The Forgotten History of Black Women Protesting Sexual Assault

The Forgotten History of Black Women Crying Out Against Sexual Assault

By Phyllis Chesler

Last week, Recy Taylor, the victim of a 1944 brutal white-on-black gang-rape in Alabama, died. She was 97 years-old. Taylor was also the subject of a nationwide crusade against the rape of black women in the Jim Crow South.

There is a long and buried history of Black American women speaking out against rape and braving considerable shame in order to testify, in detail, about the most terrifying ordeals.

However, such anti-rape and anti-sexual harassment campaigns

have been repeatedly forgotten or ghettoized.

In 1971, I was one of the keynote speakers at the first-ever New York Radical Feminist Speak-Out on Rape in NYC.

However, neither I, nor the other mainly white feminists gathered there, knew anything about the 1944 rape of Recy Taylor in Alabama, or about the nationwide protest campaign that followed.

Taylor's story, only one among many, was carefully documented, *but only thirty eight years later,* by historian Danielle L.McGuire in her powerful documentary on the subject, *The Rape of Recy Taylor.*

Most white feminists had no idea that the NAACP, a host of other organizations, and thousands of individuals had once campaigned for justice for Taylor. Her rapists were six white men and their identities were known; one even confessed. But the grand jury refused to indict twice.

In general, feminist as well as minority histories have been systematically disappeared. As the Australian scholar Dale Spender has book about her case—but not until 1991. We did not know about Celia until 20 years after our Speak-Out.

In 1850, an aging widower and farmer, Robert Newsom, purchased Celia, a fourteen-year-old child. Newsom raped Celia on the way to her new home; by the time Celia was nineteen she had given birth to two of Newsom's children.

Celia warned Newsom to keep away. When he advanced upon her anyway, she killed him, burned his body in her fireplace, crushed his bones, and hid some of the ashes. Celia did not

flee.

Boldly, Celia denied everything. Faced with evidence, Celia finally confessed. Newspaper reports claimed that the murder had been committed "without any sufficient cause." This lie was repeated in William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*—which meant that other abolitionist newspapers paid little attention to the story.

Celia was tried by an all-white, all-male jury and judge. Four of the jurors owned slaves. Although the judge remained hostile, Celia's highly experienced white defense attorney, John Jameson, argued that Celia had the moral, and possibly the legal right to kill in defense of her honor and her life. According to McLaurin, this argument was both "as bold as it was brilliant."

This may have been the first time in American history that a woman, slave or free, was seen as having such a right.

Jameson wanted Celia acquitted. The jury found her guilty and she was sentenced to hang. On December 21st, 1855, Celia was "marched to the gallows… the trap was sprung and Celia fell to her death."

Celia also has many descendants. For example, in 1974, twenty-year-old Black American, *Huffington Post.*