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“It Was like All of Us Had Been Raped”: Sexual Violence, Community Mobilization, and the African American Freedom Struggle

Danielle L. McGuire

On Saturday, May 2, 1959, four white men in Tallahassee, Florida, made a pact, one of their friends testified in court later, to “go out and get a nigger girl” and have an “all night party.” That evening, they armed themselves with shotguns and switchblades and crept up behind a car parked alongside a quiet road near Jake Gaither Park. At about 1:00 a.m. on May 3, Patrick Scarborough pressed a sixteen-gauge shotgun against the driver’s nose and ordered Richard Brown and his companions out of the car. Dressed in formal gowns and tuxedos, the four African Americans—all students at Florida A&M University who had spent the evening dancing at the Green and Orange Ball—reluctantly stepped out of the car. Scarborough forced the two black men to kneel, while his friend David Beagles held the two black women at knifepoint. When Betty Jean Owens began to cry, Beagles slapped her and told her to “shut up” or she “would never get back home.” Waving his gun, Scarborough ordered Richard Brown and his friend Thomas Butterfield back in the car and told them to leave. As Brown and Butterfield began to move toward the car and then slowly drove away, Edna Richardson broke free and ran to the nearby park, leaving Betty Jean Owens alone with their attackers. Beagles pressed the switchblade to Owens’s throat and growled, “We’ll let you go if you do what we want,” then forced her to her knees,

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slapped her as she sobbed, and pushed her into the backseat of their blue Chevrolet; the four men drove her to the edge of town, where they raped her seven times.¹

Analyses of rape play little or no role in most histories of the civil rights movement, even as stories of violence against black and white men—from Emmett Till to Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney—provide gripping examples of racist brutality.² Despite a growing body of literature that focuses on the roles of black and white women and the operation of gender in the movement, sexualized violence—both as a tool of oppression and as a political spur for the movement—has yet to find its place in the story of the African American freedom struggle.³ Rape, like lynching and murder, served as a tool of psychological and physical intimidation that expressed white male domination and buttressed white supremacy. During the Jim Crow era, women's bodies served as signposts of the social order, and white men used rape and rumors of rape not only to justify violence against black men but to remind black women that their bodies were not their own.

African American women frequently retaliated by testifying about their brutal experiences. I argue that, from Harriet Jacobs to Ida B. Wells to the women of the present, the refusal of black women to remain silent about sexualized violence was part of a long-standing tradition. Black women described and denounced their sexual misuse, deploying their voices as weapons in the wars against white supremacy.

¹ *New York Amsterdam News*, June 20, 1959, p. 37. Jimmy Carl Cooper, a white youth, testified that David Beagles told him he planned to go out and get “some nigger ‘stuff’” and noted that “stuff was not the word used”: Trezzvant W. Anderson, “Rapists Missed Out on First Selection,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 20, 1959, p. 3. A cleaned-up version reported that Beagles had plans to get a “Negro girl”: “Four Convicted in Rape Case,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 14, 1959, p. 7. “I Was Scared,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 20, 1959, p. 1. “Four Begin Defense in Trial on Rape,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1959, p. A13. See also criminal case file #3445, *State of Florida v. Patrick Gene Scarborough, David Ervin Beagles, Ollie Odell Stoutamire, and William Ted Collinsworth*, 1959 (Leon County Courthouse, Tallahassee, Fla.) (copy in Danielle L. McGuire's possession). Thanks to the Leon County Courthouse for sending me the file. Because the original trial transcript is no longer available, I have had to rely on newspaper reports, particularly those in African American newspapers: the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Louisiana Weekly*, the *New York Amsterdam News*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *South Carolina Lighthouse and Informer*. The fact that the transcript is missing is verified in the case file notes of *Patrick G. Scarborough v. State of Florida*, 390 So. 2d 830 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App., 1980). See also Robert W. Saunders, “Report on Tallahassee Incident,” May 9, 1959, box A91, series III, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.). Thanks to Timothy B. Tyson for finding this information for me.

² The murders of Emmett Till in 1955 and Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney in 1963 are considered pivotal moments in the civil rights movement. Their stories are given prominent attention in the PBS *Eyes on the Prize* series and Hollywood films such as the 1988 thriller *Mississippi Burning*. For monographs on these murders, see, for example, Nicolaus Mills, *Like a Holy Crusade: Mississippi 1964—The Turning Point of the Civil Rights Movement in America* (Chicago, 1992); and Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (Baltimore, 1991).

³ Historians have only recently begun to explore how gender and sexuality affected the civil rights movement. Early efforts to include gender often took the form of “a women's history tacked onto men's history of civil rights”: Steven F. Lawson, “Civil Rights and Black Liberation,” in *A Companion to American Women's History*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt (Oxford, Eng., 2002), 411. On the ways women changed the civil rights movement and how it changed their lives as well, see, for example, Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, eds., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941–1965* (New York, 1990); and Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York, 1997). Recent works place black and white women and their long-standing traditions of community organizing and resistance in the forefront of the movement; see, for example, Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, 1995); and Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, 2003).

Indeed, their public protests often galvanized local, national, and even international outrage and sparked campaigns for racial justice and human dignity. When Betty Jean Owens spoke out against her assailants, and when the local black community mobilized in defense of her womanhood in 1959, they joined in this tradition of testimony and protest.

The arrest, trial, and conviction of Owens's white rapists by an all-white jury marked a dramatic change in the relations between this tradition of testimony and a tradition of silence that Darlene Clark Hine has termed the "culture of dissemblance."⁴ The verdict not only broke with southern tradition but fractured the philosophical and political foundations of white supremacy by challenging the relationship between sexual domination and racial inequality. For perhaps the first time since Reconstruction, southern black communities could imagine state power being deployed in defense of their respectability as men and women. As a result, the 1959 Tallahassee rape case was a watershed event that remains as revealing now as it was important then.

The sexual exploitation of black women had its roots in slavery. Slave owners, overseers, and drivers took advantage of their positions of power and authority to rape slave women, sometimes in the presence of their husbands or families. White slave owners' stolen access to black women's bodies strengthened their political, social, and economic power, partly because colonial laws made the offspring of slave women the property of their masters.⁵ After the fall of slavery, when African Americans asserted their freedom during the interracial experiment in democracy that briefly characterized Reconstruction, former slaveholders and their sympathizers used violence and terror to reassert control over the social, political, and economic agency of freedpeople. At the heart of this violence, according to Gerda Lerner, rape became a "weapon of terror" to dominate the bodies and minds of African American men and women.⁶

"Freedom," as Tera Hunter notes, "was meaningless without ownership and control over one's own body." During Reconstruction and Jim Crow, sexualized violence served as a "ritualistic reenactment of the daily pattern of social dominance," and interracial rape became the battleground upon which black men and women fought for ownership of their own bodies. Many African American women who were raped or assaulted by white men fought back by speaking out. Frances Thompson told a congressional committee investigating the 1866 Memphis race riot that seven armed white men broke into her house on a Tuesday afternoon, "drew their pistols and said

⁴ On the "culture of dissemblance," see Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on a Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs*, 14 (Summer 1989), 912–20.

⁵ On the way gender and sexuality structured racial slavery, see, for example, Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 128–36; Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca, 2002); and Deborah Gray White, *Arn't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985).

⁶ Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York, 1972), 172. See also, for example, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'The Mind That Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape, and Racial Violence," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York, 1983), 328–49; and Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana, 1997), 37, 44–45, 119–21.

they would shoot us and fire the house if we did not let them have their way with us.” Four of the men raped Frances, while the other three choked and raped sixteen-year-old Lucy Smith and left her close to death. In 1871, Harriet Simril testified in front of a congressional committee investigating Ku Klux Klan terror during Reconstruction that she was beaten and “ravished” by eight men in South Carolina who broke into her house to force her husband to “join the democratic ticket.” Essic Harris, appearing before the same committee, reported that “the rape of black women was so frequent” in the postbellum South that it had become “an old saying by now.” Ferdie Walker, who grew up during the height of segregation in the 1930s and 1940s in Fort Worth, Texas, remembered being “scared to death” by a white police officer who often exposed himself to her while she waited at the bus stop when she was only eleven years old. The sexual abuse of black women, she recalled, was an everyday occurrence. “That was really bad and it was bad for *all black girls*,” she recalled.⁷

John H. McCray, editor of the South Carolina *Lighthouse and Informer*, reported that it was “a commonplace experience for many of our women in southern towns . . . to be propositioned openly by white men.” He said, “You can pick up accounts of these at a dime a dozen in almost any community.” African American women that I interviewed in Birmingham, Alabama, in March 2003 echoed Ferdie Walker’s and McCray’s comments. Nearly all of them testified about being sexually abused or intimidated by white men—particularly bus drivers, police officers, and employers.⁸

The acclaimed freedom fighter Fannie Lou Hamer knew that rape and sexual violence was a common occurrence in the segregated South. *For Freedom’s Sake*, Chana Kai Lee’s biography of Hamer, is one of the few histories of the modern-day civil rights movement that openly deals with and documents the legacy of sexual assault. Hamer’s grandmother, Liza Bramlett, spoke often of the “horrors of slavery,” including stories about “how the white folks would do her.” Bramlett’s daughter remembered that “this man would keep her as long as he want to and then he would trade her off for a little heifer calf. Then the other man would get her and keep her as long as he want—she was steady having babies—and trade her off for a little sow pig.” Twenty of the twenty-three children Bramlett gave birth to were products of rape.⁹

⁷ Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 34. Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 141. Frances Thompson quoted in Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America*, 174–75; Harriet Simril quoted *ibid.*, 183–85; see also Hannah Rosen, “‘Not That Sort of Woman’: Race, Gender, and Sexual Violence during the Memphis Riot of 1866,” in *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, ed. Martha Hodes (New York, 1999), 267–93. Essic Harris quoted in Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” *Public Culture*, 7 (1994), 112n8; Ferdie Walker quoted in William Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad, eds., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South* (New York, 2001), 9–10.

⁸ John H. McCray, “South’s Courts Show New Day of Justice,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 11, 1959. Theralene Beachem interview by McGuire, March 19, 2003, audiotape (in McGuire’s possession); Gloria Denard interview by McGuire, March 19, 2003, audiotape, *ibid.*; Linda S. Hunt interview by McGuire, March 19, 2003, audiotape, *ibid.*; Mrs. Lucille M. Johnson interview by McGuire, March 16, 2003, audiotape, *ibid.*

⁹ Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana, 1999), 9. On the “perilous intersection of race, gender, and sexualized brutality,” see Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill, 1999), 2, 94. Though over a half century old, two of the best articulations of the sexual subtext of segregation that exist are John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (Madison, 1937); and Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York, 1949).

Hamer grew up with the clear understanding that a “black woman’s body was never hers alone.” If she was at all unclear about this lesson, the forced hysterectomy she received in 1961 and the brutal beating she received in the Winona, Mississippi, jail in 1963 left little room for confusion. After being arrested with other Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activists for desegregating a restaurant, Hamer received a savage and sexually abusive beating by the Winona police. “You bitch,” one officer yelled, “we going to make you wish you was dead.” He ordered two black inmates to beat Hamer with “a long wide blackjack,” while other patrolmen battered “her head and other parts of her body.” As they assaulted her, Hamer felt them repeatedly “pull my dress over my head and try to feel under my clothes.” She attempted to pull her dress down during the brutal attack in order to “preserve some respectability through the horror and disgrace.” Hamer told this story on national television at the Democratic National Convention in 1964 and continued to tell it “until the day she died,” offering her testimony of the sexual and racial injustice of segregation.¹⁰

By speaking out, whether it was in the church, the courtroom, or a congressional hearing, black women used their own public voices to reject the stereotypes used by white supremacists to justify economic and sexual exploitation, and they reaffirmed their own humanity. Additionally, African American women’s refusal to remain silent offered African American men an opportunity to assert themselves as *men* by rallying around the protection of black womanhood. Many other men, however, remained silent since speaking out was often dangerous, if not deadly. Most important, women’s testimonies were a political act that exposed the bitter ironies of segregation and white supremacy, helped to reverse the shame and humiliation rape inflicts, and served as catalysts in mobilizing mass movements.¹¹

Only after local and national groups were organized, black women’s testimony began to spark public campaigns for equal justice and protection of black womanhood. In this respect, World War II served as a watershed for African Americans—especially in the South. Black women’s testimony and the willingness of black leaders to protect black womanhood must be viewed as part of these resistance movements. For example, in Montgomery, Alabama, the organizational infrastructure that made the Montgomery bus boycott possible in 1955 stemmed in part from decades of black women’s activism and a history of gendered political appeals to protect black women from sexual assault. The majority of leaders active in the Montgomery

¹⁰ Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 9–10, 78–81. Although Lee argues that Hamer was “inclined to dissemble when it came to sex, race, and violence” (*ibid.*, 78–81), Lee’s own evidence suggests that Hamer testified publicly to the sexualized aspects of her beating in Winona, Mississippi, and her forced sterilization as often as she kept them hidden; see *ibid.*, 54, 59, 79, 80–81, 89, 198n42, 196n2. See also Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York, 1993).

¹¹ See Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York, 1999), 60–66. John Lewis Adams, “‘Arkansas Needs Leadership’: Daisy Bates, Black Arkansas, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People” (M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2003). Thanks to John Adams for sharing his research with me. On “reversing the shame,” see Temma Kaplan, “Reversing the Shame and Gendering the Memory,” *Signs*, 28 (Autumn 2002), 179–99. Jo Ann Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*, ed. David J. Garrow (Knoxville, 1987), 37.

Improvement Association in 1955 cut their political teeth demanding justice for black women who were raped in the 1940s and early 1950s.¹²

In 1944, the kidnapping and gang rape of Mrs. Recy Taylor by six white men in Abbeville, Alabama, sparked what the *Chicago Defender* called “the strongest campaign for equal justice to Negroes to be seen in a decade.” Taylor, a twenty-four-year-old African American woman, was walking home from the Rock Hill Holiness Church near Abbeville on September 3 when a carload of six white men pulled alongside her, pointed a gun at her head, and ordered her to get into the car. They drove her to a vacant patch of land where Herbert Lovett pointed his rifle at Taylor and demanded she get out of the car and “get them rags off or I will kill you and leave you down here in the woods.” Lovett held her at gunpoint while each of the white men took turns “ravishing” her. After the men raped her, Lovett blindfolded her, pushed her into the car, and dropped her off in the middle of town. That night, Recy Taylor told her father, her husband, and Deputy Sheriff Lewey Corbitt the details of her harrowing assault.¹³

Within a few weeks, the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor formed and was led on a local level by Rosa Parks, E. D. Nixon, Rufus A. Lewis, and E. G. Jackson (editor of the *Alabama Tribune*), all of whom later became pivotal figures in the Montgomery bus boycott. By utilizing the political infrastructure designed to defend the Scottsboro boys a decade earlier and employing the rhetoric of democracy sparked by World War II, Parks, Nixon, and their allies secured the support of national labor unions, African American organizations, women’s groups, and thousands of individuals who demanded that Gov. Chauncey Sparks order an immediate investigation and trial. “The raping of Mrs. Recy Taylor was a fascist-like, brutal violation of her personal rights as a woman and as a citizen of democracy,” Eugene Gordon, a reporter for the *New York Daily Worker*, wrote in a pamphlet about the case; “Mrs. Taylor was not the first Negro woman to be outraged,” he argued, “but it is our intention to make her the last. White-supremacy imitators of Hitler’s storm troopers [will] shrink under the glare of the nation’s spotlight.” Gordon closed by universalizing the rape: “The attack on Mrs. Taylor was an attack on all women. Mrs. Taylor is a Negro . . . but no woman is safe or free until all women

¹² On the impact of World War II, see, for example, Timothy B. Tyson, “Wars for Democracy: African American Militancy and Interracial Violence in North Carolina during World War II,” in *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy*, ed. David Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson (Chapel Hill, 1998), 254–75; and Harvard Sitkoff, “Racial Militancy and Interracial Violence in the Second World War,” *Journal of American History*, 58 (Dec. 1971), 661–81. My preliminary dissertation research indicates that African Americans throughout the South used World War II as a wedge to publicize southern injustice, especially sexual violence by white men. Between 1942 and 1950, African American women accused white men of rape, testified about their assaults, and sparked community mobilization efforts in a number of southern towns, often securing convictions, mostly on minor charges with small fines assessed.

¹³ Fred Atwater, “\$600 to Rape Wife? Alabama Whites Make Offer to Recy Taylor Mate,” *Chicago Defender*, n.d., clipping, Recy Taylor case, folder 2, Administrative Files, Gov. Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943–1947 (Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery); N. W. Kimbrough and J. V. Kitchens, “Report to Governor Chauncey Sparks,” Dec. 14, 1944, *ibid.*; John O. Harris, N. W. Kimbrough, and J. V. Kitchens to Gov. Chauncey Sparks, “Supplemental Report, December 27, 1944,” *ibid.* See also “Grand Jury Refuses to Indict Attackers,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb. 24, 1945, folder 3, *ibid.*; “This Evening,” *Birmingham News*, Feb. 21, 1945, *ibid.*; and “Second Grand Jury Finds No Bill in Negro’s Charges,” *Dothan Eagle*, Feb. 15, 1945, *ibid.*

are free.”¹⁴ Few African Americans were surprised when the Henry County Grand Jury twice failed to indict the white men—despite the governor’s belief that they were, in fact, guilty. Still, Recy Taylor’s testimony launched a national and international campaign for equal justice that must not be ignored.¹⁵

Five years later, African Americans in Montgomery, Alabama, rallied to the defense of a twenty-five-year-old black woman named Gertrude Perkins. On March 27, 1949, Perkins was walking home when she was arrested for public drunkenness and attacked by two white police officers in uniform. After forcing her into their squad car, they drove her to the edge of town and raped her repeatedly at gunpoint. Afterwards, they threw her out of their car and sped away. Somehow, she found the strength to stagger into town, where she went directly to Rev. Solomon Seay Sr.’s house. Awaking him, she told him the details of her brutal assault through sobs and tears. “We didn’t go to bed that morning,” remembered Seay; “I kept her at my house, carefully wrote down what she said, and later had it notarized.” Seay sent Perkins’s horror story to the syndicated columnist Drew Pearson, who let the whole country know what happened in his daily radio address before Montgomery’s white leaders knew what hit them.¹⁶

The leaders of the local Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, the Negro Improvement League, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), led by E. D. Nixon and the Reverend Mr. Seay, joined together to form the Citizens Committee for Gertrude Perkins. Mary Fair Burks and her newly formed Women’s Political Council may have been involved since one of their early goals was to “aid victims of rape.” Although the community mobilized on behalf of Perkins, a grand jury failed to indict the assailants a few weeks later, despite running the full process of “the Anglo-Saxon system of justice.” Still, Joe Azbell, editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser*, thought Gertrude Perkins, who bravely spoke out against the men who raped her, “had as much to do with the bus boycott and its creation as anyone on earth.” The Perkins protest did not occur in isolation. In February 1951, Rufus A. Lewis, whose influence was crucial to the 1955 campaign, led a boycott of a grocery store owned by Sam E. Green, a white man, who was accused of raping his black teenage babysitter while driving her home. Lewis, a World War II veteran and

¹⁴ On Scottsboro’s political infrastructure, see Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (New York, 1971); and James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York, 1994). Over thirty national labor unions and many more locals supported Recy Taylor. See “Press release,” Feb. 3, 1945, folder 4, box 430, Earl Conrad Collection (Cayuga Community College Library, Auburn, N.Y.). Other organizations that played an active role in Recy Taylor’s defense include the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, the National Council of Negro Women, the Southern Negro Youth Congress, the National Negro Congress, the International Labor Defense, and the Birmingham and Montgomery branches of the NAACP: “Partial Sponsor List,” Dec. 28, 1944, *ibid.*; Earl Conrad, Eugene Gordon, and Henrietta Buckmaster, “Equal Justice under Law,” pamphlet draft, *ibid.*

¹⁵ See Kimbrough and Kitchens, “Report to Governor Chauncey Sparks”; Harris, Kimbrough, and Kitchens to Sparks, “Supplemental Report.” See also “Grand Jury Refuses to Indict Attackers,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb. 24, 1945; “Dixie Sex Crimes against Negro Women Widespread,” *Chicago Defender*, n.d., Scrapbook Collection, Conrad Collection; “Alabama Rapists Came from Church to Join White Gang in Sex Crime,” *Chicago Defender*, March 24, 1945, *ibid.*; and “Alabama Has No Race Problem, Claims Official,” *Chicago Defender*, n.d., *ibid.*

¹⁶ See *Montgomery Advertiser*, April 5, 1949, p. 8A; *ibid.*, April 6, 1949, p. 1B; *ibid.*, April 7, 1949, p. 2A; S. S. Seay, *I Was There by the Grace of God* (Montgomery, 1990), 130–31. “Drew Pearson Changes Mind; Criticizes City,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, May 3, 1949, p. 1A; *ibid.*, May 21, 1949, p. 1A; “Anglo-Saxon System of Justice,” *ibid.*, May 22, 1949, p. 2B.

football coach at Alabama State University, organized other veterans and members of the Citizens' Coordinating Committee in the successful campaign to close the store and bring Green to trial.¹⁷

The 1955 Montgomery bus boycott itself can be viewed as the most obvious example of the African American community coming to the rescue of a black woman, Rosa Parks, though not because of rape. When Parks sat down in a bus's "no-man's land" and was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man, Montgomery blacks found the *perfect* woman to rally around. "Humble enough to be claimed by the common folk," Taylor Branch notes, Rosa Parks was "dignified enough in manner, speech, and dress to command the respect of the leading classes." Rosa Parks fit the middle-class ideals of "chastity, Godliness, family responsibility, and proper womanly conduct and demeanor" and was the kind of woman around which all the African Americans in Montgomery could rally. It is clear that her symbolic role as icon of virtuous black womanhood was decisive in Montgomery. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s first speech at Holt Street Baptist Church stressed this point. "And since it had to happen," the young preacher told the crowd, "I'm happy it happened to a person like Mrs. Parks. Nobody can doubt the height of her character; nobody can doubt the depth of her Christian commitment."¹⁸

By selecting Rosa Parks as the symbol of segregation instead of other, less exemplary black women who had been arrested on buses earlier in 1955, black leaders in Montgomery embraced the "politics of respectability" and adhered to what Darlene Clark Hine calls the "culture of dissemblance" as a matter of political necessity amidst the burning white backlash that the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* sparked.¹⁹ The White Citizens' Councils, a kind of uptown Ku Klux Klan, led the movement for massive resistance to school integration by relying heavily on sexual scare tactics and white fears of racial amalgamation. As a result, any gender or racial impropriety on the part of African Americans could be viewed as threatening the social order. For the supporters of segregation, "integration always meant miscegenation." Headlines in the *Citizens' Council* warned that "mixed marriage," "sex orgies," and accounts of black men raping white girls were "typical of stories filtering back from areas where racial integration is proceeding 'with all deliberate speed.'"²⁰

¹⁷ "Rape Cry against Dixie Cops Fall on Deaf Ears," *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 9, 1949, p. 1; Stewart Burns, ed., *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 7; Joe Azbell quoted in "Cradle of the Confederacy," transcript, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, Southern Regional Council Web site (March 1997; not currently available; printout in McGuire's possession). Rufus A. Lewis story in Townsend Davis, *Weary Feet, Rested Souls: A Guided History of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1998), 34.

¹⁸ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York, 1988), 130. Marissa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, "'Dress modestly, neatly . . . as if you were going to church': Respectability, Class, and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement," in *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith (New York, 1999), 87. Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 130.

¹⁹ Black leaders in Montgomery decided against using the arrests of Claudette Colvin, an unwed pregnant teenager, and Mary Louise Smith, the daughter of a local drunk, as test cases for desegregating the buses; see Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 123-28; Lynn Olson, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroes of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830-1970* (New York, 2001), 94-95; and Chappell, Hutchinson, and Ward, "'Dress modestly, neatly . . . as if you were going to church,'" 84.

²⁰ Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-1964* (Urbana, 1994), 184, 186; see also Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South*

In this environment, respectability and dissemblance required that silence surround black sexuality, a “cult of secrecy” that helped counter negative stereotypes and kept the inner lives of African Americans hidden from white people. This self-imposed reticence, Hine argues, “implied that those [African American women] who spoke out provided grist for detractors’ mills and, even more ominously, tore the protective cloaks from their inner selves.”²¹ Silence as strategy did not emerge in the mid-twentieth century; it had been a staple of black clubwomen’s politics since Reconstruction, when whites continued to use racist violence and sexual abuse to shore up white supremacy.

The culture of dissemblance does not mean there was an unbroken wall of silence. There are moments in history when the pain of violation or the opportunity for justice forced women to come forward to speak out against their abusers. Yet this code of secrecy, a political imperative during the Montgomery bus boycott, helped create a void in the historical record. As a result, violence toward black women has not been as “vividly and importantly retained in our collective memory,” Elsa Barkley Brown claims, as the lynching of and violence against black men.²²

In many ways, this culture of dissemblance silenced more than the survivors of rape; it also trained historians of the black freedom struggle to ignore the subject of black women’s dissemblance. Over the past two decades, historians have sharpened their focus on the gendered meanings of respectability, but they have lost sight of the role rape and the threat of sexual violence played in the daily lives of African American women as well as within the larger black freedom struggle.²³ Yet throughout the Jim Crow South African American women such as Recy Taylor in 1944, Gertrude Perkins in 1949, and Betty Jean Owens in 1959 refused to shield their pain in secrecy, thereby challenging the pervasiveness of the politics of respectability. Following in the footsteps of their Reconstruction-era counterparts, they testified about their assaults, leaving behind critical evidence that historians must find the courage to analyze.

To be sure, black women’s refusal to remain silent about sexual violence during and after slavery suggests that the culture of dissemblance functioned in tension and in tandem with a tradition of testimony. Even after respectability became the key to black women’s symbolic place in the civil rights movement in the early 1950s, however, a number of African American women continued to speak out publicly about being raped, and African American community members rallied to their defense. Unfortunately, too many of these stories remain buried in the archives, yellowing

during the 1950s (Baton Rouge, 1969), 83–84; and Tom P. Brady, *Black Monday: Segregation or Amalgamation, America Has Its Choice* (Winona, Miss., 1955). The White Citizens’ Councils counted approximately 250,000 members throughout the South.

²¹ Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” 915.

²² Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere,” 146.

²³ Historians of the modern day civil rights movement are beginning to build upon work that chronicled the ways respectability, dignity, and manhood and womanhood shaped the strategies and goals of the middle- and working-class black activists during Reconstruction and the Progressive Era; see, for example, Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill, 1999); and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993).

newspapers, or the memories of the survivors, contributing to the historical amnesia about black women's experiences. And Montgomery, Alabama, was not the only place in which attacks on black womanhood fueled protests against white supremacy. Betty Jean Owens's experience in Florida is evidence that a significant story has been missed across the South.

When the four armed white men in Tallahassee forced Thomas Butterfield and Richard Brown to get into their car and drive away, leaving Betty Jean Owens and Edna Richardson at the mercy of their assailants, the two black men did not abandon them but drove around the corner and waited. As the blue Chevrolet disappeared down the street, Brown and Butterfield hurried back to the scene. Edna Richardson, the black woman who was able to get away, saw her friends from her hiding spot, called out to them, and then ran to the car. Hoping to save Owens, the Florida A&M students rushed to the local police station to report the crime.²⁴

Similar situations in other southern towns had typically left African Americans without police aid. The officer on duty that night in Tallahassee was Joe Cooke Jr., a nineteen-year-old intern from the all-white Florida State University. Much to the surprise of the three black students, he agreed to look for Owens and her assailants. After a lengthy search, one of the students finally spotted the blue Chevrolet and shouted, "That's it!" It was just after 4:00 a.m. Deputy Cooke turned on his flashers and drove alongside the car. Attempting to escape, the kidnapers led Cooke "twisting and turning through the dark streets of Tallahassee at speeds up to 100 miles per hour." One of the white men suggested "dumping the nigger," but William Collinsworth replied, "we can't now, he's on our tail." Finally, Collinsworth pulled the car to the curb, grabbed his shotgun, and got out of the car. Deputy Cooke drew his pistol and ordered all four to line up against the car or, he threatened, "I will shoot to kill."²⁵

As they waited for assistance from Cooke's supervisor, they heard muffled screams coming from the car. Richard Brown and Deputy Cooke peered through the rear window and saw Betty Jean Owens, bound and gagged, lying on the backseat floorboards. Brown tried to help her out of the car, but, as her feet touched the ground, she collapsed. Cooke drove Betty Jean Owens and her friends to the local colored hospital at Florida A&M while Deputy Sheriff W. W. Slappey arrested the four white men and drove them to the jailhouse.²⁶

Laughing and joking on the way to the police station, the four white men apparently did not take their arrest seriously, nor did they think they had done anything wrong. Collinsworth, for example, worried less about the charges against him than about the safety of his car. Deputy Sheriff Slappey revealed his disgust when he

²⁴ "Deputy Tells of Confessions," *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 12, 1959.

²⁵ Saunders, "Report on Tallahassee Incident."

²⁶ "Deputy Tells of Confessions," *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 12, 1959. Original reports stated that Owens was "bound and gagged," but she later testified that she was only blindfolded; after she pulled the blindfold down, she appeared to have been gagged.

handed the men over to Sheriff Raymond Hamlin Jr. "They all admitted it," Slappey said; "they didn't say why they did it and that's all I'm going to say about this dirty business." William Collinsworth, David Beagles, Ollie Stoutamire, and Patrick Scarborough confessed in writing to abducting Betty Jean Owens at gunpoint and having "sexual relations" with her. When Sheriff Hamlin asked the men to look over their statements and make any necessary corrections, David Beagles, smiling, bent over the table and made one minor adjustment before he and his friends were hustled off to jail.²⁷

If the four white men did not take their arrests seriously, students at Florida A&M University flew into a rage. Many of them were veterans of the Tallahassee bus boycott in 1957, a Montgomery-inspired campaign that highlighted the trend in students' preference for direct action rather than the more respectable and slower litigation favored by the NAACP throughout the 1940s and 1950s. When the students heard news of the attack on Owens and the subsequent arrest of four white men, a small group planned an armed march to city hall to let city officials know that they were willing to protect black womanhood the same way whites "protected" white womanhood—with violence or at least a show of force. Mainstream student leaders persuaded them that an armed march was "the wrong thing to do" and patched together a "Unity" demonstration on Sunday, May 3, only twelve hours after Betty Jean Owens was admitted to the hospital and the four white men were taken to jail.²⁸

Fifteen hundred students filled Lee Auditorium, where Clifford Taylor, president of the Student Government Association, said he "would not sit idly by and see our sisters, wives, and mothers desecrated." Using language white men in power could understand, student leaders professed their "belief in the dignity, respect, and protection of womanhood" and announced that they would petition the governor and other authorities for a "speedy and impartial trial."²⁹

Early the next day, a thousand students gathered in the university's grassy quadrangle with signs, hymns, and prayers aimed at the national news media, which sent out stories of the attack across the country. The students planned to show Tallahassee and the rest of the nation that white men could no longer attack black women without consequence. Student protesters held signs calling for "Justice"; other posters declared, "It could have been YOUR sister, wife, or mother." Some students linked the attack in Tallahassee to larger issues related to the black freedom struggle: two students held up a poster depicting scenes from Little Rock, Arkansas, which read, "My God How Much More of This Can We Take."³⁰

²⁷ "Four Whites Seized in Rape of Negro," *New York Times*, May 3, 1959, p. A45.

²⁸ On the Tallahassee bus boycott, see Glenda Alice Rabby, *The Pain and the Promise: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Tallahassee, Florida* (Athens, Ga., 1999), 9–46. Robert M. White, "The Tallahassee Sit-ins and CORE: A Nonviolent Revolutionary Sub-movement" (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1964), 65.

²⁹ White, "Tallahassee Sit-ins and CORE," 65.

³⁰ "Rapists Face Trial," *Famuan*, 27 (May 1959), 1, 3; "Negroes Ask Justice for Co-ed Rapists," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 4, 1959, p. 2; "Four Whites Seized in Rape of Negro," *New York Times*, May 3, 1959, p. A45; *ibid.*, May 5, 1959, p. A23; "Mass Rape of Co-ed Outrages Students," *Louisiana Weekly*, May 9, 1959, p. 1; *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 12, 1959; *Herald Tribune-London*, June 13, 1959; "Jury to Take Up Rape of Negro Co-ed," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 5, 1959, p. 5.



On May 4, 1959, over one thousand Florida A&M students gathered on the university's quad-angle to demand justice for Betty Jean Owens, a student at the historically black college who had been brutally raped by four white men two nights before. *Courtesy of the Famuan, the Florida A&M University student newspaper, May 1959.*

It was the deeply personal violation that rape inflicts, however, that gave the students their focus. Patricia Stephens Due remembered feeling helpless and unsafe. She recalled, “we all felt violated, male and female. It was like all of us had been raped.” The student leader Buford Gibson, speaking to a crowd, universalized the attack when he said, “You must remember it wasn’t just one Negro girl that was raped—it was all of Negro womanhood in the South.”³¹ By using Betty Jean Owens as a black Everywoman, Gibson challenged male students to rise up in protest and then placed the protection of black womanhood in their hands. Gibson’s exhortation inspired students at Florida A&M to maintain their nonviolent demonstration, unlike white men who historically used the protection of white womanhood to inspire mob violence against black men.

At about the same time, white men in Poplarville, Mississippi, used the protection of womanhood as justification for the lynching of Mack Charles Parker, a black man who was charged with the kidnapping and rape of a twenty-four-year-old white woman who could barely identify him in a police lineup. On April 25, 1959, two days before his trial, a group of eight to ten white men obtained keys to Parker’s unguarded jail cell, savagely beat him, and then dragged him down three flights of stairs and out of the building while he screamed “I’m innocent.” Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents located Parker’s bloated body floating in the Pearl River on May 4, 1959, just two days after four white men gang-raped Betty Jean Owens.³²

³¹ Patricia Stephens Due telephone interview by McGuire, March 4, 1999 (notes in McGuire’s possession). See also Tananarive Due and Patricia Stephens Due, *Freedom in the Family: A Mother-Daughter Memoir of the Fight for Civil Rights* (New York, 2003), 40–41. White, “Tallahassee Sit-ins and CORE,” 65.

³² See Howard Smead, *Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker* (New York, 1988); Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 143; “Lynch Victim Mack Parker’s Body Is Found,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, May 5, 1959.

The Parker lynching cast a shadow over Tallahassee, brutally reminding the black community that white women's bodies were off limits, while the bodies of black women were fair game.

Accelerating media coverage, student-led protests, and a threat to boycott classes at Florida A&M forced Judge W. May Walker to call members of the grand jury into special session in Tallahassee on May 6, 1959. Over two hundred black spectators, mostly students, squeezed into the segregated balcony at the Leon County Courthouse to catch a glimpse of Betty Jean Owens and her attackers before they retreated into the secret hearing. Still undergoing hospital treatment for injuries inflicted during the attack and for "severe depression," Owens was accompanied to the courthouse by a nurse, the hospital administrator, and her mother.³³

Gasps and moans emanated from the balcony when, after two hours behind closed doors, William Collinsworth, David Beagles, Patrick Scarborough, and Ollie Stoutamire emerged, calmly faced the judge, and pleaded innocent to the charge of rape, making a jury trial mandatory. African Americans in the balcony roared with disapproval. Dr. M. C. Williams, a local black leader, shouted, "four colored men would be dead if the situation had been reversed. It looks like an open and shut case." Defense attorneys for Collinsworth and Scarborough argued for a delay, insisting that public excitement threatened a fair trial, but Judge Walker ignored their objections. For the first time in Florida history, a judge sent the white defendants charged with raping an African American woman back to jail to await their trial. Echoing the sentiments of the people around him, a young boy traced "we want justice" in the dust on the railing of the segregated balcony.³⁴

Justice was the last thing the black community expected. In the thirty-four years since Florida began sending convicted rapists to the electric chair instead of the gallows, the state had electrocuted thirty-seven African Americans charged with raping white women. Before this, Florida led the country in per capita lynchings, even surpassing such notoriously violent states as Mississippi, Georgia, and Louisiana. From 1900 to 1930, white Floridians lynched 281 people, 256 of whom were African American. Throughout its history, Florida never executed or lynched a white man for raping a black woman. In this respect, Florida followed the entire region. Florida's violent history included the "little Scottsboro" case involving Samuel Shepard, Walter Irvin, and Charles Greenlee, black men accused of raping a white woman in Groveland, Florida, in 1949. After the U.S. Supreme Court overturned their guilty verdicts in 1951, Sheriff Willis McCall picked up Shepard and Irvin from Raiford State Prison to transfer them back to the county. On the way there, McCall pulled to the side of the road and asked the two handcuffed men to change the tire and then

³³ "4 Indicted in Rape of Negro Co-ed," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 7, 1959, p. 5; Moses Newson, "Leaves Hospital to Give Testimony," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 16, 1959, pp. 1-2.

³⁴ M. C. Williams quoted in "Packed Court Hears Not Guilty," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 16, 1959, pp. 1-2; "Judge Instructs Jury Here," *Tallahassee Democrat*, May 6, 1959, p. 1; "Sobbing Co-ed Bares Ordeal," *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 16, 1959, p. 1; "Indictment for Rape," criminal case file #3445, *Florida v. Scarborough, Beagles, Stoutamire, and Collinsworth*; "Four Plead Not Guilty to Rape," *Tallahassee Democrat*, n.d., clipping, folder 4, box 912, W. May Walker Papers (Special Collections, Robert Manning Strozier Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee).

shot them both in the chest. He radioed his boss and muttered, "I got rid of them; killed the sons of bitches." Walter Irvin survived the shooting, but Samuel Shepard died that day.³⁵

In Tallahassee, memories of the "little Scottsboro" case hung over many members of the African American community in 1954 when the state electrocuted Abraham Beard, a seventeen-year-old black youth accused of raping a white woman. Apart from the races of the accuser and the accused, the Beard case featured a cast of characters almost identical to that of the Tallahassee case five years later: an all-white jury had tried and convicted Beard in the same courtroom where Betty Jean Owens faced her attackers. Judge W. May Walker presided, and William D. Hopkins served as the state prosecutor. Harry Michaels, Patrick Scarborough's attorney in 1959, served as Beard's court-appointed attorney in 1954. Both the "little Scottsboro" and the Beard cases revealed the extent to which the protection of white women served as the ultimate symbol of white male power and the foundation of white supremacy. When African Americans in Tallahassee demanded equal justice for Betty Jean Owens, that foundation began to crumble.³⁶

News that four white men would actually face prosecution for raping a black woman plunged both whites and blacks into largely unfamiliar territory. It not only highlighted the bitter ironies of segregation and "social equality" but allowed African Americans to publicize them. According to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the arraignment made the "arguments for white supremacy, racial discrimination, and segregation fall by the wayside" and the arguments against school desegregation seem "childishly futile." "Time and again," another newspaper editor argued, "Southern spokesmen have protested that they oppose integration in the schools only because it foreshadows a total 'mingling of the races.' The implication is that Negroes are hell-bent for intimacy, while whites shrink back in horror." "Perhaps," the writer argued, "as Lillian Smith and other maverick Southerners have suggested, it is not quite that simple."³⁷

While prominent members of the white community expressed their shock and horror at the rape, they continued to stumble into old narratives about race and sex. The indictment helped incite age-old fears of miscegenation and stereotypes of the so-called black beast rapist. William H. Chafe argues that "merely evoking the image of 'miscegenation' could often suffice to ring the alarm bells that would mobilize a solid phalanx of white resistance to change." For example, white women around Tallahassee began to speak openly about their "fear of retaliation," while young white couples avoided parking "in the country moonlight lest some Negroes should be out

³⁵ Claude Sitton, "Negroes See Gain in Conviction of Four for Rape of Co-ed," *New York Times*, June 15, 1959, p. A1. Statistics are from David R. Colburn and Richard K. Scher, *Florida's Gubernatorial Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Gainesville, 1995), 13. Willis McCall quoted in Steven F. Lawson, David R. Colburn, and Darryl Paulson, "Groveland: Florida's Little Scottsboro," in *The African American Heritage of Florida*, ed. David R. Colburn and Jane L. Landers (Gainesville, 1995), 298–325, esp. 312.

³⁶ See Moses J. Newson, "The Wind Blew, the Sky Was Overcast," *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 20, 1959; Moses J. Newson, "Abraham's Shadow Hangs Low over Tallahassee," *ibid.*; and Moses J. Newson, "His Mother Can Never Forget Him," *ibid.*

³⁷ "Another Dixiecrat Headache," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 20, 1959; "The Other Story," n.d., clipping, folder 1, box 912, Walker Papers.

hunting in a retaliatory mood.” Reflecting this fear as well as the larger concern with social equality, Florida legislators, like other lawmakers throughout the South, passed a series of racist bills designed to segregate children in schools by sex in order to circumvent the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and “reduce the chances of interracial marriage.”³⁸ The extent to which the myth of the black beast rapist was a projection of white fears was never clearer than when the gang rape of a black woman conjured up terror of *black-on-white* rape. The fact that the black community rallied around Betty Jean Owens and her womanhood threatened white male power—making the myth of the black savage a timely political tool.

Black leaders from all over the country eagerly used the rape case for their own political purposes as well. Most focused on the lynching of black men in similar cases, placing the crime against Betty Jean Owens into a larger dialogue about the power struggle between black and white men. As A. D. Williams, a black businessman in Tallahassee, put it, “the white men are on the spot.” Rev. Dennis H. Jamison felt that the indictment of four white men indicated a “better chance at Justice than any involving the races in the South,” but, he added, “still no white men have ever been executed.” Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam, expressed this viewpoint forcefully. Using almost the exact same language as white supremacists, he accused the “four devil rapists” of destroying the “virginity of our daughters.” “Appeals for justice,” he fumed, “will avail us nothing. We know there is no justice under the American flag.”³⁹ Nearly all the editorials in major black newspapers echoed his sentiments.

Ella Baker, director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), felt that the evidence in the Tallahassee case was so strong that “not even an all white Florida jury could fail to convict.” Reminding whites of their tendency to mete out unequal justice toward black men, she warned, “with memories of Negroes who have been lynched and executed on far less evidence, Negro leaders from all over the South will certainly examine every development in this case. . . . What will Florida’s answer be?” The *New York Amsterdam News* called for equal justice, noting that the “law which calls for the death sentence does not say that Negro rapists should be punished by death and white rapists should be allowed to live.” The *Pittsburgh Courier* bet on acquittal, despite the fact that the case “is as open and shut as a case can be.”⁴⁰

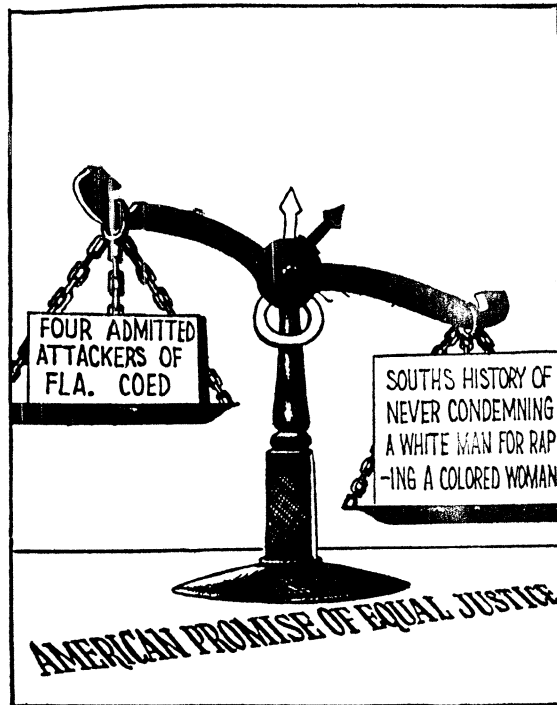
Martin Luther King Jr., at the annual SCLC meeting in Tallahassee a few days after the indictment, praised the student protesters for giving “hope to all of us who struggle for human dignity and equal justice.” But he tempered his optimism with political savvy, calling on the federal government to force the country to practice what it preached in its Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union. “Violence in the South can not be deplored or ignored,” King declared, directing his criticism at President

³⁸ William H. Chafe, “Epilogue from Greensboro, North Carolina,” in *Democracy Betrayed*, ed. Cecelski and Tyson, 281–82. “Senate to Get Racial Measures,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 14, 1959, p. 1; “Pent Up Critique on the Rape Case,” *ibid.*, May 14, 1959.

³⁹ *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 30, 1959, p. 3; “Mr. Muhammad Speaks,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 16, 1959.

⁴⁰ Ella Baker quoted in *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 30, 1959, p. 3; see also Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 210. “Enforce the Law,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 9, 1959; “What Will Florida Do?,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 16, 1959.

Another Sample of Separate But Unequal?



This cartoon, featured in an African American newspaper, places sexual violence at the center of the civil rights campaign for equal justice. It also demonstrates African Americans' belief that historically, southern white men went unpunished for sexually assaulting black women, even when they admitted to the crime. *Courtesy Baltimore Afro-American, May 16, 1959.*

Dwight D. Eisenhower; “without effective action, the situation will worsen.”⁴¹ King exploited a political context in which America’s racial problems were increasingly an international issue. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) broadcast segments of the Florida A&M University student speeches condemning the rape and racial injustice, while newspapers throughout Europe closely watched the case unfold. “It is ironical that these un-American outrages occur as our representatives confer in Geneva to expand democratic principles . . . it might well be necessary and expedient,” King threatened, “to appeal to the conscience of the world through the Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations.” This international angle was a strategy shared by mainstream integrationists, leftist radicals, and black nationalists alike. Audley “Queen Mother” Moore, leader of the Universal Association of Ethiopian Women, Inc., petitioned the United Nations Human Rights Commission in person to end the “planned lynch terror and willful destruction of our people.” She

⁴¹ “King Asks Ike to Go to Mississippi,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 23, 1959; see also Martin Luther King Jr. to Clifford C. Taylor, May 5, 1959, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King*, ed. Clayborne Carson et al. (vol. 6, Berkeley, forthcoming). Thanks to Kieran Taylor for sending me this information.

tied issues of race, gender, sex, and citizenship together by demanding Justice Department assistance for Betty Jean Owens's rape case, an FBI investigation of the Mack Charles Parker lynching, and basic voting rights.⁴²

Robert F. Williams, militant leader of the Monroe, North Carolina, chapter of the NAACP, suggested African Americans stand their ground and defend themselves. The Parker lynching, the Tallahassee rape case, and two Monroe, North Carolina, cases in which white men stood accused of attacking black women forced Williams to defend racial pride and black womanhood. On May 6, 1959, B. F. Shaw, a white railroad engineer, had been exonerated on charges of beating and kicking a black maid at the Hotel Monroe, even though he did not show up for court. That same day, white jurors giggled while Mrs. Mary Ruth Reed, a pregnant black woman, testified that Lewis Medlin, a white mechanic, beat and sexually assaulted her in front of her five children. Medlin's attorney argued that he was just having a little fun, that he was married to a "lovely white woman . . . the pure flower of life," whom he would not dare leave for "that." The jury deliberated for less than ten minutes before returning the not guilty verdict. It was the defilement of black womanhood and the humiliation of black manhood that inspired Williams to hurl his infamous vow to "meet violence with violence." His exhortation set off a national controversy, culminating at the 1959 NAACP convention where Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins suspended Williams for his remarks. Williams defended his position by citing the tragedy in Tallahassee. Had the "young black men who escorted the coed who was raped in Tallahassee" been able to defend her, Williams argued, they would have been justified "even though it meant that they themselves or the white rapists were killed."⁴³

Roy Wilkins shared Williams's gender and race politics but not his methods for achieving them. In a letter to Florida governor LeRoy Collins, Wilkins invoked the lynchings of Mack Charles Parker and Emmett Till, noting that the victims' skin color alone kept them from receiving a fair trial and that their deaths threatened political embarrassment at home and abroad. "Full punishment has been certain and swift in cases involving a white victim and a Negro accused," he said, "but the penalty has neither been certain nor heavy in cases involving a Negro victim and a white accused . . . for these reasons," Wilkins warned, "all eyes will be upon the state of Florida."⁴⁴

On June 11, 1959, at least four hundred people witnessed Betty Jean Owens face her attackers and testify on her own behalf. Owens approached the witness box with her head bowed. She wore a white embroidered blouse and a black-and-salmon checked skirt with gold earrings. The African American press had cast her in the role of

⁴² "Report from Europe," *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 23, 1959; "King Asks Ike to Go to Mississippi," *ibid.* For the impact of the Cold War on civil rights, see, for example, Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, 2000); and Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001). "Appeal to U.N. to Stop Race Violence," *Louisiana Weekly*, May 9, 1959, p. 1.

⁴³ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 145–51, esp. 148, 149; *ibid.*, 163–65.

⁴⁴ Roy Wilkins to LeRoy Collins, May 6, 1959, box A91, series III, NAACP Papers.

respectable womanhood by characterizing her as a God-fearing, middle-class college co-ed “raised in a hard-working Christian household” with parents devoted to the “simple verities of life that make up the backbone of our democracy.” Unlike white women, who were often able to play the role of “fair maiden” before a lynch mob worked its will on their alleged attackers, Betty Jean Owens had to tell her story knowing that the four white men who raped her might go unpunished. Worse, Owens had to describe the attack in front of hundreds of white people in a segregated institution that inherently denied her humanity.⁴⁵ Though it may seem unnecessary, even lurid, to bear witness to the details of her testimony today, it is crucial that we hear the same testimony that the jurors heard. Owens’s willingness to identify those who attacked her and to testify against them in public broke the institutional silence surrounding the centuries-long history of white men’s sexual violation of black women, made a white southern judge and jury recognize her womanhood and dignity, and countered efforts to shame or stereotype her as sexually unchaste. As a result, her testimony alone is a momentous event.

Owens remained strong as state prosecutor William Hopkins asked her to detail the attack from the moment she and her friends left the Florida A&M dance. This she did powerfully and emotionally. “We were only parked near Jake Gaither Park for fifteen minutes,” she said, when “four white men pulled up in a 1959 blue Chevrolet.” She identified Patrick Scarborough as the man who pressed the shotgun into her date’s nose and yelled, “Get out and get out now.” When Owens began to cry, David Beagles pressed a “wicked looking foot long knife” to her throat and forced her down to the ground. He then pulled her up, slapped her, and said, “You haven’t anything to worry about.” Owens testified that Beagles pushed her into the car and then “pushed my head down in his lap and yelled at me to be quiet or I would never get home.” “I knew I couldn’t get away,” she stated; “I thought they would kill me if I didn’t do what they wanted me to do.”⁴⁶

She continued with the horrid details. As the car pulled off the highway and into the woods, “the one with the knife pulled me out of the car and laid me on the ground.” Owens was still wearing the gold and white evening gown as they tugged at the dress and “pulled my panties off.” She pleaded with them to let her go and not hurt her when Beagles slapped her again. She then told how each one raped her while she was “begging them to let me go . . . I was so scared, but there was nothing I could do with four men, a knife, and a gun . . . I couldn’t do anything but what they said.” Owens testified that the men eagerly watched one another have intercourse with her the first time around but lost interest during the second round. “Two of them were working on taking the car’s license plate off,” she said, “while the oldest one” offered her some whiskey. “I never had a chance to get away,” she said quietly; “I was on the

⁴⁵ *Tallahassee Democrat*, May 4, 1959. On the “fair maiden,” see Hall, “The Mind That Burns in Each Body,” 335.

⁴⁶ “I Was Scared,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 20, 1959; see also “Did Not Consent,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 11, 1959; “Rape Co-eds Own Story,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 20, 1959, p. 1; *Atlanta Constitution*, June 12, 1959; “Negro Girl Tells Jury of Rape by Four,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1959, p. A16. Coverage of Owens’s testimony was nearly identical in newspapers cited.

ground for two or three hours before the one with the knife pushed me back into the car." After the men had collectively raped her seven times, Ollie Stoutamire and Beagles blindfolded her with a baby diaper and pushed her onto the floorboards of the car, and they all drove away. When she heard the police sirens and felt the car stop, she pulled the blindfold down and began yelling for help. After police ordered the men out of the car, Owens recalled, "I was so scared and weak and nervous that I just fell on the ground and that is the last thing I remember."⁴⁷

Betty Jean Owens then described the physical injuries she sustained from the attack. "One arm and one leg," she said, "were practically useless" to her for several days while she was at the hospital. A nurse had to accompany her to the grand jury hearing a few days after the attack, and she needed medication for severe depression. She also had a large bruise on her breast where the bodice stay from her dress dug into her skin as the four men pressed their bodies into hers. Asking her to identify some of the exhibits, Hopkins flipped open the switchblade used the night of the attack, startling some of the jurors. Immediately the four defense attorneys jumped up and vehemently called for a mistrial, arguing that "by flashing the knife Mr. Hopkins tried to inflame the jury and this prejudiced their clients' constitutional rights to a fair trial." Judge Walker denied their motion, signaling Hopkins to continue. When asked whether she consented, Owens clearly told Hopkins and the jury, "No sir, I did not."⁴⁸

Defense attorneys grilled Owens for more than an hour, trying to prove that she consented because she never struggled to get away and that she actually enjoyed the sexual encounter. "Didn't you derive any pleasure from that? Didn't you?" the attorney Howard Williams yelled repeatedly. He kept pressing her, "Why didn't you yell or scream out?" "I was afraid they would kill me," Owens said quietly. She showed signs of anger when Williams repeatedly asked if she was a virgin in an attempt to characterize her as a stereotypical black jezebel. Owens retained her composure, refused to answer questions about her chastity, and resisted efforts to shame her. The defense made a last-ditch effort to discredit Owens by arguing that, if the young men had actually raped her and threatened her life, she would have sustained more severe injuries.⁴⁹

Proceeding with the state's case, William Hopkins called the doctors, both black and white, who examined Owens after the attack. They told the jury that they found her in a terrible condition and that she "definitely had sexual relations" that caused the injuries that required a five-day hospital stay. Richard Brown, Thomas Butterfield, and Edna Richardson took the stand next. They all corroborated Owens's testimony, adding that after the attack Owens was "crying, hysterical, and jerking all

⁴⁷ "Did Not Consent," *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 11, 1959; *ibid.*; *ibid.*; "I Was Scared," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 20, 1959, p. 1; "Did Not Consent," *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 11, 1959; *ibid.*; see also *Charlotte Observer*, June 12, 1959, p. 1A.

⁴⁸ "Did Not Consent," *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 11, 1959; "I Was Scared," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 20, 1959; "State's exhibits" (knife) in criminal case file #3445, *Florida v. Scarborough, Beagles, Stoutamire, and Collinsworth*, 1959.

⁴⁹ "Rape Co-eds Own Story," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 20, 1959, p. 1; "I Was Scared," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 20, 1959, p. 1; see also "Four Begin Defense in Trial on Rape," *New York Times*, June 13, 1959, p. A13.

over.” Brown testified that Scarborough pointed the shotgun into his car window and ordered him and Butterfield to kneel in front of its headlights. Defense attorney John Rudd asked Brown on cross-examination, was it a “single or double barrel shotgun they pointed into your car?” Brown replied, “I only saw one barrel, sir.” Laughter rolled down from the balcony, upsetting Rudd. “I can not work with this duress and disorder at my back, a boy’s life is at stake here!” Judge Walker called for order and reprimanded the spectators.⁵⁰ When the prosecution finally rested its case at 8:30 p.m. on June 11, defense attorneys moved for a directed verdict of acquittal, claiming the state failed to prove anything except sexual intercourse. Judge Walker vigorously denied the motion and insisted the defense return the next day to present their defense.

Amid a sea of people in the tiny courtroom, David Beagles, an eighteen-year-old high school student, sat rigidly on the stand, pushing a ring back and forth on his finger as he answered questions from his attorney. His mother buried her head in her arms as she listened to her son tell the jury his side of the story. Beagles testified that he had a knife and William Collinsworth had a shotgun. The four of them were out “looking around for Negroes who had been parking near Collinsworth’s neighborhood and bothering them.” When they came upon the Florida A&M students, Beagles admitted holding the switchblade but then said he put it away when he saw they were dressed in formal wear. He admitted that they ordered Brown and Butterfield to drive away but insisted that he “asked the girls to get into the car.” He denied the rape, arguing that Owens consented and even asked them to take her “back to school to change her dress.” Under cross-examination, Beagles admitted that he “pushed her, just once . . . not hard,” into the car, that he said, “If you do what we want you to, we’ll let you go,” and that he blindfolded her with a diaper after the attack. Defense attorney Howard Williams then asked Judge Walker to remove the jury as Beagles detailed the confession he made the night of the crime. Williams argued that when police officers arrested the young men, they “were still groggy from a night of drinking,” making their confessions inadmissible. Under Hopkins’s cross-examination, however, Beagles admitted that he was not pressured to say anything, that his confession was voluntary, and that he actually looked over the written statement and made an adjustment.⁵¹

Patrick Scarborough, who admitted that he was married to a woman in Texas, testified that he had intercourse with Owens twice but emphatically denied using force. When Hopkins questioned him, Scarborough admitted that Owens pleaded, “please don’t hurt me,” but he insisted that she offered “no resistance.” He denied kissing her at first and then said he kissed her on the neck while he had sex with her.⁵²

⁵⁰ Doctors quoted in “Rape Co-eds Own Story,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 20, 1959, p. 1; also in “Four Begin Defense in Trial on Rape,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1959, p. A13; friends quoted in “Did Not Consent,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 11, 1959; John Rudd and Richard Brown quoted in “Deputy Tells of Confessions,” *ibid.*, June 12, 1959.

⁵¹ Anderson, “Rapists Missed Out on First Selection,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 20, 1959, p. 3; “Four Begin Defense in Trial on Rape,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1959, p. A13; Howard Williams quoted in “Rape Defendants Claim Consent,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 13, 1959.

⁵² “Negro Co-ed Gave Consent, Rape Defendants Tell Jury,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 13, 1959.

Defense attorneys focused on discrediting Owens instead of defending their clients because the prosecution repeatedly drew self-incriminating information from them. State prosecutor Hopkins argued that “they simply have no defense.” Defense attorneys tried to use each man’s ignorance to prove his innocence, highlighting their low IQ’s and poor educations. When that failed, they detailed the dysfunctional histories of each defendant, as though to diminish the viciousness of the crime by offering a rationale for the men’s depravity. Character witnesses for William Collinsworth, for example, described his sordid home life and drinking problem. Nearly every member of Collinsworth’s family took the stand, spilling sorrowful stories about their poverty and dysfunction. His sister, Maudine Reeves, broke down on the stand and had to be rushed to the hospital. His wife, Pearlie, told the jury through sobs and tears that he was “not himself when he was drunk,” but when he was sober “you couldn’t ask for a better husband.” On the stand, she failed to mention what her letter to the judge had made explicit: that her husband regularly beat her. When that did not seem to work, defense attorneys switched gears and attempted to portray their clients as reputable young men who were incapable of rape. Friends and family members all testified that these young men “were good boys,” and that in particular Ollie Stoutamire, a cousin of Tallahassee police chief Frank Stoutamire, had “nothing but pure and moral intentions.”⁵³

Finally, the defense appealed to the jury’s prejudices. Collinsworth blamed his actions on the “Indian blood” pulsing through his veins; the Pensacola psychiatrist Dr. W. M. C. Wilhoit backed him up when he argued, “It is a known fact that individuals of the Indian race react violently and primitively when psychotic or intoxicated.” When Collinsworth added alcohol to his “Indian blood,” Wilhoit argued, “he was unable to discern the nature and quality of the crime in question.” The attorney for Ollie Stoutamire, city judge John Rudd, blamed “outside agitators.” The defendants are “being publicized and ridiculed to satisfy sadists and people in other places,” Rudd yelled during closing arguments. “Look at that little skinny, long legged sixteen-year-old boy. Does he look like a mad rapist who should die . . . should we kill or incarcerate that little boy because he happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time?”⁵⁴

In their summations to the jury, defense attorneys S. Gunter Toney and Harry Michaels followed Rudd’s lead. Michaels insisted that “the crime here is insignificant . . . the pressure, clamor, and furor are completely out of proportion.” Pointing to

⁵³ William Hopkins quoted in “Four Convicted in Rape Case; Escape Chair; 2 hr 45 min Verdict Calmly Received in Court,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 14, 1959, p. 1; Pearlie Collinsworth and friends quoted in “Rape Defendants Claim Consent,” *ibid.*, June 13, 1959; Maudine Reeves’s history of Ted Collinsworth, “State’s exhibit #15,” criminal case file #3445, *Florida v. Scarborough, Beagles, Stoutamire, and Collinsworth*, 1959; letter from Mrs. W. T. Collinsworth, “State’s exhibit #16,” *ibid.*

⁵⁴ W. M. C. Wilhoit’s testimony in “Motion for Leave to File Notice of Defense of Insanity,” May 28, 1959, criminal case file #3445, *Florida v. Scarborough, Beagles, Stoutamire, and Collinsworth*, 1959. “Four Begin Defense in Trial on Rape,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1959, p. A13; John Rudd quoted in “Four Guilty of Raping Negro; Florida Jury Votes Mercy,” *ibid.*, June 14, 1959, p. 1; Arthur Everett, “Four Convicted in Florida Rape Case,” *Washington Post*, June 14, 1959; “Insanity Plea Prepared as Rape Case Defense,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, May 28, 1959; “Mental Exam Set for Collinsworth,” *ibid.*, May 29, 1959; “Four Begin Defense in Trial on Rape,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1959, p. A13.

Scarborough, Michaels told the jury, “his motives, intentions, and designs that night were wholesome, innocent and decent.” The fact that Owens could “have easily walked ten feet into the woods where nobody could find her,” Michaels said, proved she consented. Waving her gold and white gown in front of the jury, he pointed out that it was “not soiled or torn,” which he said proved no brutality was involved. Finally, he called for an acquittal, arguing that the jury could not possibly convict on the basis of “only one witness—the victim, and confessions that admitted only one fact—sexual intercourse.” Sitting in the segregated balcony, Charles U. Smith, a sociologist at Florida A&M University, said he gasped when he heard Howard Williams yell, “Are you going to believe this nigger wench over these four boys?”⁵⁵

In his summation, prosecuting attorney William Hopkins jumped up, grabbed the shotgun and Betty Jean Owens’s prom dress, and appealed to the jury for a conviction.

Suppose two colored boys and their moron friends attacked Mrs. Beagles’ daughter . . . had taken her at gunpoint from a car and forced her into a secluded place and regardless of whether they secured her consent or not, had intercourse with her seven times, leaving her in such a condition that she collapsed and had to be hospitalized?

Betty Jean Owens, he said, “didn’t have a chance in the world with four big boys, a loaded gun and a knife. She was within an inch of losing her life . . . she was gang-raped SEVEN times.” “When you get to the question of mercy,” he told the jury, “consider that they wouldn’t even let that little girl whimper.”⁵⁶

Restless spectators, squeezed into every corner of the segregated courthouse, piled back into their seats when jurors emerged after three hours of deliberation with a decision. An additional three hundred African Americans held a silent vigil outside. A. H. King, the jury foreman and a local plantation owner, slowly read aloud the jury’s decision for all four defendants: “guilty with a recommendation for mercy.” The recommendation for mercy saved the four men from the electric chair and, according to the *Baltimore Afro-American*, “made it inescapably clear that the death penalty for rape is only for colored men accused by white women.” A. H. King defended the mercy ruling by arguing that “there was no brutality involved” and insisted, implausibly enough, that the decision would have been the same “if the defendants had been four Negroes.”⁵⁷ Judge Walker deferred sentencing for fifteen days, cleared the courtroom, and sent the four white men to Raiford prison.

African Americans who attended the trial quietly made their way home after the bittersweet verdict. Betty Jean Owens’s mother told reporters that she was “just happy that the jury upheld my daughter’s womanhood.” Rev. A. J. Reddick, former

⁵⁵ “Four Guilty of Raping Negro; Florida Jury Votes Mercy,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1959, p. A1. Charles U. Smith interview by Jackson Lee Ice, 1978, in Jackson Lee Ice Interviews, Florida Governors Manuscript Collection (Special Collections, Strozier Library); verified in Charles U. Smith telephone interview by McGuire, March 9, 1999 (notes in McGuire’s possession).

⁵⁶ “Precedent Seen in Rape Trial,” *Tampa Tribune*, June 15, 1959; *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 14, 1959, p. 1.

⁵⁷ “Verdict,” June 14, 1959, criminal case file #3445, *Florida v. Scarborough, Beagles, Stoutamire, and Collinsworth*, 1959. “Guilty as Charged,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 20, 1959; A. H. King quoted in “No Brutality Proof, Says Florida Jury,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 15, 1959, p. 1.

head of the Florida NAACP, snapped, "If it had been Negroes, they would have gotten the death penalty." "Florida," he said, "has maintained an excellent record of not veering from its pattern of never executing a white man for the rape of a Negro," but he acknowledged that the conviction was "a step forward." Betty Jean Owens showed a similar ambivalence in an interview by the *New York Amsterdam News*. "It is something," she said; "I'm grateful that twelve white men believed the truth, but I still wonder what they would have done if one of our boys raped a white girl."⁵⁸

Florida A&M students, who had criticized Butterfield and Brown for failing to protect black womanhood a week earlier, were visibly upset after the trial. In fact, letters to the editors of many African American newspapers condemned the two men and all black men for failing to protect "their" women. Mrs. C. A. C. in New York City felt that all Negro men were "mice" and not worthy of respect because "they stand by and let the white men do anything they want to our women." She then warned all black men that they "would never have freedom until [they] learn to stand up and fight." In a letter to the *Baltimore Afro-American*, a black man accepted her challenge: "unless we decide to protect our own women," he argued, "none of them will be safe." Some African American women felt they should protect themselves. A white woman sent her black maid home one day after she came to work with a knife, "in case any white man came after her," reported the *Tallahassee Democrat*. Still, many felt that "someone should have burned."⁵⁹

Despite their anger at the unequal justice meted out, some African Americans in the community considered the guilty verdict a victory. The Reverend C. K. Steele Jr., head of the Tallahassee chapter of the SCLC, said it showed progress, reminding others that four white men "wouldn't have even been arrested twenty years ago." The Reverend Leon A. Lowery, state president of the Florida NAACP, saw a strategy in the mercy recommendation. He thought that it could help "Negroes more in the long run" by setting a precedent for equal justice in future rape cases.⁶⁰ After Judge Walker handed down life sentences to the four white men, some African Americans in Tallahassee applauded what they felt was a significant step in the right direction; many others, however, exhibited outrage. Roy Wilkins openly praised the verdict as a move toward equal justice but acknowledged in a private letter the "glaring contrast that was furnished by the Tallahassee verdict." In light of the recent lynching of Mack Charles Parker, no one really had to wonder what would have happened had the attackers been black. Editors of the *Louisiana Weekly* called the trial a "figment and a farce"

⁵⁸ Sitton, "Negroes See Gain in Conviction of Four for Rape of Co-ed," *New York Times*, June 15, 1959, p. A1; "I'm Leaving Dixie," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 20, 1959.

⁵⁹ Apparently students at Florida A&M ostracized Thomas Butterfield and Richard Brown for failing to protect Betty Jean Owens and Edna Richardson; students thought they ought to have shown some "physical resistance" rather than run away from the "point of a knife and gun": "I'm Leaving Dixie," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 20, 1959. "Hits Negro Men," *ibid.*, June 6, 1959, p. 8. "Williams Was Right," *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 27, 1959; "Four Convicted in Rape Case," *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 14, 1959, p. 7; "I'm Leaving Dixie," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 20, 1959.

⁶⁰ Sitton, "Negroes See Gain in Conviction of Four for Rape of Co-ed," *New York Times*, June 15, 1959, p. A1. "Negroes Say They Will Use Tallahassee Case as Precedent in Rape Trials," *Tampa Tribune*, June 15, 1959. Later that summer, Leon A. Lowery and others helped launch a successful campaign to highlight the unequal justice meted out for black men accused of raping white women. See also Trezzvant W. Anderson, "Four Florida Rapists Near Chair," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 4, 1959.

and insisted that anyone who praised the verdict “confesses that he sees nothing wrong with exacting one punishment for white offenders and another, more severe for others.”⁶¹

Any conviction was too much for some whites who felt that sending four white men to jail for raping a black woman upset the entire foundation of white supremacy. Many believed the guilty verdict was the result of a Communist-inspired NAACP conspiracy, which would ultimately lead to miscegenation. Letters to Judge Walker featured a host of common fears and racist stereotypes of black men and women. Fred G. Millette reminded the judge that a conviction “would play into the hands of the Warren Court, the NAACP, and all other radical enemies of the South . . . even though the nigger wench probably had been with a dozen men before.” Mrs. Laura Cox wrote to Judge Walker that she feared this case would strengthen desegregation efforts, posing a direct threat to white children who might attend integrated schools. “If the South is integrated,” she argued, “white children will be in danger because the Negroes carry knives, razors, ice picks, and guns practically all the time.” Petitioning Judge Walker for leniency, Mrs. Bill Aren reminded him to remember that “Negro women like to be raped by the white men” and that “something like this will help the Supreme Court force this low bred race ahead, making whites live and eat with him and allow his children to associate with the little apes, grow up and marry them.”⁶²

It is ironic that a rape case involving a black woman and four white men would conjure up images of the black brute chasing white women with the intent to mongrelize the white race. The Tallahassee case attests to the persistence of such images decades after Reconstruction, when the mythological “incubus” took flight, justifying mob violence and a reign of terror throughout the South. Anxieties about the black beast rapist and fears of miscegenation conveniently surfaced when white men feared losing their monopoly on power. As Frederick Douglass noted nearly a century earlier, the myth of the black man as a rapist was an “invention with a well defined motive.”⁶³ The rape of Betty Jean Owens reminds us that the maintenance of white supremacy relied on *both* the racial and sexual domination of black men *and* women.

While the verdict was likely the confluence of localized issues—a politically mobilized middle-class African American community, the lower-class status of the defendants (who were politically expendable), Florida’s status as a “moderate” southern state dependent on northern tourism, and media pressure—it had far-reaching consequences.⁶⁴ The Tallahassee case focused national attention on the sexual exploitation of black women at the hands of white men, leading to convictions elsewhere that

⁶¹ Roy Wilkins to Fredrick Cunningham, June 23, 1959, box A91, series III, NAACP Papers; “This Is Not Equal Justice,” *Louisiana Weekly*, July 4, 1959.

⁶² Fred G. Millette to Judge W. May Walker, June 15, 1959, box 912, folder 1, Walker Papers; Mrs. Laura Cox to Judge Walker, June 15, 1959, *ibid.*; Mrs. Bill Aren to Judge Walker, June 15, 1959, *ibid.*

⁶³ On the “incubus,” see Glenda Gilmore, “Murder, Memory, and the Flight of the Incubus,” in *Democracy Betrayed*, ed. Cecelski and Tyson, 73–93. Frederick Douglass quoted in Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven, 1997), 206.

⁶⁴ For information on Florida’s “moderate” racial politics, see Tom Wagdy, *Governor LeRoy Collins of Florida: Spokesman of the New South* (University, Ala., 1985); and Steven F. Lawson, “From Sit-in to Race Riot: Businessmen, Blacks, and the Pursuit of Moderation in Tampa, 1960–1967,” in *Southern Businessmen and Desegregation*, ed. Elizabeth Jacoway and David R. Colburn (Baton Rouge, 1982), 257–81.

summer. In Montgomery, Alabama, Grady F. Smith, a retired air force colonel, was sentenced to fourteen months of hard labor for raping a seventeen-year-old African American girl. In Raleigh, North Carolina, Ralph Lee Betts, a thirty-six-year-old white man, was sentenced to life imprisonment for kidnapping and molesting an eleven-year-old African American girl. And in Burton, South Carolina, an all-white jury sent a white marine named Fred Davis to the electric chair—a first in the history of the South—for raping a forty-seven-year-old African American woman. In each case, white supremacy faltered in the face of the courageous black women who testified on their own behalf.⁶⁵

Betty Jean Owens's grandmother recognized the historic and political significance of the verdicts. "I've lived to see the day," she said, "where white men would really be brought to trial for what they did." John McCray, editor of the South Carolina *Lighthouse and Informer*, wondered if the convictions in Tallahassee and elsewhere pointed to "defensive steps" taken by the South to "belatedly try to disprove that it discriminates against colored people." Still, he realized the importance of guilty verdicts. "This forced intimacy," he argued "goes back to the days of slavery when our women were the chattel property of white men." For McCray, the life sentences indicated a new day: "Are we now witnessing the arrival of our women? Are they at long last gaining the emancipation they've needed?"⁶⁶

John McCray's connection between the conviction of white men for raping black women and black women's emancipation raises important questions that historians are just beginning to ponder. How did the daily struggle to gain self-respect and dignity, rooted in ideas of what it meant to be men and women, play out in the black freedom struggle? It is not just a coincidence that black college students, struggling for their own identity and independence, sparked the sit-in movement soon after Betty Jean Owens was brutally raped. In Tallahassee, Patricia Stephens Due, who felt that the rape symbolized an attack on the dignity and humanity of all African Americans, organized the city's first Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) chapter just six weeks after Owens's trial. Florida A&M CORE members launched an uneventful sit-in campaign that fall, but, like other black students throughout the South, successfully desegregated local lunch counters, theaters, and department stores in the spring of 1960. The students later led the "jail, no bail" tactic popularized by SCLC and SNCC.⁶⁷ While the rape alone may not have been the galvanizing force that turned students into soldiers for freedom, the sexual and racial dynamics inherent in this case speak to larger themes in the African American freedom struggle.

⁶⁵ Cases cited in Kimberly R. Woodard, "The Summer of African-American Discontent," unpublished paper, Duke University, 1992 (in McGuire's possession). See also "Death to Be Demanded in Rape Case," *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 4, 1959; John H. McCray, "Marine Doomed to Electric Chair in S.C. Rape Case," *ibid.*, July 11, 1959, p. 1; Clarence Mitchell, "Separate but Equal Justice," *ibid.*; "Girlfriend Turns in Rape Suspect," *ibid.*, Aug. 1, 1959; Trezzvant Anderson, "Negroes Weep as Georgia White Is Acquitted," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sept. 2, 1959.

⁶⁶ "The Tallahassee Case: A Turning Point in South," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1959; John H. McCray, "South's Courts Show New Day of Justice," *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 11, 1959.

⁶⁷ Richard Haley, "Report on Events in Tallahassee, October 1959–June 1960," folder 7, box 10, series 5, Congress of Racial Equality Papers (Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison).

The politics of respectability—Betty Jean Owens’s middle-class background, her college education, and her chastity—may have enabled African Americans on the local and national level to break through the “culture of dissemblance” and speak out against her rape. But it was the convergence of the politics of respectability, Owens’s testimony, and African Americans’ growing political influence on the national and international stage in the late 1950s that made the legal victory possible. Still, the long tradition of black women’s testimony, stretching back to slavery and Reconstruction, makes it clear that some elements of the Tallahassee case were not aberrations. The testimonies and trials of Betty Jean Owens, Gertrude Perkins, and Recy Taylor, to name just a few, bear witness to these issues, forcing historians to reconsider the individual threads that make up the fabric of African American politics. Black women not only dissembled where it was necessary but testified where it was possible. Not only silence but often protest surrounded the sexualized violence against African American women. If we are fully to understand the role of gender and sexuality in larger struggles for freedom and equality, we must explore these battles over manhood and womanhood, frequently set in the context of sexualized violence, that remain at the volatile core of the modern civil rights movement.