



Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation

Estelle B. Freedman

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Rape has never had a universally accepted definition, and the uproar over "legitimate rape" during the 2012 U.S. elections confirms that it remains a word in flux. *Redefining Rape* tells the story of the forces that have shaped the meaning of sexual violence in the United States, through the experiences of accusers, assailants, and advocates for change. In this ambitious new history, Estelle Freedman demonstrates that our definition of rape has depended heavily on dynamics of political power and social privilege.

The long-dominant view of rape in America envisioned a brutal attack on a chaste white woman by a male stranger, usually an African American. From the early nineteenth century, advocates for women's rights and racial justice challenged this narrow definition and the sexual and political power of white men that it sustained. Between the 1870s and the 1930s, at the height of racial segregation and lynching, and amid the campaign for woman suffrage, women's rights supporters and African American activists tried to expand understandings of rape in order to gain legal protection from coercive sexual relations, assaults by white men on black women, street harassment, and the sexual abuse of children. By redefining rape, they sought to redraw the very boundaries of citizenship.

Freedman narrates the victories, defeats, and limitations of these and other reform efforts. The modern civil rights and feminist movements, she points out, continue to grapple with both the insights and the dilemmas of these first campaigns to redefine rape in American law and culture.

Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation Details

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Sally Kenney says

Dense, but informative, this is a very important book. Taught it in my Politics of Rape Class. At times, I wish the reading were more accessible to students and that she drew out her larger points. Still, gives rape a history, really, for the first time, and draws in the suffragists.

Ty Burshar says

In "Redefining Rape" Estelle B. Freedman chronicles the political history of rape beginning with its first definition as "a brutal attack on a chaste, unmarried, white woman by a stranger, typically portrayed as an African American man" (1). This is heavily seen in the evolving perceptions of rape through rhetoric and media, and reinforced by laws. While suffragist's protested for "equal political rights to ensure their public safety and fair rape trails," civil rights activists "insisted that black women could be victims of rape and that white men should be held accountable for assault" (Freedman 2). The exclusion of women of color from social justice liberation is not uncommon in American history. Freedman states, "Because female slaves belonged to their owners, not to their male kin, sexually violating these women was not considered rape" (27). Black women were constantly exploited by white slave masters to engage in non-consensual sex, which was founded during the times of slavery. The evolution of their assumed sexual deviance is now actualized through hypersexual stereotypes.

Each oppressive measure—the objectification of all women, the exclusion of black women, and the savage black archetype—were instruments to maintain white supremacy. Women were pit against one another through morality and race, and the creation of the brute caricature which stigmatized black men all worked simultaneously in maintaining a white male dominate society. Essentially, these divisions and pitting's of marginalized groups became embedded in everyday rhetoric, media, and behavior—turning contained oppression on one another, instead of on their true oppressors.

Darlene says

Fascinating look at a topic still very much in the news. How do we define sexual assault, and how, historically, have charges of sexual assault been used as a political weapon? In addition, how are certain populations disenfranchised from exercising the right to charge sexual assault?

An important look at historic American attitudes that still play out today in questions of power, race and sexuality.

Kristine says

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Amanda says

Really good - dense but good info; I'd have preferred if there was a bit more info on modern times re: politicians who speak poorly about rape
