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Black Women and Anti-Rape Activism

- Reviews section -

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In *At the Dark End of the Street*, Wayne State University historian Danielle McGuire persuasively and powerfully argues that the history of Black women's anti-rape activism must be understood as an integral part of the Civil Rights Movement, but that standard accounts of civil rights have neglected the significance of these women's efforts.

McGuire's gripping narrative begins in 1944, a decade before the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycotts. Rosa Parks, branch secretary of the NAACP chapter in Montgomery, traveled to Abbeville, Alabama, to talk with a 24-year-old mother, Recy Taylor. Taylor had been kidnapped on her way home from church by seven armed white men who gang-raped and left her on the side of the road.

McGuire says, "After meeting with Recy Taylor, Rosa Parks helped form the Committee for Equal Justice. With support from local people, she helped organize what the *Chicago Defender* called "the strongest campaign for equal justice to be seen in a decade." Despite a national campaign in support of Taylor, two all-white grand juries refused to issue indictments to try the men accused in the case.

However, McGuire points out that "eleven years later" Parks and others involved in Taylor's defense "would become better known as the Montgomery Improvement Association. The 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, often heralded as the opening scene of the Civil Rights movement, was in many ways the last act of a decades-long struggle to protect black women, like Taylor, from sexualized violence and rape" (xvii).

McGuire recounts a score of cases showing "not surprisingly" that the rape and subsequent failure of the justice system in the Taylor case was in fact typical. As Patricia Hill Collins demonstrates in *Black Feminist Thought*, historically the sexuality of Black women has been systematically dehumanized and hypersexualized to justify their sexual abuse by white men.

The resulting pattern of interracial rape was designed to terrorize and dominate the Black community, and consequently mobilized a vigorous defense of the bodily integrity of Black women. Slave narratives by women like Harriet Jacobs highlighted the sexual vulnerability of Black women, which served as a focal point of Black women's anti-slavery activism.

After the Civil War, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Barrier Williams, Anna Julia Cooper and other Black activists continued to challenge white supremacist sexual exploitation. At the same time that Black women were subject to interracial rape with very little legal recourse, Ida B. Wells argued that Black men were accused of rape as part of a larger "system of intimidation" (Wells, qtd. xviii).

Rosa Parks and her husband had hosted meetings of local defenders of the men accused in the Scottsboro case in their home in 1932. McGuire's history of the activism of Parks and others against "sexualized violence" provides a context for the bus boycott that recasts it as "a women's movement for dignity, respect and bodily integrity" (43).

Equal Justice and Protection

McGuire shows that already existing social and political structures in Montgomery enabled the "relative speed with which the 1955 boycott was begun." These had been organized, in part, to seek "equal justice and protection for black women" (62, 54). One of these organizations was the Women's Political Caucus, or the WPC, established by

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Mary Fair Burks in 1946 after a “run-in” with a “club wielding police officer” (63).

The WPC quickly decided to focus on registering voters. In 1950, Jo Ann Robinson took over leadership of the WPC. Like Burks, Robinson was a faculty member at Alabama State College. Under her guidance the WPC challenged segregation in city parks as well as police brutality. In 1952 they attended a City Commission meeting to protest segregation on city buses and “abuses heaped upon black female bus riders,” demonstrating years of Black women’s activism in regard to the bus system preceding the 1955 boycott (65).

Efforts to seek justice for Black women raped by white men also proved the effectiveness of political strategies later utilized in the successful effort to desegregate the Montgomery buses. One of these women was Gertrude Perkins, raped in Montgomery in 1949 by two uniformed police officers.

Perkins sought the help of Reverend Solomon Seay, who joined with E.D. Nixon, local president of the NAACP, and other groups to form the Citizens Committee for Gertrude Perkins. Although the grand jury refused to issue indictments in this case as well, Seay identified it as critical in politicizing “all the ministers” in Montgomery (57).

Another important case was that of Flossie Hardman, a 15-year-old raped in 1951 by her employer, Sam Green, one night when he was driving her home. When an all-white jury found Green not guilty after five minutes of deliberation, Rufus Lewis, a Black veteran and local businessman who had been involved in voter registration, organized a boycott of Green’s grocery store, which was in a “primarily black neighborhood.”

The campaign succeeded in closing the store, and “established the boycott as a powerful weapon for justice and sent a message to whites that African Americans would not allow white men to disrespect, abuse, and violate black women’s bodies with impunity” (58).

Open Season

In a chapter titled “There’s Open Season on Negroes Now,” McGuire discusses the backlash that followed the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in public education, when murder and sexual violence were used as weapons of terror against Black women and men. Segregationists insisted that “the goal of integration was “miscegenation”” at the same time that white men continued to rape Black women (115).

The 1955 murder of Emmett Till is infamous, but just one of the “530 acts of segregationist violence and economic intimidation against African Americans between 1954-1959” (129). McGuire says that while the period between 1956-1960 has been called the “fallow years” by one historian of the Civil Rights Movement, “federal sensitivity to world opinion, and the existence of a left-wing media that spotlighted black women’s testimony, brought the issue of white-on-black rape to the forefront of the freedom struggle,” and that campaigns for justice “led to trials and even convictions throughout the South” (130).

One of these trials was of four white men who raped Florida A&M student Betty Jean Owens. Owens was with three other students in a car after a dance, when the four men, who had decided to “go out and get a nigger girl’ and “have an all night party” kidnapped her at gunpoint (130).

The rapists were apprehended with Owens bound and gagged in a car. The men were found “guilty with a recommendation for mercy,” saving them from the electric chair (149). Clearly their life sentences in the case were not commensurate with penalties typically meted out to African Americans “charged with raping white women” “37 of whom had been electrocuted “in the 34 years since Florida began sending convicted rapists to the electric chair

instead of the gallows” (138).

Yet as McGuire argues in regards to another similar case, the conviction and sentence should be “considered a significant milestone in the modern civil rights movement” because “it destroyed a pillar of white supremacy that was rooted in slavery — the ability of white men to rape black women without legal consequences” (199).

McGuire’s discussions of the climate of racial and sexual hysteria surrounding the summer of 1964, when SNCC brought white students from the North to register Black voters in Mississippi, as well as the Selma, Alabama, campaign of 1965, show that both have “an important history rooted in sexualized violence the historians have not yet explored” (xxi).

The final case that McGuire discusses is that of Joan Little, on trial in 1975 for the murder of Clarence Allgood, a guard in the North Carolina prison where Little was serving a sentence for breaking, entering and larceny. Allgood entered Little’s cell with an ice pick and demanded that she “suck him” (222).

An Important Victory

A host of civil rights and women’s organizations organized in support of Little. And just as she did for Recy Taylor more than 30 years earlier, Rosa Parks worked to secure justice for Little, helping to “found a local branch of the Joan Little Legal Defense Committee in Detroit, where she had fled two years after the Montgomery bus boycott” (215).

McGuire points out that the campaign in support of Little is often understood “as the product of second wave feminism, which finally enabled women to break the code of silence surrounding sexual violence and “speak out” against rape” (221). But as McGuire has shown in her book, African-American women had been speaking out “for more than a century (227).

While the prosecutor attempted to show that Little had seduced Allgood, Little’s attorneys, Karen Galloway, the first African-American woman to graduate from Duke Law School, and white civil rights lawyer Jerry Paul, emphasized the “history of white men’s lawlessness and indifference toward black women’s humanity” (224). McGuire argues that Little’s acquittal marked a significant victory in that centuries-long battle.

While *At the Dark End of the Street* is painful reading, it also importantly reconfigures the way we understand not only the Civil Rights Movement, but the Women’s Movement as well. It is because of this that the students in my Introduction to Women’s Studies classes will be reading the chapters in this book focusing on the Montgomery Bus Strike.

I want my students to understand the way in which the two movements have been inextricably related — but that Black women’s role in each has not been adequately understood. Doing so, both in terms of the past and the present, is critical to our ability to create a most just society.

As bell hooks argued in the title essay of her important work in feminist theory, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, the needs of Black women must be moved from the margin to the center of feminist theory. McGuire makes this conceptual shift in understanding the Civil Rights movement, with powerful results.