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Symbolic Rage

Postbellum lynching—in which the general rationale for mob and state terrorism was that it countered black male sexual violence against white females—exemplified the symbolic rage and prosecutorial performances of the state. Symbolic rage is connected to such performance in that the symbols associated with one’s fury supersede and determine responses to specific abuses that have allegedly sparked that fury. Violent anger is supposedly inspired by the myths and symbols that precede and take precedence over any specific criminal act.

Antilynching campaigns, led in part by Ida B. Wells, demystified symbolic rage—the white “civilized” fury against black “savagery.” Noting that the charge of rape was used as the general apologia for mob violence and state complicity in or indifference to it, Wells proved that many of these accusations tended to be false and that the charge of sexual violence was only leveled in a fraction of lynching cases. Of white men, who as a caste were the prosecutors and executioners of sexual violence (as well as the perpetrators), Wells wrote in 1895 that to “justify their own barbarism they assume a chivalry which they do not possess.”¹

Designating interracial sex—specifically that between black men and

white women—as the most heinous form of criminality, moral and social leaders based the legality of lynching on racial and sexual myths and on a white code of chivalry that featured a macabre duet played out in bipolar stereotypes of white knights and ladies pitted against the threat of black sexual brutes and savages. In Wells's era, European American women, particularly those from the propertied classes, were perceived as inherently virtuous, and thus absolved of any charges of sexual promiscuity or miscegenation; European American men, again particularly of the upper classes, were considered inherently chivalrous and thus absolved of charges of sexual violence or miscegenation. African American men, on the other hand, were identified as rapists; defined as inherently promiscuous, African American women could not be violated because they were said to be without virtue. A white man would not rape a lady (a white woman) and could not rape an object (a black woman). (Intraclass rape of white women, including incest, was usually represented as the seduction of the white adult male.) A white woman could not desire a brute or likely join in coalition with someone considered to be a sexual object. During the era of lynching, voluntary sexual associations between black males and white females were constructed as rape, and were punishable by death (of the African American involved). Wells and others argued that the mythology of black sexual pathology that motivated lynching functioned as the apologia for rape in a society where actual and alleged assaults against whites were prosecuted while convictions in cases of sexual violence against black women were rare.

Female African American antilynching activists confronted the convergence of racist and sexual violence, urging white women to respond to the political use of the rape charge in lynching cases. These activists argued that the prosecution of actual sexual violence for either white or black women was not the objective of the lynch law. The majority of sexual assaults were in fact intraracial. Although national crime statistics for sexual violence were not recorded in the nineteenth century, today's statistics are illuminating. Currently, the FBI reports that more than 90 percent of rapes are intraracial; in interracial rape cases, the percentage of white male assaults on black women exceeds that of black male assaults on white women. One hundred years ago, the percentage of black male assaults on white women was even lower, given racial segregation and the social restrictions on white women. While the percentage of white male assaults on

black women was higher (as black women worked as domestic servants in white homes), white males had virtual immunity—as the caste that adjudicated, legislated, and enforced the laws—from prosecution for sexual violence against black women and near immunity from attacks on their female family members or on white women of the lower classes. In fact, the majority of sexual violence in Wells's era was committed by white men who were (and remain) the most likely assailants of white women and who were also responsible for a considerable amount of violence in the lives of black women.

A true correlation between the occurrence of lynching and the prosecution of sexual violence should have meant that the majority of those lynched in the postbellum era were white men. Yet the victims were largely African American. That collective punishment was inflicted on black communities (where property was stolen or destroyed by lynch parties); that the specificity of the crimes and their punishment was treated as inconsequential by mob and state prosecutors; that nonexistent crimes were alleged; and, finally, that the rare phenomenon of black male sexual assault on white females became the national marker for sexual violence—all these facts reveal how the state and society's outrage over sexual violence was based on symbols and mythology that justified the use of ritualized racial violence.

If perpetrators of state violence require demonization to justify their symbolic rages, then entertainment is indispensable to their prosecutorial performances. As spectacles, lynching and later legal executions racialized and politicized sexual violence. Sexual violence that violated classist and racist hierarchies was constructed as the most heinous form of abuse and so was given the most heinous form of punishment. Demonization of racialized sexuality as criminal promoted mass participation in lynchings and furthered indifference to intraracial sexual violence that did not reflect the racial mythology. Symbolic rage validated mob vigilantism, state malfeasance, and police violence in the name of “protecting” women. Prosecutorial performances rarely emphasized the specifics of the crime, the importance of just laws, or the rights of the accused or the survivors; instead, such exhibitions engendered a fixation on generic types of sexual beasts, heroes, and heroines.

Institutionalized, legitimized, and paternal, symbolic rage and state violence needed no specificity of crime because prosecution was directed by

mythology. (Subaltern rage also entails demonizing but it is often grounded in the material conditions of oppression.) “Ordinary” sexual violence—that is, intraracial instances—became overshadowed by “extraordinary” racial violence—or interracial occurrences. Until sexual violence crossed caste borders, violating race and class hierarchies, it was considered private and commonplace; in its transgression of such borders, it became public and doubly offensive to state sensibilities. In general, the prosecution of private violence (when it occurs) is routine; the prosecution of public violence, in contrast, is highly ritualized in keeping with the symbolism. Lending itself to apathy and social denial of the prevalence of racial and sexual violence, symbolic rage in prosecutorial performance demands an audience. As I argued earlier in reference to Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, public prosecutions and executions are essential to spectacles. In its larger-than-life punishment and ritualized pageantry, state violence provided the imagery, parameters, and meanings of prosecution and justice in lynching cases.

Prosecutorial Performances

I first began reflecting on symbolic rage in state prosecution when reading Ida B. Wells’s political memoir, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*.² Yet it was my mother’s unfinished autobiography, which described how a family tragedy of domestic and sexual violence transmuted into racialized spectacle and sport, that led me to reconsider the impact that race, rage, and the law have on our lives. Typically, my family never speaks of the incident; understandably, family elders do not keep alive a story that permits neither pride nor comfort in the telling. Although the persistence of the story counts for something, it reveals no resolve as in the stories of rage and resistance offered in Maya Angelou’s autobiographical account of male relatives who buried her pedophilic rapist in a cornfield, or Wells’s descriptions of black families who avenged white violence.³ (The only story of outrage I recall from my mother described the night she spent roaming with her five-year-old twin sister and older siblings to decapitate black jockeys gracing the lawns of white homes.) Retelling parts of familial stories, freeing them to function with the best or worst of intentions, I reveal my own discontent, which is three generations removed from black Mississippi fear and white prosecutorial performances:

In the 1920s and 1930s, my mother's black-red mother, Mamie, raised her five children in rural Mississippi. Most of the time they lived in Holly Bluffs, sometimes on, sometimes near a plantation farm owned by her Choctaw mother, Virginia Elam, and her African American stepfather. (Not blood kin, and reportedly my grandmother's abuser, he remains nameless in my mother's book.) On that farm lived the children from great-grandmother's previous marriages and her current and last one. P was considered the favorite of my great-grandmother Virginia's sixteen children and was, writes my mother, a very beautiful, dark-skinned black woman.

My great-aunt was a favorite among not only black but also white people in Holly Bluffs. This was in small part due to her looks and in great part due to her character; generosity was one of her most striking features. Aunt P *never* (my mother's emphasis) had a relationship with a white man; her popularity with whites came from her culinary talents, charm, and strategic acumen: she baked well and often brought cakes to the local white sheriff's office. Aunt P was also given presents. Black men courted her with gifts. At nineteen, after receiving the gift of an automobile from one man, Albert, she kept seeing other Negro men. Having warned her of his jealousy, one day he took her life: with a shotgun, stepping from behind the bushes near my great-grandma's doorstep, he shot P as she strolled near home. Many in our family and its community who loved my great-aunt—including the other men she knew—were outraged at her death. None of these, however, sought the prosecution of her killer. Whites did. Within days, a posse, which likely included the sheriff, found where Albert was hiding, dragged him out, and lynched him.⁴

The lynchers marbleized murder into sport and spectacle. Leaving little space for mourning, they created—after the mess Albert left for my great-grandmother in her yard—another mess to clean up, another atrocity to contain. What was to be cleared and framed would shape the ground on which local Negroes stood in relationship to pain and punishment as state performance and white ritual. How to find and move to other sites without losing their footing must have bewildered black Mississippians standing so far from justice.

Sorting out the posse's public rage and my family's pain from my great-grandmother's private grief and anger is difficult. I imagine that rage without grief is a flight from pain; that symbolic rage is the antithesis of

grief; that it preempts mourning and suggests that there is nothing to fear if demons are punished. Rage at the state seems to be deflected, its splinters strike subjects and objects at varying distances, reflecting how little trust there is in state protection. Rage at Albert fluctuates between rightly blaming him for my great-aunt's murder and wrongly blaming him for his own lynching (with the reasoning that any pre-World War II Negro stupid enough to murder a pretty, young Negress who baked for the local white sheriff courted death). The state proved that it did not need to bring Albert before family or community for sentencing, for grief, or for healing and thus excluded them from determining restitution. The state, embodied in the lynching mob and the court, owned Albert and could dispense with him—and justice—as it saw fit. Private rage and grief would be respectful to the memories of P and Albert; yet the numbing familiarity of symbolic rage is immediately forthcoming. I can use it myself: it is emotionally (although not always professionally) safer to rage at white and male abstractions. Neither attentiveness to details nor counterstrategies are required; while specificity does not anesthetize, abstract generalities bring relief from deep feelings, clarity, and responsible action. Understandably, one would be reluctant to feel an anger that could slide into fear, pain, and later, perhaps, resistance.

My great-grandmother and her family felt grief and a private rage that had no symbols for public expression in a white world. It was permissible for blacks to rage at Albert but not at his killers. Mississippi blacks could have vicariously participated in his pursuit and death or, like the black minister in Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-bow Incident*, go along to pray for the departed and the living.⁵ Either of those roles, expressing their rage or sorrow, would have been somewhat risky given the unpredictability of lynching mobs. This was true before the Civil War for whites, the majority of lynching victims then, and for postbellum blacks, the majority of victims after the war. In lynchings, there were no promises of safe return, especially for those whose status was more like the hounds than the hunters; black Mississippians, in fact, were given fewer guarantees of survival than the hunters' dogs. More than one black in Holly Bluffs may have cheered the posse. On the other hand, more than one might have quietly wished for Albert's escape, which could indicate either misogyny and indifference to sexual violence or a privileging of racist violence as more heinous than intraracial sexual violence. Hoping for his escape might

also merely show that some blacks possessed a sense of justice not tied to a lynching rope; others may have dismissed the possibility of justice in that state where white vigilantes had immunity from prosecution, for black kin were at their mercy. Still others may have felt or feigned indifference to both victims and the mob; choosing to let go of the dead and those who might as well be gone, they offered no prayer of protection and buried the dead in silence. Disturbed by the executions, anyone praying for, cursing, or trying to ignore Albert's attempts to stay alive likely damned the authoritarian killers, whose rage was unlike justice and, by its excess, as identifiable as a lover's jealous brutality. Because killing Albert did not bring his victim back to life, the point of his death remains debatable: was the execution restitution or revenge? And yet, do not restitution and revenge belong by right to the sufferer or her/his family? Social punishment and execution, like self-punishment and suicide, seem to be both restitution and revenge. The posse's vengeance may have been an expression of its members' pain mingled with anger. Stories about Mississippi crackers suggest that the lynching party's emotions likely stemmed in part from indignation that any black man would dare take (away) a woman—even a black one—who belonged to them. Psychologizing a lynching party, however, does not obscure its omnipotent racial power vested by state authority.

Justice, of course, was the prickly issue. The posse killed as part of a law-and-order campaign. Yet the prosecutorial performance that led to the execution of a murderer did not inspire a great sense of safety among African Americans. Racial violence as public violation felt by a community (historically, lynchings included collective punishment) would eclipse sexual violence as personal violation felt by an individual. So what was initially my great-aunt's story becomes Albert's story; mourning P was supplanted by concerns over Albert's prosecution and punishment.

Not being white, Albert would have no trial date for legal prosecution, a custom recognized but not sanctioned by both whites and blacks. The law was white and so the punishment, although deadly and irrevocable, seemed whimsical, or unpredictable. Prosecution generally tends toward whimsy in respect to black life. Whimsy would have stood in his favor, although if Albert had been a "special" Negro, if he had had the good fortune to be popular among white men or to "belong" to some prominent white man in his hometown, men of influence would have argued for leniency. For instance, white folklorist Alan Lomax was successful

in his pleas to the Texas governor for the pardon of blues singer Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter), who was incarcerated for murdering a black woman. Other white patrons have had less good fortune. After calling for the execution of black and Latino youths accused of brutally raping a white woman in Central Park, in an advertisement in the *New York Times*, Donald Trump unsuccessfully pled for boxer Mike Tyson before his conviction for raping a black woman, Desiree Washington. If Albert had been a popular entertainer of whites—for example, a military hero like Othello or a sports hero like O. J.—it is unlikely that he would have been lynched for killing a black woman, although he most certainly would have died horribly for killing a white one. But as an “ordinary nigger,” Albert was also by definition unlucky: as entertainment rather than entertainer, he could not survive sport, which overtook tragedy.

Albert was transformed by spectacle and prosecutorial performance. Until the lynching party arrived, there was probably nothing particularly unique about this man. His newly gained prominence only highlighted his insignificance: Albert became special the day that whites decided to lynch him—not the day he killed my great-aunt. There was certainly nothing unusual about his crime. Because someone’s woman kin is murdered daily by a male friend—every day four women die at the hands of their male partners—sexual violence seems a commonplace epidemic. Given the prevalence of domestic violence as a form of sexual violence, only the lynching seems extraordinary, uncommon. Today, Albert would not have been lynched or legally executed for killing a black woman, given the racial disparity in death sentencing. (If his victim had been white, sensationalism would have memorialized the spectacle so that future generations could use it to illustrate either black sexual or white racial savagery, depending on what point the writer wanted to make.)

The lynching moves to monopolize my attention, quickly dominating everything—except my great-grandmother’s grief. Because of the lynchers, this man, not even a blood relation, upstages our family tragedy as both victimizer and victim. His image, as insecure parasite, feeds on that of my great-aunt. To jettison Albert, to throw him out like debris—or at least relegate him to a footnote in this story—however, would be in bad faith. On some level, we seem to occupy the same skin, uncut by gender and blood. Hortense Spillers writes that an enslaved African American female “shares the conditions of all captive flesh,” as the “entire captive community be-

comes a living laboratory"; for such women the theft and mutilation of the body create a special condition in which "we lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related or gender-specific."⁶ In contrast, Zillah Eisenstein points out that these shared conditions erase neither the female body as a site for sexual violence nor gender specificity in violence;⁷ the batterer, the rapist, the irate husband/lover/father/brother knows no ungendered female body. Still, to return to Spillers, the meanings of sexual abuse are shaped by the status of the "captive community's" members and the state's "laboratories" or theaters for punishment and discipline. Those who are doubly bound by racial and sexual violence seem timelessly stitched together. Yet ties to violent males and state executioners need not become entanglements that hide the commonalities between captive or captor communities, which can lead to organizing sites for safety and mourning and to confronting the specificity of crime without racialized mythologies and prosecutions.

Social Texts: Black Women and Sexual Violence

The common ties among women confronting sexual violence are evident. Several years ago, my godsister S. told me that when Tikki, a fourteen-year-old African American, immediately reported that she had been raped by a white transit policeman, her story was generally received as unreliable, even by her mother.⁸ So Tikki went to a girlfriend's house and called the ambulance that took her alone to St. Luke's emergency room. Once there, she persisted until hospital staff eventually listened to and treated her, despite a white male intern's initial combative insistence that she had not been raped. As an upper-class white woman, S. brought a legitimacy to Tikki's story in retelling it to me and others. Affluent but female, S. could not translate her class status into enough clout to report a white, working-class male cop's crime against a black, poor girl to the New York Police Department. Unable to have the officer sanctioned, Tikki now finds an alternative route to and from school, selecting other subway stops to avoid the police officer assigned to her home station. S.'s intercessions for Norma, a fifteen-year-old Latina who was periodically beaten in the streets by her ex-boyfriend, were more fruitful; both were able to report the assaults to city agencies. But at the bureau desk that determines who qualifies for a hear-

ing to obtain a restraining order, the woman behind the desk denied Norma a court date. Both S. and Norma were unable to sway juvenile authorities; along with some of Norma's girlfriends, these state employees insisted that Norma had walked not only in her ex's neighborhood but on his street at the time of the attacks, and so she courted her own abuse. Like Tikki, Norma also now finds other routes to travel.

Unsurprisingly, sexual violence is generally underreported. Survivors are more likely to tell their stories when they feel they will be believed and treated compassionately. Such treatment is somewhat difficult to find in a culture that desensitizes spectators to violence and markets violence as a commodity, particularly when sexual violence occurs in the lives of non-whites. Given the stereotypical projection of licentious, unnatural, and violent sex onto darker-skinned peoples as sexual reprobates, this deviancy is triply complicated by sexism, classism, and heterosexism. Black women's experiences of violence are shared with all women but magnified by racism and classism, given the stigma of an Africanist sexuality.

Subaltern or captive communities have little credibility, even among themselves. Generally, sexual violence is most believable if the survivor has privilege over the accused: those who are adult male, light-skinned, affluent, or heterosexual are considered more credible and authoritative than those who are young, female, dark-skinned, poor, gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

In his documentary *Ethnic Notions*, Marlon Riggs illustrates how cultural representations of racial and sexual others have rationalized atrocities against African Americans. Objectified as either hypersexual whore or asexual mammy (both eager to serve white males), the black female has been entwined in caricature with bipolar stereotypes of African American men as either aggressively oversexed (the black rapist) or neutered as the family retainer (Uncle Tom). The image of black women as promiscuous, which was manufactured by white males, deflected attention from racialized sexual violence inflicted by white men. Historically, the rape of enslaved African women was common. Not until the twentieth century did courts in general begin to recognize that black women could file charges against their assailants.

The construction of blacks as animals rather than humans shaped representations of sexuality, defining black female sexuality as a site of bestiality and illicitness. Black feminist writers have explored the devolving status of African women under enslavement as well as African American

women's resistance to this oppression. Paula Giddings notes that changes in Virginia laws concerning indentured servants culminated in 1661, when Virginia officially recognized slavery.⁹ African American women were subsequently referred to in law as "nasty and beastly." This new entity could now be impregnated to create a new "crop" of enslaved people because under the new legal statutes, children would assume their mothers' status. In 1691, law prohibited whites from marrying indigenous or African people.¹⁰ In addition, "property" (slave, prostitute, wife, child, prison inmate) was said to have no legal rights; similarly, subhuman females had no virtue. The alleged absence of (sexual) virtue affected, and still affects, the legal standing of African American women. Europeans and European Americans cannot present the image of the black without the fantasy of black sexuality that is both titillating and terrifying for those who indulge in it. In popular mythology, African Americans were considered only capable of lust, whereas whites could love; still, sleeping with black females was seen as a rite of passage for white manhood.

Social respectability is premised on "proper" sexuality. White women commit racial and social suicide when they align themselves with black, brown, yellow, or red women against white men accused of sexual attacks. In other words, maintaining their personal integrity and morality is rewarded with a loss in conventional respectability. Not only are such women called race traitors, but by defending a historically virtueless victim, they also transgress white standards of sexual decency. For instance, Suzanne Ross, a white woman advocating fair proceedings for black and Latino youths accused of rape and battering, recounts how white women hissed "Race traitor!" at her as she took her seat on stage during a talk show about the Central Park rape case.¹¹ Conversely, women of color who join white women in confronting men of color accused of sexual violence are also labeled race traitors; the dominant society, however, grants these women the social respectability of sexual morality that it typically denies white women who support black or brown defendants.

Individuals without social, political, or economic equality have little legal equality; this is true not merely for defendants but for victims and survivors, too. Women without racial equality are not sexually equal to men or women of the dominant race; they subsequently have no equal legal protection in cases of sexual violence because prosecution is administered by the racialized state. The state's enforcement of their rights, there-

fore, is seen as whimsical. (Sexual equality between respectable and unrespectable women would, in the absence of gender equality with men, merely provide greater recognition of “other” women as spectacles in violence.)

Sexual reprobates have difficulty in proving themselves as victims. By definition, sexual deviants transgress social norms; thus violating such an aberrant person is seen as an oxymoron. This problematicized status, which places women outside the protection of legal and social concern, led to antilynching campaigns and African American women’s historical critique of the sexual politics involved in racial violence and lynching. Although some veneer of sexual innocence can be maintained—the prostitute with a heart of gold, the loyal Pocahontas or Malinche—the public is not socialized to view black females sympathetically in rape cases, given their historical construction as whores. Maternity also works against black women, who are represented as a source of social decay; rather than mother, they are alleged to reproduce or breed criminals and deviants. Characterized as the quintessential bad or destructive mother, the black woman categorically lacks credibility as a victim of social violence. (The destructive mother image tends to be appended to women who advocate the right to choose to regulate childbearing: they are portrayed as the enemy of the child or fetus.)

Social bias is evident given how violence is considered newsworthy and then rendered sensationalist. Few of the sexual-violence cases reported in the *New York Times* in the late 1980s and early 1990s involved white males accused of assaulting black females. (The equal expression of national outrage for highly publicized trials of white men accused of sexually assaulting women of color is an anomaly.) Of those cases that did, the most notable were the Tawana Brawley investigation and the St. John’s rape trial. In each situation, the black girl or woman involved had no credibility. Brawley’s case, directed in the media by Alton Maddox, Vernon Mason, and Al Sharpton, was considered a hoax. (The television show *Law and Order* ran an episode on May 17, 1995, fictionalizing the Brawley case, with the message that even though the legal system is racially unjust, it is the best we have.) In the other case, white athletes from St. John’s University were acquitted of charges of gang rape and sodomy of a black female student.

In both fictional and news accounts, some of the most sensational

representations of sexual violence have depended on black characters and caricatures. White American pop-culture classics such as D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, and *King Kong* recycle images of white heroes foiling and avenging black demons who threaten or sexually assault infantilized white women. White male chivalrous knights, white female virtuous ladies, black male sexual brutes, and black female sexual objects all perform for a national cultural mythology that is the backdrop for social and symbolic rage against sexual violence.

Although the majority of sexual assaults are intraracial not interracial, the media reserves its most sensationalist accounts for those cases in which the accused or convicted is black. News sources often privilege accounts in which black assailants violate racial and class hierarchies. When the victim or survivor is from a privileged caste and the accused is from a marginalized class, the assault becomes one against caste and is prosecuted as such by the state. If the victims are socially subordinate to the assailants, the violence becomes a literal and figurative index of subaltern oppression by dominant groups.

Most of the infamous cases reported in the *New York Times* in the 1980s and 1990s centered on African American males who assaulted black or white females. (Where Asian, Latina, and Native American women appear in relationship to black males is obscured.) Blacks in sexual-assault cases serve as a catalyst for social reflection on and rage at sexual violence. Surreptitiously, they also serve as entertainment. Toni Morrison notes that "Africanism has become . . . a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability."¹² Africanisms provide the setting for racialized treatments of sexual violence and selective condemnation of it.

State Scripts: Crime, Punishment, and Performance

Between 1930 and 1964, ninety percent of the men executed in the United States for rape were black. One study of sentencing found that black men convicted of raping white women received prison terms three to five times longer than those handed down in any other rape cases. Yet, at the same time that black-on-white

rape evoked the most horror and outrage, it was by far the least common form of violent sexual assault. An investigation of rape cases in Philadelphia in the late 1950s found that only three percent of them involved attacks on white women by black men.

—John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters*

John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman write that despite the infrequency of black attacks on white women, the image of the black rapist has been used to control black men and “instill fear into white women who moved too freely in the public world.”¹³ Interracial sexual violence is involved in less than 10 percent of reported rapes, according to the film *Rape Culture*, which states that white males sexually assault black females at twice the rate that black males assault white females: 8 percent and 4 percent, respectively. Interracial rape is the cultural marker of the horror of sexual violence. Representations of such violence as heinous rather than infrequent (less than one in six rapes are reported), makes it “extraordinary” and sets the stage for sensationalist prosecution. Freedman and D'Emilio write: “The fears and outrage that the rape charge elicited among whites was such that, initially, few responded to the moral challenge that lynching posed. Instead the accusation of rape encouraged the demise of white support for racial equality. At best, white leaders shifted the onus onto blacks and urged them to stem the tide of sexual assaults. But, more often, commentators accepted the truth of the charge and sought an explanation for the propensity of black men to commit sexual offenses” (217).

Increasingly, sexual pathology is understood to include all types of assailants; physical appearance, however, continues to demarcate savage or civilized sexuality, thereby implicating or absolving defendants in crime. According to Sander Gilman, “the Other’s physical features, from skin color to sexual structures such as the shape of the genitalia, are always the antitheses of the idealized self’s. . . . sexual anatomy is so important a part of self-image that ‘sexually different’ is tantamount to ‘pathological.’”¹⁴ Frantz Fanon’s dramatic assertion—“Whoever says *rape* says *Negro*”—refers to the imago, in the white mind, of a black male with a white female.¹⁵ Mythologized whiteness is a form of absolution in most state representations of sexual violence. Some subaltern communities reverse this process: whiteness becomes a marker of guilt, signifying the abuses of racial supremacy, whereas blackness represents resistance and exists as a

marker of virtue. The black-power movement often cited misogynist passages of black men posing and posturing with Fanon's *imago* as weapon and security blanket. In the cultural imaginings of the white mainstream blacks symbolize sexual criminality. In this way, Fanon's generalization seems accurate, particularly if one restates it: "Whoever says *Negro* says *rape*." That is, rather than reduce sexual violence to a type of being, one reduces the being to a type of violent act. For Fanon, whites in general are "convinced that the *Negro* is a [sexual] beast"; describing Martinican attitudes toward the Senegalese, Fanon also suggests that Negroes are similarly convinced (165). These images are replayed as a cultural constant both in fictive and factual accounts of reality: "European culture has an *imago* of the *Negro*. . . . on the screen the *Negro* faithfully reproduces that *imago*" (169). Fanon's reference to the movie screen can be extended to television and local and national crime news, in which the criminal incidents chosen for illustration seemingly prove the stereotype. Today, more than a few blacks and nonblacks suffer from a phobia of male blacks.

Ordinary violence is black on black, white on black, or white on white; extraordinary violence is black on white in mainstream representations or white on black in subaltern representations. Within these constructions, the rare is the most reprehensible, the symbol is the norm, and all are invited to express rage and fear as responsible acts. Even though state protection, if and when it comes, is desperately welcomed, it is not necessarily a manifestation of the state's interest in people's safety. Protection appears and disappears with the whims and interests of the state, as it regulates or deregulates violence, funds or defunds violence and anti-violence programs. Many seem to have given up on any hope of adequate state protection from and prevention of violence, particularly those who live in communities represented as either violent or deviant. The safety of captive communities rarely seems to coincide with state concerns. Safety becomes, like protection, a commodity that is sold to those who can afford to purchase it (or a possibility for those who demand it).

Conclusion

Today, women and people of color are invited to participate in determining legal action within the context outlined by the state. Feminist and antiracist perspectives on violence have influenced the media and laws

on prosecution. The days of whites-only and men-only juries are past. Increasingly, women and subaltern ethnic peoples take part in trials as judges, district attorneys, and prosecutors. Wielding the state's police and prosecutorial powers, they assume and project the impartial objectivity of institutionally authorized voices. Where legitimacy relies on conservative ideology, however, the mainstream acceptance of feminists and blacks depends on their mirroring and masking of dominant biases. Speaking authoritatively may require asserting state fictions as fact. The appropriation of black and/or women's voices and bodies allows state prosecution to be colorized and feminized. When the state is feminized or racialized as victim, it garners a sympathy that deflects from its misrepresentations of sexual violence and its own implementation of violence. More often than not it is safer and more socially acceptable to participate in rather than oppose state prosecutorial whimsy concerning sexual and racial violence.

Sometimes indictments are just; other times they evoke morality plays in which symbolic rage incites and executes its own violence, rationalizing punishment as a form of protection. Supplanting the original violent act, prosecution carried out by a mob, the police, or the court may create new forms of violence. This kind of abuse differs from social violence in its hegemonic moralism and uncontested legitimacy. The historic, symbolic prosecution of sexual violence used as a weapon of terror against blacks has left a peculiar legacy for contemporary society in which the black remains linked to the image of concupiscence and violence. The fact that blacks are accused of being sexually violent and promiscuous has suggested that they have a greater "invulnerability" to injury that in turn has rationalized antiblack violence. Portrayed as naturalized by violence and impervious to pain, blacks allegedly invite abuse.

Valorizing the state as the natural prosecutor of and protector from violence requires ignoring its instrumental role in fomenting racial and sexual violence. Like the family, the state "protects" itself from exposure and confrontation by discrediting or muting stories (and erasing them in historical texts and news sources) that denounce the caprice in punishing sexual violence as spectacle. Stories that condemn sexual and racial violence are probably perceived as most disturbing, for they contest claims to moral legitimacy by the state. The possibility of criticizing prosecutorial performance that is shaped by racism and sexism while at the same time supporting survivors is an anomaly in the sporting arena of the court

room. There, polarizing school-yard challenges mandate the choosing of sides: either one is pro-prosecution (pro-survivor and hard on crime) or pro-defense (anti-survivor and soft on crime). To question the function of punishment, rage, and symbolism as prerequisites for justice is cast as morally dubious.

The state defines the terms for the prevention and prosecution of and the protection from sexual violence. Its prosecutorial performances deflect social concern from the overwhelming majority of sexual-violence cases: most sexual assaults go unreported; only a fraction of reported cases go to trial; of those litigated, few end in convictions. Most often, the assailants are known by the victims/survivors and share their ethnicity, economic status, classroom, neighborhood, or even home. As a masking technique for states that refuse to grapple with the specificity of sexual violence, sensationalized show trials shield the state from critiques of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism in court. The mythologies unchallenged during such trials obscure racial and sexual violence.

Rather than advocate vigilante or privatized police forces (as diverse as white gangs or the Nation of Islam's patrols of urban neighborhoods), one could explore other forms of civic response to social and criminal violence—for instance, those guided by human-rights covenants. Many, particularly disenfranchised peoples, stand on shifting ground in relationship to state prosecutorial powers. Sometimes, police brutality and court malfeasance would seem to caution against coperforming in spectacles of rage; yet media demonization and social hysteria around crime support acquiescence to state violence as protection and prosecution. Fearing vulnerability to violence, some may yield to myth and moralizing in a state (which is unwilling to fund prevention, treatment, and support services adequately) in order to gain promises of safety and performances of selective, ritualized punishment. Front-row seats or stage roles in televised punishments offer the spectacle of show trials, which we may watch with the conviction that we are closer to the hunters than the hunted.

Sidebar: Private Traumas and Public Spectacles

Late for a women's soccer meeting in Manhattan, I accepted a ride after a night class with a fellow graduate student who assured me that he was heading my way. He was African, unlike the nameless white

man who stopped at the San Antonio bus stop to offer me, a seventeen-year-old late for work at the mess hall, a lift. When I said to both that I would take public transportation, both insisted there was no inconvenience—each was going in my direction. Like the white good old boy, the black grad student drove several miles before hooking his arm around my neck to choke me. (More literate than the Texan, who only used physical force, my classmate attacked my resistance with psychoanalysis: “You probably prefer white men”; “You are incestuously enamored of your father.” Unlike the “cracker” who pulled the car off the highway into a wooded area, the “brother” parked along north Central Park to rape me. While I was struggling with him, a patrol car pulled up alongside the car. Two white cops eyed us from behind their rolled-up window. Startled, we stopped fighting long enough to stare back. In those few seconds, I never thought to ask the police for help; they never offered protection. As they pulled away, I opened the door and began running, at 10 p.m., alongside the park toward the subway. Unlike my escape out of the woods onto the Texas highway, no black woman with two children in her car insisted on helping me as my assailant cruised beside me, apologetically assuring me that now he would drive me to work. (I missed work that day at the air-force base just as I later missed my meeting that night.) When I tried to report a white stranger’s attempted rape, the police who came to the house reasoned that because it would be his word against mine, it was not worth filling out an incident report. Seven years later, I never bothered to report a black colleague’s attempted rape. Instead, I just reminded myself to find other ways to travel.

Like Tikki and Norma, many might locate alternate routes, finding and believing themselves to be beyond state protection. Self-reliance, strained through fear and isolation, merely feeds rage and despair. Organizing a different route for travel also involves community. Building community resistance to violence is a way to move away from the symbolic rage of state prosecutorial performance, the titillation of racial and sexual spectacles, the criminalization and social neglect of racialized groups. In family tales and state spectacles alike, private and public violence intersect. Studying family stories and social analyses, one might construct narratives of racial and sexual violence that map roads other than those demarcated by the state. In fact, one could conceivably sketch the context for personal and

political relationships to community and state that forgoes indifference to pain, grief, and justice.

Rarely told, frequently exploited, and rejected, stories about racial and sexual abuse are often unable to achieve even the best of intentions. Left dangling, narratives about personal violence fade as grief and anger recede to half-memories. Typically, many label their nonfictive stories as painful and embarrassing: rape, incest, domestic abuse. For poor and/or black families, the stories depict victimization by police, courts, and the occasional lynching mob. Unless implicated in the story, outsiders, spectators, and foreigners prove more attentive and sympathetic listeners; and yet, having little invested in the telling, many feel no obligation to respond beyond listening. Families and states often discourage storytelling that reveals their vulnerable proximity to, as well as culpability in, violence. For example, speaking out about incest or sexual abuse threatens to expose the less-than-ideal family or state; ironically, telling the truth about family violence is viewed as destabilizing the family just as vocalizing state violence and human-rights abuses is portrayed as destabilizing the state. Family and state may shield themselves from confrontation by curtailing the voices of protesters who seek an end to abuse. Victims and survivors are encouraged to protect others with their silences. Although this leaves them vulnerable to old abuse and denies them their own right to rage, it likely guards them from newer abuses such as social condemnation, isolation, and punishment for exposés in the classroom, courtroom, church/mosque/temple/synagogue, at the dinner table, as well as in the media, military, or government. Sometimes, a family or state deflects attention from its flaws by projecting a victim as its nemesis; then punishment becomes performance, electrified by symbols that promote the continuity of the romanticized entity. Such punishment, like the silencing of private stories of abuse, distances the victim from vulnerability and grief. The “some things better left unsaid” are generally those that cannot be glorified or celebrated by the idealized self, family, race, or nation. Likewise, the most marketed or exploited stories of violence are those that do not threaten fragile idealized identities.

At the intersections of racial and sexual violence, recounted in family tales, social texts, and state scripts, tragedies are dragged across borders, crossing over into silent denials or public spectacles. Whether abuse is silenced or sensationalized, each response erases grief and denies protection.

Building sites for mourning and safety, one may resist the muting and marketing of pain. To demystify racial and sexual mythologies as well as social contempt for and indifference to the violence in black and female lives, one must analyze state scripts in which symbolic rage masks stereotypes and contempt while suggesting that punishment serves as protection.

Personal tales and public texts interweave family stories and social spectacles. These narratives clear a space for reflecting on the ways in which private tragedy inspires and mirrors public horror. In their clearings they may create a moral for audiences, generating some compassionate thought or action: compassion brings the possibility of identification, and with it struggle, with the subject suffering—a connection that suggests more permanent ties than pity where one might feel superior to and so alienated from the sufferer. These tales are told in call-and-response fashion, with expectations, even demands, for action. Often these expectations are frustrated. Even for those who escape apathy, agency is problematic. Some survivors, particularly survivors of institutional violence, doubt their own strength and collective power; consequently, exhortations that they assume more responsibility in a world that is irresponsible enough to abuse them seem burdensome and accusatory. Nevertheless, many survivors speak about and organize to counter violence. Occasionally, their stories about sexual and racial abuse are received as instructive. On other occasions, these narratives are used to depressurize and legitimize everyday rage against violence and any group associated with inflicting it.

Sometimes those who reveal their stories see them turned into spectacles. The price for acceptance of the story, no longer rejected, is the marketplace. Functioning with the worst of intentions, commodified tales entertain and, in their performance, encourage detachment and passivity, the unengaged as amorally amused or morally bemused spectator. As discourse in community gatherings, news commentary, or surrogate event, the spectacle replaces political actor with social spectator. Those raised to “never put their business in the streets” avoid becoming spectacles and flee associative contamination from the indiscreet or unlucky. If ever implicated in the tale or confronted by an urgent request for assistance, thus cornered and unable to assume the role of detached viewer, one can suppress the story, deny its validity, and erase its danger. Seeking a safe haven as audience, shielded as an anonymous spectator, one can wield an illusory control over the tragedy-as-spectacle, turning pain into performance. This

search for anonymity as a measure of safety in turn patterns our speech and acts. Many, even survivors, rarely discuss as engagés the events that highlight their vulnerability to violence. Those who do might find that sharing stories provides an essential narrative, an ethical text that deprivatizes pain to border-cross into public activism.