

Feminist Sexual Ethics Project

Literature Review by Monique Moultrie

Darlene Clark Hine. "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex." In *Black Women in American History*. Vol 2. Ed. Darlene Clark Hine. Brooklyn: Carlson, 1990, 657–666. First published in *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 3 (1979) 123–127.

Darlene Clark Hine is the John A. Hannah Distinguished Professor of History at Michigan State University.

In this groundbreaking essay, originally written in 1979, Darlene Clark Hine notes that the study of slave resistance has often overlooked the resistance of slave women. Twenty years later, progress has been made in examining women's lives during slavery, but as Hine posited, more work still needs to be done to uncover enslaved women's political, economic, and sexual resistance. Hine begins her article by denoting the dual oppression that female slaves endured as survivors of economic and often sexual exploitation. She argues that scholars have failed to thoroughly examine the gendered aspects of slavery or to raise the "pivotal question of how it must have felt to be forced to nurse and raise her future oppressors" (p. 658). Another aspect of sexual oppression that solely affected slave women was the constructed view of black female sexuality, a construct that was designed to justify black women's sexual exploitation by perpetuating images of innate black lasciviousness.

Despite the daily experiences of enslaved women's sexual and economic oppression, Hine suggests three ways that they resisted: 1) sexual abstinence; 2) abortion; and 3) infanticide (pp. 659–661). She regards slave women's refusal or avoidance of sex with masters or with enslaved men as a method of denying slavocracy's claim to the fruit of their wombs. Abortion was another technique used to deny slave masters economic gain from their sexually exploitative deeds. While abortion appears to have been less common than sexual abstinence, there is evidence that even those women who did not have abortions "resisted even more covertly by aiding those who desired them" (p. 661). Thus, one can assert that a type of female slave conspiracy existed on southern plantations that was designed to limit the master class's economic profit, since after 1808, when it was no longer legal to import slaves into the United States, the slave system depended on slave women's fertility. Perhaps the most damaging of the options of resistance was infanticide: mothers chose to kill their children as opposed to allowing them to endure the horrors of slavery. Again there is great debate at what frequency infanticide was actually used, but Hine argues that it is important to acknowledge that infanticide was considered a valid option for slave women for various reasons, an option worthy of further study.

In the remainder of the article, Hine points out that slave women's resistance to sexual and thus economic exploitation posed a threat to the slave model since in their resistance was the implicit message of a slave's refusal to accept her role in society. This had major political and economic implications, for a "woman who elected not to have children," i.e., through sexual abstinence, abortion, or infanticide, was a woman who "introduced a unit

of psychological heterogeneity into a worldview which depended, for its survival, on homogeneity” (p. 664). Slave women’s sexual decisions represented a legitimate method of slave resistance, a method that should have been considered quite dangerous. In fact, one could argue that if “all the bond women had been of the same mind, how soon the institution could have vanished from the face of the earth” (p. 665). Thus, Hine’s article reminds contemporary scholars of the importance of investigating gendered aspects of slavery and offers a starting ground for discussion of slave women as more than complicit victims. (p. 258).

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