaved body was legally defined property as, for example, Dr. Flint reminds and threatens her, "Do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you, that I can kill you, if I please?"¹²⁷ Jacobs had no legal rights, as a slave she was considered property. This made it difficult for her to seek help and protection from the legal system.

The widely publicized sexual violation of an enslaved is deplorable when the political doctrine, which is liberalism and capitalism as it defines the standards of the nineteenth century regarding the sexual abuse of enslaved women and girls, Dr. Flint was very reluctant to have Jacobs submit to him sexually by harassing her. Flint whispers "foul words,"¹²⁸ writes obscene notes and has her read them, both to herself and out loud. Jacobs describes an incident where:

"My master, whose restless, craving, vicious nature roved about day and night, seeking whom to devour, had just left me, with stinging, scorching words; words that scathed ear and brain like fire. O, how I despised him! I thought how glad I should be, if some day when he walked the earth, it would open and swallow him up and disencumber the world of a plague."¹²⁹

This abhorrent was a deliberate strategy employed to assert dominance and control over enslaved individuals, often resulting in traumatic physical and psychological harm. This form of sexual violence was not only a physical act, but also a symbolic one that demonstrates liberalism's patriarchal values over Harriet Jacobs' body, reinforcing Dr. Flint's ownership and domination.

VII. "Legalized Rape of African-American Women: Celia, A Slave"

¹²⁷ Jacobs 41

¹²⁸ IBID 135

¹²⁹ IBID 135

*“Slavery relied as much on routine sexual abuse as it relied on the whip and the lash.”*¹³⁰

- Angela Davis, Women, Race, & Class (1981)

I start this chapter with an Angela Davis quote where she implies that “slavery relied on as much on routine sexual abuse as it relied on the whip and the lash ,”¹³¹ which existed only for African-American women and girls. African-American women and girls have been referred to as subordinated in a system that subjected them to white male domination. This system involved the exploitation of their bodies, including sexual access by white men. Brenda Stevenson has emphasized that the institution of slavery laid the groundwork for the epidemic of rape on Black women where “women and girls were subject to their masters’ sexual abuse or manipulation.”¹³² The sexual abuse or manipulation that enslaved women and girls have endured through slavery has formed a relationship with liberalism and capitalism. As indicated by Bell Hooks, African-American women and girls are “stripped by a patriarchal devaluation”¹³³ that exploits the reproductive labor of these women and girls.

African-American women and girls were unable to escape the sexual abuse from their owners and legally, they were considered as “human property”¹³⁴ by Antebellum law. The Antebellum period justified the sexual abuse of enslaved women and girls from their owners as white men carry out the rape of an enslaved Black women and girls during slavery. Angela Davis proposed that the rape of enslaved women and girls represents “an essential dimension of the social relations between slavemaster and slave”¹³⁵ and the interest of the enslaver in exerting complete control over Black women and girls’ bodies to demonstrate their property rights.

¹³⁰ Davis 182

¹³¹ Davis 189

¹³² Stevenson 268

¹³³ Hooks 191

¹³⁴ Morgan *Laboring Women* 144

¹³⁵ Davis 189

Many members of the slave society excused the abuse by subscribing to beliefs that enslaved African-American women and girls are “loose women,”¹³⁶ and are “whores,”¹³⁷ and that they welcomed the attention” from white men. However, these terms carried out the illusion that enslaved African-American women and girls were “sexually aggressive women”¹³⁸ in the societal enablement of their owners’ sexual abuse in order reduced African-American women to a single dimension. In perpetuating the practice of sexualizing African-American women and girls, slave owners were able to deflect crime by casting responsibility upon the females themselves for engaging in sexual acts with their enslavers.

Since the emergence of liberalism, the origins of slavery in the United States have declined the experiences of African-American women and girls. African-American women and girls are subjected to frequent and severe sexual violence from their white oppressors, which Davis has mentioned. As Angela Davis argued in *Women, Race, and Class*, white patriarchal systems utilized rape as 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 demoralized their men.”¹³⁹ “Slave owners”, Davis writes, “encouraged the terroristic use of rape in order to put Black women in their place”¹⁴⁰ predominately in Southern states. Rape, she explains, was necessary because it held power over Black women and girls within a larger context of white patriarchal dominance.

The use of rape as a form of sexual terrorism during the era of slavery reflects the intersection between white patriarchal system and the oppression of African-American women and girls. This practice legitimized and normalized the acts of sexual violence towards enslaved

¹³⁶ IBID 196

¹³⁷ IBID 196

¹³⁸ IBID 82

¹³⁹ IBID 37

¹⁴⁰ IBID 38

women and girls while characterizing them as objects of sexual desire. Moreover, it served to perpetuate fear and repression among Black women and girls as they were not able to resist the sexual abuse from their owners. This represented the white patriarchal system, which we know as liberalism, and the dominance that is behind it.

Rape laws, for example, were initially created for the “protected of upper-class men whose daughters and wives were assaulted.”¹⁴¹ These laws did not see Black women and girls as females, they were merely put inside this category as ‘subhuman.’ by liberal discourse. Davis states that institutionalized racism in the United States has been the notion that white men, especially those in power, have a right to the bodies of African American women.¹⁴² Therefore, the sexual violence toward African-American women and girls usually went unnoticed.

As Davis draws attention to “anonymous rapists who remain unreported, untried, and unconvicted.”¹⁴³ This inaction was because sexual violence became a “weapon of domination”¹⁴⁴ against African women and girls to collectively achieve equality in the United States during enslavement. This concept of enslavement denies a person’s freedom and the autonomy over their own body, which is incompatible with liberalism’s values that emphasizes the inherent natural rights, such as “life, health, liberty, or possessions.”¹⁴⁵ It established a norm white men were allowed to continually raped Black women and girls as this was a common practice in the United states. For instance, Black women and girls often became the victims of their enslavers’ sexual domination over their bodies. This sexualization of the Black body existed throughout the history of slavery, and resulted in rape and reproductive exploitation.

¹⁴¹ Davis 186

¹⁴² IBID 189

¹⁴³ IBID 115

¹⁴⁴ IBID 37

¹⁴⁵ Locke 133

To give you an idea, *Celia, A Slave* narrates the dispossession of African-American women and girls. In her case, it highlights the lack of the protection for enslaved African-American women and girls' physical bodies. More importantly, the lack of liberty that liberalism provides, which was compromised by the Antebellum law. Celia's case demonstrates the distinction between Antebellum law and an African girl's reproductive capacity, it also demonstrates the willingness to overlook the rape of an African-American girl. Although there is not much background information on this specific case as most of it detailed through the use of trial records and Melton McLaurin's biography, the story of her horrendous night was never told directly by Celia.

During the trial, *Celia, a slave*, was prohibited from testifying. It is only through the testimony of the men who she spoke with during the search party for Newsom and her trial that we hear 'her words' such as William Powell¹⁴⁶, who reiterates her confession as a testimony in court, consequently amplifying her voice amidst the trial proceedings. *Celia, A Slave* was a fourteen-year-old slave when she was purchased as property "in 1850 by Robert Newsom."¹⁴⁷ Newsom was around 50 years old at the time of Celia's purchase. He was a widowed farmer with four children, Virginia, Mary, Harry, and David Newsom where they reside in Callaway Country. Newsom is a described by historian, Melton McLaurin, "as a man who was respected in his Callaway Country community in Missouri for his hard work, affluence, and his contributions to his children"¹⁴⁸

Celia only knew that Newsom purchased her to provide a service in his home, but she was not aware at the time that she would be Newsom sex slave. On the journey back to Newsom's farm, Newsom immediately began to force himself onto Celia; it is probable that this

¹⁴⁶ McLaurin William Powell was an owner of two slaves p.52 -54; also see pg 55 and 56

¹⁴⁷ McLaurin 24

¹⁴⁸ McLaurin describes Newsom as a family man who is dedicated to his community

was Celia's first sexual encounter. As McLaurin describes, this initial rape "established and defined the nature of the relationship between master and his newly acquired slave."¹⁴⁹ Celia was most likely "serving as a concubine for their master,"¹⁵⁰ Robert Newsom continued to rape her to mark his claim on Celia's body. Dorothy Roberts states that "the rape of slave women by their masters was primarily a weapon of terror that reinforced whites' domination over their human property,"¹⁵¹ this system of bodily ownership and control was used to justify the power of enslavers to sexually exploit and abuse of enslaved women and girls, who were often subjected to rape by their owners. Newsom ensured access to Celia by separating her from the male slaves by keeping her at his convenience "in a special cabin close to his home"¹⁵² where Newsom's violent acts continued on for a duration of five years, up until June of 1855. It is clear that Celia encountered physical and sexual violence that was exerted from the violent confrontation of that midsummer evening in 1855.

Johnson argues that owners "were concerned that their female slaves be breeders,"¹⁵³ viewing them as valuable commodities to be used solely for the purposes of producing more enslaved individuals is exemplified in the case of Celia's pregnancies. As McLaurin notes, "Celia gave birth to two children"¹⁵⁴ by Newsom, both of them became vital assets to Newsom's property. In the context of the Antebellum South, "women's reproductive lives was dictated by the economic interests of their white slave masters"¹⁵⁵ as Dorothy Roberts alludes to. If a slave has fallen pregnant, their owners were able to profit off of them considering that they were seen as valuable commodities. Similar to their enslaved mothers, children were economic incentives,

¹⁴⁹ McLaurin 33-34

¹⁵⁰ McLaurin 35-36

¹⁵¹ Roberts 55-56

¹⁵² McLaurin 28

¹⁵³ Johnson 143-144

¹⁵⁴ McLaurin 28

¹⁵⁵ Roberts 51

as they represented an increase of economic wealth.

At the time, “African women produced children only for the marketplace”¹⁵⁶ as Jennifer Morgan points out. The economic benefit of rape and impregnation of slaves firmly established economic ties where enslavers took full advantage of the profitability of rape and impregnation of slaves. Davis argued that “by virtue of their economic position, [white men] had unlimited access to black women’s bodies. It was as oppressor — or, in the case of non-slave owners, as agents of domination — that white men approached Black women’s bodies.”¹⁵⁷ In the continuation of a degrading breeding system, the cruel and oppressive methods of slavery came several repercussions for enslaved women since enslavers were free to sell their property in America’s economy in the domestic slave trade. In the slave states, Celia and her children were valuable items which equated to wealth and propensity for enslavers. Black women and girls living under the oppression in Southern states dealt with exploitation and sexual violence on their bodies because their role as reproducers of property and capital in slavery, reinforced their position and devaluation. In which, many of their enslavers held them for reproducing capital.

In 1855, while Celia was living under Newsom’s control, she “became romantically involved with another of Newsom’s slaves, a man named George.”¹⁵⁸ Their relationship is not too detailed by Mclaurin, but all we know is that Celia was pregnant at the time during their relationship. While it was clear that the child did belong to Robert Newsom, however, this was the final straw for George. George told Celia that “he would have nothing more to do with her if she did not quit the old man.”¹⁵⁹ For Mclaurin, “George’s ultimatum placed Celia in a quandary that exemplified the vulnerability of female slaves to sexual exploitation by males within the

¹⁵⁶ Morgan 126

¹⁵⁷ Davis 40

¹⁵⁸ Mclaurin 29

¹⁵⁹ IBID 38

owner's household."¹⁶⁰ There is little recollection of George according to McLaurin, but we know that there was some type of relationship that developed between them.

Celia decided to stop Newsom's violent acts of sexual assault despite Newsom denying any claims she may have had against herself by raping her. Similar to Celia, Harriet was forced to make a choice to defy all laws that explicitly told her was the property of her master and that she had to submit to him. Celia told Newsom "not to come, and if he came she would hurt him"¹⁶¹. Newsom had legal property rights over Celia's body where Celia had no right to make this demand. Newsom disregarded Celia's interests, and any natural rights to her body, to perpetuate his own interests and satisfy his own sense of entitlement as a white enslaver.

Parallel to Harriet Jacobs' narrative, Celia's race or enslaved status did not give Newsom rights to her body. As stated by McLaurin, "Celia confronted her master sometime on or immediately before June 23, 1855"¹⁶² demanding Newsom to stop his sexual attacks on Celia. It is believed by McLaurin that there are no court records of the altercation between Celia and Newsom. It is apparent that Newsom did not take Celia's warnings seriously, because she had "obtained a large stick"¹⁶³ earlier that afternoon. As Newsom approached Celia, Celia defended herself by obtaining "a large stick... for the purpose of defending herself."¹⁶⁴ As Newsom stumbled backwards, he made an effort to grab, but she avoided this and hit him once again until death. In her desperation to hide the body of Newsom after she had killed him, Celia attempted to burn his remains in her own fireplace. Unfortunately for her, this effort proved to be unsuccessful, as the fire did not consume Newsom's body in its entirety. Subsequently, Celia was charged with the crime of murder in relation to Newsom's violent demise.

¹⁶⁰ IBID 38

¹⁶¹ McLaurin 42

¹⁶² IBID 41

¹⁶³ IBID 42

¹⁶⁴ IBID 42-43

Celia's case does illustrate the power imbalances between enslaved women or girls and white civil societies. Celia's status shifted from property to human based on the problem at hand. Celia was a slave, in which she was subjected to sexual abuse and harassment from Newsom. However, in order to be considered as an enslaved individual, that person must be considered as property rather than a person. In which, Mclaurin revealed that "Celia was treated as an equal ... for swearing Celia a slave \$.05."¹⁶⁵ In that case, Celia could have been charged with murder due to the fact she was seen as "an equal."¹⁶⁶ When it came to the question of rape and sexual assault of an enslaved girl, Celia was relegated back to the status of property. As an enslaved girl, Celia did not have bodily ownership or autonomy. Therefore, she could not resist the sexual violence from her enslaver because it was not her legal right to do so. This mischaracterization of property rights stopped Celia from being protected by the law from the sexual violence from her master.

During her trial, Celia was represented by John Jameson, Isaac M. Boulware, and Nathan Chapman Kouns, all of whom Mclaurin described as 'savvy political choices for Celia's defense'¹⁶⁷ against Judge Hall's dismissal of the notion. This notion did not allow Celia to be legally recognized as a woman with individual rights and autonomy, including ownership of her body, was predicated on the assertion that she was, in fact, someone's property. Enslaved women and girls were not treated as women at all in the eyes of the law, since they were categorized as property and dismissed. Essentially, Newsom was protected by the law when he raped Celia since her owner **cannot** trespass on their own property. The law did not apply to owners as they were allowed to sexually violate their 'property,' with no remorse.

The emphasis on sexual coercion and rape was essentially through the blaming enslaved African women and girls for their sexual involvement, freeing the white man's moral

¹⁶⁵ IBID 57

¹⁶⁶ IBID 57

¹⁶⁷ Mclaurin 86-87

responsibility. In this case, Newsom was not responsible to the rape of Celia and she was found guilty of first-degree murder of her enslaver which she was sentenced to be executed on “the sixteenth day of November 1855”¹⁶⁸ at nineteen years old

Similar to all enslavers, Newsom reinforced his dominance over Celia and his ownership over her body. Did Newsom see Celia as this “sexually aggressive”¹⁶⁹ girl at fourteen years old for him to continually rape her for a duration of five years? However, due to image of the Jezebel stereotype that Collins alludes to, African-American women and girls were subjected to rape and excused all white men from the criminalization of rape of an enslaved women and girls. White men often used the method of over-sexualizing Black women and girls to appropriate the blame where white men could remain “untried and unconvicted”¹⁷⁰ in the rape of an enslaved woman or girl.

In Celia's trial, the composition of the jury, which consisted entirely of white men, may have influenced the outcome of the case.¹⁷¹ There is a possibility that the jury was reluctant to convict another white man, but they all believed Newsom had the right to sexually violate Celia for a duration of five years. The Antebellum law did not protect Celia or other enslaved women and girls who had been in her position, it was never intended to protect the rights of enslaved Africans. But, only to exclude them and take away their legal human rights.

Celia, she was in the middle of a journey, alone with her rapist, with no protection. Because of this, Davis asserts that “it would be a mistake to regard the institutionalized pattern of rape during slavery as an expression of white men’s sexual urges.”¹⁷² These “white men’s sexual

¹⁶⁸ Mclaurin 114

¹⁶⁹ Collins 81

¹⁷⁰ Davis 213

¹⁷¹ Mclaurin 102-103

¹⁷² IBID 37

urges”¹⁷³ normalized the sexual abuse of enslaved women and girls. Under these conditions, white men saw themselves as entitled to the bodies of enslaved women and girls, an attitude that is ingrained in slaveholding society. The rape and sexual abuse of enslaved women and girls were not isolated incidents, but rather part of an institutionalized structure of violence.

VIII. “Portrayal of the Black Female Body: Sally Hemings”

*“He desired to bring my mother back to Virginia with him but she demurred. She was just beginning to understand the French language well, and in France she was free, while if she returned to Virginia she would be re-enslaved. So she refused to return with him. To induce her to do so he promised her extraordinary privileges, and made a solemn pledge that her children should be freed at the age of twenty-one years. In consequence of his promises, on which she implicitly relied, she returned with him to Virginia.”*¹⁷⁴

- Recollections of Madison Hemings

Sally Hemings: A Novel constructs the story of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings as a romantic relationship between enslaver and the enslaved, despite the context of slavery, where such relationship is filled with inherent power imbalances and the potential for exploitation. The implications of the novel and its cover art perpetuates a troubling narrative that neglects the reality of slavery, and romanticizes the existence of their relationship. For Hemings to wear a locket around her neck, which contained Thomas Jefferson’s portrait in close proximity to her heart, signifies that “Sally loved Thomas Jefferson.”¹⁷⁵ This construct challenges conventional narratives about slavery and its history, wherein the concept of love between an enslaver and the enslaved is not recognized as a possibility. The sentiment in the cover art depicts Hemings as a

¹⁷³ IBID 37

¹⁷⁴<https://www.monticello.org/slavery/slave-memoirs-oral-histories/recollections-of-madison-hemings/>

¹⁷⁵ Chase-Riboud 33

Euro-scended woman wearing a simple, yet elegant, dress consisting of a white bodice and a flowy pale blue skirt, which is complemented by a white kerchief tied neatly around her neck, and a single pearl earring adorning her left ear.

Chase-Riboud's description of Sally Hemings as "indeed beautiful"¹⁷⁶ adds a layer of complexity to the interpretation of the cover art as this description begs the question of whether her beauty has been utilized as a tool in her oppression. It reflects the societal norms in eighteenth-century America, where Black women and girls were generally considered as inferior to their white male counterparts. However, it becomes apparent that the critical analysis is necessary in order to contextualize the meaning carried with this portrayal of the Black body. Riboud's description of Hemings may offer insights into how she was perceived by those around her as she was a woman of African descent, but had an all white appearance who possessed attributes of submissiveness and devotion to Jefferson, along with sensuality as "white women were placed on moral pedestals."¹⁷⁷ This gives us an indication of Chase-Riboud's description of Hemings' appearance, a woman who exemplifies a model of femininity, purity, and beauty that is unattainable by most Black women and girls that tried to regain their agency, Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* inquires into Sally Hemings' "deviant sexuality."¹⁷⁸

The novel, which was published in 1979¹⁷⁹ was used as a starting point to reevaluate the assumptions about Black women and girls' sexuality and identity, which had long been neglected or misinterpreted in late twentieth-century America by challenging racial categorization. However, the novel has sparked controversy among scholars such as Dorothy Roberts due to its discourse that has facilitated a long-overdue reconsideration of prejudices that has hindered the

¹⁷⁶ Chase-Riboud 8

¹⁷⁷ Roberts 36

¹⁷⁸ Collins 83

¹⁷⁹ Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Sally Hemings* (1979)

progress of the feminist movements. Roberts argues that these portrayals “reinforce social hierarchies”¹⁸⁰, particularly those surrounding related issues such as race and gender.

As such, by centering Hemings’ experiences, Chase-Riboud interrogates the way in which the portrayal of the Black body has been subject to exploitative stereotypes that have been dominated by the idealizations of liberalism and the context of racism. This emphasis on liberal discourse as Carole Pateman explains has served to naturalize “men’s patriarchal right over women,”¹⁸¹ which shifts the focus away from the sexual exploitation that enslaved women and girls have endured since enslavers felt entitled to use their enslaved women and girls’ body in ways that satisfied them.¹⁸²

Furthermore, Chase-Riboud produces binary modes of thinking freedom and enslaved by illustrating the experiences of enslaved African-American women and girls from the silence and systemic oppression that is tied to both reconfigurations of slave narratives and generic conventions of dehumanization, which have traditionally depicted enslaved African-American women and girls as lacking agency, autonomy, and personhood. She draws attention to the silence and systemic oppression that enslaved women and girls have experienced, highlighting the ways in which their voices have been silenced and their experiences erased from traditional slave narratives. The silencing of these women and girls is not accidental, but rather a deliberate attempt to reinforce “the social position”¹⁸³ of them.

Despite the absence of a formal codification of the principle caste in the United States’ social structure, the institution of slavery facilitated the emergence of a color-based hierarchy, as exemplified by the relationship between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson. This color-based

¹⁸⁰ Roberts 337

¹⁸¹ Pateman 16

¹⁸² White 62

¹⁸³ Pateman 6

hierarchy where Patricia Hill Collins explains, stratifies individuals based on their race by attaching meanings to “Whiteness and Blackness”¹⁸⁴ as this has remained an unacknowledged feature of American history. As in the case of Sally Hemings, Hemings’ mixed-race identity held significant implications for her position in the Monticello household. As Chase-Riboud narrates the social implications, Hemings is portrayed as benefiting from the sexual relationship with Thomas Jefferson. This construct, however, perpetuates a systemic exploitation and “male oppression of the female sex”¹⁸⁵ that is antithetical to the recognition of the full humanity of enslaved women and girls, emphasizing their forced sexualization at the expense of acknowledging the inherent structures of oppression that dictated their lives, where she defies the myth of America’s “pure”¹⁸⁶ racist history.

Who was Sally Hemings? She was an enslaved girl who lived in the United States during the 18th and early 19th centuries whom Thomas Jefferson inherited from his father-in-law that essentially bore him several children later on. Born in Virginia in 1773, Sally Hemings is a fourteen year enslaved “mulatto”¹⁸⁷ who was the daughter of Elizabeth Hemings and John Wayles.¹⁸⁸ Sally was also the half-sister of Jefferson’s wife, Martha Wayle, as both women had the same father. Upon the death of John Wayles, one of his legal heirs inherited a portion of his human chattel, which included Sally Hemings’ mother, Elizabeth, and her children, all of whom were fathered by Mr. Wayles. As such, the property rights of wives were considered to be that of her husband’s, and the inheritance of the Hemings was subject to her father’s will. With that being said, Jefferson inherited the Hemings family upon his marriage to Martha Wayles and

¹⁸⁴ Collins 90

¹⁸⁵ Pateman 133

¹⁸⁶ Chase-Riboud 363

¹⁸⁷ A person who has white and black ancestry. However, this term is considered a racist term as it is historically used to describe a mixed race person. It implies that a mixed-race person is similar to a hybrid animal.

¹⁸⁸ Gordon-Reed 119

declaring his ownership of Sally Hemings while claiming her as property.

At the age of fourteen, Sally Hemings embarked upon a journey from Virginia to France with Thomas Jefferson, poised to serve as Polly Jefferson's domestic servant and companion. Polly was the nine year-old daughter¹⁸⁹ of Thomas Jefferson, who summoned Sally Hemings to accompany him and Polly around Paris, where Thomas Jefferson was the ambassador for the United States. With kind hospitality, the Jefferson family welcomed Sally into their French household, affording her the opportunity to broaden her horizon in Paris. Despite the challenging circumstances prevalent at that time, Sally remained a reliable confidant and aide to Polly throughout their stay in France.

Despite her age, Sally Hemings was already aware of her own captivating qualities such as her beauty while embracing her new life in Paris, where she received academic instruction from a tutor as well as piano lessons. Sally Hemings accompanies the Jeffersons around the city of Paris, which further her existence. Sally's love for Thomas Jefferson becomes more evident to her as she grows more fond of Jefferson, and she eagerly anticipates the day when his receptiveness towards her will shift.

A moment between Sally and Jefferson occurs in *Sally Hemings*, wherein Sally is summoned by Jefferson to his bedroom, and Sally willingly accepts the invitation with a mixture of nervousness and enthusiasm.¹⁹⁰ Their physical attraction brings an end to any lingering uncertainty that she had, and Sally finds herself overwhelmed by the intensity of the experience, feeling as though it is the very purpose of her existence. Sally and Jefferson's relationship is portrayed as a passionate love affair that transforms Paris into a paradise for the two.

¹⁸⁹ At fourteen years old, Sally's mother offered nine year old Polly, Sally to accompany her in Paris 63

¹⁹⁰ Chase-Riboud 112-113; Thomas Jefferson fetches one of his, which is Sally Hemings. The way that Chase-Riboud describes the interaction between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson in his room, suggests that Thomas Jefferson's love for Sally was real.

Throughout the novel, the scenery in Paris serves as a backdrop for setting the scene of the passion that she shares with Thomas Jefferson and the power that he holds over her. While the romantic setting of the city provides a sense of freedom for Sally Hemings by allowing her to explore her own desires that are separate from her status as an enslaved woman, Sally Hemings cannot escape “the bonds of enslavement”¹⁹¹ she inhabits. When Sally Hemings becomes pregnant, it compels her to examine the implications of her decision to maintain her bond with Jefferson and return to Virginia with him as his slave.

Despite her pregnancy, Sally leaves Jefferson’s residence and solicits assistance from a former servant to help Hemings during her pregnancy. The resolution to Sally's distress resurfaces when she discovers that Jefferson is devastated by her departure from Paris and is enduring headaches throughout her pregnancy. Observing Jefferson's love, desire, and need for her, Sally makes a definitive choice to stay with him. Sally promises Thomas Jefferson that she will not leave him nor resort to the legislation in France to change her status as a free slave.¹⁹² In return, Jefferson makes his enslaved mistress a concubine because Sally could not have been anything but a concubine during that time. As explained by Annette Gordon-Reed, a concubine is “a woman who lived with a man without being married to him.”¹⁹³ Therefore, Hemings could not be his legal wife because interracial marriages were illegal. Nevertheless, Jefferson commits to emancipating their children as a testament to his devotion to their love.

In 1802, James Callender's editorial referencing Thomas Jefferson's scandalous relationship with Sally Hemings identified her solely by her first name, an act that was meant to

¹⁹¹ Morgan *Labouring Women* 190

¹⁹² Chase-Riboud 74; In accordance with these legislations,, Sally Hemings is considered as a free individual as Paris abolished slavery.

¹⁹³ Annette Gordon-Reed 107

give his accusations against Jefferson.¹⁹⁴ Despite the insignificance of this act, Hemings' response to the event would display a degree of thoughtfulness and depth towards the editorial, evidencing a sensitivity towards the situation that had her shocked and ashamed that “they are attacking the master through”¹⁹⁵ her. The manner in which Hemings deployed reflects the intricate interplay between slavery and personhood, where Jefferson is central to the controversy, and Hemings is stripped of any meaning. In the absence of any agency of personal dignity, her language indicates the profound power relations that characterize slavery. In these circumstances, the scandal becomes a site of contestation inside slavery’s horrors, with Hemings unable to assert her agency whereas Jefferson, who could rely on his position of power and wealth to support his social standing and reputation, Hemings was rendered to a powerless object where she is misvalued and devalued¹⁹⁶ by those in charge of her.

The protagonist comprehends that the scandal at hand is a resemblance to the unethical practice of “subjugating enslaved women”¹⁹⁷ and girls, perpetuated by a capitalist structure who perceive them as their personal property, and similar to the unethical practice of using enslaved women and girls for personal gain. Elizabeth, concerned for her daughter Sally's well-being, cautions her regarding Thomas Jefferson's intentions, implying that he would sell her off without a second thought, if it interfered with his political aspirations, Sally replies “he will not sell me, Mama...because he cannot live without me.”¹⁹⁸ While it is undeniably true that Thomas Jefferson has strong feelings for Sally Hemings, it is also true that he would exploit and subjugate her for personal gain, rather than out of concern for her wellbeing. On previous

¹⁹⁴ Chase-Riboud 243; “The Recorder” where James Callender slanders Thomas Jefferson and his relationship with Sally Hemings. James Callender proceeds to call Sally Hemings a wench and a mute as these are dehumanizing terms.

¹⁹⁵ Chase-Riboud 244

¹⁹⁶ Roberts 303

¹⁹⁷ Roberts 81

¹⁹⁸ Chase-Riboud 246

occasions, Sally had ask Thomas Jefferson how he would sustain a relationship between them and her own children “in such an abomination,”¹⁹⁹ he replies “by loving you.”²⁰⁰

For Thomas Jefferson, ownership was in the form of loving Sally Hemings.

Chase-Riboud’s depiction of Jefferson’s intimate relationship with Sally makes it apparent that he took pleasure from owning Sally, even in moments of intimacy. When Thomas Jefferson initiates a sexual relationship with Sally Hemings in France, admiring her naked body, reiterating his sense of entitlement over her by thinking:

“She was indeed his creature. Both in body and in spirit. He had formed and shaped her himself, this wild flower ... He possessed something he had created from beginning to end, without interference or objections or corrections. In a way, he had birthed her. As much as he had his daughter. He had created her in his owner's image of womanly perfection, this speck of dust, this handful of clay from Monticello. ‘I love you,’ he said.”²⁰¹

Later on in the text, Sally Hemings’ brother James observes Thomas Jefferson’s demeanor, describing the master’s “look of a man who both converted and had the means to possess what he coveted ... a look of tender greed would flash cross [sic] his face.... And then his hand would reach out and touch the object presented to him, bringing it under his domination.”²⁰² Although James attempts to condemn Jefferson’s behavior by portraying him as an incestuous enslaver playing God, the passage adopts a heavy-handed style. However, this suggests that love is in the form of possession, ownership, and an incestuous God essentially echoing Patricia Hill Collins’ allegations in the “objectification of the Black female body is provided by the exhibition.”²⁰³ Within the book, a recent disclosure posits a contentious

¹⁹⁹ IBID 269

²⁰⁰ IBID 269

²⁰¹ IBID 119

²⁰² IBID 125

²⁰³ Collins 136

viewpoint that even if Jefferson regarded Hemings with romantic affection, his ownership of her as a slave precluded any notion of equality within their apparent relationship; ultimately, Hemings was easy to manipulate, discard, or moldable at her will, “his hands riding over that beautiful body, seizing it as if it were handfuls of his own buff clay Monticello earth; the fragile woman's landscape of her turning, twisting, rising, and falling under his hands; the long black hair winding like a tributary of his own Ravina River.”²⁰⁴

Barbara Chase-Riboud's presentation of Sally Hemings' story reveals a complex and troubling dichotomy. While the central focus of the narrative is the relationship between Hemings and Jefferson, she also portrays the predicament that arises from being a slave who is simultaneously subjected to an affair with her master. Through her writing, Chase-Riboud presents Hemings as being trapped between two different worlds; one that affords her a degree of personal intimacy with her master, and another that completely strips her of any legal rights or public personhood. Jennifer Morgan reminds us that the “commodification of personhood was inescapably generational,”²⁰⁵ which the novel demonstrates through Sally Hemings' life where she is denied legal recognition and ownership by Virginia law as a Black woman in a society dominated by white and property-owning men.

As for Sally Hemings' relationship with Thomas Jefferson, Hemings is granted a measure of power, personhood, and agency by Thomas Jefferson. Most enslaved women and girls such as Harriet Jacobs and Celia do not have since they were subjected to brutality, rape, and sexual coercion from their masters. Hemings' experiences illustrate the complexities and moral ambiguities that are accompanied by the relationship of Jefferson and Hemings, in which liberal and capitalist values have played a significant role in shaping the dynamic between Sally

²⁰⁴ Chase-Riboud 297

²⁰⁵ Morgan 157

Hemings and Thomas Jefferson. In particular, the liberal and capitalist ideal of individual freedom was used to justify the enslavement of African-American women and girls. Within the context of the slave trade, enslaved women and girls were treated as commodities, their lives and bodies bought and sold as property by slave owners who believed that they were entitled to use and abuse them. In the case of Sally Hemings, the intersection of these two ideals is particularly evident in the power dynamics that characterized her relationship with Thomas Jefferson. Sally Hemings was viewed as property, to be bought and sold at the whim of her owner, Thomas Jefferson, is a reflection of the commodification of an enslaved woman or girl. Sally Hemings' limited agency and autonomy, as well as the complexities of her relationship with Thomas Jefferson, reflect the ways in which the liberal ideal of individual freedom was not "equally extended to Black slaves."²⁰⁶

IX. CONCLUSION

The argument posed in the introduction of this thesis was that liberalism and capitalism, which are often classified as value-neutral systems, create racialized systems of enslavement that dehumanize African-American women and girls for the exploitation of their bodies during the antebellum period, presents significant challenges due to the problematic concept of rape, patriarchy, and ownership in Southern states. The theories of liberalism and capitalism in the nineteenth century largely focused on the legal and rightful title of the owner, while relegating the possessive rights of the owner for exploitation and sexual gratification. However, enslaved women were devoid of any legal rights and bodily autonomy. But, they regularly exercised their possessive rights over their own bodies in a variety of ways. Despite the prevalent belief that ownership exclusively lay with white male elites who controlled the system of slavery, enslaved women persistently resisted against their intimate oppressions to control their own bodies. In a

²⁰⁶ Mills 78

society where it is dominated by patriarchal ideologies, liberalism in relation to capitalism oppresses and controls enslaved women and girls by declaring them as chattel, enslaved women and girls refuse to surrender their agency, despite having no legal say in the control of their bodies. As Carole Pateman reminds us that these dominant ideologies allow men to “claim right of sexual access to women’s bodies and claim right of command over the use of women’s bodies,”²⁰⁷ the societal structures that sought to subjugate them and reduce them to the status of commodities for economic exploitation failed to entirely suppress their will. Enslaved African-American women and girls were denied ownership of their own bodies, often being subjected to various forms of violence, sexual abuse, and reproductive exploitation by their slave owners. However, despite the lack of autonomy, their actions demonstrate their assertiveness in demanding ownership over their own bodies, which made them susceptible to various forms of oppression. As noted by Dorothy Roberts, slave masters had a clear “economic incentive to govern Black women’s reproductive lives”²⁰⁸ since this practice served to further exacerbate the commodification of their labor and their body as well. However, the societal structures of liberalism and capitalism, which often serve to suppress individual agency and bodily autonomy of enslaved.

Towards the end of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *Celia, A Slave*, and *Sally Hemings: A Novel*, they all share their experience at being purchased by their enslavers. However, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Celia, A Slave* serve as a symbol throughout this thesis to describe where Bell Hooks emphasize “the cruel acts inflicted upon Black slave women by white men.”²⁰⁹ Throughout these narratives, we witness constant struggle to resist the

²⁰⁷ Pateman 17

²⁰⁸ Roberts 48

²⁰⁹ Hooks 28

attempts of their masters to claim ownership of their bodies and intimate selves, and to assert their right to autonomy.

In both *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Celia, A Slave* their narrative demonstrates the “intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender”²¹⁰ that enslaved African-American women and girls experienced in the Antebellum South created a brutal world in which they had virtually no control over their own bodies, reproductive choices, or even their own voices. The infrastructures of liberalism and capitalism have stripped of any legal protection against rape and enslaved women and girls were forced to operate in a reality of “the relentless objectification”²¹¹ that offers no hope of relief from the pervasive control of their master. Harriet Jacobs reconstructs the material circumstances of her personal life by critiquing the oppressive systems that controlled her. She presents herself as "Linda Brent," a pseudonym that suggests an act of rebellion where she states that she does not want to be conquered again.²¹² In this way, she establishes a universal bond with her readers, drawing them into her quest for freedom and reminding them of the urgent need to end the institution of slavery. While *Celia* demonstrates the “lack of a legal protection against rape”²¹³ against enslaved women and girls and the brutal realities of chattel slavery that were inextricably linked with the paradoxes embedded in liberal’s values of individual rights. Liberalism was twisted to perpetuate a system of slavery that allowed white male slaveholders to exercise complete control over the lives and bodies of the women they enslaved. While their enslavers allowed the inalienable rights of free people, the reality for enslaved women was one of complete subjugation, but a subjugation that extended not only to their labor but also to their sexuality.

²¹⁰ Collins 114

²¹¹ Johnson 15

²¹² Jacobs 30

²¹³ McLaurin 132

Surrounding the discourse of liberalism and capitalism, which guarantee the freedom and inalienable rights for all. However, these were not extended for enslaved women and girls as they were subjected “to all forms of sexual coercion”²¹⁴ were the most marginalized and least likely to have their stories told. Among the slave population, only those who were privileged, typically those with lighter skin, or literacy were able to document their experiences in their own words. For instance, Chase-Riboud’s portrayal of Hemings as a Eurocentric woman is problematic, as it erases the fact that she was a woman of African descent and ignores the fact that enslaved women and girls were not free to make their own choices.

Hemings’ relationship with Jefferson as a concubine further perpetuates the harmful stereotype of enslaved women as promiscuous and complicit in their own oppression, therefore, this relationship cannot be viewed as a consensual and equal partnership. Rather, it was likely the result of the power dynamic between a slave owner and his property. Sadly, non consensual relationships were common for the majority of enslaved women and girls suffering in anonymity as almost all of their voices have been lost to history. Despite the marginalized status of these women and girls, their suffering did not go unnoticed. Slave narratives allowed enslaved women and girls to speak against the “sexual victimization at the hands of masters and overseers”²¹⁵ in authority. In doing so, enslaved women and girls challenged the liberal and capitalist justifications for exploitation and systemic oppression, highlighting the fundamental contradictions between the ideals of freedom and the realities of slavery.

²¹⁴ Davis 21

²¹⁵ Davis 38

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