

Sexuality & Slavery: Exposing the History of Enslaved People in the Americas

A conference at The University of Texas at Austin, November 11- 12, 2011

This symposium places sexuality at the center of slavery studies in the Americas. In many mainstream histories of slavery, scholars have marginalized or simply overlooked the importance of sexual practices. But sexual intimacy comprised a core terrain of struggle between slaveholders and the enslaved. Members of the slaveholding class often intervened in the most intimate areas of slave life. Such intrusions were often linked to the question of how enslaved populations reproduced, literally, wealth for slaveholders. But interference in the sexual lives of the enslaved could also be a tool of power, unrelated to reproduction.

In the face of widespread control, bondpeople, sometimes successfully, worked to obstruct such intrusions, and themselves used sexuality as a weapon in the war to create autonomous lives. However, the search for autonomy was not without conflict; sexuality could also be a terrain of struggle within slave communities, as much as between slaveholders and the enslaved. Amid the confines slavery, black men and women shaped their own experiences, meanings and knowledge of love, sex, eroticism, intimacy and power.

There are methodological and archival challenges to constructing a history of sexuality and slavery, but these issues are true for any history of intimacy. Political concerns have limited research into this particular history: racist interpretations and the widespread, historical stereotyping of black sexuality that dates to initial contact between Europeans and Africans have long distorted this topic, while the fear of continuing such distortions has at times led to a profound silence.

This symposium will demonstrate how scholars can successfully construct histories of sexuality for enslaved people. Presenters will explore consensual sexual intimacy and expression within slave communities, as well as sexual relationships across lines of race, status and power. The use of sexuality as a tool of control, exploitation and repression, but also as an expression of autonomy, resistance and defiance will be addressed. We will discuss the politics of constructing such histories; the archival and methodological challenges to this research; and the regional differences and similarities across the Americas through historical, legal, and feminist frameworks. As we define sexuality broadly--inclusive of consensual intimacy, coercive exploitation, and the range of positions in between--we will seek to complicate our understanding of the intimacy of power.

- [Daina Ramey Berry](#) and [Leslie M. Harris](#),
Conference Conveners

Free and open to the public. [Registration](#) required.

Conference will take place on UT Austin campus at
The AT&T Executive Education & Conference Center
1900 University Avenue, Austin, Texas 78705
[AT&T Executive Education & Conference Center](#)