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SEPTEMBER 10 & 17, 1990 • \$2.95

# THE NEW REPUBLIC

Sharpton, Maddox, Brawley, the Jogger, misogyny, and race, by Jim Sleeper

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**The racial wages of misogyny.**

# NEW YORK STORIES

*By Jim Sleeper*

NEW YORK CITY

As the Howard Beach, Tawana Brawley, Bensonhurst, and Central Park jogger cases have erupted one after another over the past five years, public discourse about race in New York has turned less on issues like jobs, housing, and education, and more on emblematic violence in the streets. Nightmarish racial confrontations, followed by community uproar and nationally publicized trials, have provided a forum for the charges of white racism and conspiracy by attorneys Alton Maddox Jr., C. Vernon Mason, and the Rev. Al Sharpton. Fortunately, for the most part racially mixed juries have concentrated on the facts instead of the sideshow, vindicating both the criminal justice system and the victims (in the Brawley case the victims were the men falsely accused of rape). Yet the politics of paroxysm that has grown up around the cases refuses to die. And for all of the press attention lavished on Maddox, Mason, Sharpton, and their supporters, one of its ugliest manifestations has been largely overlooked: their rhetoric trumpets the hatred of women. Somehow, in too much of what passes for black activism, woman-hating and charges of white racism have become inextricably intertwined.

Misogyny has been a trope in racially charged cases outside of New York, such as those of Gus Savage, a black representative from Chicago, and D.C. Mayor Marion Barry. Young black men in Washington can be seen wearing T-shirts reading, "I saw the tape. The god-damned bitch set him up." The depredations of 2 Live Crew are nationwide. Whites too have exploited racial fears and sexual violence. In Boston early this year a white man named Charles Stuart managed to combine lethal violence against his pregnant wife with a calculated contempt for blacks—and to have his story instantly accepted by most of the city. The 1989 murder of Yusef Hawkins in Bensonhurst was precipitated by white youths angered by interracial dating on their turf. Yet even when white racism and misogyny have boiled over, they haven't taken on the force of a movement for "social justice" led by clerics and respected community organizers. That is precisely what has been happening in New York's black community.

Those who followed the tactics of Sharpton, Maddox, and Mason after Howard Beach first scented the poison in 1987, when Maddox defended one of two black men charged with slashing the white model Marla Hanson.

He demanded an acquittal on the grounds that Hanson's hysterical racism had caused her to frame her assailants in order to cover up for a white man who, Maddox claimed, had done the deed but with whom she shared a "code of silence" for reasons of love. Maddox described Hanson as "a girl from Texas [with] a lot of racial hang-ups, racial stereotypes. . . . Just the simple sight of two black men . . . and she went absolutely nuts." And he told the jury that Hanson "was after every man in this city who had a woman," adding that she "preyed on men."

It is common, if unjustifiable, for defense attorneys to impugn the integrity of female victims in sexual assault cases, but Hanson's was not such a case. She was slashed in front of her apartment by strangers who made no sexual advances. Seizing upon the allegation that Hanson's white landlord had paid for the attack in a feud over her tenancy, Maddox concocted his tale of intrigue involving a white slasher. Yet, partly because he was still a hero for having forced the state to appoint a special prosecutor in the Howard Beach case, his vicious cross-examination of Hanson drew support from black activists.

Soon afterward, fifteen-year-old Tawana Brawley's claim that she'd been kidnapped and raped by a gang of white men, including law enforcement officers, brought to the surface an archetype, seared into black memory, of the most intimate sort of exploitation. Under the ministrations of Maddox, Mason, and Sharpton, even the likelihood that her story was a hoax was made to echo an equally venerable archetype of suffering: for centuries whites had falsely accused blacks of raping white women. That whites themselves would now taste victimization by lie seemed to give any number of otherwise intelligent people a certain satisfaction.

Repeatedly, on the black radio station WLIB and in press conferences with stunned reporters, Mason and Maddox opened a spigot of lurid psychosexual fantasies. Mason accused state Attorney General Robert Abrams of masturbating over photos of Brawley, for example, and Maddox declared that "white men want to do to Tawana what they're afraid to do to their own women." The city's black dailies reported and embellished these charges in a tone that can only be described as gleeful outrage.

In the depths of this nightmare, Hugh Pearson, a young black writer, tried to explain the allure of Brawley's tale even for blacks who couldn't reconcile it with the facts of the case. The communal delirium was more than just "a long pent-up anger at the history of coerced sexual relations" between black women and white men, Pearson wrote. The truth that blacks are racially mixed, not a "proudly distinct racial group, strikes at the core self-image of black Americans in a unique and ironic manner: it undermines the appeals of Brawley's champions to racial solidarity. An irreconcilable tension develops between black anger at past sexual violation and the undeniable truth of blacks' interracial heritage. . . . At stake are the images not only of black 'purity,' but also of black manhood. Humiliation, Pearson wrote,

"has dogged black men who could not protect and care for their own." In the Brawley psychodrama, black men could at last come to the rescue of one of their violated women. Horrific stuff. The use of a confused fifteen-year-old as a prop in a pathetic fantasy of historic redemption is, of course, an abuse of her. Forced miscegenation is transmuted into misogyny.

Equally outrageous was the white left's opportunistic handling of this anguished confusion. As Brawley's tale began to unravel in the spring of 1988, *The Nation* published a piece on its implications by Albany-based activist Jeff Jones. He recounted two racial incidents in the Hudson Valley and argued that Brawley had served as an organizing tool for marches against racism. "In the weeks ahead, the mainstream press is likely to focus on whether the Brawley family's account of what happened to Tawana is accurate. But more important is the exposure of racist violence . . . in the Hudson Valley and around the country." After the case had fallen apart, *The Nation* let anthropologist Stanley Diamond try his hand. In cultural perspective, if not in reality, he wrote, "it doesn't matter whether the crime occurred or not. . . . It was described with skill and controlled hysteria by the black actors as the epitome of degradation, a repellent model of what actually happens to too many black women. . . . It may be asking too much of the white community to excuse the Brawley deceit; but they misunderstand it at their peril."

William Kunstler, a staunch supporter of Maddox and Mason, put out much the same line in an interview with *New York Newsday*: "It makes no difference whether the attack on Tawana really happened. . . . It doesn't disguise the fact that a lot of young black women are treated the way she said she was treated. [Maddox and Mason] now have an issue with which they can grab the headlines and launch a vigorous attack on the criminal justice system."

Nothing can excuse this astounding indulgence of lies and its implicit contempt for the history of black women's suffering and for decent working-class white opinion in the Hudson Valley. Why couldn't Diamond or Kunstler find in this case even a faint echo of the fable of the boy who cried wolf? Diamond's condescension to whites who misunderstood the Brawley deceit "at their peril" is breathtaking. At his own peril, he misunderstands the importance of factual truth to mythmaking in public discourse. By his logic, it wouldn't have mattered if the Scottsboro Boys had really committed the rapes with which they were charged in 1931.

In fact, the case of the Scottsboro Boys was exhumed as a precedent for the black and Latino youths charged with assaulting and raping the Central Park jogger. Reports that she'd been bludgeoned nearly to death loosed a torrent of white rage that had been seething in the wake of the Brawley hoax. Clearly reveling in that fury, Maddox told an audience on WLIB that the Central Park rape story was itself a hoax. Who, he asked suggestively, had been allowed to see the victim before her

suspiciously “miraculous” recovery? That Maddox and a colleague had watched one defendant break down on videotape while looking at photos of the battered woman somehow didn’t matter.

Wilbert Tatum, editor of the black weekly *Amsterdam News*, referred repeatedly to the Central Park trial as a “lynching.” Abandoning journalistic canons, his paper, another weekly, *The City Sun*, and WLIB talk show host Gary Byrd all publicized the jogger’s name. They argued, at least in part, that she deserved no more privacy than Brawley had gotten from the “white press”—neglecting to note that Brawley was the first “rape victim” ever to have called a press conference before phoning a district attorney.

Then Sharpton actually brought Tawana Brawley to the trial—to call attention, he said, to the double standard the criminal justice system uses for whites and blacks who charge rape. Many women told reporters that any lingering faith they’d had in Brawley’s story vanished forever when they saw the smartly dressed teenager shaking hands amicably with the Central Park defendants. Sharpton even plans to use the collapse of prosecutor Elizabeth Lederer’s marriage during the trial as part of one of the defendants’ appeals. He told *The New York Post*: “It added to her hostility, her frame of mind.”

**B**y now it seems clear that most of the city has rejected the delusional world inhabited by Sharpton, Maddox, and their followers. Yet this development may well please them. It confirms the imagery of implacable white hatred they have long painted as the background and basis of their struggle. Even though polls in the black community consistently record less than 15 percent support for the Brawley advisers, it is a potent minority, capable of cowering more moderate blacks, particularly in the face of white anger.

It is also capable of profoundly miseducating a larger portion of the black community. Its tactics reinforce what Shelby Steele has identified as the perverse sort of organizing that “binds the victim to his victimization by linking his power to his status as a victim. . . . One sees evidence of this in the near happiness with which certain black leaders recount the horror of Howard Beach and other recent instances of racial tension. As one is saddened by these tragic events, one is also repelled at the way some black leaders—agitated to near hysteria by the scent of victim power inherent in them—leap forward to exploit them as evidence of black innocence and white guilt.” And in the tortured labyrinths of these men’s minds, that legacy of victimization and impotence somehow translates into psychosexual cruelty as well.

One can scarcely overestimate how painful it would be for an already beleaguered community to face and discuss these awful truths. Has white society done much better with its own misogyny? Still, it’s astonishing that apparently more moderate black leaders such as Bill Perkins, tenant leader of the defendants’ Schomburg Plaza Housing complex, and the Rev. Calvin Butts of Harlem’s Abyssinian Baptist Church don’t feel compelled to correct what they read in the black press and

hear in Maddox’s and Sharpton’s diatribes. Asked if there was a lesson to be learned from the verdict in the Central Park case, Perkins said it was that black youths can be railroaded by the system. Butts, in his sermon the day after the verdict was rendered, challenged his congregation to “be like Jesus” and show forgiveness toward the defendants—adding, paradoxically, that he doubted the verdicts’ validity.

That might have made sense had Butts ever challenged his congregants to “be like Jesus” toward the white murderers and assailants in Bensonhurst and Howard Beach—or had he challenged Sharpton’s and the black press’s cruel, delusionary antics. Instead, he, like Perkins and many other black clerical and civic leaders, help by silent assent to wrap the mantle of victimization around young defendants.

Could stronger leadership make a difference? Several courageous black leaders, such as Brooklyn Assemblyman Roger Green and East Brooklyn Congregations chairman Rev. Johnny Ray Young Blood, have tried. So has David Dinkins. When the assault on the jogger occurred in April 1989, Dinkins, then Manhattan borough president, summoned black leaders to a meeting in his office. When Perkins objected to Dinkins’s reference to the perpetrators of the assault as “urban terrorists,” Dinkins sternly replied, “I called them that, Bill, because that’s what they were.” The silence in the room conveyed wary acknowledgment that Dinkins was right. Yet the participants’ refusal to reinforce that truth publicly can only be seen as a contribution to the deepening undertows of normlessness and violence gripping low-income black communities.

The criminal justice system has not been perfect in these cases. Disturbing questions about the quality of investigations, evidence, and judges’ instructions haunt the Bensonhurst and Central Park trials. They may provide grounds for appeal. But that is a job for defense attorneys who aren’t doubling as political leaders. The difference between personal responsibility and public posturing was clarified by Sheryl McCarthy, a black columnist for *New York Newsday*: “After the crimes [against the jogger] were committed, there was only denial—by the teens, their parents, and their supporters—who saw racism in the mere fact that the jogger was white and that black teenagers were charged with the crime. . . . Because of all the denial and the frenzy into which the community was whipped up by the trial, I suspect the teens view themselves as the wronged ones. Though there is a young woman with a scarred face and body, . . . these young men see themselves as the victims. But there must be times in the middle of the night when Anton, Yusef, and Raymond are awakened by sudden flashes of the truth, when they realize the true horror of what they did.”

The question is whether the truth can awaken more black leaders as well.

JIM SLEEPER, an editorial writer for *New York Newsday*, is the author of *The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York*, which will be published by W. W. Norton this week.