

Martha Hodes, “The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War” (1993)

Abstract

[Martha Hodes](#), an historian at New York University, teaches and writes about race and gender in the United States during the nineteenth century. In this article she interrogates the origins of the postbellum Southern backlash against black men. From lynch-mob violence against blacks to sexual mutilation of both races, Hodes explores how southern whites tried to re-cement their political power in the post-war period using “a new language of sexualized politics.”

Introduction

In the antebellum South, sexual liaisons between white women and black men threatened the institution of racial slavery in a way that sex between white men and black women did not. A child’s legal status as slave or free followed the mother; therefore, when white women had children by black men not only were racial categories eroded, but boundaries of slavery and freedom were eroded too, as free people of African ancestry endangered racial slavery. At the same time, however, as long as the institution of slavery remained in place, so too did a mostly satisfactory, if at times unreliable, system of stratification.

Although whites invoked ideology about the sexual ardor of black men in the colonial and antebellum periods,¹ antebellum documents reveal that communities of white Southerners displayed some degree of toleration for liaisons between white women and black men under the institution of racial slavery. Black men could be acquitted or pardoned on charges of raping white women; white husbands could be denied divorces even if their wives had committed adultery with black men; and the black men in such adultery cases could go without retribution.²

The shift away from white toleration for sex between white women and black men accompanied the political transformations that came with the demise of racial slavery. The separation of blacks and whites was essential to Southern whites who were

¹ See Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1968; rpt. New York, 1977), 32-43, 151-62, 398-99, 579; George Fredrickson, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (New York, 1981), 104-105; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1988), 291; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1972), 461-462.

² Martha Hodes, “Sex across the Color Line: White Women and Black Men in the Nineteenth-Century American South” (Ph.D diss., Princeton University, 1991), 70-79, 86-101.

determined to retain supremacy after the Civil War; consequently, the “mixture” of people of European ancestry and people of African ancestry became a much more serious taboo. Because it was the men among the former slave population who gained suffrage rights and a measure of political power—and who therefore had the potential to destroy the racial caste system—whites focused on the taboo of sex between white women and black men with a new urgency. Following the war, white anxiety and alarm about black male sexuality reached an unprecedented level of intensity. During the Reconstruction era black male sexuality first became a major theme in white Southern politics, thereby commencing an era of terrorism and lynching.³

This essay examines the white Southern response to sexual liaisons between white women and black men in the years following the Civil War. The intertwining of sex and politics in the minds of white Southerners in the postemancipation South was betrayed throughout testimony taken for the congressional investigation of the Ku Klux Klan in 1871. In these years, the Klan’s actions represented the common concerns of Southern whites who wished to retain a racial hierarchy.⁴ In justifying their acts of violence, Klansmen and their supporters often conflated the newly won political and economic power of black men with alleged sexual liaisons with white women. White women accused of participating in such liaisons were, in turn, abused and assaulted by the Klan. Ultimately, the Klan offered white Southerners a new language of sexualized politics; this language moved away from the white-only rhetoric of democracy and republicanism that had justified the coexistence of black slavery and white liberty, to issue ominous warnings about the perils of racial equality.

Question 1

How does Hodes explain the increased violence against black men in the aftermath of the war?

Question 2

How does Hodes’s description of white reactions to black sexuality in the colonial and antebellum periods support her argument?

The Terrorization of Black Men

Although black women and whites who supported the rights of the freedpeople were also victims of Klan terror during Reconstruction, the greatest violence was reserved for black men. The Klan was most active in areas of the South where the economic disparity and social inequality between blacks and whites was least remarkable. Members

³ Nell Irvin Painter points out the crucial need to study sexuality in Reconstruction politics in her article, “A Prize-Winning Book Revisited,” *Journal of Women’s History* 2 (1991): 126-134.

⁴ Eric Foner writes: “In effect, the Klan was a military force serving the interests of the Democratic party, the planter class, and all those who desired the restoration of white supremacy.” See Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York, 1988), 425.

preferred to gather in areas with smaller black populations such as the Piedmont and upland regions, for the most part ignoring cities, the plantation heartland, most tidewater, coastal, and delta areas, and areas in which white Republicans were a significant presence.⁵

Six young returning Confederate officers had organized the Klan as a secret social club in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1865 or 1866, creating their name from the Greek word for circle, *kuklos*.⁶ The activities of their club soon encompassed the harassment of freedpeople, and by 1868 branches of the organization were established, at least for some time, in all Southern states. Although lacking central control, the Klan's methods were consistent. Tactics ranged from the destruction of property to whipping and maiming, castration, rape, and murder. Because Klan participants early on realized the power of operating as an underground organization, there were few public signs of their existence. Moreover, attacks generally took place in isolated rural areas at night. Attackers disguised themselves, and one group might number about a dozen, although mobs of fifty or a hundred also launched attacks. Klan membership included all classes of white Southerners, but leaders usually were drawn from among the more well-to-do.⁷ The former Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest became the Klan's leader, or Grand Wizard, and state leaders included lawyers, businessmen, journalists, former governors, and future U.S. senators among their ranks. Klansmen were motivated by the goal of white supremacy, most concretely manifested in white control of formal politics. Members claimed to guard against insurrection by freedpeople, deter crime, punish corruption, and protect against "lawlessness."

Klan victims had no effective legal recourse until as late as 1871.⁸ Anti-Klan laws passed by state governments proved nearly impossible to enforce; the use of military power was slightly more effective. On the national level, President Ulysses S. Grant's determination to control the Klan in 1868 (the year in which the violence reached its zenith) did not succeed in arrests and convictions until 1871. White Southerners who disagreed with

⁵ On the geography of the Klan, see Allen Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (Westport, CT, 1971), 64; Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (New York, 1987), 57; David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The First Century of the Ku Klux Klan, 1865-1965* (New York, 1965), 10, 16; John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction: After the Civil War* (Chicago, 1961), 155.

⁶ On the nineteenth-century Klan, the most thorough work has been done by Trelease; see also Foner, 425-44, 454-59; Wade, 31-111; Chalmers, 8-21; Franklin, 152-73; George Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens, GA, 1984); Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979), pp. 274-82; John Carpenter, "Atrocities during the Reconstruction Period," *Journal of Negro History* 47 (1962): 234-47.

⁷ On the participation of all white classes, see Rable, 30.

⁸ Trelease writes: "Within the traditional federal system, the crimes of the Ku Klux Klan were offenses against state and local law; the central government lacked jurisdiction over murder, assault, robbery, and trespass, and but for the Klan most Republicans would have kept it that way" (p. 383).

Klan tactics for the most part remained silent, and for blacks to defend themselves in any organized fashion would have meant taking up arms; the retaliations, they knew, would be more than they could withstand.⁹

In April 1871, a committee of twenty-one members from both houses of Congress embarked on an investigation of Klan violence.¹⁰ Republicans, the party of Abraham Lincoln and of virtually all blacks in the Reconstruction South, outnumbered Democrats, the party of most white Southerners. For months, testimony was taken in Washington as well as in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. The committee discovered that those in greatest danger of attack were black men who defied white efforts to retain a racial hierarchy: voting Republicans, especially political leaders; labor activists; those who displayed economic independence (landowners, for example); and those who crossed boundaries of the color line, ranging from talking back to forming sexual liaisons. Among whites, Republican officials and teachers of the freedpeople suffered, as did Northerners (“carpetbaggers”) and white Southern Republicans (“scalawags”).

The ordeal of Henry Lowther, a married freedman in central Georgia, illustrates the ways in which white anger at black male political power merged with sexual accusations.¹¹ Twenty disguised Klansmen had come to the Lowther home on horseback one night, but Lowther had managed to elude them. “They said I had taken too great a stand against them in the republican party,” Lowther recalled. “I worked for my money and carried on a shop. They all got broke and did not pay me, and I sued them.” Lowther concluded: “They have been working at me ever since I have been free. I had too much money.” Lowther was jailed on charges of conspiring to murder another black man but was denied a trial. A white man came to warn Lowther of trouble and asked whether Lowther was “willing to give up your stones to save your life,” indicating castration. As Lowther remembered the scene, almost two hundred Klansmen arrived in the middle of the night, and twenty of them carried him away to a swamp. “The moon was shining bright, and I could see them,” Lowther recalled; all the men were Democrats. There the Klansmen castrated him. Did Lowther know the reason for the attack? “Any offense against the law, any breach of the peace, any violence, any insult to any white woman, or anything of that kind?” asked one of the congressional investigators. “No, sir; I never insulted any white woman,” Lowther said. “They said I was getting to have too much influence in the republican party there.” When pressed, however, Lowther admitted that the attackers “said I was going to see a white lady,” but he pointed out that the charge was untrue. The white woman in question had hired Lowther to tend her land, but this charge had not been made when Klansmen had first come for him. According to a Southern white Republican judge, once Lowther had been assured that “he would not be compelled to incriminate himself before the court,” he had admitted “that he had sexual intercourse with a white woman.”

⁹ On this point, see E. Foner, p. 437.

¹⁰ On the committee, see Trelease, pp. 391-98. Although the congressional proceedings did break the organization, few Klansmen were brought to justice; see Trelease, pp. 399-418; Rable, pp. 106-10.

¹¹ For Lowther’s narrative, see *KKK Report*, pt. 6:356-63; see also pp. 430-31.

In the castration of Henry Lowther, and in cases throughout the congressional testimony, white Southerners invoked charges of illicit sexual behavior toward or with white women together with accusations of Republican activism or the de facto crime of successful crops—that is, of political or economic authority and independence.¹² Klansmen could also resort to sexual mutilation for any act that struck them as demonstrating political or economic power on the part of black men, whether or not they tacked on an accusation of sexual misconduct. In North Carolina, for example, a black man was forced to mutilate his sexual organs with a knife due to a labor dispute.¹³

Question 3

Identify the groups at risk for increased violence after the Civil War.

Question 4

Which statement made by Henry Lowther does *not* support Hodes’s central argument?

The Protection and Abuse of White Women

As a specifically male-only organization, one of the Klan’s stated purposes was that “females, friends, widows, and their households shall ever be special objects of our regard and protection.”¹⁴ The Klan’s intention to protect women applied, of course, to white women only. As part of their violent rampages, Klansmen also assaulted and raped black women.¹⁵

A black man merely accused of raping a white woman could be lynched.¹⁶ Charles Clarke of Georgia was charged with raping the white daughter of a Methodist preacher. The judge found insufficient evidence for conviction, and Clarke was returned to jail, supposedly pending further investigation. Thirty-six undisguised Klansmen shot Clarke dead at the jail.¹⁷ Similarly, a white businessman in Georgia described an 1866 case in which a black man was accused of raping a sixteen-year-old white girl. “They caught that negro, tied him to a stake, and burned him in the day time before, I suppose, a thousand people,” he recalled. “They never had any trial, or proof, or anything of that sort, and

¹² *KKK Report*, pt. 6: 474, 476.

¹³ Testimony of John W. Long, *Ku Klux Klan Papers*, William Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, NC (hereafter cited as WPL); see also *KKK Report*, pt. 6:359.

¹⁴ *KKK Report*, pt. 2:364, repeated or paraphrased on pp. 366, 399, 422, 507, 524, 530, 555, 561, 572-73; pt. 13:9.

¹⁵ See *KKK Report*, pt. 2:36-37, 49, 99-100, 148; pt. 6:75, 375-77, 387; pt. 7:914, 1004; pt. 8:80, 547, 553; pt. 9:930, 1188, 1189; pt. 12:1084.

¹⁶ See Richard Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York, 1975), p. 323; statistics for lynchings due to the alleged rape of white women by black men do not exist. See also Rable, p. 98.

¹⁷ *KKK Report*, pt. 7:655-66, 723-27.

they never gave the name of this girl, so far as I ever knew.”¹⁸ By these means did the Klan claim to fulfill the purpose of protecting white women.

Their protection of women was circumscribed not only by race, but by class as well. White women of the lower classes could not count upon white ideology about white female purity and black male aggression to absolve them of illicit sexual activity. White women whom Klansmen and their sympathizers judged to be lacking in virtue were subject to abuse ranging from insulting language to rape.¹⁹ Georgia Klansmen, for example, “shot five balls through Rice Heath, a negro who was living in adultery with a white woman named Griffin. They then strapped the woman across a log, and whipped her so severely that she could not sit up yesterday.”²⁰

Klansmen also practiced the sexual mutilation of white women who lived outside particular boundaries of sexual propriety. In a Georgia case of cohabitation in which the accused black man was castrated, a witness recounted that Klansmen “took the woman, laid her down on the ground, then cut a slit on each side of her orifice, put a large padlock in it, locked it up, and threw away the key, and then turned her loose.”²¹ In North Carolina, a white girl with a bad reputation was assaulted by the Klan; one witness testified that “they took her clothes off, whipped her very severely, and then lit a match and burned her hair off, and made her cut off herself the part that they did not burn off with the match.”²²

Question 5

Which kind of evidence is missing from Hodes’ analysis that, if included, may have provided additional evidence to support her argument?

The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics

The terrorization of black men, the abuse of white women of the lower classes, and the conflation of politics and sex were interlocking elements in the broader sexualization of politics in the Reconstruction South. Despite their own violent actions, both sexual and otherwise, Klansmen took upon themselves the policing of sexual conduct beyond transgressions between white women and black men, indicating the retrenchment of authority on the part of Southern white men dismayed at the outcome of the war. White men whose politics were in accord with the Klan were left alone if they were sexually engaged with black women; indeed, Klansmen themselves were guilty of such transgressions.²³ But Klansmen searched out white men who were their political

¹⁸ *KKK Report*, pt. 6:214. See also pt. 2:8, 142,268-69,310, 315; pt. 6:275, 574, 575, 577-78; pt. 7:611, 1061, 1097, 1190-93; pt. 8:242, 446; pt. 11:364; pt. 12:879.

¹⁹ See, for example, *KKK Report*, pt. 7:1007 (insulting language); pt. 2:4; pt. 8:550-51; pt. 12:652 (physical abuse); pt. 8:549 (rape).

²⁰ *KKK Report*, pt. 7:1096; the quotation was reprinted in the report from the Savannah News, n.d.

²¹ *KKK Report*, pt. 7:1120.

²² *KKK Report*, pt. 2:37.

²³ See *KKK Report*, pt. 6:79, 172; pt. 9:1390-91.

enemies and whom they suspected, or purportedly suspected, of sexual liaisons with black women.²⁴

Grand Wizard Nathan Forrest claimed that the Klan “had no political purpose,”²⁵ and the minority members of the committee agreed, denying “any political significance” to the organization.²⁶ Others, however, linked Klan assaults for sexual misconduct to Reconstruction politics, whether that misconduct was fabricated, rumored, or real.²⁷ When the investigating committee asked a North Carolina Klansman about the purpose of the organization, he said: “It was to keep down the colored un’s from mixing with the whites.” And in what way could this be done? “To keep them from marrying, and to keep them from voting,” he answered.²⁸

The end of racial slavery also meant the potential end of a racial hierarchy. Whites, of course, resisted. For Southern whites, racial hierarchy could be maintained primarily through the development of a rigid color line: if blacks and whites did not have children together, then racial categories could be preserved. Obviously, white men had been largely responsible for the blurring of racial categories throughout the era of slavery; their power of sexual coercion had stemmed from their political, economic, and social authority in Southern society. Now, for the first time, black men possessed political power, as well as opportunities for greater economic and social power. White Southerners thus conflated those powers with a newly alarmist ideology about black male sexuality. Armed with such an ideology, they hoped to halt the disintegration of their racial caste system, as well as the potential political, economic, and social power within communities of freedpeople.

Question 6

According to Martha Hodes, what was the purpose of the Klan?

²⁴ See *KKK Report*, pt. 2:229; pt. 6:82-83, 184, 187, 274; pt. 7:696, 972, 1204; pt. 8:429, 445-46; pt. 9:1297-98; pt. 10:1440-41, 1485, 1523-24; pt. 11:226-27; pt. 12:623-24, 632, 701.

²⁵ *KKK Report*, pt. 13:6. In 1868, Forrest had described the organization as “a protective, political, military organization” that supported the Democratic party and opposed black suffrage; see *ibid.*, pp. 32-35, reprinted from the *Cincinnati Commercial*, August 28, 1868.

²⁶ *KKK Report*, pt. 1:292.

²⁷ Trelease writes: “The Klan’s purpose was political in the broadest sense. It sprang up in opposition to every aspect of Radical Reconstruction: the whole idea of racial equality or ‘Negro domination,’ as white Southerners chose to regard it, economic and social as well as narrowly political” (Trelease, p. 49). Elsewhere in the book, however, Trelease employs a narrower definition of politics, for example, when he writes: “Much of the Klan’s activity was purely racist in inspiration, with little or no political overtone” (p. 35); “Klan raiding was less political in motivation by 1871” (p. 319); and “As always, raids were made for nonpolitical reasons too, although the victims were virtually all Republican” (p. 360). See also E. Foner, pp. 425, 428-30.

²⁸ *KKK Report*, pt. 2:434.

Question 7

Hodes' essay on the Klan during Reconstruction leaves room for further research. For example, Hodes presents freedpeople solely as victims of Klan terror and provides no indication of how they resisted Klan attacks. Find a scholarly [monograph](#) on the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction that is published by an academic press, written by a scholar with an advanced degree in history or related discipline, and properly documented with citations to sources consulted.

Does the secondary source focus on the “first” Klan during Reconstruction? (The Klan, called the “second Klan” by scholars, re-emerged in the early twentieth century amid rising nativist sentiment. The “third” Klan arose in the 1950s as a reaction against the Civil Rights movement.)

- Yes
- No

Is the secondary source published by a university press?

- Yes
- No

Is the secondary source written by a scholar with an advanced degree in history or related discipline?

- Yes
- No

Is the secondary source properly documented with citations to evidence?

- Yes
- No

Question 8

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Enter the bibliographic citation (in Chicago style) below.

Concluding Thoughts

During Reconstruction, Klansmen and their allies denied the existence of the terrorist movement or suggested that the Ku Klux Klan merely existed for the purposes of amusement. Historian Martha Hodes documents the terrors inflicted by klansmen,

especially the sexualized nature of their violence. In her analysis, black southerners and their white allies appear primarily as victims. Other historians, however, have shown that black southerners relied on the ties they forged under slavery to protect their rights during Reconstruction. For example, families and communities solidified through the experience of enslavement mobilized to arm—as best they could—and drill themselves for self defense. White opponents of equal rights argued that the experience of enslavement made black southerners incapable of acting as citizens. Freedpeople’s enslaved past therefore enabled rather than obstructed their ability to claim their rights as citizens. Ultimately, however, freedpeople were outgunned, and they required the assistance of the government to secure their freedoms.²⁹

Source

Excerpted from Martha Hodes, “The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 3 (January 1993): 402-417.

²⁹ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).