



Creating Sexual Ethics in Slavery's Shadow

Bernadette Brooten is exposing the deep historical roots of contemporary stereotypes as prologue to building new sexual ethics.

By Carrie Simmons

Bernadette Brooten imagines a world in which jurists judge a rape case on its merits, not on the race of the victim.

But in the twenty-first century, an African American woman who is raped is still less likely to report the crime, less likely to have her assailant prosecuted, and less likely to a jury convict.

With support from the Ford Foundation, Brooten has spent the last six years exposing the historical roots of contemporary sexual stereotypes in order to create new sexual ethics.

Her work illustrates how the humanities can help to solve pressing social problems.

"If all rape cases were judged on the merits—and if rape were rare—ours would be a totally different world," says Brooten, the Robert and Myra Kraft and Jacob Hiatt Professor of Christian Studies and professor of women's and gender studies. "Citizens' views of who is virtuous and who is not virtuous would be transformed. We as a society still have doubts about whether African American women are virtuous."

Such doubts have their roots in slavery, contends the MacArthur "genius award" recipient, who directs a research team of scholars, artists, and activists under the banner of the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project (FSEP). Their research has established that sexual abuse and the breakup of families have frequently accompanied slavery in world history. Slaveholders often blamed the enslaved victim, whom they cast as sexually licentious. The research team has also uncovered a disturbing toleration of slavery in the sacred texts and traditional religious laws of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, even in the face of slaveholders having sex with their female slaves.



Bernadette Broten

“Sexual ethics needs history. Slavery corrupts the moral fabric of society, including its sexual morality. Past toleration of slavery still shapes our moral imagination and our individual ethical decisions. In order to heal from the past, we need to confront it,” says Broten. “Antebellum U.S. slavery continues to cast its shadow. Our racism is sexualized, and our sexuality is racialized.”

During U.S. slavery, slaveholders, in an effort to increase their wealth, pressured enslaved women to give birth frequently. But even after slavery, whites sought to control African American reproduction, this time by limiting it through targeted birth control and forced sterilizations during the eugenics movement.

“Echoes of that mindset remain,” Broten says. “Although the majority of people who receive welfare benefits are not African American, the general public pictures welfare recipients as sexually irresponsible black teenage girls and women.

“Such distortions pose a moral problem to the nation at large and to Christians in particular. Christians cannot simply claim that we used to tolerate slavery, but that we no longer do,” says Broten. Although early Christian leaders knew that enslaved women were sexually vulnerable to their owners, they did not penalize Christian slaveholders in the New Testament or in canon law for having sex with their slave women.

Recently, some religious denominations have begun to examine the connection between religion and slavery. The Church of England apologized in 2006 for

profiting from the slave trade, and some U.S. Christian denominations have urged passage of a bill put forth by Illinois congressman John Conyers authorizing a congressional study of reparations for slavery.

Judaism and Islam also continue to live with the effects of past toleration of slavery. For example, early rabbis and early Muslim jurists distinguished between slavery and marriage, and yet used the language of slavery to describe marriage. In rabbinic sources, a free wife, like an enslaved person, is “acquired.” In Islamic religious texts, male “authority” or “dominion” applies both to slavery and marriage.

“I am encouraged that a small group of thoughtful Christians, Jews, and Muslims are looking at this history, acknowledging where things went wrong, and rethinking how we view sacred texts and think about sexuality,” says Broten.

Last fall, the FSEP team presented its research results to overflow crowds at a major public conference held at Brandeis. “Beyond Slavery: Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacy,” included speaker Mende Nazer, a Sudanese woman who herself escaped contemporary slavery. Broten is editing a volume based on that conference and is writing a book on early Christian women who were enslaved or who were slaveholders.

“We can create a world in which owning or controlling another person’s body, whether as a worker or a wife, is impossible to imagine,” she says.

For more information, see the project’s Web site:
www.brandeis.edu/projects/fsep/.

Nineteenth-century
freedom medallion



Roman matron surrounded by enslaved women.

