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Moonlight, Magnolias, and Brigadoon; or, “Almost Like Being in Love”:
Mastery and Sexual Exploitation in Eugene D. Genovese’s Plantation South

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Like most eager graduate students on the job market, I vastly overprepared for my AHA interviews, which, thankfully, now seem like a lifetime ago. One of the questions I imagined my interviewers would ask was, what do you believe to be the most important book published in southern history (as I considered myself then as now, first and foremost, a southern historian)? Needless to say, the question was never posed; interviewers showed much greater interest in the more pedestrian tasks of determining what teaching gaps I could fill in their departments and in sizing me up as a collegial colleague. At long last, it seems, I now have an audience and a forum for that long-ignored question, as well as my response.

Professors Livingston and Sinha have offered wonderful, thorough analyses and synopses of the published work of Eugene Genovese and its impact on the field of southern history. Some of what I have to say, therefore, is a mere reiteration of their points. Foremost, what I believe to be Genovese’s greatest contribution to the field is his attentiveness to analysis. As we all know, Genovese relied on many of the sources used by U. B. Phillips, whose work, American Negro Slavery, is considered the first scholarly attempt to grapple with slavery as a historical subject. Whereas the apologist and racist Phillips marshaled the sources, largely the texts written by slaveholders

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themselves, to justify the enslavement of Africans and their descendants ("plantations were the best schools yet invented for the mass training of that sort of inert and backward people which the bulk of the American negroes represented"), Genovese subjected them to a different interpretive analysis, placing them squarely in a Marxist ideological framework. His work ranks among the most intellectually ambitious history ever produced; his efforts to navigate a comprehensive, coherent thesis about the slave experience and the antebellum slave economy through the voluminous sources, and his attempt to comprehend the places of both the master and the slave within the same system, are nothing short of bold, sweeping, and yes, provocative.1

But as thoughtful and important a body of work that Genovese has produced, and despite the admiration it has engendered, I have encountered few converts among my own mentors and colleagues. If anything, I have, over the years, noted significant irritation, impatience, and incredulity, not to mention downright disavowal, among my historian cohorts. In short, while most historians express tremendous admiration for Genovese's intellectual achievement and even have adopted some of his language, few are persuaded by his conclusions, or at least the implications of those conclusions. They counter that his view is monolithic and fails to take into account nonplantation slave experiences; that his work is Manichaean; that he minimizes the impact of the market economy in the slave South; that he minimizes the acquisitiveness of southern planters and the extent to which they were complicit in the global capitalist economy; that his portrayal of slavery remains too romantic; that his treatment of the master class appears too reverential; that it fails to account for regional variation. The volleys continue ad nauseam.

Genovese's work has spawned a plethora of pointed responses to his provocative arguments. The most famous and sustained example, I think, is Jim Oakes’s The Ruling Race. In fact, Oakes devotes several pages in his introduction to framing his own argument in light of Genovese’s work. He then proceeds to forcefully and systematically, with the precision of a skilled surgeon, disembowel Genovese’s theoretical corpus. I trot out the example of Oakes’s rebuke of Genovese to illustrate what I think is the second reason Genovese’s intellectual contributions are among the greatest in the field of southern history: his ability to provoke remains unsurpassed. Who among us wouldn’t be thrilled to have someone structure virtually an entire book around our own ideas and conjectures? Who among us wouldn’t be bursting at the seams to have another historian cite our work as an inspiration, as antagonistic as that inspiration might be? Moreover, Genovese’s influence endures. Roll, Jordan, Roll is over thirty years old, yet it remains required reading for graduate students and continues to force new historians to engage and consider its arguments well into the twenty-first century.2
My own copy of Roll, Jordan, Roll is in pitiful shape, the spine having given out long ago from overuse. Procuring a new copy, of course, would be heresy, as my marginalia serve as invaluable guideposts through the numerous pages of this tome. So I’ve happily settled for the rubber band that holds its innards in place. And it is to this disheveled, mutilated book, and to Eugene Genovese, that I turned recently in researching a project on the history of the rape of black women, admittedly not a topic for which Genovese is known widely. But since no single work on the rape of black slaves exists, I consulted numerous general works on slavery, Roll, Jordan, Roll among them. What I encountered was one of the most blatantly apologetic treatments of slavery in the book, and one of the most misogynistic and least sympathetic discussions of female slaves to be found in the modern literature on American slavery. Genovese crafts a discussion of the sexual abuse of slave females that at once minimizes the suffering and brutality of coerced sex between master and slave and, disturbingly, casts slaveholders as noble Casanovas, victims themselves of a racist system that steadfastly stood in the way of the legitimization of clandestine love affairs between master and slave.

The language Genovese employs in his discussion of sexual exploitation makes for the first tip-off that rape of slave women will be soft-pedaled. To be sure, the very title of the section, “Miscegenation,” implies consensual relations. As Brenda Stevenson has noted, the word miscegenation is a “sterile, emotionless term that often shrouds acts of sexual submission characterized by violence and degradation.” And indeed, Genovese’s choice of words to describe the act of sex between a master and slave blunts much of the heinousness about what was clearly a ubiquitous, despicable practice throughout the slave South: the systematic sexual exploitation of female slaves. Throughout the text, Genovese variously refers to sex between master and slave as, “interracial intimacy” (414), “seduction” (414), “sexual union” (416), “interracial ties” (416), “strong and affectionate interracial relationships” (418), “interracial unions” (418), “meaningful affairs” (419), and, “accommodations” (419). In Genovese’s rendering, white men “took” (419), “slept with” (418, 425), or “seduced” (423) female slaves, whom he refers to countless times as “mistresses” (417, 420, 421, 423, 424, 425), the irony of that term obviously eluding him. His conscious (or unconscious) euphemization of the sex act between master and slave serves a useful ideological purpose: to hint that sexual relations between master and slave were generally consensual, innocuous.

Genovese’s cadre of critics has often pointed to his admiration of the planter class as a major shortcoming of his work. His affinity for them, they contend, has allowed him to minimize their complicity in the slave regime. Nowhere does this become more apparent than in Genovese’s attack of abolitionist claims that the large percentage of a racially mixed population in the antebellum South supplied proof of widespread sexual exploitation by slave owners. At the time he wrote, Genovese
maintained that about three-quarters of all African Americans were of mixed racial background. By contrast, however, in 1860, “only” about 13 percent of African Americans had white ancestry. Buried in an endnote, we find Genovese’s acknowledgment that W. E. B. Du Bois put the estimate between 13 and 25 percent, but the author dismisses the higher figure without substantiation as “probably too high” since Du Bois was only “guessing” (412 n. 3). In fact, Genovese settles on an even lower figure. In all probability, he speculates, “little more than 10 percent of the slave population had white ancestry” (414).

While minimizing the extent of racial mixing among the slave population, Genovese emphasizes the significantly higher percentage of racially mixed “free Negroes,” which in 1850 he estimated at about 37 percent. Why is this distinction so important to Genovese? Because it allows him to maintain that most products of interracial sex were born into freedom, thus ruling out the likelihood that masters had fathered mixed-race offspring, which would have turned up demographically among the slave, not free black, population. While conceding the possibility that some free blacks were born of interracial unions on slave plantations, he argues, “their very freedom suggests that many of the original sexual unions had been other than rape and debauchery” (415). For Genovese, the demographic statistics provide proof that the “plantations hardly emerge from the statistics looking like the harems of abolitionist fantasy” (415). In other words, he challenges assertions that slave masters routinely raped their female slaves.

Genovese works mightily to deflect blame from the plantation masters themselves. He points an accusing finger to southern towns and cities, where “urban life generally moved at a faster pace and in a looser manner” (415). Cities and towns, of course, were highly commercialized and much more steeped in bourgeois values than the “plantation heartland,” so sexual debauchery is more logically associated, in Genovese’s mind, with the decadent culture of the capitalists. But even here Genovese cannot resist making a feeble attempt at contextualizing the purported higher miscegenation rate in racial and gender demographics. White males generally outnumbered white females, he argues, and black females outnumbered black males. White males, obviously therefore, had little choice but to pair up with black females, kind of a “the-demographics-made-me-do-it” defense.

Genovese redirects blame from masters to overseers as the more likely culprits of sexual offenses against slaves. In fact, slave owners actively discouraged sex between overseers and their slave charges, not because such actions were deemed improper or immoral, but rather because they increased the likelihood of “trouble in the quarters” (421). Notwithstanding an employer’s sanctions, overseers sometimes kept “black mistresses or behaved promiscuously with the slave women” (421). Genovese claims that masters seemed less disturbed when the women were “single” and when “the relationship was stable” (421), intimating that women without “hus-
bands” were fair game. White laborers and “local poor whites,” too, shared culpability for raping slaves, though their access was not nearly as unhindered as that of the slave owners themselves. Lower-class whites, Genovese suggests, fathered an undetermined number of mulatto children, although in these cases, Genovese contends incredulously that “the women had the option of refusal” (422). If white men were having sex with slave women, Genovese suggests, we can’t ignore the misdeeds of ne’er-do’-well whites. Such arguments serve as a further exoneration of planters as rapists of slaves.

Yet Genovese’s observations about interracial sex on the plantation betray an inherent contradiction. While he contests abolitionists’ characterizations of the plantation as an antebellum Sodom and Gomorrah, he nonetheless proceeds to argue that occasional sexual relations between master and slave did occur. Genovese employs several strategies to ameliorate the sexual misdeeds of masters. On those occasions when interracial sex took place on the plantation, he explains, the slaves were more likely to be “single” than “married,” categories obviously problematic given the fact that slaves could not marry in the same sense that whites could. Irrespective of the legal status of these women, Genovese finds it less egregious an offense for a master to meddle with an unattached slave female. Here the slave master comes off with honor intact, or at least not so badly compromised. It wasn’t quite so bad to have sex with an unmarried slave female: there is no slave husband to trespass against, to cuckold, to offend (415).

In his treatment of masters who sexually exploited their female slaves, Genovese makes heroic efforts to cast these men as noble but flawed. While base instincts may have motivated an initial sexual tryst with a slave, to Genovese’s mind, the association often evolved from purely physical and lustful to a meaningful and loving relationship over time: “Many white men who began by taking [not raping] a slave girl in an act of sexual exploitation ended by loving her and the children she bore” (415). All too often, “those who began by seeking casual pleasure ended by caring” (419). These were, foremost, men, Genovese empathizes, and he asserts that it “would be hard to live with a beautiful and submissive young woman for long and to continue to consider her mere property or a mere object of sexual gratification, especially since the free gift of her beauty has so much more to offer than her yielding to force” (417). In writing specifically about “fancy girls” from New Orleans, Genovese would like us to believe that these women involved in concubinage with white men “often ended by falling in love with their men, and vice versa” (417).7

Genovese further exonerates slaveholders of their sexual dalliances with slaves by blaming “the system,” if you will. For him, the real crime, the real tragedy, is not the systematic sexual abuse of slave women by their masters, but rather the rigidly racist South that stood in the way of legitimizing illicit, clandestine relationships. He laments the “tortured circumstances” under which “‘caring,’ ‘affection,’
and 'love' could not be simple matters” (419). Well-meaning masters who fathered slave children often attempted to do the right thing by taking care of their mixed-race offspring after death—by manumission or by bequeathing them some level of material comfort or wealth. But strict laws governing manumission frequently stymied their attempts. It was southern society, not the individual master, that stood in the way of a man trying to legitimize and provide for his slave family and kin. Genovese is convinced that the “tragedy of miscegenation lay, not in its collapse into lust and sexual exploitation, but in the terrible pressure to deny the delight, affections, and love that so often grew from tawdry beginnings” (419). White slaveholders, like their slaves, were victims of a closed social system comprised of racial boundaries that precluded master and slave from acknowledging their feelings for one another. Here Genovese conveniently forgets that these planters were indeed the beneficiaries as well as the propagators of the very system he claims was holding them—and their relationships—hostage.

Genovese portrays slaveholder David Dickson of Georgia as one such victim. As Genovese recounts, Dickson emerged as one of the most celebrated leaders in the southern agricultural reform movement. Dickson, having lost his wife early in life, “took a [slave] mistress.” The two lived openly with their child, which cost him respectability in an intolerant white community. Dickson, in this adulatory account, becomes a martyr to his passions and affections. Genovese’s illustration would have us believe that Dickson sacrificed social respectability and a place of honor in his community for the love of a slave wife and children. He willingly paid the price with “social disapproval” (417–18).

A more recent analysis of this same case offers a very different, nonheroic view of Dickson and his actions. The slave Dickson raped—in Genovese’s narrative, the “mistress” Dickson “took”—was twelve years old. According to family oral history, Dickson, a large and heavyset man, aged forty, was riding across his fields one day in February 1849, when he saw Julia, a “great pet” of his mother’s. He rode up beside the slave girl, swung her onto the back of his horse, and, “that was the end of that,” according to a descendant. Julia purportedly never forgave Dickson for sexually assaulting her at so young an age. We also know that Julia’s pain was most likely compounded when the child born of this sexual assault was taken from her soon after she was weaned and placed in Dickson’s mother’s room. The child, a daughter named Amanda America, was then raised with many of the privileges of a free child, such as learning to read and write. But the life that daughter Amanda led was not one shared by her slave mother. Julia lived in separate quarters, not in the “big house” with daughter and lover, as Genovese implies. While she certainly occupied a special if not privileged status among the other Dickson slaves, Julia most assuredly did not receive treatment as a “wife” in any formal respect. Perhaps the greatest evidence of this was that in 1871, long after Julia had been freed from slavery, Dickson
married a white woman. While law precluded him from marrying Julia, he could have continued a discreet, clandestine relationship. He did not. Genovese's representation of the plantation South explicitly and deliberately avoids contemplating the predatory acts of men like David Dickson or Linda Brent's master, Dr. Flint, instead conjuring up a kind of antebellum Brigadoon, a mystical place where forbidden love sprouted and flourished against all odds. One can almost visualize a white master—whip by his side, smile on his face, and love in his eyes—frolicking on stage, embracing a smitten, beautiful mulatto in a low-cut blouse exposing ample cleavage (for Genovese, all the female objects of white men's affection were beautiful), belting out a duet, "Almost Like Being in Love." Instead of reading about twelve-year-old "Susan Black" who was coaxed into a shed by her master and then raped, we read the account of one ex-slave who recalled that his own white father had been "a fool" over his slave mother (418). Rather than citing the case of the Missouri slave Celia, raped by her new master en route home from his trip to purchase her and then hounded sexually for the next several years, Genovese relies on a quote by James Dallas Burruss, the son of a master and a slave, who claimed that his parents, "lived together in affectionate and respectful companionship" (418). Genovese's portrait of interracial sex between master and slave thus ignores voluminous evidence that slaves endured unspeakable horrors and degradation at the hands of their masters.

Truth be told, however, a number of recent scholarly works on the topic of interracial sex indeed hold out the possibility (or probability) that something akin to love (affection, fondness, or caring) did characterize some relationships between master and slave. The most famous example, of course, is the Thomas Jefferson–Sally Hemings liaison. While Jefferson himself revealed little to nothing about the nature of the relationship, we know that all of Hemings's children, as well as Hemings herself, were eventually freed and that the children and Hemings enjoyed special privileges at Monticello, namely light workloads. Recent historical works have revealed the existence of numerous interracial relationships between white masters and slaves that could be characterized as affectionate, even loving. Genovese is right to point out that attempts to manumit or provide for racially mixed slave children might indicate paternal affection and responsibility. But as Philip Morgan cautions, mere suspicion or innuendo is insufficient in definitively establishing the true nature of these relationships. "Shadow families," as Morgan calls them, did in fact exist in the slave South. The point here is not that Genovese was wrong about masters forming sometimes meaningful relationships with female slaves; further study has established that at times they certainly did. Rather, Genovese's analysis errs in two ways. First, it fails to acknowledge a wider range of sexual behaviors between master and slave, a spectrum that included forms of extreme, sadistic, and degrading sexual violence, as well as the less overt forms of sexual coercion and extortion. And
second, it incorrectly takes the position that sexual assault by the master remained uncommon and out the ordinary.

To be sure, Genovese couches his argument with qualifiers and disclaimers. “Enough violations of black women occurred . . . to constitute a scandal and make life hell” (415). Similarly, he concedes that a majority of slaves born to slaveholders were in fact not freed as gestures of fatherly affection or humanity (416). But to my mind, such disclaimers make for mere window dressing, a strategic feint. One need only to look to the substance of his argument to see that such begrudging acknowledgments remain obligatory and hollow. “The frequent charge that slaveholders and overseers seduced or forced most of the young, sexually attractive slave girls [again, these women are always good-looking], appears to be a great exaggeration” (422). The question for Genovese is not whether masters raped their slaves. Most didn’t. Rather, for him the question is, why didn’t they rape them more frequently? By framing the question thus, he tries to make the case that what stands out about master-slash slave sexual relations is the restraint demonstrated by slave owners. “The problem is to explain why it did not go much further” (423). Here Genovese considers the occasional resistance by a female slave and/or her husband as a factor, but for him this proves an insufficient explanation. For Genovese, the answer lies in the extraordinary sexual self-control demonstrated by southern slave masters.

To make his case, Genovese contrasts the practices of Latin American slave masters with those of their southern counterparts. In Brazil, for example, Luso-Brazilian elites flaunted their numerous sexual relationships with slaves. Masters’ sons would have suffered ridicule had they not sexually exploited the female slaves at their disposal. Ubiquitous sexual exploitation, by contrast, was not the norm in the antebellum South, argues Genovese. What explains this cultural difference? Genovese grounds the explanation in the Protestant Reformation and its Puritan strain of religious resistance. Protestant countries, such as England and Holland, lost much of the exploitive impulse embedded in the seigniorial culture, whereas Portugal, which continued to embrace Catholicism and seigniorialism, experienced no such revolution in sensibilities. By the nineteenth century, adherence to marriage vows and companionate marriage became the norm in the South. Infidelity and sexual indiscretion culturally fell out of favor, or at least were driven underground. So while southern slave owners were certainly capable of sexually exploiting their slaves, and sometimes did have sex with their slaves, they didn’t enjoy it. “Typically, the slaveholders could not take [again, not rape] their black ‘wenches’ without suffering psychic agony and social opprobrium. They could not sow their wild oats with the happy abandon of the Brazilians” (424). The thought of having sex with their slaves proved so unsettling, so self-loathing, that masters morphed into “prudes.” Sometimes, though, even the prudes could take “their share,” but they did so with an “uneasy conscience” (425).
The plantation master, unwrapped by Genovese in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, then, is essentially a well-meaning, good guy who (a) doesn’t have sex with his slaves; or (b) has sex with the beautiful slaves, but only in response to natural impulses, then falls in love; or (c) reluctantly has sex with his female slaves, but then feels really badly about it. This hypersympathetic version portrays masters who sexually exploit their slaves as mere humans who fall victim to their own passions or emotions. They have consciences. They’re flawed.

So what are we to make of Genovese’s depiction of interracial sex in the plantation South? On one hand, criticizing Genovese for falling short on gender analysis in the slave South seems rather like shooting fish in a barrel. At the risk of mixing animal metaphors, I feel rather sheepish about calling Genovese on the gendered shortcomings of his important work on southern slavery. Of course he fell short. Writing in the early 1970s, he didn’t have the full benefits, including the analytical tools, of burgeoning women’s history that was only beginning to take root. Hence his work lacks the attendant gender sensibilities. In fact, other important works on slavery that came in the wake of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, John Blassingame’s *The Slave Community* and Herbert Gutman’s *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1715–1925*, for instance, were also soundly pronounced deficient by women historians for privileging black masculinity at the cost of a diminished analysis of and sensitivity to black women.15 On the other hand, I have a carp in my sights, and I’m taking aim. I argue that Genovese’s treatment of master-slave sex provides an important microcosm for his larger themes. Importantly, it is his analysis of such relationships that expose the vulnerability and fallibility of his most forceful claims. In other words, I pose, how might a gendered analysis of master-slave sexual relations affect some of Genovese’s hallmark contentions?

Genovese’s refutation of masters’ sexual exploitation of their slaves is essentially required if he wants to convince us that the planter class is comprised of antibourgeois, precapitalist gentlemen. What, for instance, of the utterly crass suggestion that masters had sex with their slaves foremost to enhance their own wealth through slave progeny? Genovese had a great deal theoretically invested in denying that profit motivated masters’ sexual activities. This is why he trots out the testy exchange between William Gilmore Simms and Harriet Martineau, who alleged that masters had an economic incentive to impregnate their female slaves. Simms, of course, denies such a charge, asserting that the “rule that the child shall follow the condition of the mother is not a stimulant to licentiousness among the whites” (416). Acknowledging slaveholder complicity in the mixed-race population would prove tantamount to admitting the possibility that the very thing motivating the thoroughly capitalist businessman—profit and wealth—may explain why a master had sexual
relations with his female slaves. The thought so repulsed Simms, and Genovese, that mere denial seemed insufficient. Not only did they proclaim Martineau’s assertion untrue; both defenders also countered with an example of anticapitalist behavior by way of an exclamation point: “The greater number of Southern mulattoes have been made free in consequence of their relationship to their owners” (416). Flouting financial self-interest, masters manumitted their offspring and thus willingly forfeited personal wealth in favor of paternal affection.

Widespread sexual exploitation of slaves at the hands of masters would be difficult if not impossible to contemplate in Genovese’s paternalistic, precapitalist antebellum world. If what made the slave labor system distinct, in part, from northern industrial capitalism is the lack of exploitation, then how are we to consider sexual access to slave workers? The work of Christine Stansell and others shows that an increase in sexual exploitation and assault came as a direct outgrowth of the spread of wage work, commercialization, and urbanization.\(^1\) If slave women were at risk sexually, just as working-class women in northern cities were, perhaps there was less distance between the regional cultures than Genovese would have us believe. If capitalist employers of northern areas were lecherous toward and exploitative of female wage earners, Genovese would have no choice but to deny the sexual abuse of slave women on southern plantations. Genovese takes it one step further, though. Not only does he deny that masters raped their female slaves; he argues that they exercised their paternalistic protections when overseers overstepped their bounds and made sexual overtures to slave women. On the infrequent occasions when masters did foray into sexual relations with their slaves, he denied that the relations were purely sexual in nature. He needed to infuse them with great affection. Without such an explanation, master-slave relations were no different—no better—than employer-worker relations.

The master class, for Genovese, serves as the antithesis of the acquisitive northern industrialists. His analysis of interracial plantation sex furthers this ideological agenda. The southern slaveholder’s seigniorial morals and ethics stood in contrast to the avaricious self-interest of the northern capitalist. The behavior of the planter—admirable, honorable—distinguished itself through its restraint. Masters rarely succumbed to sex with their slaves, despite temptations, but on those rare occasions when libido triumphed over reason, a loving relationship often bloomed in consequence. Such reasoning, however, betrays an internal contradiction. In his Herculean effort to depict masters’ interests in slave women as sexually indifferent, Genovese comes dangerously close to describing bourgeois values: self-discipline and, when that failed, romantic love. In his descriptions, the southern masters look very similar to their northern counterparts.\(^1\)

Conceding the existence of pervasive and systemic sexual exploitation on the plantation not only depicts a South not all that different from the North but slave
masters who don’t look all that different from northern businessmen as well. It fatally undermines Genovese’s notion of paternalism and how it functioned in the slave South. Central to Genovese’s definition of paternalism is reciprocity: master and slave shared a set of mutual obligations. The master, mindful of duties required of his position, provided protection and respected certain “rights” that slaves customarily demanded. Slaves, in return, acquiesced as dutiful and obedient servants. The master-slave dynamic hinged on the slaves’ acceptance of this paternalistic bargain. Implicit in this arrangement, therefore, is the slaves’ consent and acceptance. This understanding made possible the recognition of the slaves’ humanity (4–7). Consider now a master’s rape of a female slave. The master no longer emerges as the protector, but as the predator. He violates a woman’s unspoken “right” not to be taken sexually against her will. Unwilling targets of sexual abuse, slave women, withhold consent. A master-rapist thus violates, not upholds, the very tenets of paternalism. It is not a slave’s humanity that emerges in this scenario, but rather degradation and exploitation.

A master’s rape of a female slave thus depicted the slave system at its worst. It undermines Genovese’s claim that paternalism “protected both masters and slaves from the worst tendencies inherent in their respective conditions” (6) and instead exposes it as a sham behind which masters hid sexual violation of their purported charges. For Genovese’s paternalistic ethos to be credible, the relationships between white masters and black slaves must be reciprocal, else the edifice of paternalism collapses. Furthermore, institutionalized sexual exploitation of female slaves presents a problem for Genovese’s assertion that “paternalism created a tendency for the slaves to identify with a particular community through identification with its master” (6). What better illustration of this than a female slave falling in love with her oppressor? It is in his study of female slaves, in particular their sexual relationships with their masters, that Genovese inadvertently comes close to embracing the argument of Stanley Elkins, whose work Genovese otherwise staunchly refutes. Like the prisoner who identifies with his captor, so, too, the slave identifies so closely with her master that she falls for him romantically. And that is hardly paternalism.

None of this, of course, sees the light of day in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Perhaps there is no greater shortcoming in Genovese’s treatment of interracial sex in the plantation South than the absence of a female voice. With good reason. The inclusion of a slave’s perspective, and consideration of unwanted sex between a master and slave, would jeopardize Genovese’s theoretical conclusions. The best way to come at this is to imagine how a gendered analysis of master-slave sexual relations in the plantation South would revise Genovese’s findings. What better way to achieve this than to turn to the stories of slave women themselves?

Many sources refute Genovese’s claim, implicit and explicit, that masters didn’t force their female slaves into unwanted sex. Melton McLaurin’s book, *Celia,*
forcefully stands testament to one young woman who was driven to murder her master, cut his body into pieces, and burn it in her own hearth, compelling evidence that the experience was so painful, so intolerable that she risked the gallows to end the unwanted sexual abuse. Harriet Jacobs’s poignant account of years spent trying to avoid her lecherous master’s sexual advances do not jive with Genovese’s depiction of honorable, self-restrained masters. Then there is the oft-repeated story of the Virginia slave Sukie, who worked mightily to keep her master at bay. Frustrated at her unwillingness to cooperate, the master ordered her to remove her dress for a whipping. Sukie physically resisted, punching him and knocking him into a hot cauldron of soap.

By failing to acknowledge the existence of the widespread sexual abuse of slaves, Genovese ignores the devastating consequences of slave rape or sexual abuse, which, of course, allows him to contend that material conditions for southern slaves were quite good compared to the treatment of Latin American slaves and peasants and workers throughout the world (49–70). In reality, slaves forced to have sex with their masters often found their home life turned upside down as a result. Slave husbands whose wives engaged in unwanted sex with masters lacked the most fundamental right that, by contrast, served as the cornerstone of white patriarchal families: the right to shield and protect one’s wife. While slave men no doubt understood theoretically that their wives were unwilling partners in these sexual exchanges, some, probably overwhelmed by resentment and anger, nonetheless projected these feelings onto their wives, who thus became the objects of domestic violence and abuse. Emasculated slave husbands, many of whom lived daily with the mixed-race products of these illicit relationships, thus irrationally lashed out at their own wives rather than the abuser-masters themselves. Not surprisingly, as Brenda Stevenson has shown, many slave relationships and families suffered consequences that included alcoholism, abuse, abandonment, and, in some cases, wholesale destruction of the slave family unit.

Master-slave sexual relations also adversely affected the dynamics of the slaveholder’s family, which in turn often made life more difficult for slave women. Many mistresses suspected or knew of their husbands’ infidelity with the slave females and, like angry slave husbands, frequently made the victim herself, rather than the offending slave owner, the target for reprisals. Accounts of mistreatment by jealous mistresses abound in historical records. Some scorned mistresses, like Linda Brent’s Mrs. Flint, lashed out with mere tirades and inquisitions, while other responses broached the criminal or sadistic. Mistresses who blamed slave women for their husbands’ sexual transgressions sometimes resorted to physical violence of varying degrees. Not uncommon was an irate mistress’s demand that children born of such relationships be sold off, thus separating mother and child and compounding a slave woman’s emotional pain. In one exceptionally brutal case, the wife of a
planter who suspected her husband of having fathered a child by a slave slipped into that slave's quarters and decapitated the baby.22

A slave’s emotional devastation, psychological damage, and personal loss, the effects of unwanted sexual coercion by a master, are nowhere evident in Genovese’s conception of plantation relations. By minimizing the extent of masters’ sexual abuse, and by casting interracial sex in the plantation household as consensual, even loving, he ignores the obvious, that sexual abuse of slaves was a form of gender and racial domination and control. Masters used sex as a tool to further subordinate black women. And unless the master freed them—an uncommon occurrence, no matter which man on the plantation was the father—the children produced by these relationships necessarily enhanced the master’s wealth. Sex constituted an important and effective means of social control over female slaves. And importantly, such behavior underscores the brutality and dehumanization of slavery in general and of sexual exploitation in particular. In Roll, Jordan, Roll, Genovese consistently and utterly fails to comprehend how slave owners exercised power over their female slaves. And because he doesn’t really understand this kind of power, the power exercised over women by men, he romanticizes it. In fact, he continually interprets power as love, romanticizing power—and what could be more bourgeois than that?

Notes
5. Genovese is not alone in marshaling these statistics to argue that white masters rarely had sex with their slaves. See also Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 132.

Gauging the percentage of America’s mixed-race population is a slippery slope since racial categories were and are notoriously fluid and subjective.


13. Ralph Quarles of Louisa County, Virginia, maintained a long-term relationship with the slave Lucy Jane Langston, who bore him four children. His white neighbors did indeed ostracize Quarles. Rothman, Notorious in the Neighborhood, 42–43. See also the cases of Thomas Wright of Campbell County, Virginia, who had four children by a slave and freed them all, and George Calvert of Maryland, who likewise fathered a shadow family. Both are related in Morgan, “Interracial Sex in the Chesapeake and the British Atlantic World c. 1700–1820,” 52–84. See also Catherine Clinton, “‘Southern Dishonor’: Flesh, Blood, Race, and Bondage,” in In Joy and Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830–1900, ed. Carol Bleser (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 61.


15. See, for example, Deborah Gray White, Ar’nt I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York: Norton, 1985), 21.


