

# THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE BLACK FEMALE BODY

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**By Ayesha-Jade Reece**

**ABSTRACT** The legal institution of chattel slavery has demonstrated commodity fetishization of the Black female body. White Englishmen have, throughout history, utilized Marx's doctrine to codify the existence of African American women as sexual property for their pleasure. Furthermore, commodity fetishism explains the racism and white superiority that white Englishmen were able to uphold over their enslaved counterparts. African American women were vulnerable to dehumanization, sexual exploitation, premature violence, and rape. Slavery was intended to systematically oppress African American females in appropriating blackness through the transformation of enslaved African American women into forms of capital, which has become an ideological foundation in slave regimes. As these regimes further developed, the commodification of African American females has increased.

## INTRODUCTION

As Marx termed it, commodity fetishism analyzes the commodity applied to society as a whole. Marx uses the term 'fetish', but not in a derogatory manner. He draws upon the colonial origin of the word 'fetish', used to describe religious objects with magical powers. Marx applies the idea to understand the relationship that money has with all other commodities while successfully hiding the social and labour relations with the value in the commodities and money we exchange. Through the commodification or objectification of an African women's body; Englishmen historically attached themselves "to the products of labor, so soon they are produced as commodities, which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities" (Marx 1996, 48).

To understand how the institution of racial slavery has structured capitalism, we must understand the terms *commodification and objectification* and how these terms relate to the enslavement of African American women. These concepts are frequently used to describe the presence of slavery's imprint under capitalist regimes. Under these regimes, economic rationality and racial hierarchy are

associated with oppressive autocracy against African American women. According to Du Bois (2004), "the basis of the English trade, on which capitalism was erected was Negro labor. This labor was cheap and was treated as capital goods and not as human beings" (81).

African American women were considered commodities for economic gain as most of these women were bought and sold from enslavers to improve the profit margins of these early colonial corporations through contemporary exploitation. The exploitation of enslaved African American women was a promising market for white Englishmen since the economic institutions were invested in the sexual exploitation of African American women. Still, enslaved females were neglected and objectified by their enslavers. White men saw the economic labour system of slavery as beneficial to them. It was effortless to "work any Negro slave more than 45 hours a week" (Marx 1996, 185) by turning them into material objects to reconcile as capital.

The trajectory of this essay is divided into four sections. First, I will discuss the origin of racial capitalism by applying Cedric Robinson's and Du Bois' thesis, which uncovers the racist

history of capitalism and its imperialistic frameworks. With that, I will utilize the prominent work of Rosa Luxemburg to support their critique of capitalism. Secondly, I will briefly speak about Celia. *Celia, A Slave* is a narrative that portrays the realities of the rape of enslaved women. White Englishmen viewed young women as sexual property, and children as itemized properties as a permanent part of slavery's economic calculations. Thirdly, I will go into detail about the relationship slavery has to gender by implementing writings from several feminist scholars, such as Angela Davis, Dorothy Roberts, Jennifer Morgan, and Gayle Rubin, while linking their work to the economics of the slave trade that Carl Wennerlind and Thomas Sowell have alluded to. Lastly, I will discuss race in relation to capitalism and how race has justified the sexual abuse of Black females.

## RACIAL CAPITALISM

Slavery is associated with *racial capitalism*, which Cedric Robinson introduced in his book *Black Marxism*. Robinson (2020) challenges the idea that racial capitalism is the "organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions" (2). His analysis observes the social transformation within the late 20th century regarding an anti-Black system. This anti-Black system is illustrated as capitalism, where it possesses articulations of historical expropriations from a racial and colonial discourse that emphasizes the dispossession of African Americans, along with their bodies.

Cedric Robinson (2020) describes Marxism as "a conceptualization of human affairs and historical development emergent from the historical experiences of European peoples" (2). Robinson provides an accurate analysis of the paradigm, which reveals a social structure blind to racism. For Robinson, racism and exploitation of African Americans are embedded in European antiquity. Capitalism is a precursor to modern racism; both heavily rely on slavery, structural violence, and the subordination of marginalized groups.

According to Robinson (2020), capitalism is "the tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize, but to differentiate-to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones" (26). Racial capitalism signifies racialized categories through a capitalist system in European civilization, considering that it operates through processes of invasion and expropriation. However, racial capitalism operates within a system that advocates for internalized racism. Racism still pertains to producing the violence that maintains capitalism in Western modernity.

In relation to commodity fetishism, Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism* thesis is that colonial slavery was the foundation for the Industrial Revolution and industrial capitalism. In his book, Robinson (2020) argues that Europe has deliberately suppressed the Black radical tradition of "Africa (and its own) past" (2). His statement is significant in terms of capitalism's relation with slavery and the fact that enslaved women were a substitution for currency in exchange for goods.

W.E.B. Du Bois' literature, *Black Reconstruction*, shares several commonalities with Cedric Robinson's thesis in *Black Marxism*. Both scholars examine the historical dispossession of African Americans in America's system of capitalist exploitation that underpins their subjugation. The chapter "The Black Worker" essentially represents the treatment of enslaved Black females. Racial dominance is demonstrated in how "the system of slavery demanded a special police force" (Du Bois 1935, 12) towards the sexualized violence and torture of African American women. Women were victims of sexual abuse and rape in American capitalism, transforming them into the focal point of its economic development. As stated by Du Bois (1935), "the true significance of slavery in the United States to the whole social development of America lies in the ultimate relation of slaves to democracy" (15). To further explain, Black females were inherently incapable of participating in economic institutions without

fully integrating themselves into capitalism's development.

The capitalist system illustrates the historical oppression and subsequent system towards African Americans. However, this did not become prominent until the 15th century when Portuguese traders arrived in Western Africa. "In 1493, Portugal created a monopoly with West Africa" (Williams 2021, 22) with their desire for trade and established bilateral trade treaties with their counterparts: Spain, the Netherlands, and Britain. By 1787, the Portuguese acquired "20,000" (Du Bois 2007, 29) enslaved people to facilitate its trade regimes. Enslaved people were used as an incentive for economic development on the West African coast, where race and hierarchy co-existed within a capitalist structure.

Regarding the capitalist structure, Du Bois' "The Souls of White Folk" argues that xenophobia or bondage was not innovated in the 15th century. He proposed that white "men striven to conceive their victims as different from victors... in soul and blood, strength and cunning, race and lineage" (Du Bois 2004, 34-35). Du Bois realizes that capitalism allowed the separation of races to continue, and that traditional white supremacy led to the dispossession, brutality, and dehumanization of African Americans in its contemporary ideation.

As mentioned above, the contemporary idea of racial capitalism developed through epistemic roles of European idealization in racial differences. These racial differences are exemplified as a mode of production where racial disparities are historically linked to racial slavery. African American women "were extracted from their social formations" (Robinson 2020, 309) by white capitalists in the destruction of Black economic institutions. African American women were violated by an unprecedented history of sexual abuse imposed by their enslavers. They were treated as currency in the United States' long history of inadequately compensating them. African American women were tremendously undervalued, and their labour was immensely

exploited. These women were compensated for their wages by their human capital attributes, highlighting the inequality African Americans have endured. That is, "like racism, sexism is one of the great justifications for high female unemployment rates" (Davis 1983, 137). At the same time, the inequality of Black women in the labour market often gets overlooked, particularly in the construction of American economic institutions.

Roberts claims that "racism [was] created for white slave owners" (Roberts 1997, 49). White enslavers had an incentive from economic institutions to allocate enslaved labour from Black females in America's economy. Moreover, America's economy incited all enslaver's decisions from the labour enslaved women provided. However, it administered methods of subordination and sexual assault against African American women to impregnate them. Their offspring were characterized as "his property" (Roberts 1997, 55), essentially enough to exploit their labour and perform acts of sexual violence on enslaved African Americans. White men cared about their property when it was effectively being damaged, and their property was an idealization of systems of chattel slavery.

Capitalism entails a complex system of chattel slavery that requires a colonial mode of production. Capitalism often focuses on the racialization of Black bodies in understanding how economic institutions operate in the commodification, exploitation, and alienation of African American women. African American women were solicited in economic institutions on their "productive and reproductive body" (Morgan 2021, 7), enslavers depended on the degradation of Black reproductive systems to facilitate wealth in America's economy.

In Rosa Luxemburg's work, *The Accumulation of Capital - A Contribution to the Economic Explanation of Imperialism*, the author speaks about the position capitalism has in slavery. Luxemburg (2004) claims that "capital needs other races to exploit territories where the white man cannot work. It must be able to mobilize world labour power without restriction to utilize

productive forces of the globe — up to the limits imposed by a system of producing surplus value” (343). Capitalism is an ideal form that assumes the movement of capital tends to operate in relation to colonialism. The enslaved person is not a person of labour power that the enslaver exploits - instead, her body becomes his property.

Although slavery is associated with explicit sexual dominance towards African Americans in the emergence of a racialized system, the question of labour is still unknown, since the construction of slavery and the process of commodification occurs through operations of gender differences and racial slavery. Rosa Luxemburg (2004) explains that “institutions of slavery and bondage are combined in various forms” (339), namely, the forms of sexual abuse and exploitation of African American women.

#### CELIA, A SLAVE

“Celia, A Slave” addresses the historiography of African American females in a capitalist system. McLaurin (1991) “presents us with a detailed case study of the fundamental moral anxiety that slavery produced” (11). This moral anxiety of slavery has not been documented as other aspects of racial slavery have, such as its “economic and social aspects” (McLaurin 1991, 11). However, Celia’s short life illustrates how African American women were forced to make immoral decisions. McLaurin’s book also illustrates the power dynamics in the Antebellum period, for instance, between Celia and her enslaver Robert Newsom. Newsom holds Celia as a sexual object, and repeatedly sexually assaults her. Celia’s story reveals the moral reality of sexual abuse that enslaved African American women in the Antebellum Period.

Slavery was a functionality in capitalism that viewed the reproductive systems of Black women as valuable. For white Englishmen, the “Black reproductive autonomy serves the interest of white supremacy” (Roberts 1997, 31). Slavery was about controlling Black women’s reproductive capacity to attain white

supremacism since their reproductive system was seen as an economic incentive that could reap investments for them. Davis (1983) states that regarding the utilization of rape from Englishmen, “the institutionalized pattern of rape during slavery as an expression of white men’s sexual urges, otherwise stifled by the specter of white womanhood’s chastity. Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression” (23). Rape was an act of patriarchal violence and a weapon that could sustain white supremacy. Celia is a poignant example of patriarchal violence. Celia represented many enslaved girls, given that Robert Newsom bought her when she was 14 years old. He was able to rape her for a duration of 5 years repeatedly. Furthermore, the importance of sexual violence to slavery as an economic system allowed enslavers to “rape the women they claimed as property” (Morgan 2021, 5) in the aspects of exploitation in the United States’ history.

United States’ history replicates the sexual violence and exploitation of Black bodies from slavery. Celia is depicted as a Black female that had a price on her, and over her lifetime, she “labored under the coercion of slavery” (Davis 1983, 242). Celia is a subject of sexual violence, which was approved by the state of Missouri. In approving this decision, the state essentially disregarded the sexual violence that Celia had endured during her enslavement. “In 1821, Missouri was admitted to the union as a slave state” (McLaurin 1991, 34) that was characterized as a system of sexual violence against African American women. With aspects of private ownership governed by private law, Celia was held to a contract while most of her life was under the direct supervision of Missouri.

With Celia, “female slave narratives contains a reference to, at some juncture, the ever present threat and reality of rape” (McLaurin 1991, 28). Robert Newsom intended to purchase Celia since she was vulnerable to sexual exploitation. McLaurin (1991) found that “the sexual politics of slavery presented an exact paradigm of the power relations within the larger society” (108). Enslaved Black

women were essentially “powerless in a slaver society, unable to legally protect themselves” (McLaurin 1991, 108). Between the 17th and 18th centuries, it was common for enslaved women to experience a “routine of sexual abuse” (Davis 1983, 102). Enslaved women dreaded, so they started to bind their breasts together to show that they were not at the age where they could produce offspring. However, this was quite difficult to prevent in the institution of slavery and commodification of Black women.

Celia was able to “challenge to her master’s power over her sexual integrity” (McLaurin 1991, 130) by ending the pattern of sexual exploitation. At the age of 19, Celia is tried for the first-degree murder of her owner. A predominantly white jury convicted Celia and sentenced her to death. She was allowed to give birth seeing as she was anticipating Newsom’s child, or *property* (McLaurin 1991, 91-115). Enslaved females were given the opportunity to give birth seeing as it provided enslavers additional sources of labour, which was one of the primary motivations for exploiting Black female’s reproductive systems. Rape was a commonality in America, as Dorothy Roberts (1997) highlights, “exploring how the denial of Black reproductive autonomy serves the interest of white supremacy” (31). In Celia’s case, men viewed young women as sexual property and children as itemized properties equating to labour and wealth. White enslavers wanted to control the reproductive capacities of those women.

In the directness of the title ‘Celia, A Slave,’ is a powerful narrative that portrays children of enslaved women as permanently part of slavery’s economic calculations. Granted by the state, Celia was not able to “own and control her own body” (Roberts 1997, 83). Enslavers had power within the economic institutions of slave ownership, which led to sexual violence. Furthermore, the power imbalances between the enslaved and their owners gratified sexual urges against enslaved women.

## GENDER AND SLAVERY

The connection between gender and slavery is that Englishmen rationalized eliminating African women’s offspring from their population. As mentioned, children were viewed as itemized products that benefited America’s economy. Children were taken away from their mothers and sold off to portray a circular economy. As explained by Angela Davis (1983), “Black women have been profoundly affected by their experiences during slavery” (10), in which most of them were forced to give birth and be separated from their children. Black females were systematically assigned values as commodities on the English colonial frontier. Similarly, Jennifer Morgan (2021) stated that “white men routinely, and possibly systematically, raped the women they claimed as property” (5), specifying that women were immensely dehumanized in slavery’s history.

Capitalism has set the foundation for heredity, racial slavery, and European modernity in the narrative of the slave trade. In the formation of racial disparities in the Antebellum period, the slave trade allowed white Englishmen to move Africans into the category of enslavement. Economic historians Carl Wennerlind and Thomas Sowell touch on the fact that white Englishmen favored the slave trade. Wennerlind (2011) claims the “South Sea Company was chartered to undertake England’s trade in African captives to Spanish-controlled South America... the credit crisis relied on the public favorably imagining the prospects of the Atlantic slave trade” (197). The South Sea company relied on the Atlantic Slave Trade as a tangible asset, and returns were easily reproduced. Wennerlind (2011) argues that shareholders were mobilizing the financialization of public investing towards the “right to carry African slaves to Spanish ports, as well as opportunities to sell British goods legally and illegally, in this vast colonial market” (200). The market indicated early reinvestment models in the 1600s despite its failures during its first few years as it slowly restored itself by addressing the nation’s financial crisis.

Regarding the commodification and sexualization of African females, the violence used on enslaved females strikes Wennerlind as a key component of credit fetishism. Wennerlind (2011) defines credit fetishism as a “lack of recognition of either the slaves’ mortality or their rebelliousness highlights credit’s general capacity to obfuscate its underlying social reality” (200). This idea was developed in the formation of the South Sea Company with the relationship it has towards commodity fetishism, the power of credit’s general capacity to complicate the social reality of investment in forms of racial dominance that severely underpinned the slave trade, in which African American women were morally dehumanized.

By the end of the 17th century, the link between wealth and the economic health of the English nation was promising through the silencing of Black bodies. Credit fetishism participated in the racial violence towards these individuals, suggesting that race and capitalism were linked from the beginning. It is quite apparent that slavery was a class relationship that obtained numerous characteristics of white supremacy and racial dominance. Thomas Sowell (2006) observed that in the ideological framework of capitalism, it is “explicitly racial” (408) in the trajectory of institutional exploitation. White supremacy and racial dominance had aspects of racism deeply integrated into the capitalist system with a connection to race and economics, particularly in the labour market and investment in human capital. In accordance with Davis (1983), “black women during slavery [were] the slaveholders’ economic power” (199). This statement underlines racial capitalism hegemonic tendencies towards enslaved females who were vulnerable to the exploitation of racial capitalism.

Racial capitalism helps the circulation of slavery, empire, and industrial development. The imperial aspect of the conceptualization of racial capitalism draws attention to the history of the Western hemisphere and genocide as aspects of the same process in labour exploitation and female reproduction. Roberts

(1997) wrote that “black procreation helped to sustain slavery, giving slave masters an economic incentive to govern Black’s reproductive lives” (48). Black procreation aids the extraction from slavery, removes a deeper consideration of racialization, and its significance to understanding race and racism in Marx’s theorization of slavery. Marx’s theorization of slavery as a crucial part of capitalism - capitalism is not one regime of labour; it is a multitude of rules that require forms of indentured and unfree labour. Europeans were familiar with the enslavement of lesser-status women, who are constantly used in elite European households. Changes in the market economy altered women’s relationships with households and family production, further undermining their control over their lives. Enslaved women were part of trade channels between enslavers, which introduced them as currency and premature violence— enslavers were able “increase their wealth” (Roberts 1997, 50).

White Englishmen were psychologically invested in the institution of the slave trade. Scholars acknowledged the implications of economic rationality in colonial influences and powerful incentives to brutalize enslaved women. Roberts (1997) asserts that white men had complete ownership of their enslaved women and the investments their offspring could bring by “law made slave women’s children the property of the slave owner. White masters therefore could increase their wealth by controlling their slaves’ reproductive capacity” (50). Europeans prescribed values to Black bodies as commodities. Enslaved females were essentially a site of a metaphor for value, where females labored as sexual objects - the enslavement of women included their reproductive capacity. In essence, owners adhered to racist assumptions that Black females were identical to animals. That is, they were able to breed and reproduce offspring. Davis (1983) implies that women were “expressly assigned to be breeders or sucklers” (10).

As stated by Gayle Rubin (2012), “capitalism is heir to a long tradition in which women do not

inherit.” (164). In the context of Marx’s work, African American women were deeply troubled by the racist history of America. Black women could never afford freedom. In the inner workings of Marx’, slavery incited white supremacists exploit the enslaved in the origins of racial slavery violently. A woman’s sexual vulnerability was open to white men as a substitution within the expansion of early capitalism. Early capitalism and the production of surplus value are materially connected to the separation of masculinist pursuits. In a separation were “condemned and oppressed by a wealth aristocracy” (Davis 1983, 41). For most Black women, reproduction is situated in the public life of the enslaver since enslavers “systematically bred their slaves for sale in the market” (Morgan 2021, 187).

Racial capitalism and liberal individuation express ideas of non-liberation onto African American women and their descents. Charles Mills (2017) showed that “the white working class in capitalist modernity do attain personhood status,” (8) while categorizing African American women’s reproductive system into definitions of enslavement and terminating their personhood. In slave society, there was no conflict between capitalism and labour. Labour lies adjacent to capitalism, while capitalism dictates the labour produced by enslaved females. Slavery perpetuated subjugation towards enslaved African American women by diminishing African American women’s power.

White Englishmen showed no remorse to African American women in constructing early modern capitalism. White Englishmen were in favor of extracting labour from these women, which eventually led to African enslavement. As Roberts (1991) states “slaveholders were willing to overwork pregnant slaves at the expense of the health of both mother and child” (51). Their statement confirms a historical intimacy between enslaved females and their enslavers which was the epitome of a racialized system that continues to exploit African American women.

Using racial capitalism to describe the horrendous acts such as performing sexual labour on their enslavers, Saidiya Hartman (2016) emphasizes the historical continuities “of the unborn and reproducing slave property” (169) in a capitalist society. Despite capitalism’s historical context, capitalism still proceeds to lead in the fragmentation of enslaved females’ liberty through domination and labouring enslaved females.

## RACIAL RELATIONS IN CAPITALISM

The theorization of race in relation to slavery and the Black presence defined the racial barriers of “developing capitalism of the North” (Davis 1983, 41). African American women had to invest in the political languages of capitalism and expansionist regimes that stripped the identities of enslaved people through a new world labour system. These included race alongside the sexual abuse many have faced through Western imperialist ideals of hierarchy and hereditary racial slavery. Racial slavery exhibits a distinct relationship to gender, sexuality, and female reproduction in capitalism.

The rise of capitalism and liberal idioms indicates the instrumental understanding of racism as a predominant ideology that divided Blacks and whites. As identified by Roberts (1997), capitalism provided “meaning of economic independence” (246) for white men in economic systems that capitalized on the Black female’s reproductive system and racial dominance. In the functionalities of dominant ideologies, liberalism and capitalism allow white enslavers to have reproductive rights of the Black body. Enslaved females’ physical well-being in capitalism’s history was essential for enslavers to control female reproductive systems.

The link between race, racialization, and Atlantic slavery is particularly jarring, as capitalism becomes a dominant factor in setting a logical social reproduction at the systemic level. The United States focused on the reproduction systems of enslaved women,

where rationalizing capitalism becomes an idea where it is dominant, white supremacist, and colonialist. Capitalism justified “white men’s sexual abuse of Black women” (Roberts 1997, 37) in the marketplace. Enslaver’s rationality is heavily dictated by violence in the marketplace, which is evident that African American women feared sexual assault.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, race is a familiar topic in modern political philosophy, where racial slavery and white supremacy are at the forefront of liberalism and capitalism. These phenomena have spread throughout the centuries, including economic exchanges between transnational classes, multilateral agreements, and the financialization of Black females. During the slave trade, “whites invented the hereditary trait of race and endowed it with the concept of racial superiority and inferiority to resolve the contradiction between slavery and liberty” (Roberts 1997, 9). European settlers purchased women in African markets to produce commodities. However, these women

were seen as investments that could reap returns for white Englishmen and their progeny. The financialization of enslaved females provided a structure on which the institution of racial slavery could prosper.

Slavery is a rape industry that derives from a capitalist infrastructure. “Slave women were frequently abused by white men” (McLaurin 1991, 34) in the historical practice of violating and exploiting the bodies of African American women. African American women were subjugated to premature violence, rape, and torture. African American women exemplify how capitalism thrives through a racialized system, converting them into sexual commodities to benefit their enslavers. Enslavers viewed Black women as incapable of personhood and civilization. Capitalism becomes problematic in the historical narratives of the reproduction of enslaved women and the accumulation of wealth is at the center of a woman’s reproductive system.

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