

Race Treason, Gender Trouble

Chris Day

1995

Dear Love and Rage,

Noel Ignatiev's attempt to defend his claim that white women can expect "that the state will protect them from strangers" demands a response. Noel replies to the evidence of the experience of "white" women on the Love and Rage Production Group to the contrary by asserting that by their apparent refusal "to be the property of any man" they have placed themselves beyond the shield of whiteness.

The main problem with Noel's argument is really a simple matter of fact: women who in no way place themselves "beyond the shield of whiteness" cannot expect that the state will protect them from strangers unless by "strangers" Noel means Black men. In that case Noel is correct in noting that such protection is extended not out of concern for women but in order to protect the property of white men, but then it is white men and not white women who have an expectation of protection.

White women (like all women) can expect to be treated like the collective property of men (including strangers) without any expectation of protection by the state. Women are routinely menaced and harassed by strange men on the streets with impunity. And in a thousand ways (in conversations, in the mass media, in all manner of social customs) men assert their control over women. In the ultimate expression of male power, rape, women usually have no effective recourse through the state. In those instances in which the state does act a white woman who has been raped can expect that in the defense of the property rights of white men she will be put through a legal process that often reproduces much of the humiliation and degradation of the initial act of rape.

I think that it is the way that Noel conflates the defense of white women as the property of white men with a benefit to white women (the expectation of protection) that is so infuriating. Noel is right to say that patriarchy is decisively shaped by white supremacy, but he needs to also see how white supremacy is shaped by patriarchy. The power of contemporary white supremacy has its roots in the historical ownership of human beings by other human beings. The power of patriarchy is rooted in the continuing ownership of human beings by other human beings.

Clearly the state treats white women and black women differently and in many instances those differences constitute privileges for white women. But sexual violence as a central part of the apparatus of social control is not just about upholding whiteness. It is first and foremost about upholding the subordinate social position of women.

Noel claims that “statistics show that the safest thing to be in this country is a white woman.” The crucial term here is “thing.” White women are safe only if we exclude the vast majority of violence that is done to them by men who claim ownership over them (fathers, brothers, husbands, boyfriends, bosses...). That violence of course is highly underrepresented in any statistics precisely because women know that they can’t expect to be protected by the state. These statistics also exclude the millions of times women capitulate to men (to have sex, to do the dishes, to do what he wants) who have not even threatened violence because those women know that it lurks just beneath the surface of the situation.

Noel argues that by refusing male control rebellious women (like the women on the Production Group) are locating themselves outside of whiteness. By attempting to define acts of resistance to the patriarchy through the solitary lens of race treason Noel is effectively erasing the feminist content of those acts. The emerging theory and practice of race treason will be better served by a respectful analysis of the full range of resistance to the full range of forms of domination than by trying to drag every expression of revolt or refusal under the umbrella of treason to whiteness.

Love and Kisses,
Christopher Day

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