

SEX,  
POWER,  
AND  
SLAVERY



EDITED BY  
GWYN CAMPBELL AND ELIZABETH ELBOURNE

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## SEX, POWER, AND SLAVERY

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# SEX, POWER AND SLAVERY

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*Edited by*

*Gwyn Campbell*

*and Elizabeth Elbourne*

OHIO UNIVERSITY PRESS

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ohioswallow.com  
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25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16      5 4 3 2 1

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Sex, power, and slavery / edited by Gwyn Campbell and Elizabeth Elbourne.  
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8214-2096-6 (hc : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-8214-2097-3 (pb : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-8214-4490-0 (pdf)

1. Slavery—History. 2. Sex crimes—History. 3. Women slaves—Social conditions. 4. Slaves—Social conditions. I. Campbell, Gwyn, 1952— editor of compilation. II. Elbourne, Elizabeth, editor of compilation.

HT861.S33 2014  
306.3'6209—dc23

2014036293

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The editors acknowledge with gratitude the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. They are also very grateful to Rachel Sandwell, Renée Saucier, and Marie-Luise Ermisch for expert assistance; to Joan Sherman for sharp copyediting; and to Gillian Berchowitz, Nancy Basmajian, and Beth Pratt of Ohio University Press for guiding this project to the end with skill and insight.



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# INTRODUCTION

## *Key Themes and Perspectives*

ELIZABETH ELBOURNE

This collection looks at the intersections between the history of sexuality and the history of slavery in broad comparative perspective. The obligation to provide sexual labor was a critical feature of enslavement for women (and to a more limited extent and in certain circumstances for men) in almost every society in which slavery existed. Control of the bodies of the enslaved was central to slavery, no matter the theological or legal underpinnings of particular societies. Ideas about honor and debasement, furthermore, affected how the sexuality of the enslaved was understood and harnessed in a range of different contexts. The obligation of the enslaved to provide sex had implications at every level, whether at the micro scale of individual personal experience or the macro scale of the economics of long-distance slave trades. At the same time, the entangled histories of sexuality and slavery cannot be limited to the sexual interaction between master and slave, nor, indeed, can they be reduced to a history of rape—even if rape was a constant feature of the experience of enslaved women.

A growing body of work in many areas of the world attests to the value of a fuller understanding of the sexual dimensions of slavery, as well as to the importance of reinscribing the history of slavery and colonialism into the history of sexuality. Yet, as the studies in this volume suggest, scholars do not agree about what *kind* of a difference it makes to our

understanding of slavery to take account of the history of sexuality more fully, nor do they share a uniform approach to studying sexuality and slavery. Here, we seek to showcase a range of ways in which sexuality mattered, to look at a number of possible approaches to studying sexuality and slavery together, and to provide the opportunity for contrast and comparison among different societies. The essays in this collection are drawn from many regions, and this in itself invites comparison between various scholarly traditions.

The study of sexuality and slavery is well under way in different regions of the world, even if there are still many areas in which the history of sexuality needs to be more thoroughly understood and many archival silences that may never be filled. The very diversity of this project provides a significant opportunity to bring together scholars whose works might not otherwise be read against one another. Particularly fruitful space for collaboration might exist, for example, between feminist scholars interested in gender and sexuality and others who define themselves as primarily scholars of slavery and the slave trade (despite the important overlap between these categories). Similar opportunities for comparison and collaboration are opened up by bringing work on the Atlantic world into dialogue with work on other regions, including the Indian Ocean world.

#### POINTS OF DEPARTURE

There are thus numerous entry points to the study of sexuality and slavery. It would be foolhardy to seek to provide an overview of the many large and diverse scholarly literatures on which histories of sexuality and slavery in very different places have drawn or might potentially draw in the future. Nonetheless, it may be useful to gesture at some critical questions and methodological approaches that have provided points of departure for at least some of the essays in this collection, before exploring certain overarching themes that the essays seem, despite their considerable diversity, to raise.

In recent years, the impetus to examine the history of slavery and sexuality has come from several directions, perhaps leading to some rather distinct scholarly languages. A great deal of pioneering work, particularly in the Americas, derived from the desire to understand more clearly the experience of enslaved women.<sup>1</sup> Much of this work puts sexual violence at

the heart of the experience of such women.<sup>2</sup> In line with ongoing trends in the field, feminist historians in particular have more generally built on the study of women's experience to analyze the wider dynamics of sexuality, race, and class through the lens of gender, including the dynamics of masculinity. How did ideas about gender and sexuality, broadly conceived, maintain power relationships?<sup>3</sup> The linked fields of women's history and gender history, informed by feminist perspectives, have thus been major points of departure for at least some of the work in this volume. Conversely, sexual violence—the “everyday wound,” in Edward Baptist's evocative phrase—also framed men's experience of slavery, whether as enslaved men unable to prevent masters from sleeping with enslaved women, as masters whose views of enslaved women were shaped by the expectation of sexual dominance, or as male slaves who were themselves sexually abused.<sup>4</sup>

Another key point of departure, overlapping with work on women and gender, has been scholarship on the slave family, informed by, among other things, an interest in the family as a locus both of resistance and solidarity, on the one hand, and of gendered power struggles between men and women, on the other hand.<sup>5</sup> Work on the family opens, in turn, the question of “interracial” sexuality and the formation of what Catherine Clinton, in an American context, terms “shadow families.”<sup>6</sup>

However, as a number of essays here make clear, families and the roles of the enslaved within them looked quite different in many regions outside the Atlantic world, characterized as the latter was by the putatively monogamous patriarchal nuclear family and a sharp distinction (in theory if not in practice) between “free” and “unfree.” Gwyn Campbell and others have argued that the structure of slavery was very different in the Indian Ocean world and that one key difference was that societies in that region were largely characterized by webs of dependence, rather than by a free/unfree binary.<sup>7</sup> In this context, the enslaved woman often, in some sense, joined the acknowledged kinship networks of the patriarch, at times openly bearing his children and at times becoming a recognized concubine or even wife. Although kinship and “family” relationships and accompanying ways of thinking about the family are central vectors in analyzing sexuality in slave societies, sexuality and slavery were woven together differently in societies with different kinship structures.

Another point of departure for some historians in the anglophone world is found in work on gender and empire.<sup>8</sup> A growing number of historians, often but not necessarily also working within an explicitly feminist tradition, have become interested in colonialism and sexuality, with attention to, among other things, sexual relationships between colonizers and the colonized as well as the regulation of sexuality by the colonial state.<sup>9</sup> Although this work tends to start from an interest in colonialism rather than slavery, it raises the issue of how the supposedly “private” realm of sexuality was both a target of an often obsessive interest by colonial states and a critical way in which colonial power was upheld. In other words, this work breaks down the barriers between private and public, and it makes a case for the importance of the control of sexuality to state power.<sup>10</sup> As Gabeba Baderoon points out in her chapter, feminist historians interested in colonialism and sexuality further raise the issue of how ideas about sexuality and ideas about “race” were linked; thus, Baderoon cites Philippa Levine’s argument that ideas about the supposedly perverse sexuality of the colonized were used to justify colonial rule, just as similar ideas were used to justify slavery.<sup>11</sup> But even as the history of colonialism has increasingly focused on ways in which colonized peoples also worked within colonial structures, studies on sexuality and colonialism have raised the central issue of how (and whether) enslaved and colonized women alike were able to turn oppressive structures to their own advantage. In addition, these studies have considered whether talking about agency in this context is simply securing the “fetters of subjection” while “proclaiming the power and influence of those shackled and tethered,” in the words of Saidiya Hartman.<sup>12</sup>

In general terms, as the burgeoning historiography of sexuality and colonialism suggests, the history of sexuality is, of course, an increasingly significant field in its own right. The study of queer history is an important part of the rapidly growing field of the history of sexuality, even if queer history has not yet engaged as much as it might with the history of slavery and of colonialism. In this volume, Ronaldo Vainfas provides a striking example of the effort to mine well-known archival sources (in his case, in colonial Brazil) with new questions in mind, including the life experiences of homosexual people and the legal regulation of sexuality defined as transgressive. Brian Lewis reexamines the life of Roger Casement,

queer antislavery activist and Irish nationalist, with attention to his sexual encounters in colonial contexts. Queer history, with its interest in why certain practices (not necessarily only gay sex) are considered outside some wider social “norm,” also poses questions of why and how certain kinds of sexuality, such as sex between slave and free, might come to be seen as transgressive in the first place.

It might be somewhat artificial to separate various fields of study in approaching the history of sexuality and slavery. Nonetheless, despite substantial areas of overlap between the approaches discussed here, it is also important to underscore that much significant work on women, sexuality, and slavery asks macroeconomic questions or tries to come to some larger conclusions about the structures of enslavement and the slave trade.<sup>13</sup> In what ways did the sexual work of slaves matter economically, for example? Can this help explain why women outnumbered men among slaves within Africa and throughout the Indian Ocean world? Here, there is perhaps an intriguing confluence of interest between certain feminist theorists and economic historians, both interested in sex as a form of labor.

This type of work is part of a long-standing rethinking of the role of women in slavery among historians of slavery and the slave trade. Not least among the macro-level insights offered by this radical rethinking of slavery through attention to gender has been recognition of the fact that the male-dominated plantation slavery systems of the Americas were actually relatively anomalous. In Africa itself, as also within Indian Ocean slave-trading systems and in household slavery in many parts of the world outside the Americas, women were preferred by the purchasers of slaves, and in general, more women than men were both trafficked and used as slaves.<sup>14</sup> Why this was so remains a subject for debate. There is disagreement among specialists over themes such as the relative importance of women’s productive labor (especially in regions of the world, such as Africa, where women carried out the bulk of agricultural labor) versus the importance of women’s reproductive roles. In the current collection, Martin Klein revisits his own debates with the classic work of Claude Meillassoux regarding the relative significance of reproductive and productive labor by women. Other studies point to the economic importance of a slave trade in young women as items of luxury consumption required to perform sexual labor, as well as to the need for women in order to



staff the harems of powerful men in many areas of the non-Christian world, including the Middle East, North Africa, and much of Asia.<sup>15</sup> In an African context, Joseph Miller has made a trenchant case that what mattered most about female enslavement over the long term, or *longue durée*, was that women could be brought in from outside communities and assimilated, allowing households to replenish themselves.<sup>16</sup> In terms of the dynamics of the slave trade, it is also clearly important that women and children could be captured and transported with greater ease, especially in open warfare (when men were often killed and women and children kidnapped). This was a particularly vital supply dynamic in often chaotic and violent frontier zones on the fringes of empires or in congenitally war-torn regions.<sup>17</sup> This, in turn, often led to captive women providing sex and reproduction. At the same time, however, women and children could be sold more readily by their families than could adult men, as debt bondage came to replace direct violence as a key motor in the replenishment of the slave trade in Africa in the eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Much of the work in this volume starts from the standpoint of slavery studies and draws on these and similar questions about economics and material power.

Another critical question arising both from more macro-level work and from textured local studies is that of routes to manumission: how often and in what ways were enslaved women able to use sexuality, especially the fact of bearing the master's children, as a route to emancipation for themselves and their offspring? And did this—to return to the issue of women's experience with which we began—mean that men and women experienced slavery in radically different ways?

In this extensive and sometimes contested work of revision across many fields, the question of the intersections between sexuality and slavery has obviously been a crucial issue. It has not, however, always been foregrounded on its own terms. This volume attempt to do precisely that. To that end, it brings together scholarship on a wide variety of places and time periods, although with a particular focus on the period from the late eighteenth to late nineteenth centuries. The collection also seeks to place male and female sexuality in a common frame and thereby escape the popular (if not academic) equation of "gender" with "women"—an equation feminist historians have complained about since the 1990s.<sup>19</sup> The study of masculinity is decidedly a central aspect of the history of

slavery, and male and female sexual experience in slave societies cannot be disentangled.<sup>20</sup> In sum, this collection, though certainly not comprehensive, tries to represent regional, temporal, and gender diversity while also pointing to some larger trends; furthermore, it is relatively interdisciplinary within the confines of historical studies, as the authors approach the topic of sexuality from many perspectives. The work covers a wide gamut of societies and slave systems, whether the Atlantic slave system and chattel slavery in the Americas, slavery in a variety of forms in Africa, the Indian Ocean slaving system (with its greater orientation to procuring slaves for household labor), the trafficking of prostitutes in the British imperial world, the sale of wives in Qing China, or concubinage within the harem.

The history of sexuality and enslavement should not, of course, be limited to the history of sexual intercourse between female slaves and male masters, even if this is easiest to document from available records (albeit still quite hard to authenticate). A number of chapters in this volume struggle with the question of what it might be possible to know about same-sex sexuality in slave societies, for instance, or sexual relationships between slaves. Broadening the focus helps illuminate complex interactions across societies between slave and free, even among those who were not involved in sexual relationships with one another. To take just one example in this collection, Ann McDougall's contribution argues that in twentieth-century Mauritania, the fertility of slave women enabled and, indeed, underpinned the diminished fertility of "fattened" free wives.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, we must consider what "counts" as sexuality? Is it possible that the enslaved might not have seen a difference between intercourse and the daily invasion of their bodies in other ways informed by the erotics of power relationships? More generally, a focus on sexuality also allows us to raise questions about gendered systems of power in slave societies and how ideologies and material power relationships undergirded one another.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, it must be underscored that slavery is not over (even if it is not always easy to label and identify) and that it remains intimately linked to sexual exploitation. Global sex trafficking provides one modern instance, at least for some historians, as does the covert continuation of household slavery in a number of contexts. The 1956 United Nations Supplementary

Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery placed bonded labor, serfdom, servile marriage, and the transfer of children to the end of exploitation on the same legal footing as chattel slavery, while scholars and international lawyers continue to debate and expand definitions of enslavement.<sup>23</sup> The capture and sexual exploitation of children and young women by militias in conflict zones such as Uganda or the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a further example of the confluence between sexual exploitation and enslavement in a modern context.<sup>24</sup>

#### METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

Before turning to some of the themes raised by essays in this collection, I would like to acknowledge certain ethical and methodological issues, even if they might not admit of easy resolution. Any project of comparison across time and space necessarily raises methodological concerns, but perhaps this is doubly true with reference to a topic such as sexuality and slavery. The broad topic of sexual relations between enslaved and enslaver touches on particularly difficult issues and needs to be approached with sensitivity. At what point is the researcher's or reader's gaze prurient in itself?<sup>25</sup> And how does one amass and discuss information on what has sometimes been termed "difficult knowledge"?<sup>26</sup> This task may not be so different from research on knowledge more broadly; perhaps, in a sense, all knowledge is difficult. Nonetheless, there are distinct challenges in discussing material that may seem to be both particularly repugnant and particularly personal (just as there are challenges in displaying so-called difficult knowledge in a museum context).<sup>27</sup> On a more purely technical level, the broad topic of sexual relations, including the varying meanings individuals and societies ascribe to sex, is often simply quite difficult to research, given a frequent paucity of source material; sparse material is interspersed, furthermore, with telling stories from records such as legal archives that are often shocking but may not be representative. Silences mark the history of sexuality, reflecting both lacunae in historical records and the hush surrounding certain sexual practices in many times and places.<sup>28</sup> Silences can be read, but to do so often requires resort to unconventional types of source material as well as recognition of the fact that not all silences (such as the frequent silences of enslaved women) can be filled with confidence.

Comparison also raises its own issues. Is it, in fact, helpful to compare sexual dynamics across different “systems” of slavery? This current collection has a particularly large number of studies drawn from the worlds of two key trading systems. On one hand are those trading networks that helped knit together an Indian Ocean world where a majority of the enslaved were probably women living in households. On the other hand are those that drew together an Atlantic world where more slaves worked on plantations and on farms than within households and where the majority of human beings imported as slaves were male. Slavery worked very differently in these diverse environments. The current project confronts the inherent risk, familiar in other contexts, of essentializing different systems. Comparison in itself entails the danger of creating reified models and thus of oversimplifying. It also runs the risk of appearing to make value judgments in a field in which orientalism is already prevalent, as many scholars from Edward Said onward have taught us, and in which much crucial evidence amassed by observers was itself premised on what we might call orientalist assumptions.<sup>29</sup> On a more general level, again familiar in other contexts, it is hard to compare across very dissimilar linguistic systems, in which common terms such as *slave* (or even *freedom*) have markedly different meanings.

Yet, despite real pitfalls, comparison of the interaction between sexuality and slavery in widely variant contexts does provide useful insights and questions. Not least is the universal frequency of sex between (in particular) enslaved women and free men: we will suggest, in the pages that follow, that the obligation to provide sex might be seen as a central characteristic of enslavement, whatever the putative taboos against sexual relations between slave and free and whatever the legal frameworks. Comparison also points to the significance of cultural conceptions of gender and sexuality, for example. More generally, comparison is useful as a tool to think with, even if its conclusions can never be taken as definitive. It destabilizes and thus exposes more distinctly the assumptions particular societies take, or have taken, for granted. The diverse case studies here are thus also useful for pointing to local particularity and breaking down the very idea of universal systems.

Given that these are, to some extent, intractable issues, it is not surprising that the authors in this collection approach them differently. With

due attention to particularity and diversity, what are some of the recurring themes, whether local or transnational, that their essays identify?

### BLURRING THE LINES

The definition of slavery has long been a topic for debate among scholars. The study of slavery in comparative perspective, of course, raises the issue with particular force, but it also perhaps points to the futility of seeking a clear definition of *slavery* and *freedom* in all contexts.<sup>30</sup> One might, in fact, suggest that a distinct binary was the product of Western commercialized society, with its need for juridical clarity in the marketplace, in contrast to other societies where fluidity of status was more useful. Be that as it may, if a slave in the Atlantic slave system was defined by being alienable and therefore plainly set off in law (if not in reality) from the “free,” even in this context it makes sense to see a spectrum of free and unfree labor rather than a rigid dichotomy—as suggested, for instance, by the history of masters and servants legislation or the history of convict transportation.<sup>31</sup> In many other parts of the world, the line between slave and free was even less clear. Thus, across Asia and the Middle East, as several chapters in this collection illustrate, the sale of laborers who were not hereditary slaves was common, and this included the permanent or temporary sale of family members by their own kin. But slaves were not always sold as commodities.<sup>32</sup> In all societies, the model of the free person was the male.<sup>33</sup> In the current collection, Joost Coté uses the example of the Dutch East Indies to argue that the colonial discourse of what did or did not constitute slavery served colonial ends, since colonial reformers defined certain coercive labor relationships as slavery and other, more favored relationships as freedom, “thus legitimating the more general condition of ‘unfreedom’ that was colonialism.”<sup>34</sup>

To focus on sexual relations further muddies the juridical line between slave and free in several interesting ways. In many societies, supposedly free women were less free than men in terms of controlling their own sexuality. In many contexts, women in particular status groups had no choice but to provide coerced sexual labor, even if they were not considered slaves. At the same time, even in more overt conditions of bondage, sexual relationships often moved across what were allegedly impermeable boundaries. In some societies, such relationships were not supposed

to happen, especially given the ascription of debased status to enslaved people, even if they were widely and tacitly accepted in reality. Caribbean plantation societies provided compelling examples, combining as they did widespread and often open sexual relations between slaves and masters with a theoretical theological opposition to extramarital sexual relations, including relationships between slave and master.<sup>35</sup> In this collection, Sandra Evers offers a fascinating analysis of peasant society in Madagascar, where those ascribed slave status slept with males who described themselves as masters by the river at night, despite the existence of very strong taboos against such contact and concern over the ritual impurity it was held to impart.<sup>36</sup> In societies with relatively rigid category distinctions (particularly legal distinctions) between slave and free, sexual relationships provided a reality that was messier than the theory and compelled slave societies to come to terms, at least in some minimal way, with the children who were the products of such relationships.<sup>37</sup>

In many other societies, especially those in which monogamy was not a religiously prescribed norm, sexual relationships between slaves and masters were acknowledged and offspring ascribed particular legal statuses, depending on circumstances. A number of essays in this volume point to the codification of the status of slave concubines in Islamic and Confucian law, for instance, including chapters by Abdul Sheriff, Ann McDougall, and Johanna Ransmeier. In these societies, it could be argued, female slaves had more rights and clearer potential benefits arising from sexual contact with masters, as Abdul Sheriff suggests in his contribution, “*Suria*: Concubine or Secondary Slave Wife? The Case of Zanzibar in the Nineteenth Century.”<sup>38</sup> Yet it could conversely be argued that nonslave women tended to have more legal restrictions on their actions; authors seem to disagree on this issue and on whether the codification of rights for slave concubines was or was not a sign of a more humane system. It is also significant that there were many factors in addition to legal custom that determined the status of slave women in particular local hierarchies. In this collection, George Michael La Rue, in his chapter “The Fatal Sorbet: An Account of Slavery, Jealousy, Pregnancy, and Murder in a Harem in Alexandria, Egypt, ca. 1850,” outlines the tragic case of a young Sudanese slave woman in a nineteenth-century Egyptian harem who had a sexual relationship (under unclear circumstances) with her owner. The

wife of the master abused the slave woman and had her severely beaten, eventually even murdering her child; the slave, in turn, murdered the wife and was then executed. However embellished the story (recounted by Charles Didier) may have been, it points to the underlying reality of the frequent powerlessness in social practice of enslaved women at the bottom of racial hierarchies.

Several areas of experience explored in a number of chapters illustrate the blurring of lines between slavery and freedom and its significance with particular force. In the remainder of this introduction, I will first focus on three specific areas, namely, marriage and concubinage, prostitution and sex trafficking, and motherhood and the politics of reproduction. Since slavery was a juridical relationship as well as one determined by social practice, I will in each case consider both legal issues and some of the arguments that the authors make about the much messier nature of lived social realities.

I will then discuss the more scattered evidence provided by chapters in this collection on same-sex sexuality and sexual relationships between slaves themselves. Finally, I will return to the wider themes of what might be termed the “emotional geographies of enslavement” and the systems of honor and shaming around sexual relationships that, I argue, were integral to slavery in a wide variety of settings. In this context, I will also consider observers’ representations of enslaved women and their sexuality, a theme raised by a number of essays in this collection.

#### MARRIAGE, CONCUBINAGE, AND SLAVERY

Across many societies, the experience of enslaved women and the sexual demands placed on them were intimately related to wider views of marriage and the relative degree of freedom wives (and, where pertinent, concubines) knew. Thus, slave women had different kinds of status in societies where wives, concubines, and slaves lived together in separate spaces than in those where slaves were largely separated as a group, allowing living space to be governed dominantly by slave status and race rather than dominantly by gender. The harem has been said by some scholars to have provided a separate woman’s space, for example.<sup>39</sup> Enslaved wives, concubines, and casual sexual partners also had different statuses in societies that sanctioned polygamy as opposed to those that paid lip service

to monogamy. In the former environment, one might argue, the sexual labor of unfree women was more openly acknowledged.

It might further be argued that a sharp distinction between slave and free, or freedom and unfreedom, was a binary juridical model that was being developed in Europe and the Americas in the eighteenth century in part through the experience of struggles over emancipation and debate over the meaning of a free labor economy. That binary did not necessarily apply to European imperial worlds, whether before or after emancipation. An enormous amount of scholarship has been devoted to the reality of the coercive elements of free labor regimes, including the legal coercion of taxation policy in colonial contexts, the imperial use of masters and servants legislation, and the lack of freedom of the indentured laborer. Nonetheless, the discursive binary between slave and free still had an intellectual, political, and legal impact, not least in framing discourses of emancipation. It helped build discursive walls between slave and free communities that otherwise lived very closely together. Is it possible this was particularly true of Protestant societies with strong proscriptions against extramarital sexuality and a heavy stress on the purity of the core community?

Nevertheless, there was certainly an enormous disjuncture between theory and practice when it came to sexual relationships in the Americas. In theory, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Christian slave societies and in a strictly juridical sense only, wives had the obligation to provide sexual labor to their husbands. There was no legal concept of marital rape. Indeed, in the Scottish Presbyterian Church, women could be rebuked in front of the congregation for refusing sex to their husbands.<sup>40</sup> Conversely, in theory, men could not demand sex from women other than their wives, including slave women: such women had no legal or religious obligation to provide sex.

The reality was, of course, quite different. An enormous amount of scholarship has documented the widespread sexual abuse of enslaved women, as well as the opportunities that such sexual relationships opened up for a few women and their children. In his chapter on "Slavery, Sex, and Dehumanization," David Brion Davis convincingly documents the extent of sexual relationships between slaves and masters in the American Atlantic world, including some horrific examples of abuse. Arguably, the existence of the free wife with strong claims to monogamy and the



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