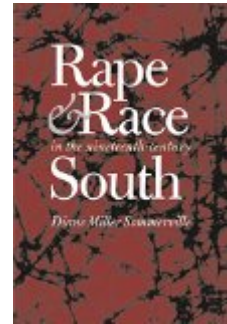


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Diane Miller Sommerville. *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xiii + 411 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5560-7; \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2891-5.

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Questioning the Myth of the Black Beast Rapist

Diane Sommerville's book draws on a vast body of research into the application of Southern laws against black men accused of rape and attempted rape to demonstrate that accused and convicted black rapists frequently escaped the death penalty, and sometimes were treated with a certain amount of sympathy, or even given support, by juries, local whites, and politicians. Their non-elite white female accusers, even young girls, were regularly discredited and insulted. The book questions the strength, timing, and, finally, even the very existence of the "black beast rapist" myth, reminds the reader of the realities of black-on-white rape in the nineteenth-century South, and ultimately asks whether the nineteenth-century South was really as different from the nineteenth-century North as we have assumed. It stages a frontal assault on some important arguments and assumptions of influential historians of Southern race and sexuality, from Winthrop Jordan to Martha Hodes. To say that the book is ambitious is an understatement.

Though the book spans the nineteenth century, its center of gravity is between 1850 and 1890. Nine chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue approach the topic from various angles, including the evolution of rape law, the ways in which the social class of the victim factored into rape accusations and prosecutions, the special case of the rape of children, the treatment of accused antebellum free blacks, and examples of and judicial responses to black-on-white rape during the Civil War and Reconstruction Era.

Black-on-white rape has rarely been treated as its own subject. Historians have usually approached it as part of a larger analysis of lynching or the inequities of the Southern legal system. Part of what Sommerville is doing in this book is freeing rape from the hold of those powerful narratives. This is most notable in her repeated reminders that lynching was never the normative response to black-on-white rape. Sommerville calls this "one of the fundamental empirical lessons of this book" (p. 4). It should not have needed to be argued. We have known the rough statistics on lynching for decades. While the numbers were sometimes well over 200 per year throughout the South, when one considers that most lynchings were not related to rape allegations, surely they do not account for most instances of rape in the region.[1] Likewise, Sommerville's revelation that "[b]lack men, it would seem, at times coerced or forced sex from white women and girls" should not come as a shock to the student of human nature (p. 220). Even Sommerville's skepticism about Freudian interpretations, coming, as it does, at a time in which Freud's theories have largely been rejected by psychologists, should not seem as new and daring as it does. When rape is considered independently of lynching narratives, these embedded assumptions are much easier to rethink.

Yet the analysis of rape is not an end in itself in Sommerville's book either. While the book describes dozens of nineteenth-century rapes in uncomfortable detail, it is not as interested in the act of rape itself, or in how rape was understood or experienced by its perpetrators or vic-

tims, as it is in what Southerners' response to black-on-white rape revealed about their racial assumptions. Sommerville believes that the speeches and writings about race by elite Southerners that have so often been used by historians seeking to characterize Southern racism fail to represent broadly held views; in the writings of judges, jurors, witnesses, and groups of petitioners for and against the pardon of an accused or convicted rapist, she has found a much more diverse and representative group of voices.

In the end, Sommerville is in dialogue with historians of lynching. This is clearest in one of her more powerful claims: she reads her evidence of "lenience" toward black rapists in the antebellum, wartime, and postwar South as demonstrating that the "black beast rapist" myth did not emerge, if it ever did emerge, until the end of the nineteenth century. She sees the myth not as the product of the gender anxieties of Southern men, as has so often been argued, but rather of, among other things, a national trend toward more public discussion of illicit sexuality (p. 254).

Sommerville's work contributes to two trends in recent historiography. First, it explains Southern racial views as heavily mediated by gender and class ideologies and struggles.[2] At the same time, it ultimately poses an important challenge to theories of Southern exceptionalism, suggesting that the South was significantly more impacted by national movements, like the late-nineteenth-century social purity campaign that makes a brief but significant appearance in Sommerville's book, than is generally believed.[3]

There is a flipside to Sommerville's innovative research and bold argumentation. Occasionally, she pushes her evidence too far. One example of this is her use of data she has collected on men entering the North Carolina Penitentiary between 1885 and 1899. She notes that the percentage of inmates who were literate was much higher in 1896 than in 1887 and claims that this data supports the argument that, during these years, whites' fear of blacks came to encompass black men of all social classes, rather than just those at the bottom. There are, however, many problems with this use of statistics. To begin with, as Sommerville carefully concedes, those convicts who had been sentenced to death were not included in this data, as the state processed them separately. We cannot know exactly how this impacted the data, but it makes them unreliable as a basis for generalizations about those convicted of rape. Additionally, the total number of convicts included in this table is only 201,

about fourteen per year. With that low sample number, the annual numbers fluctuate wildly. While there does appear to be an overall upward trend in the percentage of convicts who were literate, there was a higher percentage in 1885, for instance, than in 1897, 1898, or 1899. Even someone not trained in statistical analysis can recognize that these numbers are not significant. Sommerville is aware of their limitations and scrupulous about warning the reader about them, and yet she devotes three pages to them and uses them to affirm her larger theories (pp. 209-214).

Another example of this sort of stretching of the data comes when she discusses the fate of the fourteen slaves that she can find records, in various sources, of having been convicted of rape or attempted rape in Virginia from 1860 to 1865. Pointing out that none of the seven convicted in 1860 and 1861, two of the five convicted in 1862, the one convicted in 1864, and the one convicted in 1865 are known to have been executed, she suggests that the ones who were condemned "tended" to have committed the crimes late in the war. To the extent that she is using these data anecdotally, to point out that the wartime government of Virginia was willing to allow convicted black rapists to live, the point is well taken. However, when she detects in these numbers evidence of "a discernable change of heart" about interracial rape between the early and late war years, she is taking them too far (p. 145)

But these are minor points: in general, Sommerville's arguments are well supported by her impressive research. The research pays off in other ways as well. Beyond its arguments, one of the real strengths of this book is that in consulting case files, Sommerville encounters vivid details not only about the experience of rape in the nineteenth-century South, but also about the day-to-day lives of black and white Southerners. We learn about an upper-class young girl who regularly slept on a pallet on her bedroom floor, either because the cousin with whom she shared a bed kicked her or because she was awaiting a black lover. We learn about the plight of a mentally disabled white woman who was prone to wander about her small town. We hear reports of the bar-room boasting of young male slaves about the conquests they have planned for the evening. In reading their responses to accounts of rape, we discover quite a bit about the everyday sexual norms and practices of nineteenth-century Southerners.

There is much going on in this book, and Sommerville's arguments can be subtle, so this is not a quick read. It is, however, well worth the investment of time

and attention it requires. Sommerville's writing style is fluid and quite engaging. Her bold interpretations are a much-needed breath of fresh air, and most of them are backed up by Sommerville's impressive, thorough, and quite careful research. It is crucial reading for anyone interested in the culture of the nineteenth-century South.

Notes

[1]. Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002), 90.

[2]. Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

[3]. John W. Quist, *Restless Visionaries: The Roots of Antebellum Reform in Alabama and Michigan* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997).

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