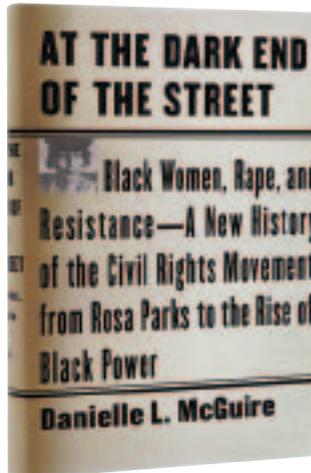


ROSA AND HER SISTERS

A young scholar unearths some hidden history about women in the civil rights movement—then finds it unexpectedly echoed in her own life.

By Bliss Broyard



The story goes that in 1955, Rosa Parks, a tired seamstress in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus, sparking a boycott that launched the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. into the national spotlight and coalesced into the civil rights movement. But the real story, as Danielle L. McGuire, an assistant professor of history at Wayne State University, argues in her groundbreaking new book, *At the Dark End of the Street* (Knopf), is in many ways even more inspiring.

It turns out that Parks, who was 42 at the time of the boycott, had actually been holding down a second job for the previous dozen years as the secretary of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). One of her duties was to investigate and document particularly egregious violations of African-Americans' rights. The year after she started the job, she was assigned to the case of Recy Taylor, a 24-year-old African-American mother who, while walking home from church one evening, was abducted at gunpoint and gang-raped by six young white men. Taylor reported the crime, despite the fact that her assailants had promised to kill her if she did.

With Parks' help, Taylor got her day in court, but the sheriff's failure to make any arrests or conduct even a rudimentary investigation made it easy for the all-white, all-male jury to dismiss the case without an indictment. Parks then teamed up with various African-American, labor, and women's organizations to form the Alabama Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor—which the *Chicago Defender*, a prominent black newspaper, called the “strongest campaign for equal justice to be seen in a decade.” The dismissal was blasted across the front pages of black newspapers across the country, provoking the governor of Alabama to launch a second grand jury investigation.

Among African-American servicemen abroad, the story particularly hit a nerve. As one seaman wrote to the governor, “I have risked my life many times to deliver supplies to our armed forces and our allies. My morale drops when I learn that a woman of my race has been brutally raped



McGuire

by six white men and nothing done about it. Isn't Negro womanhood as sacred as white womanhood?" The question hints at the outrageous hypocrisy at work in the Jim Crow South. According to McGuire, popular white opinion—stoked by race-baiting journalists and segregationists—reasoned that recognizing the sanctity of a black woman's body was akin to granting "social equality" between the races, which would inevitably lead to interracial sex and the unleashing of the "black beast

about sexual violence had brought home the point that a lack of respect for black women's basic dignity and humanity was what made white men feel entitled to treat them as they liked, to abduct them off the street, rape them, and walk away scot-free.

When it was clear that the movement had legs, men such as King and fellow minister Ralph Abernathy became its public faces (and eventually its heroes), while women like Robinson and her fellow female activists stayed behind the scenes (and out of the

own fears about sexual violence."

In the process of writing the book, McGuire found her own voice, too. In 1998, she was a first-year grad student at the Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, researching her first case—that of Betty Jean Owens, a black college student in Tallahassee, Florida, who in 1959 was abducted and raped by four white men. Early one February morning, McGuire woke up after a night of partying to find two male friends attempting to sexually assault her in her bed. One was a star athlete on a UW team. She'd fooled around with one of the men before, but in this instance she made her objections loud and clear. But the district attorney's office declined to prosecute. "We were friends; I had let them into the house; we were drinking. It was fuzzy," as McGuire recalls the DA's explanation. The dean of students wasn't much better. McGuire believes that the athlete's star status protected him.

"I was terrorized by it for a while," McGuire tells me. She didn't want to go to class or continue her research. Frustrated by the lack of punishment, McGuire decided to seek justice another way. She and some activist friends printed posters naming the two men as assailants, and hung them in women's bathrooms around campus. After she'd filed her police report, her house had been egged and her car had been keyed. "But I was so inspired reading about Betty Jean Owens. If she was able to go in front of a hostile white jury in the 1950s, then I should be able to do this."

The verdict in the Owens case marked a turning point in the Southern justice system: For the first time, white men received life sentences for raping a black woman. Other convictions against white rapists across the South soon followed. It would be a long time—and there would be many more instances of sexual violence and intimidation—before the promise of equality codified in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was fully enforced. But in Washington, North Carolina, in 1975, when Joan Little, a 20-year-old black woman with a history of arrests, was acquitted of murdering her white jailer in self-defense when he tried to rape her, the promise of justice was finally fulfilled.

McGuire was with Recy Taylor on the day the first black president was inaugurated. Taylor had just turned 89, and as they watched Michelle Obama hold Abraham Lincoln's Bible while her husband took his oath of office, McGuire asked Taylor if she had believed an African-American woman could become first lady. "Not in my lifetime," she answered. ●

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rapist" that surely lurked inside every African-American man.

A second trial also failed to bring Recy Taylor's assailants to justice, but her case, McGuire writes, "highlighted the power of sexual stories to mobilize communities and build coalitions." In Montgomery alone, it was public knowledge that Viola White's daughter was raped by a policeman in 1946 in retaliation for her mother's challenge to bus segregation; that Gertrude Perkins, a 25-year-old black woman, was raped by two police officers in 1949; and that Flossie Hardman, a 15-year-old, was raped after babysitting for a white store owner in 1951. But countless other cases were kept quiet to preserve the image of black women's virtue in what historian Darlene Clark Hine calls a "culture of dissemblance."

By the time Parks was too tired to give up her seat on that bus, there was in place a well-organized network of women headed by seasoned activists who were waiting to turn just such a solitary moment of defiance into mass collective action. After learning of Parks' arrest, Jo Ann Robinson, head of the Montgomery Women's Political Council, stayed up all night at Alabama State secretly mimeographing 52,500 flyers urging the bus boycott. Thousands of domestic workers who made up the bulk of the buses' ridership became, literally, foot soldiers, walking miles to and from their white employers' homes rather than tolerate the mistreatment and humiliation they suffered on city buses. But they also chose to walk for 381 days because publicity

history books), doing the work of keeping the boycott going: organizing car pools, negotiating with bus companies and city officials, and keeping everyone informed. "Part of that was the gender politics of the time," McGuire says. "Many women of color were happy to see their men in power because they'd been denied that by Jim Crow for so long." In their recollections and published memoirs, McGuire adds, these women make clear that they understood their crucial role, though most—but not all—say they didn't mind letting men hog the spotlight.

McGuire, a 35-year-old white woman from overwhelmingly white Janesville, Wisconsin, may seem an unlikely candidate to recast the prevailing civil rights narrative. The movement was over before she was born. But in high school, a teacher suggested that she read *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol's treatise on racial inequality in America's schools. "And the headline was WHITE GIRL DISCOVERS RACE AND WANTS TO CHANGE THE WORLD!" McGuire says with a self-deprecating laugh. One of her thesis advisers at Rutgers University, Nancy Hewitt, tells me that while other books have exposed the extent of sexual violence against black women in the South, what makes *At the Dark End of the Street* different is McGuire's focus on these women's courage and willingness to testify rather than on their victimhood. McGuire agrees: "My book gives voice back to women who spoke out during that time period but somehow have been silenced by history and by our