

Black Testimony and Activism Against Sexualized Violence During the Civil Rights Movement

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The discussion of sexualized violence within Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010), Scott Ellsworth's *The Ground Breaking* (2021), and Danielle L. McGuire's *At the Dark End of the Street* (2010) is a key concept in understanding Black people's quest for civil rights, as well as Black women's fight for bodily integrity. These texts portray sexualized violence as a tool used by white supremacy to villainize Black men, as well as abuse Black women and portray them as sexually promiscuous. Wilkerson, Ellsworth, and McGuire give historical examples which reinforce McGuire's claim that white supremacy uses the threat of sexual violence against Black women in an attempt to keep Black people in their same social and economic station. It is vital to examine the sexualized violence against Black people in the context of the Civil Rights Movement in order to understand how sex was weaponized against Black men and women in different, yet similarly harmful, ways and how Black people battled these tactics throughout their quest for civil rights by using personal testimony and organized political activism. These three texts reveal once more that sexualized violence is not merely a problem amongst individuals, but a larger issue which reinforces the racial and economic hierarchy established by white supremacy.

The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabelle Wilkerson (2010) illustrates through the experiences of Ida Mae Gladney and Dr. Robert Foster the importance of acknowledging sexualized violence during Black people's quest for civil rights. A specific instance in which Gladney faced sexualized violence occurred when she was propositioned by a white, male employer while doing domestic work in Chicago (Wilkerson 2010). Gladney was racially sexualized as she experienced "a white man expecting her to sleep with him as if that were what any colored woman would just naturally want to do." (Wilkerson p. 336). She was a victim of a common racialized stereotype that Black women were sexually promiscuous, particularly for

white men. Gladney's positionality as a working-class Black woman made her vulnerable to harassment and sexualization by white men, which coincides with McGuire's claim that "White men lured black women and girls away from home with promises of steady work and better wages...;raped them as a form of retribution or to enforce rules of racial and economic hierarchy." (McGuire p. xviii). Gladney is one of many working Black women who were victims of sexualized violence during the context of the Civil Rights Movement. Though she was able to avoid being assaulted, "[Gladney] would not likely have gotten out of it in Mississippi. Her refusal would have been seen as impudence, all but assuring an assault." (Wilkerson p. 336). Gladney's experience shows a greater context of Black women being sexualized by white male employers which McGuire describes as a common tactic of upholding white patriarchal power. Gladney's refusal to sleep with her employer represents the fight against racial and patriarchal systems which will continue throughout the Civil Rights Movement.

Similarly, Wilkerson's (2010) description of Dr. Foster's experience throughout his late career as a physician represents how the unsubstantiated claims of violence committed by Black men against white women is a tool used by white supremacy to villainize Black males. Dr. Foster made his journey to California in order to form a successful medical practice, and throughout his long and illustrious career, he was known for his care towards patient relations. (Wilkerson 2010). However, during his time at the West Los Angeles Veterans Administration Medical Center, "a white woman patient at the hospital complained about an examination." (Wilkerson p. 461). Due to the woman's complaint, Dr. Foster faced scrutiny in the workplace as his office was moved to a lesser part of the building and his reputation was tarnished. He felt humiliated and degraded by this accusation, which placed him amongst many other black men within the historical context of the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. Foster's experience affirms McGuire's point

that “The most incendiary race rumors were about black men’s insatiable lust for white women.” (McGuire p. 26). He was villainized without proper evidence similarly to other Black men, representing the larger issue of the accusation of sexual violence being used as a justification to attack or discredit Black men.

In addition to this example of the demonization of Black men, a case which is mentioned in both Wilkerson’s (2010) and McGuire’s (2010) texts is the murder of Emmitt Till. Till was a fourteen-year-old Chicago resident who was brutally murdered on a visit to Mississippi by two white men, J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant, for allegedly flirting with Bryant’s wife (McGuire 2010). Wilkerson describes Gladney’s attendance at Till’s funeral in which his mother chose an open casket “so people could see what Mississippi had done to him.” (Wilkerson p. 369). This choice represents an act of defiance and protest by Till’s mother, who refused to cover up the violence of the south and what it did to her son. McGuire (2010) contrastingly describes how Milam and Bryant, along with other white supremacists, justified Till’s murder due to their fear and hatred of miscegenation and integration. This case represents how white people used fear of the accusation of sexual violence as a way to keep Black men in their social station. The NAACP attempted to battle these hateful tactics by bringing attention to Till’s violent murder and emphasizing how Black men were not safe in the south under the threat of facing physical violence due to sexual rumors. Till’s case represents the brutal reality of white supremacy in the south and its use of sexualized violence to vilify Black men.

Black men are similarly demonized within Scott Ellsworth’s *The Ground Breaking* (2021), as the catalyst for the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre is the accusation of Dick Rowland, a Black man, sexually assaulting Sarah Page, a white woman. The massacre stemmed from an alleged accusation of assault, though Ellsworths says, “For whatever happened or did not happen

in the elevator, Sarah Page will not press any charges.” (Ellsworth p. 18). Though there was no evidence but a rumor, a white lynch mob gathered outside the courthouse to take Dick Rowland. The crowd became riled with anger as the mob used enraging phrases such as, “What if she was your daughter or your sister? What are we waiting for?” (Ellsworth p. 21). This phrase exemplifies a tactic used by white supremacists which vilified Black men and victimized white womanhood. The mere idea that a white woman may be sexually attacked gave cause to attack or lynch Black men. This illustrates how sexualized violence must be discussed during Black people’s fight for civil rights as McGuire exemplifies that “interracial rape was not only used to uphold white patriarchal power but was also deployed as a justification for lynching black men who challenged the Southern status quo.” (McGuire p. xviii). McGuire’s (2010) analysis of this common tactic shows how white supremacy attempted to demonize Black men by exalting the morals of protecting Southern womanhood. However, McGuire reveals in *At the Dark End of the Street* that this same guise of protecting Southern womanhood is not afforded to Black women during their fight for civil rights.

Within *At the Dark End of the Street*, McGuire (2010) describes a series of Black women before and throughout the Civil Rights Movement who testify about the sexualized violence they experienced. Through the stories of Recy Taylor, Betty Jean Owens, Rosa Lee Coates, and Joan Little, McGuire illustrates how Black communities did not react passively to the brutalization of Black women and fought passionately on their quest for bodily autonomy and dignity. In Abbeville, Alabama in 1944 Recy Taylor was abducted and gang-raped by seven white men, and her treatment reveals the way in which sexualized violence was used to enforce racial and economic guidelines. Law enforcement did not work to provide justice for Taylor as Sheriff Gamble failed his duties to “call the other men in, issue any warrants, or make any arrests.”

(McGuire p. 9). White prosecutors and media tried to smear Taylor's reputation and portray her as a prostitute, with former police chief, Will Cook, saying that she "was nothing but a whore around Abbeville." (McGuire p. 40). Ultimately, despite the overwhelming amount of evidence, the all-white male jury did not choose to indict. Taylor's lack of support by law enforcement, her reputation being discredited in the media, and her being a target for further violence after her testimony reveals how the ideals of Southern womanhood that white people claimed to believe in did not extend to Black Southern womanhood. Though she garnered much attention from Black organizations, in part due to the work of Rosa Parks, Taylor never received legal justice for her rape, demonstrating how sexualized violence against Black women was essentially not punishable by law. This injustice would come to be one of the pillars of white supremacy the Civil Rights Movement would work to topple. Though she never received proper justice, Taylor made a significant difference in the way people viewed sexualized violence against Black women as she, "broke the institutional silence surrounding the long history of white men's violation of black women, countered efforts to shame or stereotype her as unchaste, and made white Southern leaders, including the governor of Alabama, recognize her personhood." (McGuire p. 284). Taylor set a precedent for other Black women who would continue to testify about the sexual violence they endured under the thumb of white supremacy.

McGuire (2010) continues to illustrate the difference that was being made in Black people's quest for civil rights through the story of Betty Jean Owens. Owens, a student at Florida A&M University, was pulled from a car and abducted and gang-raped by four white men. (McGuire 2010). Students at FAMU and Black political leaders spread Owen's story through protests, representing the connection between the Civil Rights Movement and protecting Black womanhood. During the trial, the rapist's defense attorneys used common tactics of white

supremacy by “attempting to characterize [Owens] as a stereotypical black jezebel,” to prove “that she actually enjoyed the sexual encounter.” (McGuire p. 177). Though these were the same tactics used against Recy Taylor, they were unsuccessful in this case and the men received life sentences with a recommendation for mercy. This was a bittersweet victory because it maintained the pattern of white men never having been executed for raping Black women. (McGuire 2010). This injustice reveals the structures of white supremacy in society which place less value on the Black female body. However, this case did still represent progress being made as Owen’s attackers were found guilty, showing how the fight for Black women’s bodily integrity was heavily intertwined with the Civil Rights Movement through protests organized by university students and Black leaders.

Likewise to Owens, the testimony of Rosa Lee Coates represents how the discussion of sexualized violence is vital to understanding the scope of the Civil Rights Movement. Coates, a fifteen-year-old African American girl, was kidnapped under the guise of completing domestic work and sexually assaulted by Norman Cannon, similar to the experience of Gladney in Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010). Though Cannon and his Klan attorney attempted to discredit Coates with racist stereotypes, her testimony was “clear and simple”, and Cannon received a life sentence. (McGuire p. 238). Though this case was a major breakthrough for the Civil Rights Movement, it gained little attention in the media because the officials in charge of the case “had done everything right.” (McGuire p. 239). Unlike many other Black victims of sexualized violence, Coate’s attorneys had, “successfully defended [her] chastity and respectability,” showing that Black women should have just as much right to bodily integrity as their white counterpart. This case must be acknowledged in the discussion of Black people’s quest for civil rights because it represents an organized effort by Black leaders with the

cooperation of law enforcement to stop the violation of Black women and dismantle ideas of white supremacy. It represents a massive victory of Black womanhood being protected from the sexualized violence perpetrated by white males.

Similarly, Joan Little's testimony about her harassment and sexual assault in jail represents how the Civil Rights Movement played a large part in Black people receiving justice for acts of sexualized violence committed against them. Little was sexually assaulted by a white guard, Clarence Alligood, in a prison in Washington, North Carolina where she acted in self defense, killing Alligood and escaping prison. (McGuire 2010). McGuire examines how after she turned herself in, Little's case drew major attention from the media through countless protests and activism by Angela Davis, as well as garnered support from many different political organizations, such as the National Organization for Women, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the North Carolina Alliance Against Racial and Political Repression. Due to Little's reputation and past run-ins with the law, she was portrayed by prosecutors in court through racialized and sexualized stereotypes which "attacked her credibility and portrayed her as a prostitute." (McGuire p. 272). Her attorneys, Jerry Paul and Karen Galloway, however, fought against the slander perpetrated by the politics of respectability, emphasizing how no past misdeed justifies Little being sexually assaulted. In closing statements, Paul put Little's case into the historical context of the Civil Rights Movement by exclaiming that "This case compels the world to see that women, black women, deserve justice; that women are victims of rape and that rape is not a sex crime and that they do not lure men into raping them." (McGuire p. 274). This remark affirms how Little's fight is representative of a larger movement for Black people to attain civil rights and bodily autonomy. Because of brave testimony and organized activism,

Black people were able to incorporate the fight for bodily integrity into the Civil Rights Movement as a whole.

Ultimately, it is vital to understand how sexualized violence was used as a weapon by white supremacy to justify the violence, abuse, and mistreatment of Black people. It is equally important to understand the way in which Black people battled this injustice throughout their quest for civil rights and bodily integrity. The brave testimony of Black women and organized efforts by political leaders and activists represent how Black people fought against institutional racism in order to protect Black womanhood and dismantle racial stereotypes of sexual violence and promiscuity.

References

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