



THE RAPE OF REGY TAYLOR

A FILM BY NANCY BUIRSKI



FAITH-BASED
DISCUSSION GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

THE RAPE OF RECY TAYLOR documents what it meant for Mrs. Recy Taylor to be a Black Christian woman in the 1940's South, piecing together her dignity after seven white boys believed they could rape her with impunity. In their privilege they relied on the horror of rape, and fear induced by Jim/Jane Crow legislation and culture to silence her. Mrs. Taylor, however, relied on her clear understanding of her own humanity and dignity to compel and sustain her in the fight to receive justice. She was joined by friends, family and a national extended community that included Rosa Parks and the NAACP who took up her cause.

THE RAPE OF RECY TAYLOR opens up the historic and ongoing fight to claim Black women as sacred rather than profane, black sexuality as private and intimate rather than publicly objectified, and justice as a basic human right in the face of rape.

Curated footage from Black archival resources and the analysis of historian, Dr. Crystal Feimster, bring the racial, economic, gendered, and sexual nuances of Black women's historic and contemporary rape into focus in this important film. The accompanying discussion guide furthers this exploration by providing commentary, and scriptures for reflection that support communal conversation about the following themes: Whiteness in the South; Race and Religion; Gender and Masculinity; Victimization and Resistance; the Culture of Silence; Rape and Gender; and, The Politics of Respectability.

CONTRIBUTORS

Rev. Dr. Jennifer Harvey is Professor of Religion at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. She received her Ph.D. in Christian Social Ethics from Union Theological Seminary. The courses Prof. Harvey teaches run the gamut in relation to her research interests. Broadly speaking, they focus on encounters of religion and ethics with race, gender, activism, politics, spirituality, justice, and any other aspect of social life in which religiosity decides to "show up." Prof. Harvey's most recent book *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation* has led to her engagement as a speaker and workshop leader with faith communities and academic audiences around the nation. She is also the author of *Whiteness and Morality: Pursuing Racial Justice through Reparations and Sovereignty* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and a co-editor of *Disrupting White Supremacy: White People on What We Need To Do* (Pilgrim Press, 2004). Her recent publications include work on contemporary reparations movements in Protestant traditions, queer articulations of Christian traditions, and Native-Colonial dialogues on issues of environmental justice.

Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, the inaugural Dean of Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary, leads EDS at Union in the education and preparation of students in fulfilling requirements for ordination in the Episcopal Church while receiving their degree from Union. A leading voice in the development of a womanist theology, Dr. Douglas is widely published in national and international journals and other publications. Her groundbreaking and widely used book *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (1999) was the first to address the issue of homophobia within the black church community. Her latest book, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (2015) examines the deep roots of "Stand Your Ground" culture in America and the challenges it brings for the Black Church community. Other books include *The Black Christ* (1994), *What's Faith Got to Do With It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (2005), and *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (2012) which seeks to move the black church beyond its oppressive views toward LGBT bodies and sexuality in general.

Dr. Ryan Harper is the Faculty Fellow in Religious Studies at Colby College. His scholarship and teaching revolve around American religious history and culture, with a special focus on contemporary American Christianity and the arts. His first book *The Gaithers and Southern Gospel: Homecoming in the Twenty First Century* (University Press of Mississippi, 2017) is an ethnography of gospel singer-songwriters Bill and Gloria Gaither and their Homecoming video and concert series. Ryan is in the early research stages of his second major project—a study of American Christians' interest in the production and consumption of creative writing, focusing on Post-Vatican II aesthetic exchanges and encounters between evangelicals, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox Christians. In both projects, Ryan is interested in what varieties of theological, racial, and sexual identities collide and collude in Christian art worlds—and what identities are formed as a result. A poet himself, Ryan's full-length collection, *My Beloved Had a Vineyard*, won the 2017 Prize American in Poetry and is available via the Poetry Press of Press Americana (April 2018).

Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective

CONTRIBUTORS

Rev. Dr. Shively T. J. Smith serves as Assistant Professor of New Testament at Boston University School of Theology (Boston, MA), having served in that capacity at Wesley Theological Seminary (Washington, DC) for several years. She completed her Ph.D. in New Testament Studies at Emory University as the first African American female degreed in that specialization. Furthermore, she recently published her first book called, *Strangers to Family: Diaspora and First Peter's Invention of God's Household* with Baylor University Press and is completing a commentary on Second Peter for SBL Press. Smith is an ordained itinerant elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church where she proudly serves as member and resident scholar at the historic Cathedral of the AME Church, Metropolitan AME Church (Washington, DC). As a scholar of New Testament, Smith writes and teaches on all 27 books of the New Testament, but her particular focus is on the traditions of Peter, diaspora and cultural studies, approaches to biblical interpretation (hermeneutics), Womanist and African American biblical interpretation, and issues related to the treatment of and hospitality to "strangers," locally and globally. She has contributed to multiple writing projects and series, including *Feasting on the Gospels, Reading & Writing Theologically*, and the forthcoming series, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. She is a regular contributor to the online Working Preacher Lectionary series and the Odyssey Network's "On Scripture" online series and Odyssey Impact campaigns.

Rev. Dr. Keri Day is an Associate Professor of Constructive Theology and African American Religion at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, NJ. Day received her PhD in Religion from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. She earned an MA in Religion and Ethics from Yale University Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut, and a Bachelor of Science degree from Tennessee State University in Nashville. Her teaching and research interests are in womanist/feminist theologies, social critical theory, cultural studies, economics, and Afro-Pentecostalism. Her first academic book, *Unfinished Business: Black Women, The Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America*, was published in November of 2012. Her second book, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives*, was published in December of 2015. In 2017, she was recognized by ABC News as one of six black women at the center of gravity in theological education in America. Alongside her scholarship, she also engages public policy leaders. In 2011, she was the keynote speaker at the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast in Springfield, Illinois, highlighting the importance of interfaith dialogue within local communities. In addition, she was part of the 2012 delegation of scholars who participated in the White House Religious Scholars Briefing in Washington D.C. to discuss issues related to economic policy, religious freedom, and peace building efforts around the world. She has been a guest political commentator on KERA, NPR, DFW/FOX News, and Huffington post Live on issues related to faith and politics. She has written for the Dallas Morning News' Faith and Politics Blog, The Feminist Wire, and The Huffington Post.

CONTRIBUTORS

Rev. Dr. Neichelle R. Guidry is a spiritual daughter of New Creation Christian Fellowship of San Antonio, Texas, where the Bishop David Michael Copeland and the Rev. Dr. Claudette Anderson Copeland are her pastors and where she was ordained to ministry in 2010. She is a graduate of Clark Atlanta University (2007, BA, Lambda Pi Eta) and Yale Divinity School (2010, M.Div.), where she was the 2010 recipient of the Walcott Prize for Clear and Effective Public and Pulpit Speaking. She is also a graduate of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (2017), where she completed her Doctor of Philosophy in the area of Liturgical Studies with a concentration in Homiletics. Her dissertation is entitled, "Towards a Womanist Homiletical Theology for Subverting Rape Culture." She currently serves as the Dean of the Chapel and the Director of the WISDOM Center at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. She is the creator of shepreaches, a virtual community and professional development organization that aspires to uplift African-American millennial women in ministry through theological reflection, fellowship, and liturgical curation. For six years, she served as the Associate Pastor to Young Adults and the Liaison to Worship and Arts Ministries in the Office of the Senior Pastor at Trinity United Church of Christ on the South side of Chicago, where the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, III is the Senior Pastor.

Rev. Dr. Stephanie M. Crumpton is a scholar, teacher and ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. In 2006 she began doctoral research on Black women's experiences of intimate and cultural violence. During this time she also worked as a State Court Appointed Family Violence Advocate in the Fulton County Solicitor General's Office (Atlanta, Georgia), and consulted with the Georgia Commission on Family Violence's initiative to equip faith communities with networks and practical resources for responding to intimate violence. This work continues to inform her trauma sensitive approach to her work in the community, research and teaching as the Assistant Professor of Practical Theology at McCormick Theological Seminary. There she teaches introductory level courses on pastoral care and religious education, and elective courses on pastoral theological method for justice work, womanist/feminist pastoral care and counseling, and the role of African cosmology and ritual in pastoral care. She has also taught at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, Chicago Theological Seminary, Hood Theological Seminary, Lancaster Theological Seminary, and Interdenominational Theological Center.

WHITENESS IN THE SOUTH

Jeremiah 8:15

Jeremiah 8:19-21

Micah 6:6-8

In **THE RAPE OF RECY TAYLOR** Dr. Crystal Feimster offers careful detail about the way white supremacy worked in the South. She also helps us appreciate how truly courageous and tenacious was the individual and collective resistance of Black women like Recy Taylor, Rosa Parks and so many others. Then, there's a shift toward the end of the film. Dr. Feimster breaks from her impassioned but scholarly tone and starts to talk explicitly about the white men who ravaged Recy Taylor; how young they were; what they could have been thinking as they committed this atrocity. She chokes up as her words catch in her throat: "Where is the humanity?"

And this remains the haunting and ever present question at the heart of white supremacy: "Where is the humanity?"

Often our public dialogues about race and our national racial history rely on simplistic notions of racism. If only racism was about individual people holding dehumanizing views of African Americans. If only the problem was misinformation or a lack of education. It would be much more straightforward how to destroy it.

The evils of white supremacy are about white people acting on hateful views, but they are about more than this. Over time, whiteness becomes a culture that saturates everything. It reproduces itself. It creates a climate and environment. It is an inheritance passed down from grandparent to grandchild, teacher to student, clergy to parishioners. It is explicit and subtle.

In this supremacist culture people can learn to know things that have never been spoken aloud. Complicity can be demanded without verbal threats having to be explicit. Lies everyone knows to be lies can be told, while in public many people play along as if they were true. Hate-filled acts of violence can be committed by so-called good people, while other so-called good people remain silent—as a result whiteness socializes white people multi-generationally.

Whiteness becomes legacy. And it destroys humanity in the process.

Consider the layers evident in *The Rape of Recy Taylor*. There are lies. There is silence and silencing. There is a narrative told (and re-told still) by white people in Abbeville that deforms what people actually see. For example, people in a town complicit in a cover up can still be remembered as having had good relationships across racial lines. Men who committed violent sexual assault of a young Black mother can be remembered as having been decent neighbors and, ultimately, war heroes.

WHITENESS IN THE SOUTH

Black people, then and now, understood these truths about whiteness' evil. They also, thus, knew that relentless and multi-pronged strategies were necessary to fight it and for the long haul. So Black women broke silence despite the risk. Black journalists printed the truth. Black filmmakers told different stories.

Recognizing all of this is critical for honoring, Recy Taylor's experience and courage. It's also important for understanding the ways whiteness continues to perpetrate and to be perpetuated. For to honor Recy Taylor, we must remain haunted. The counter question must persist: What is required of us, with our different racial identities and histories, to destroy cultures of supremacist whiteness today?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1:08:45 - 1:09:43

What was your reaction hearing white residents of Abbeville today, remember Recy Taylor and describe white and Black people in Abbeville as having been "friends"? Do these descriptions show us anything about whiteness that helps us challenge it today?

00:54:55 - 00:01:03

In the specific testimonies of the six young men implicated in the sexual violence against Recy Taylor what different dimensions of white supremacist culture and socialization can you hear? How should we think about the way these young men were remembered by some the white people who were interviewed today for the film?

1:05:33 - 1:07:30

In what moments of the film *The Rape of Recy Taylor* did particular aspects of whiteness—including lies, silence, distortions—show up? What are the lies, silence and distortions you see cultures of whiteness create today? How can noticing these smaller pieces of the larger evils of white supremacy help us get a stronger hand on how to challenge whiteness and white supremacy today?

RACE AND RELIGION

Genesis 1:26-28

“You are created in God’s image. You are not slaves, you are not ‘n-----s’; you are God’s children....” This was the message of black faith, Howard Thurman says, that was transmitted to the enslaved. “He who knows this,” Thurman continues, “is able to transcend the vicissitudes of life, however terrifying....” Thurman’s insights reveal the quiet but prevailing power of black faith. This is a power on display throughout the documentary, *The Rape of Recy Taylor*.

Grounded in an African religious heritage, black faith was born in the crucible of slavery. From the very beginning, black faith had to confront the perverse and tragic absurdities of black life. It is, therefore, not a faith that ignores the unthinkable and irrational terror of black existence, such as the unspeakable violation of Recy Taylor.

Neither does black faith romanticize black sufferings or revel in illusions of false hope. Instead, black faith has been a bulwark of resistance against the horrors of white supremacy. As such, it witnesses to an Exodus God who liberates the oppressed, thereby empowering black people to fight for their God-given freedom. Henry Highland Garnet made this clear in his 1843 “Address to the Slaves of the United States,” when he proclaimed, “neither God, nor angels, or just men, command you to suffer for a single moment. Therefore, it is your solemn and imperative duty to use every means, both moral, intellectual, and physical that promises success” in securing freedom.

Furthermore, black faith has been a “Balm in Gilead,” protecting black women and men from white supremacist ideas of them as inferior beings divinely destined for a chattel-like existence. Hence, it testifies that black people are made in the image of God, thereby allowing black people to affirm their innate and created worth—even in the midst of white supremacist systems and structures that suggest their utter worthlessness.

Essentially, from its inception, black faith has provided a profound counter-narrative to the vulgarities of white supremacy. It has countered notions of black men as dangerous, raping brutes needing to be “put down,” and black women as lewd Jezebels deserving to be raped.

And so, it is fitting that *The Rape of Recy Taylor* opens with a scene in the black church. For although it was as she walked home from an evening church service that Recy Taylor was brutally attacked, it was no doubt her black church faith that allowed her to survive, with dignity, the rapacious violation and the ignominy of injustice that followed.

In this regard, black faith is palpably present throughout this documentary. Its life-affirming power is juxtaposed against the dehumanizing power of white supremacy. In the end, inasmuch as *The Rape of Recy Taylor* is a story about the vulgar doggedness of white supremacy, it is also about the sacred tenacity of black faith.

RACE AND RELIGION

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

00:02:35 - 00:04:50

While the faith of Recy Taylor is clearly present in this documentary, what about the black church itself?

01:16:36 - :01:22:01

While the black church has been on the forefront in the struggle for racial justice what does its presence or lack thereof suggest about its role in black women's struggles? What are the implications for the black church today particularly when it comes to violence against black women?

GENDER AND MASCULINITY

Matthew 11:12

The Rape of Recy Taylor calls to my mind “The Baptism of Jesse Taylor,” a country song made popular in the 1970s by the Oak Ridge Boys. Taylor, a notorious rounder, has been baptized, and consequently, the local taverns and gamblers have lost business, black eyes have healed, and the local women have fewer opportunities to “step out.” Jesus has “gained a soul,” Satan has “lost a good right arm.” Jesus is not the only winner in the baptism. The final verse declares that Taylor’s home county now has “a lot more man.” Given the phrase’s connotations, it seems Taylor’s baptism has not so much drowned as it has channeled his wildness. Male aggression emerges sanctified from the baptismal waters—sanctioned, presumably, to preserve law and order. As the song says, “the black eye of the law will soon be well.”

In the American South, where “law and order” has long been synonymous with the preservation of white male power, one could imagine that Taylor’s African American neighbors did not rejoice at his supposed transformation. As *The Rape of Recy Taylor* makes clear, black people—particularly black women—cannot assume “lawful” white masculinity differs substantially from its “lawless” counterpart. Both are predicated on the subjugation of black bodies in the service of white hegemony. Both enact and protect the same social hierarchy. Both are sanctified unto this end.

Two related aims of sanctified white male violence are prominent in Recy Taylor’s story: violence as rite of passage, and as enforcement of a social order. Understood as mere property or as fundamentally given to sexual licentiousness, black women are the site of white boys’ sexual coming of age. The counterpart to “pure” white women—whose absence looms over and drives the events described in the film—black women are rendered sexually available to any white male. Black men have little choice but to stand by and witness this violence happening to their spouses, sisters, daughters. Robbed of nearly all his power, yet feared partly because of his own presumed sexual voracity, a black man is forced to watch white boys perpetrate crimes for which he is perpetually, mythically accused. He is forced to realize that white males can commit with impunity the same crime that, were he merely imagined to have perpetrated on a white woman, would leave him hanging from a tree. The rape of Recy Taylor is not only an initiation rite for the rapists. It is a ritual intended for the black men and women involved, a performed declaration of the social order: white males own your bodies—all of them.

While it sheds specific light on Jim Crow culture, *The Rape of Recy Taylor* does not isolate southern white masculinity from other forms of sanctified national violence and gender hierarchies. Several of Taylor’s assailants end up in the military, and viewers must ponder how involvement in the war machine punishes, redeems, or continues the boys’ violence toward Taylor. The film highlights the struggle of Recy Taylor’s father. While it is impossible not to sympathize with the shotgun-wielding patriarch, keeping watch over his threatened family from a treetop, the film encourages us to examine social conditions within which any assumption of male power is predicated on guarding women.

GENDER AND MASCULINITY

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

00:25:27 - 00:27:15 & 01:05:30 - 01:12:20

Professor Crystal Feimster notes that Jim Crow culture denied the “traditional mechanisms of manhood” to black men, such as Recy Taylor’s father, husband, and brother. What was the nature of these mechanisms? How did different members of the Taylor family respond to their denial? How might the unavailability of certain “masculine” roles have affected black people’s responses to local and regional injustices?

00:18:00 - :00:22:35

Are there “usable” notions of masculinity operant in the film—conceptions and manifestations of manhood that counter or subvert its obviously pernicious forms? If so, what are they? Or, is masculinity as such—or white masculinity, as such—the source of the injustice? Does the film give us ways to think about masculinities, in the plural?

VICTIMIZATION AND RESISTANCE

1 John 3:18-19

“I can’t help but tell the truth,” may not immediately strike someone as the statement of a victim. Yet, these are Recy’s Taylor’s words as she talks about being raped and the failures of the justice system in 1940s Jim Crow Alabama. Her story could easily cause the viewer to feel despair, but hopelessness and inaction is precisely what Taylor resisted. Her story embodies a commitment to truth telling that flows throughout the collective bloodstream of African American women activists who suffered victimization only to turnaround and resist tactics of dehumanization and silencing.

Chronologically wedged between Ida B. Wells in the late 19th century and Fannie Lou Hamer in the mid-20th century, Taylor’s strategy of telling the truth parallels that of historic African American women agitators. Watching the film, we can imagine Wells sitting at the intersection of race, gender, violence, poverty, and freedom declaring with utter resolve, “The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.” We can also imagine Hamer, over half a decade later, standing at that same intersection declaring, “Sometimes it seem like to tell the truth today is to run the risk of being killed. But if I fall, I’ll fall five feet four inches forward in the fight for freedom because I’m not backing off.”

Truth-telling as an action of resistance in response to sexual violence and social terror continues to be a strategy of defiance for African American women social-political activists, artists, entrepreneurs, educators, preachers, and more. Narrating our encounters of violation has been a means of reclaiming our power and shocking the conscience of so-called “good people,” who have historically found it convenient to deny and erase violence committed against black women.

What happens when these stories cause ripples in society, but do not ultimately result in justice? Taylor shared one other characteristic with Wells, Hamer, and Parks worth remembering—faith. These faithful women questioned the justice system. They did not conflate the way of God in the world with the way of an inhumane system and its conspirators. Faith did not mean ignoring and excusing violations. Rather, faith propelled Taylor and so many others to speak the truth despite disappointment because they refused to stop believing what Wells declared, “Truth is mighty and will prevail.”

VICTIMIZATION AND RESISTANCE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

00:16:00 - 00:24:22

In addition to truth telling as resistance, what other themes emerge in the stories of Recy Taylor, Rosa Parks and other African American women like Fannie Lou Hamer and Ida B. Wells?

00:41:00 - 00:48:00

How are the challenges of truth-telling, as portrayed in Taylor's story, active today and how have they changed?

01:20:00 - 01:26:40

How do we situate Taylor's brutal assault in a broader historical narrative of injustice? What concrete steps can we take to educate our communities about Taylor and this history?

REBUKING THE CULTURE OF SILENCE (WOMEN WHO LEAD)

When we think about projects of black freedom and justice, we tend to remember “major” voices that led the way such as Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malcolm X. We tend to think of “leadership giants” or spokespersons who not only gave voice to a movement but also made the movement possible. We assume that black freedom struggles would not have been possible without King and other major black male leaders. *The Rape of Recy Taylor* allows us to challenge this assumption by acknowledging the countless women and men who built grassroots movements to make justice possible for persons such as Taylor. This documentary offers a different picture on the need to pursue movement building in the absence of giants.

I was struck by the grassroots activities and practices of black churchwomen who faithfully responded to Recy Taylor’s rape case (alongside countless other black women who were raped). Although black women such as Taylor were victims of rape and other forms of sexualized violence, black women were also agents of resistance, demonstrating that the #metoo movement began decades ago for black women in America. Within much of the recounting of Civil Rights history, Rosa Parks is seen as a black woman who was simply too tired to get out of her bus seat. However, this documentary resonates with other recent studies that Parks was part of a history of black women’s civil disobedience and protest, which began in the 1940s. Before the Montgomery bus boycott, Parks was the lead investigator for the NAACP in Taylor’s case, advocating for the prosecution of the white men who raped Taylor. Parks was part of a community of black women who fashioned grassroots organizing on behalf of rape victims.

What would it mean to begin the narration of contemporary black freedom struggles with black women’s organizing against sexual violence in the 1940s instead of with a virtually all male-led Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the 1960s? How would this re-narration transform how we think of leadership in relation to movement-building? It was never the singular, popular voice (giant) that made the movement but the many voices of black people, especially black women, giving their time, energy, and resources to make resistance and justice possible. Moreover, black women’s leadership against forms of sexual violence was firmly planted in the black church. These women made the black church a safe place to talk about and advocate against rape. In an era where black women feel increasingly unsafe in black church spaces, how might this history and legacy help us fight black patriarchy from within black church spaces?

The life of Recy Taylor is tragic. Yet, the legacy of black churchwomen struggling against sexual violence is important as we think about our own forms of resistance today in light of the #metoo movement. Most importantly, this documentary teaches us that we do not need to wait on the leader to make the movement possible. We do not need another King. In the words of black feminist Alice Walker, we are the ones we have been waiting on. We can join grassroots organizing to fight forms of sexual violence still being committed against vulnerable women (and men also). It’s time we lead in the absence of giants.

REBUKING THE CULTURE OF SILENCE (WOMEN WHO LEAD)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

01:12:52 - 01:13:53

How might black organizations (NAACP, Urban League, etc.) learn from the story of Recy Taylor and advocate for women who are victims of sexual violence?

00:46:40 - :00:49:30

Black newspapers were instrumental in Recy Taylor's case becoming national news. How might black media today ensure that issues of sexual violence against black women become national news?

01:04:37 - :01:05:38

What can *you* do to challenge the stigmatization that often marks black women who have experienced rape?

RAPE AND GENDER

John 10:10

When it comes to the issues of gender and sexualized violence, the Church faces a crisis of irony. From the beginning stages of the Church as it is known, women have provided invaluable support, often holding individual persons and congregations together through generous donations of time and labor. Yet, they remain vulnerable, not only to varying levels of violence, but to the apathy and complicity by which such violence has become normative. As an institution that is immersed within a wider culture of violence against women, the Church replicates many of the attitudes, myths and behaviors that sustain rape culture in ways that theologically sanction rape culture within its own walls. While the term ‘rape culture’ might immediately conjure thoughts of rape, this term includes all forms of gender-based marginalization, disempowerment and violence.

Rape culture in the church is evident in denominational and congregational leadership hierarchies that are laden with gendered glass ceilings, patriarchal preaching, inequitable power distribution, clergy abuses of power, and poor accountability. It is most obvious in the systemic and sustained silencing of victims of sexualized violence in the church, a phenomenon that has recently received national attention due to the emergence of the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements. In short, the Church has been and continues to be complicit in the normalization of rape and gender-based violence.

Furthermore, most faith communities, regardless of their racial demographics, have yet to address the intersection of race and gender. Despite the emergence of dialogue on the social, economic, and political power of Black women, Black women are still advocating for minimal respect in many church settings, especially the Black church. “The Rape of Recy Taylor” depicts that Recy was targeted, taunted, and ultimately raped because she was a Black woman. As such, she could be raped without consequence.

Recy Taylor attended church on the night that she was raped. Her sister, Alma Daniels, recalls that she had made special arrangements and efforts to attend church that evening. Her faithfulness did not protect her. Moreover, the documentary doesn’t move away from the grief of the rape. It does not move to show other facets of Recy Taylor’s life after her assault, or how she and her family may have “moved on.” It gives the impression that there was no “abundant life” for this Black (Christian) woman after the rape, trial and unsuccessful attempts to appeal. While this could be experienced as a shortsighted telling of this Black woman’s story, it is also compelling. It raises a set of profound theological questions that beckon us to sit with the gravity of these issues, and the fact that they have yet to be resolved.

These questions include, ‘Why would God allow for ideological structures such as racism and patriarchy, and for the enactment of such ideologies in the form of bodily violence? What does it mean to serve a God who permits evil? For a woman who survives, what is the point of practicing Christianity, outside of the joy, peace, and abundance that are often used to promulgate our tradition? Why serve this God, if the systems that sustain such violence seem impenetrable, and the joy of living in the wake of violence is so difficult to attain? What are our hopes for our promised “by and by,” as it pertains to the issues of race, gender, and sexualized violence?’

RAPE AND GENDER

These questions persist as Black women continue to disproportionately experience sexualized violence, suffer from deeply ingrained stereotypes, and receive very little justice for manifold forms of marginalization. Relevant congregations must engage in conversations about creating contexts of justice, safety, advocacy, and equity for Black women. How much longer will Black women like Recy Taylor have to wait before questions and conversations translate into organized efforts to transform policy for the dignity of Black women?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

00:17:15 - :00:18:38

Recy Taylor's brother says, "the Black woman's body did not belong to her." Her sister describes Recy's attackers to have "played in her body." How do these sentiments contrast to the opening montage of the bodies of Black bodies in charismatic worship? What are the implications and possibilities of faith, ritual and community for dehumanized and disposable bodies?

Towards the beginning of the film Recy Taylor proclaims, "I couldn't help but tell the truth about what they done to me," and she ends her story with those same words. Even in the course of the prosecution of her perpetrators, Recy Taylor was very public about her rape, What is the significance of her storytelling, both then and now? How might storytelling aid in the disruption of rape culture?

00:24:21 - :00:27:17

Throughout the film, there are testimonies from Recy's brother about the ways that he and other men, particularly their father, showed up in Recy's life and in the fight for her protection and justification. What does their presence communicate about the roles and responsibilities of men within rape culture? What are the benefits and what are the risks?

00:41:27 - :00:46:36

Rosa Parks upended her own life to help Recy Taylor and to raise national awareness of her fight for justice in Alabama. She arrived to Abbeville with a passion for activism and experience in advocacy and protest, but she worked with many people to get the story out. What does the way she lead teach about orchestrating movements for justice today?

THE POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY

Song of Solomon 1:5

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined the term “politics of respectability” to describe Black Christian women in the 1940’s efforts to humanize themselves in the eyes of white racists.³ When Black women advocated hardline allegiance to white middle classed manors and morals, this politics of respectability became their way of protecting Black bodies when they had no power to police white racial violence, including rape. Through today’s lenses this logic may seem absurd, but it was a strategy to survive the bottom rungs of an overwhelmingly disparate power structure of the Jim and Jane Crow South, and its echoes in the North.

The politics of respectability also included measures that enabled Black women to psychologically survive the sexual horrors that the politics of respectability could neither prevent, nor erase from Black women’s memories. Higginbotham tied respectability politics to Darlene Clark Hines’⁴ observation that Black women often used their middle classed manners and morals to “create the appearance of openness and disclosure” about who they were as women. That powerful presentation of a good, strong, Christian woman of character also functioned to conceal the immense psychological pain they sustained from their oppressors. The politics of respectability and the culture of dissemblance were the self-protective measures that Black women used to maintain their dignity and sanity while suffering the defilement of rape.

The problem with respectability was and continues to be that it is neither safe nor smart for Black women to bet on being able to humanize ourselves in the minds of those who are committed to our subjugation and sexualization. Secondly, while the culture of dissemblance allowed Black women to keep something (even if it was their pain) to themselves, it also incarcerated their truths in prisons of silence and invisibility. Finally, neither of these two practices allowed Black women to call out white women who saw them as Black before they saw them as women, white men who literally snatched them off the road to gang rape and leave them for dead, Black males who also raped them, and Black women whose silence at times rendered them complicit.

The politics of respectability and culture of dissemblance were present in Recy Taylor’s day, and they have left behind legacies that continue to influence Black girls and women.

³ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, Revised edition. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1994.

⁴ Darlene Clark Hines, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” 912-920, in *Signs*. Vol. 14, No. 4, *Common Grounds and Crossroads: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in Women’s Lives* (Summer, 1989).

THE POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

00:00:00 - :00:05:00

The film opens with significant emphasis on how Mrs. Taylor was a good Christian woman. At the end Recy Taylor talks about the Lord being with her “that night.” What theological questions concerns come up when ‘good’ women get raped and their perpetrators go free?

00:29:36 - :00:34:55

Rosa Parks did not speak about the sexual harassment she suffered until much later. In today’s world, what’s at stake for an outspoken, justice fighting Black woman if she reveals that she has been sexually assaulted?

01:18:38 - :01:19:39

Dr. Crystal Feimster talked about how middle classed Black women were often forced off trains and humiliated by having to use the bathroom on the side of the road because it was illegal for them to use the same bathroom as white passengers. What are some of the ways that systemic racism and sexism humiliate Black women to remind them of their place regardless of their manners and morals?

Discussion A: Intersectionality and Rape

OBJECTIVE

To introduce intersectionality, racism and structural racism as useful concepts for identifying the historic and contemporary influence of race, class, gender and sexuality in the rape of Black women.

It is difficult to grasp the depth Recy Taylor’s uphill battle for justice without fully understanding the social and cultural dynamics that impacted her life then, and continues to impact contemporary Black women now. It requires being able to see her not just as Black, or as woman, or as working class, but rather as all of these things to which her supporters gave important attention, and to which contemporary sympathizers should as well.

A first step involves developing an intersectional way of viewing people in society that allows the social vulnerabilities of people like Recy to be accounted for not one at a time, but rather attended to simultaneously as pieces that contribute to her social identity as a whole.

Intersectionality, a term first coined by legal expert Kimberly Crenshaw, is a useful concept in developing this capacity. Crenshaw explains, “Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things.”⁵ An intersectional lens illuminates the multiple categories of identity that are subject to the social and political power of others not like them.

It is also important to define and identify the difference between two other concepts, racism and structural racism, in this discussion. The online resource, Racial Equity Tools, defines racism as: “individual, cultural, institutional and systemic ways by which differential consequences are created for groups historically or currently defined as white being advantaged, and groups historically or currently defined as non-white (African, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, etc.) as disadvantaged.” That idea aligns with those who define racism as prejudice plus power, a common phrase in the field. Combining the concepts of prejudice and power points out the mechanisms by which racism leads to different consequences for different groups.⁶

Racial Equity Tools defines structural racism as: “The normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal – that routinely advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. Structural racism encompasses the entire system of white domination, diffused and infused in all aspects of society including its history, culture, politics, economics and entire social fabric.”⁷

While the two are related, the difference between the individual experience of racism, and the wider systemic structures that enforce discrimination are important. All three of these terms: intersectionality, racism and structural racism, provide useful concepts that allow us to develop a fuller picture of Black women’s historic and ongoing experience of rape.

⁵ Kimberly Crenshaw, “Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later.” Columbia Law School Blog. Published June 8, 2017. <https://www.law.columbia.edu/pt-br/news/2017/06/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality>

⁶ Read “Racism” in the Racial Equity Tools Glossary. Racial Equity Tools. <http://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary#racism>

⁷ Read “Structural Racism” in the Racial Equity Tools Glossary. Racial Equity Tools. <http://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary#structuralracism>

ACTIVITY

Watch the Rape of Recy Taylor Documentary and take note of when and how:

- Racism (being Black) counted against Taylor in the justice system
- Her/her family’s financial livelihood (class) was threatened by speaking up for justice
- Male privilege required women’s sexual availability (gender/sexuality)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) In intersectional analysis the impact of each of the scenarios indicated above is significant. What kind of compromise is required of women like Recy Taylor when they have to choose between being supported in one dimension of their lives, but not in the others?
- 2) Given the questions above, and the insight provided by the film, what do legal advocates need to know about Black women's historic and ongoing experience of structural racism in the legal system?
- 3) When male privilege demands female sexual availability, how can the church carve out space that affirms Black women's bodies aside from how they may compliment the needs and desires of others?
- 4) What is the role of the church in combatting racism, sexism, and classism as they converge sexual violence?

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION (PSALM 139, GALATIANS 3:28 NRSV VERSION)

There are moments in the biblical text when a woman who has lesser social standing (Hagar the Egyptian slave in Genesis 16, Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11) is made to give her body over for the sexual use and/or desire of more powerful others. There are also moments when the violence is more direct and explicit, like the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34, the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13, and the rape and dismemberment of an unnamed woman in Judges 19.

- 1) What questions come up for you when you look at these texts through the lenses of these women - not those they are made to satisfy - in these texts?
- 2) Do any conflicts come up when reading these texts? If so, how does your faith support or not support you in sorting through them?

RESOURCES / REFERENCES

Jordanna Elizabeth, "The Intersectionality of Believability." MS Blog. Published November 8, 2017. <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2017/11/08/the-intersectionality-of-believability/>

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Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance - A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.

Discussion B: Trauma Recovery for Black Women

OBJECTIVE

To define trauma and identify key points for Black women's healing and restoration following sexual trauma.

In the film, Recy Taylor's sister speaks directly about the trauma her sister's body experienced. The atrocities are so immense that she declares that the way her sister's assailants died (in war, prolonged illnesses) was a form of payback for the horrible things they did to Recy's body. Mrs. Taylor had a husband and a child before the events of that night changed her body in ways that could not help but impact her mind and spirit. The black and white photograph of Taylor that appears throughout the movie shows her tall and thin, with a look in her eyes that suggests an important distance between her and those who would gaze upon her. While viewers are left to admire how her stance signifies her resilience, it is nearly impossible to overlook how tired and numb she looks in the picture. She is there, but not all of the way. That 'there but not all the way' quality is familiar for those who have experienced or supported others recovering from trauma. It is one of its hallmarks, and it speaks loudly about what it will take from the community to provide bridges of safety between who and how they were before an event like rape, where they are in its wake, and any possibilities for hope, trust and community in the future. Responding to sexual trauma requires a working understanding of what trauma is and how it functions. Trauma is identified by the following criteria:

- Threatens lives or bodies
- Produces terror and feelings of helplessness
- Overwhelms an individual's or group's ability to cope or respond to the threat
- Leads to a sense of a loss of control
- Challenges a person's or group's sense that life is meaningful and orderly⁸

The 'here but not here' look in Recy Taylor's eyes is rooted in multilayered trauma. Although the road is long and arduous, communities of faith have a role to play in accompanying Black women in re-inhabiting themselves.

⁸ Carolyn Yoder, *The Little Book of Trauma Healing: When Violence Strikes and Community Is Shattered*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005.

A first step in the process concerns understanding that traumatic events cause sudden, self-protective changes in the mind and body to fend off the threat of harm. These self-protective measures are largely unconscious, and they include the following.

- Shutting down of certain senses while others remain open and often become overstimulated. This occurs alongside the painful awareness of one's inability to fend off or escape and overwhelming trespass of physical, sexual and psychological boundaries. Memory of the traumatic experience is not stored like regular memories that can be recalled later as an ordered sequence of events. Unlike the cohesive narrative connected to the memory of a non-traumatic experience, this storyline has gaps. The result is a fragmented memory that is often difficult to pull together as a sequence of events, but which the body physiologically remembers often long after the event.

In the aftermath of these psychological and physiological maneuvers enacted to survive threat, women (and men, boys and girls alike) often experience a sort of alienation from themselves and others because the violation has shattered the norms for human decency. The work of restoration focuses on re-integrating the mind/body/soul connection that makes us all feel human. This is easier said than done, and requires a communal approach that takes seriously the resources and insights that faith communities, mental health workers, and physicians have to offer.

ACTIVITY

Engaging in the process of intersectional analysis discussed in Section A, lays the ground work for first understanding Black female identity and daily experience. This activity prompts consideration of what may help Black women become familiar with themselves following events that alienate them from their own minds, bodies, souls- and at times - loved ones.

Watch *The Rape of Recy Taylor* Documentary and take note of:

- The painful loss that came about as a result of an assault that was so violent that it terminated her ability to ever conceive again.
- The description of the moment when Taylor collapsed in her father's arms after being raped. What must it have been like for her father to hold his daughter's brutalized body?
- The simultaneous racial trauma of knowing that Black female rape was just as much an expression of white supremacist control as was the lynching of Black males
- The structural trauma of being brought into a courthouse alone, without any family, friends or any other Black person, for court proceedings that absolved her white attackers of any responsibility for her pain and suffering.
- The psychological trauma of her story being laid to the side after her assailants went free following the 2nd grand jury hearing, and her once concerned extended community moved on beyond her in search of victory for other victims.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) What mental health care professionals can you connect with to provide support for Black women and their loved ones? We've been talking about intersectionality and it is okay to allow that perspective to inform your efforts to provide support. What social dynamics should you inquire about as you connect with care professionals to insure that you are making a referral that is socially and culturally competent?
- 2) What messages in church and society affirm the goodness of Black female embodiment, inclusive of their sexuality? Conversely, what messages only deepen Black women's sense of being estranged from themselves?
- 3) Given the question above, what should faith-based spaces where Black women can mourn the losses caused by sexual assault look, sound and feel like?

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION (PSALM 23, GENESIS 3:26-28 NRSV VERSION)

Restoration for one's mind, body and soul in the wake of sexual assault can indeed feel like walking through the valley in the shadow of death. It takes effort on the part of the one who is walking, and equal effort on the part of the community, to cultivate space where they can lay down, sleep and eat in the face of memories of a brutal attack. Communities of faith can play this role, but only insofar as they are willing to work hard at making hospitable and safe space.

Discussion A emphasized the importance of grappling with sacred texts that do not often, if ever, hold perpetrators accountable for sexually using and abusing women. When communities of faith gloss over the passages by justifying how these women's violations were simply "the way of the culture back then," it dismisses the pain of the women in the text, and sets precedent for doing the same in contemporary communities.

- 1) What is at stake in taking a stance on behalf of the women in the text, and subsequently declaring that all acts of sexual violence (be they coercive and or direct) are sinful?
- 2) How will you speak authentically and faithfully about God to a Black woman who is enraged about God's inactivity in stopping the racism, patriarchy and other oppressions that converged in her violation?
- 3) How can the divine declaration that humanity (inclusive of Black women, men and children) is good, very good (in Genesis 3:26-27) following the desecration of rape be a resource in Black women's sacred restoration?

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