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Lisa Lindquist Dorr. *White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race in Virginia, 1900-1960.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 327 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5514-0; $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2841-0.

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A New Look at the Southern Rape Myth

Lisa Lindquist Dorr challenges the typical narrative of black-on-white rape in early-twentieth-century Virginia. While acknowledging that Virginia was "not a bastion of racial equality," Dorr observes that a white woman's accusation of rape by a black man did not inevitably mean lynching and death for the accused. Cases of black-on-white rape in Virginia involved complicated relationships that hinged on conceptions of race, class, and gender.

Dorr studied 288 cases from the court records of more than 60 Virginia counties and cities. She found that local contexts, reputation, character, and place in community, for both blacks and whites, heavily influenced the outcomes of cases of black-on-white rape. These rape cases, argues Dorr, exposed the contradictions of a society governed by legal segregation. While legal convictions of black men provided the white community with a feeling of civilized superiority, white solidarity across class and gender lines did not always follow.

Dorr's study focuses on cases involving charges of rape against black men. Out of the 288 cases she examined, 17 men were murdered by mob violence and 230 men were "convicted of some crime," out of which 50 were executed. Overall, 67 men out of the 288 (nearly 24 percent) in this study were killed by either mob violence or state executions. Dorr found that 48 men received maximum prison sentences, while 52 were sentenced to five years or less. Additionally, 35 cases were dismissed or their defendants released. Dorr provides these statistics not to downplay the injustices suffered because of the myth of the "black beast rapist," but to show that cases of black-on-white rape did not all have the same outcome.

As Dorr points out, rape has historically been a crime in which the victim is scrutinized in intense detail. In cases of black-on-white rape, however, the victim was almost immediately believed and the assailant assumed guilty. The myth of the "black beast rapist" grew out of perceived threats from a free, politically empowered black population after the Civil War. Black-on-white rape, the embodiment of the black rapist myth, threatened the patriarchal privileges possessed by white men, privileges dependent upon perceived notions of white femininity. Specifically, the myth depended upon the idea that white women were symbols of racial purity and virtue, and should be protected chivalrously by white men. The myth also depended upon the idea that white women were sexually desirable. Their "unattainability" and "untouchability," argues Dorr, reaffirmed the South's racial and gender order (p. 75).

As Dorr concludes, the myth did not always play out as expected in local contexts. Indeed, the significance of Dorr's argument is that it exposes the gulf between the rhetoric of the black rape myth and the realities of Virginia communities' responses to cases of black-on-white rape.

While only seventeen men in Dorr's study were lynched, the threat of extralegal violence heavily influenced Virginia's black-on-white rape trials. For example, the threat of violence obviously influenced the 1912 case of Alfred White, a black man accused of rape by a white woman named Bertha Ferguson. Police heavily guarded White to deter lynching, but the same police testified in court that if the trial took longer than expected they could not guarantee White's safety. Additionally, newspapers frequently reported the restlessness and anger of members of the public with regard to the case. White's case, from accusation to conviction, took less than three days and, despite an appeal by White's attorney, ended in his execution two months later. Dorr quite rightly concludes, "there was little meaningful distinction between mob violence and the legal process" for White (p. 17).

The larger story gleaned from White's case is that white Virginians preferred legal solutions over extralegal violence, even though, as Dorr demonstrates, the two were inextricably tied together. Legal prosecutions, Dorr argues, represented "civilized" responses to the uncivil,

"beastly" acts of black men, yet the threat of extralegal violence encouraged court cases to proceed rapidly, and with swift convictions.

Interestingly, Dorr observes that the "code of chivalry" only promised retribution for black-on-white rape in the form of legal prosecution and did not always involve protection from, or prevention of, rape. Indeed, as Dorr demonstrates, legal retribution enabled white men to regain some sense of superiority that was under threat by supposed hypersexual black men and the strength of white women who thwarted sexual attacks themselves.

Virginia courts would dismiss a rape case if a white man was in close proximity to the assault. "White officials," Dorr states "interpreted the presence of an able-bodied white man during a reported assault as strong evidence that no crime had in fact occurred" (p. 103). The inability of white men to protect white women from black men represented a "double blow to their white masculinity" (p. 105). In cases of black-on-white rape, both parties involved–the accusing white woman and the accused black man–indirectly exposed the flaws of white masculine chivalry because they revealed instances in which white men had not protected white women.

When white women sought redress in legal proceedings, which were controlled by white men, the women turned over their agency in the matter and reinforced white men's racial and patriarchal authority. Often in these rape cases, questions about the reputation or character of the woman involved influenced how black men were punished. Class held particular influence in black-on-white rape cases. White women who were part of poorer, less-reputable families sometimes saw their accusations rebuffed.

The expressed *desire* for white women by black men did not always result in extreme punishment for the men, only the threat or presence of *force*. If a black man admitted curiosity about kissing or having sex with a white woman, he was not inevitably given extreme punishment. In fact, as Dorr states, a black man's desire for a white woman both threatened and reinforced the foundations of white supremacy. Such expressions of desire reinforced white ideas that blacks were "naturally" more sexual and lustful than whites. These declarations also lent credence to the continued existence of a pedestal for elite and middle-class white women. At the same time, however, the expressed desire of a black man for a white woman challenged the idea that white men should have exclusive access to white women and threatened the ideal of pure and virtuous white womanhood.

Dorr argues that character testimony by whites for black defendants in rape cases did not circumvent Virginia's racial order but strengthened it. In these situations, whites often described blacks as humble, faithful individuals who "knew their place" in the racial order. In the 1923 case of John Mays Jr., a seventeen-year-old black teenager convicted of raping a seven-year-old white girl, Mays's employer, Dr. A. A. Sizer, wrote several letters that testified to the good character and integrity of Mays and his family. Sizer also stated his opinion of the poor character and reputation of the victim's family. Though Mays served seven years, the opinions of Dr. Sizer significantly helped secure Mays's release. Sizer's language questioned the "whiteness" of the victim's family while confirming that Mays was not a threat to the racial order. Ironically, such character testimony helped guard the racial order against "nuisance" blacks and unworthy whites.

In addition to reviewing white responses to black-on-white rape cases, Dorr also looks at how Virginia's African-American community influenced the outcomes of black-on-white rape cases. In the last two chapters of the book, Dorr discusses the ways in which black Virginians resisted white supremacy or tempered its influence in the lives of African Americans. In some rape cases, black communities came to the defense of an accused man by providing character testimony during the initial trial and at subsequent hearings. In other cases, the black community provided alibis for accused black men.

Testimony that provided alibis, argues Dorr, challenged the truthfulness of white women while providing legal officials outlets for leniency when the whites involved were of disreputable character. After the Second World War, the black community moved more forcefully against prejudice as efforts to obtain "victory against fascism abroad" impacted the fight "against racism at home" (pp. 208-209). The black press increasingly published articles about the untenable accusations of rape by white women, which, combined with an increased awareness and acceptance of female sexuality, worked to discredit the ideal of the sanctity of southern womanhood.

Ultimately, Dorr observes, in rape cases historians can never know precisely what happened between the accuser and the accused. Often, however, what actually happened was less important than what was perceived to have happened and what kind of character and reputation the parties involved possessed. Black men were almost always convicted of some crime when it involved sexual contact with a white woman, but the fluidity of punishment after conviction indicates the variety of ways

in which gender, class, and race relations complicated Virginia's segregated society. Dorr does not question the power of the rape myth in southern history, but she does show that the myth was far more complex than previously thought.

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