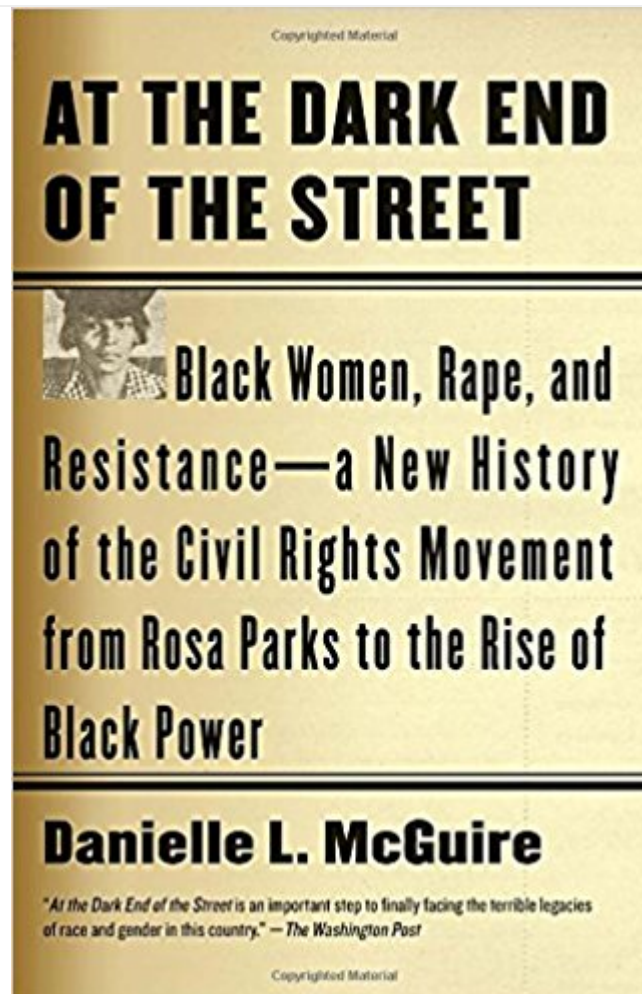


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At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance- A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power



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Reviewed Work(s)

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. By Danielle L. McGuire (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010). Pp. 392. Paper, \$16.95.

The horrific gang-rape of Recy Taylor by six white assailants in Abbeville, Alabama in 1944 is an incident both heart-wrenching and vitally important to understanding the civil rights movement of the twentieth century. However, despite the recent deluge of scholarship on female civil rights actors, the reality of sexual violence and its powerful effects on males and females of both races at mid-century still occupies merely a peripheral part of most monographs on the civil rights movement.^[1] Danielle McGuire seeks to rectify this neglect in *At the Dark End of the Street*. McGuire triumphantly lifts up the voices, fears, efforts and successes of previously unknown women who fought to reclaim their bodies and dignity in the post-war period, which she argues is essential to understanding the civil rights movement as a whole. The courage exhibited by black women who chose to use “use their voices as weapons against white supremacy,” resisted what McGuire describes as the “thingification” of their humanity, which caused local, national, and international outrage and “sparked larger campaigns for human justice and dignity” (xix).

McGuire’s work breaks the traditional mold of civil rights scholarship in both content and scope. She begins with a vivid description of Recy Taylor’s rape and Rosa Parks’s investigation of the incident. After the investigation, Parks, with the help of other local Alabama black women, organized the Committee for Equal Justice, which raised money and fought for a fair prosecution of Taylor’s attackers. The Taylor case politically charged scores of African American men and women on a national level and set the stage for “sexual violence and interracial rape [to become] the battleground upon which African Americans sought to destroy white supremacy and gain personal and political autonomy” (47).

Undaunted by the acquittal of Taylor's attackers, members of the Committee for Equal Justice sought redress for beatings and rapes of black women by white men that took place within Montgomery's city limits. Local black women, including Joann Robinson and Mary Fair Burks, teamed up with clergy members such as Ralph Abernathy to form the Montgomery Improvement Association. McGuire importantly points out that the organization, which organized the famous Montgomery bus boycott of 1955, benefited from the sage leadership of experienced women activists who cut their teeth fighting for Recy Taylor, and who later became the "backbone" of the boycott. As McGuire traces developments in the civil rights movement through the succeeding decades, she brings to light unfamiliar names and long-neglected stories of women who dared to defy the South's white power structure and laid the groundwork for future civil rights victories. Daisy Bates, Melba Patillo, Amelia Boynton, and Victoria Gray Adams are but a few of the multitudinous actors McGuire uses to evidence the vital role women played in the movement. In her effort to expose these individuals, McGuire also highlights pivotal court cases brought to trial by women such as *Browder v. Gayle* (1954) that set important civil and legal precedents used by activists in the mid-sixties to overthrow the southern caste system.

Her title notwithstanding, McGuire's work also includes an apt recognition of the myriad ways interracial sexual fear effected black male treatment. Trials and lynchings of blacks such as North Carolina native Mack Ingram in 1951 and Mississippian Mack Charles Parker in 1959, shore-up McGuire's arguments about the centrality of sexual violence to actions of both sexes on opposite sides of the color line. McGuire concludes her work with an analysis of two cases concerning interracial sexuality that importantly push her narrative beyond the traditional 1965 end point for the movement used in many previous monographs. McGuire uses *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) and the acquittal of Joann Little for murdering a white attempted rapist in 1975 to illustrate how the willingness of black women to testify against their white attackers in the 1940s "dramatically altered the political and legal landscape for black women raped or sexually abused by white men" in future generations (249).

One might take issue, however, with McGuire's strict focus on southern civil rights struggles. Her mentions of Watts and Detroit only pay lip service to multiple attacks on northern black women by white males (especially police officers) that could have been explored further. McGuire's use of Willie McGee's murder to evidence the perils of a consensual interracial sexual relationship in the South also proves problematic. As Alex Heard has recently pointed out in *The Eyes of Willie McGee*, the details surrounding McGee's prosecution and death are not as clear-cut or one-sided as previously believed.^[2] However, these critiques only detract ever so slightly from the rest of her work and at the very least, leave an intriguing research agenda open for future scholars.

McGuire should be lauded for an exhaustive bibliography of primary sources that includes international newspapers, court records, NAACP files and personal interviews which evidence her commitment to the historian's craft. Careful research and artful prose make McGuire's work essential to those interested in understanding the complexities of the civil rights movement in all of its horror and beauty. In this regard, McGuire has successfully restored the importance of sexual violence to its central role in the civil rights narrative, and her work will undoubtedly push scholarship on the movement in new and exciting directions for years to come.

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[1] For more on the central role of women in the civil rights movement see Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830-1970* (New York: Scribner, 2002); Barbra Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Katherine Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); and Faith Holsaert et al., *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

[2] Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee: A Tragedy of Race, Sex, and Secrets in the Jim Crow South* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010).



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