

working class was a triumphant moment in the development of racist ideology.

Racism has always drawn strength from its ability to encourage sexual coercion. While Black women and their sisters of color have been the main targets of these racist-inspired attacks, white women have suffered as well. For once white men were persuaded that they could commit sexual assaults against Black women with impunity, their conduct toward women of their own race could not have remained unmarred. Racism has always served as a provocation to rape, and white women in the United States have necessarily suffered the ricochet fire of these attacks. This is one of the many ways in which racism nourishes sexism, causing white women to be indirectly victimized by the special oppression aimed at their sisters of color.

The experience of the Vietnam War furnished a further example of the extent to which racism could function as a provocation to rape. Because it was drummed into the heads of U.S. soldiers that they were fighting an inferior race, they could be taught that raping Vietnamese women was a necessary military duty. They could even be instructed to "search" the women with their penises.<sup>10</sup> It was the unwritten policy of the U.S. Military Command to systematically encourage rape, since it was an extremely effective weapon of mass terrorism. Where are the thousands upon thousands of Vietnam veterans who witnessed and participated in these horrors? To what extent did those brutal experiences affect their attitudes toward women in general? While it would be quite erroneous to single out Vietnam veterans as the main perpetrators of sexual crimes, there can be little doubt that the horrendous repercussions of the Vietnam experience are still being felt by all women in the United States today.

It is a painful irony that some anti-rape theorists, who ignore the part played by racism in instigating rape, do not hesitate to argue that men of color are especially prone to commit sexual

violence against women. In her very impressive study of rape, Susan Brownmiller claims that Black men's historical oppression has placed many of the "legitimate" expressions of male supremacy beyond their reach. They must resort, as a result, to acts of open sexual violence. In her portrayal of "ghetto inhabitants," Brownmiller insists that

(c)orporate executive dining rooms and climbs up Mount Everest are not usually accessible to those who form the subculture of violence. Access to a female body—through force—is within their ken.<sup>11</sup>

When Brownmiller's book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* was published, it was effusively praised in some circles. *Time* magazine, which selected her as one of its ten women of the year in 1976, described the book as "... the most rigorous and provocative piece of scholarship that has yet emerged from the feminist movement."<sup>12</sup> In other circles, however, the book has been severely criticized for its part in the resuscitation of the old racist myth of the Black rapist.

It cannot be denied that Brownmiller's book is a pioneering scholarly contribution to the contemporary literature on rape. Yet many of her arguments are unfortunately pervaded with racist ideas. Characteristic of that perspective is her reinterpretation of the 1953 lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till. After this young boy had whistled at a white woman in Mississippi, his maimed body was found at the bottom of the Tallahatchie River. "Till's action," said Brownmiller, "was more than a kid's brash prank."<sup>13</sup>

Emmett Till was going to show his black buddies that he, and by inference, *they* could get a white woman and Carolyn Bryant was the nearest convenient object. In concrete terms, the accessibility

of *all* white women was on review. . . . And what of the wolf whistle, Till's 'gesture of adolescent bravado?' . . . The whistle was no small tweet of hubba-hubba or melodious approval for a well-turned ankle. . . . It was a deliberate insult just short of physical assault, a last reminder to Carolyn Bryant that this black boy, Till, had in mind to possess her.<sup>14</sup>

While Brownmiller deplors the sadistic punishment inflicted on Emmett Till, the Black youth emerges, nonetheless, as a guilty sexist—almost as guilty as his white racist murderers. After all, she argues, both Till and his murderers were exclusively concerned about their rights of possession over women.

Unfortunately, Brownmiller is not the only contemporary writer on rape who has suffered the influence of racist ideology. According to Jean MacKellar, in her book *Rape: The Bait and the Trap*,

Blacks raised in the hard life of the ghetto learn that they can get what they want only by seizing it. Violence is the rule in the game for survival. Women are fair prey: to obtain a woman one subdues her.<sup>15</sup>

MacKellar has been so completely mesmerized by racist propaganda that she makes the unabashed claim that 90 percent of all reported rapes in the United States are committed by Black men.<sup>16</sup> Inasmuch as the FBI's corresponding figure is 47 percent,<sup>17</sup> it is difficult to believe that MacKellar's statement is not an intentional provocation.

Most recent studies on rape in the United States have acknowledged the disparity between the actual incidence of sexual assaults and those which are reported to the police. According to Susan Brownmiller, for example, reported rapes range anywhere from one in five to one in twenty.<sup>18</sup> A study published by the New York

Radical Feminists concluded that reported rapes run as low as five percent.<sup>19</sup> In much of the contemporary literature on rape, there is nevertheless a tendency to equate the "police blotter rapist" with the "typical rapist." If this pattern persists, it will be practically impossible to uncover the real social causes of rape.

Diana Russell's *Politics of Rape* unfortunately reinforces the current notion that the typical rapist is a man of color—or, if he is white, a poor or working-class man. Subtitled *The Victims' Perspective*, her book is based on a series of interviews with rape victims in the San Francisco Bay Area. Of the twenty-two cases she describes, twelve—i.e., more than half—involve women who have been raped by Black, Chicano or Native American Indian men. It is revealing that only 26 percent of the original ninety-five interviews she conducted involved men of color.<sup>20</sup> If this dubious process of selection is not enough to evoke deep suspicions of racism, consider the advice she offers to white women:

. . . (I)f some black men see rape of white women as an act of revenge or as a justifiable expression of hostility toward whites, I think it is equally realistic for white women to be less trusting of black men than many of them are.<sup>21</sup>

Brownmiller, MacKellar and Russell are assuredly more subtle than earlier ideologues of racism. But their conclusions tragically beg comparison with the ideas of such scholarly apologists of racism as Winfield Collins, who published in 1918 a book entitled *The Truth About Lynching and the Negro in the South (In Which the Author Pleads that the South Be Made Safe for the White Race)*:

Two of the Negro's most prominent characteristics are the utter lack of chastity and complete ignorance of veracity. The Negro's sexual laxity, considered so immoral or even criminal in the white

man's civilization, may have been all but a virtue in the habitat of his origin. There, nature developed in him intense sexual passions to offset his high death rate.<sup>22</sup>

Collins resorts to pseudo-biological arguments, while Brownmiller, Russell and MacKellar invoke environmental explanations, but in the final analysis they all assert that Black men are motivated in especially powerful ways to commit sexual violence against women.

One of the earliest theoretical works associated with the contemporary feminist movement that dealt with the subject of rape and race was Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case For Feminist Revolution*. Racism in general, so Firestone claims, is actually an extension of sexism. Invoking the biblical notion that "... the races are no more than the various parents and siblings of the Family of Man,"<sup>23</sup> she develops a construct defining the white man as father, the white woman as wife and mother, and Black people as the children. Transposing Freud's theory of the Oedipus Complex into racial terms, Firestone implies that Black men harbor an uncontrollable desire for sexual relations with white women. They want to kill the father and sleep with the mother.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, in order to "be a man," the Black man must

... untie himself from his bond with the white female, relating to her if at all only in a degrading way. In addition, due to his virulent hatred and jealousy of her Possessor, the white man, he may lust after her as a thing to be conquered in order to revenge himself on the white man.<sup>25</sup>

Like Brownmiller, MacKellar and Russell, Firestone succumbs to the old racist sophistry of blaming the victim. Whether innocently or consciously, their pronouncements have facilitated the

resurrection of the timeworn myth of the Black rapist. Their historical myopia further prevents them from comprehending that the portrayal of Black men as rapists reinforces racism's open invitation to white men to avail themselves sexually of Black women's bodies. The fictional image of the Black man as rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous. For once the notion is accepted that Black men harbor irresistible and animal-like sexual urges, the entire race is invested with bestiality. If Black men have their eyes on white women as sexual objects, then Black women must certainly welcome the sexual attentions of white men. Viewed as "loose women" and whores, Black women's cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy.

During the 1920s a well-known Southern politician declared that there was no such thing as a "virtuous colored girl" over the age of fourteen.<sup>26</sup> As it turns out, this white man had two families—one by his white wife and another by a Black woman. Walter White, an outstanding anti-lynching leader and Executive Secretary of the NAACP, rightfully accused this man of "... explaining and excusing his own moral derelictions by emphasizing the 'immorality' of women of the 'inferior race.'"<sup>27</sup>

A contemporary Black writer, Calvin Hernton, unfortunately succumbs to similar falsehood about Black women. In the study *Sex and Racism*, he insists that "... the Negro woman during slavery began to develop a depreciatory concept of herself, not only as a female but as a human being as well."<sup>28</sup> According to Hernton's analysis, "(A)fter experiencing the ceaseless sexual immorality of the white South,"

... the Negro woman became "promiscuous and loose," and could be "had for the taking." Indeed, she came to look upon herself as the South viewed and treated her, for she had no other morality by which to shape her womanhood.<sup>29</sup>