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The Rape of Recy Taylor [film review]

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The Rape of Recy Taylor. Dir. By Nancy Buirski. Prod. by Nancy Buirski, Beth Hubbard, Claire L. Chandler, Susan Margolin. Augusta Films, 2017. 91 min. (<https://www.therapeofrecytaylor.com/>)

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Nancy Buirski's documentary *The Rape of Recy Taylor* centers on a brutal sexual assault in Abbeville, Alabama in 1944. A 24-year-old African American wife and mother, coming home from a sanctified church service with a friend and her son, was forced into a car at gunpoint, and gang raped by six young white men. The beating heart of the film is the on-screen testimony of Taylor's younger brother, Robert Corbitt, and her younger sister, Alma Daniels, who convey the unspeakably cruel and vicious character of the attack: Corbitt repeats the perpetrators' directions to Recy: "They said they wanted her to act just like she was in bed with her husband." Daniels vehemently emphasized the physical and psychological trauma: "What they did to my sister...you know my sister didn't have any more kids after that, and never got pregnant after that." Her description is searing: "They didn't only have sex with her, after they got through mutilating her, they played in her body." Corbitt and Taylor's powerful testimony and eloquent outrage push viewers to come face to face with the deep-rooted and everyday white male culture of entitlement to Black women's bodies that lies at the heart of white supremacy, exacting unbearable costs on Black women, Black families, and Black communities.

Taylor's nephew, now an educator, provides a historical genealogy of white male sexual assault as a commonplace of Black women's lives in slavery, under the Jim Crow segregation regime, and into the present moment. The testimony of Larry

Smith, a local historian, the first white narrator who appears in the film, unintentionally confirms Taylor's nephew's assessment, describing slave owners "having their way" with slaves, they owned as "in some instances... a consensual type of affair."

The film's opening words of text highlight the magnitude of Black women's sexual victimization: "The number of Black women raped by white men in the country's past is staggering. Afraid for their lives, only a courageous few spoke up. Only in the Black press and in 'race films'—made by mostly Black filmmakers with Black casts for mostly Black audiences—would one learn of such brutal crimes." To add visual interest and context in a film heavily dependent on interviews, director Buirski relied on short clips from several of these films, including the unprecedented and remarkable representation of the lynching of a black family and a white man's attempted rape of a black woman in Oscar Micheaux's 1919 film, *Within Our Gates*. She wanted to show the attack on Taylor as "happening to many women, not just a few...to represent the tension and violence that people lived with in those days;" she has described these films as "beautiful symbols in a way, of what had happened to other women," with "almost a biblical quality" about their aesthetic (Miriam Bale. "*The Rape of Recy Taylor's Director on the Oprah Effect*," 1/11/2018 *Vulture*, <http://2018/01/the-rape-pf-recy-taylors-director-on-the-oprah-effect.html>; Soheil Rezayazda, "Women Were Afraid to Speak Up—that's What Made Recy Taylor So Important": Director Nancy Buirski on *The Rape of Recy Taylor*, 9/27/2017, *Filmmaker*, <https://filmmakermagazine.com/103553-women->

were-afraid-to-speak-up-thats-what-made-rect-taylor-so-important-drector-nancy-buirski-on-the-rape-of-recy-taylor/). Buirski deployed new footage of Abbeville's back roads, wooded areas, dark night skies , and material she found in local archives, family photographs and home movies. Music from spirituals sung by sharecropper and civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer in 1963 (herself a survivor of involuntary sterilization) and a recent version of "This Bitter Earth/On the Nature of Daylight" (1999) sung by Dinah Washington cue a somber emotional tone to inflect the words being spoken on screen.

Taylor showed extraordinary personal courage and strength in protesting her assault and trying to bring her rapists to justice. Although her assailants released her with the proviso that she would not reveal what happened, she did NOT remain silent. In her brother's words, "Recy promised those guys that if they didn't kill her and let her go home to her baby, she wouldn't tell anyone. As soon as she got back, she told everything she could." In Taylor's own words, "I can't help but tell the truth, what they done to me. " Her refusal to be silenced depended in part on support from her family. When her father and her husband found her staggering up the road, they embraced her and held her close. Her father spent the rest of the night guarding her, her husband and child at his house with his shotgun prominently displayed across his lap. Not remaining silent intensified the danger for all of them; the house where Recy lived with her husband and baby daughter was firebombed the next day.

Although Taylor and her family could identify several of her assailants, no arrests were made. White people in town preferred readily available story proffered by Taylor's local assailants: she was a prostitute, and they had paid her. One of Recy Taylor's rapists embellished his testimony to demonstrate his idea of good manners: "all used rubbers...let her rest between acts...asked if she was ready before another boy...paid her, asked if she was satisfied, she said she was."

Recy Taylor's assault coincided with the WWII-era groundswell of organized Black resistance to Jim Crow. After the assault, someone from Taylor's family contacted the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which was rapidly expanding nationally and in Alabama, with 35 branches and 15,000 members by the mid-1940s. The NAACP representative from Montgomery who travelled to Abbeville to investigate was none other than 30 year-old Rosa Parks, who had joined the Montgomery NAACP the year before. She was then employed as a typist at Maxwell Field, an U.S. Army Air Corps Base, and working with her friend E.D. Nixon, a local labor leader, on a voter registration campaign. The eloquent and passionate historian Crystal Feimster notes that Parks was from Abbeville, had relatives there, and her mission was "personal in some ways," because "she understands at a gut level what it means to be a victim of sexual assault."

The film's next "reveal" is an account handwritten by Parks, describing being entrapped and propositioned by "Mr. Charlie." Cynthia Etivo, an award-winning

black British actress, reads from what the film identifies as a “letter” in which Parks describes her eighteen year old self in 1931, working long hours as a poorly paid domestic for a white family. After confronting “Mr. Charlie” by saying that she hated all white people, especially him, that she was not for sale, and “taunting him with the white man’s law of segregation,” she is able to successfully fend off her physically threatening white attacker. (Jeanne Theoharis, Parks’s scholarly biographer, has identified the film’s “letter” as a fragment of personal writing from the late 1950s found in Parks’s papers.)

The interconnection between Taylor and Rosa Parks is a central theme of historian Danielle McGuire’s 2010 book, *The Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*, optioned by Buirski and her co-producers. McGuire interviewed Recy Taylor and her family in 2008 and 2009, and uncovered important evidence documenting the case and the extensive national campaign to bring Taylor’s assailants to justice.

The film insistently introduces a new version of Rosa Parks, not as the commonly- pictured meek and tired, seamstress whose surprising refusal to follow segregated seating rules as ordered by a bus driver sparked the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, but instead as a provocative, spirited, feisty, experienced, life-long resister to white supremacy. However, Buirski’s film emphasizes this “reveal” at some cost to historical complexity. Misleadingly-edited narration presents the

experiences that prepared Parks for her 1955 resistance as already behind her when she came to Abbeville in 1944. McGuire's filmed testimony returns frequently to the link between Taylor and Parks as she describes the 1944 organizing that focused attention on the case, also claiming that "the [Montgomery bus] boycott is rooted in the defense of women like Recy Taylor." In Park's own 1992 memoir, she mentions her investigation of Taylor, among many other cases, but describes other people, "Black and white" who formed a "Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Taylor."

The release of this film in the fall of 2017 coincided temporally with the "#Me Too" movement's renewed attention to sexual assault. At the 2018 Golden Globes ceremony, Oprah Winfrey looped Recy Taylor's story into the new public women's campaign against sexual harassment in the entertainment industry. "There is someone you should know from history...Recy Taylor died just ten days ago, just shy of her 98th birthday. She lived, as we all have lived, too many years in a culture broken by brutally powerful men. For too long women have not been heard or believed if they dare speak their truth to the power of those men. But their time is up," Winfrey noted.

Oprah's shout-out undoubtedly expanded the potential audience for "The Rape of Recy Taylor," but connecting her story to "#Me Too" and "Time's Up" diverts attention from Recy Taylor's historical antecedents, the long line of African American women who publicly resisted sexual violence. The endlessly repeated Jim

Crow “common sense,” that Black women were willing sexual partners and Black men were a constant sexual threat, reinforced white men’s sexual privilege. It also decisively limited African-American men and women’s ability to take political action (see Crystal Feimster’s *Southern Horrors* ([2009) and Estelle Freedman’s *Redefining Rape* [2013]).

Polite white society had reasons to remain “unaware” of these assaults, but this was not the case in Black communities. As women’s historians and literary critics have argued, black women’s vulnerability to charges of sexual availability made it difficult for them to explicitly address this issue, but crucially they invented alternative means of communicating, and protesting. Fiction written by African American women in the nineteenth century commonly introduced characters of mixed race parentage to signal the prevalence of white sexual assault. In the late nineteenth century, African American women’s organizations became skilled practitioners of developing and circulating coded language in their campaigns to “protect” Black womanhood. The fiery journalist Ida B. Wells was the first Black woman to explicitly articulate what women’s historians identified as “the race-lynch narrative,” publishing her research to reveal the central place of rape accusations in post-Reconstruction political strategies to accomplish black disenfranchisement.

From the 1910s through the 1940s, the Black press increased its coverage of lynchings and the racist police and court procedures that produced unequal justice. By the late 1910s and early 1920s, the emergence of race films produced for black

audiences and screened in black theaters provided an additional set of narratives picturing the predations of white men and the vulnerability of black women.

Film scholars describe Oscar Micheaux's 1919 film, *Within Our Gates*, briefly excerpted by Buirski, as an "answer" to the incendiary charges of interracial sex driving triumphant white supremacy in D. W. Griffith's 1915 blockbuster *Birth of a Nation*.

The organized mobilization in the 1940s that drew attention to Recy Taylor's assault drew on a national conversation about race and rape, beginning with Communist and Black organizing to save the young men falsely accused of rape and sentenced to die in the Scottsboro case. Parks's husband Raymond Parks had been involved in Scottsboro defense work when they met and married in 1932, and meetings took place around their kitchen table. The Communist-led Black popular front organization, Southern Negro Youth Congress, headquartered in Birmingham, by 1939, supported campaigns against lynching and police brutality (as well as labor organizing, including for domestic workers, and voter registration). Rosa Park's friend E. D. Nixon was on its adult advisory board. Jeanne Theoharis's biography shows that Rosa and Raymond Parks worked on both the Scottsboro and Recy Taylor cases alongside Communist Party members and affiliates.

McGuire's onscreen testimony credits Parks' activism in support of Recy Taylor in forcing the Governor to reopen the case. Her emphasis on the role of the black press in circulating Taylor's story and generating protest minimizes the

contributions of the black and interracial left, already experienced political organizers with extensive national networks. When Esther Cooper Jackson, a leader in the Southern Negro Youth Congress, appears in the film, she is identified only as a “journalist” and “activist” who came from Birmingham for the purpose of getting the story of Taylor’s assault into the black press. McGuire describes the Defense Committee as later “moving on” from its focus on Recy Taylor, without crediting the intensifying anti-communist harassment that forced Left-affiliated organizers like Jackson to leave the state.

The Rape of Recy Taylor conveys a powerful lesson about sexual violence, white supremacy, and the courage of a woman and her family, determined but unable to obtain justice. The film also provides an opening to encourage deeper exploration into the long and intertwined histories of civil rights protest, black and interracial radicalism, and black women’s still unfinished struggle to define rape and consent, and to claim the bodily autonomy requisite to meaningful citizenship.

