

*Scene on Radio*

**Feminism in Black and White (MEN, Part 4)**

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/episode-50-feminism-in-black-and-white-men-part-4/>

**Alice Walker reciting Sojourner Truth speech:** Well, children. Where there is so much racket, there must be something out of kilter. I think that twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the north, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. (Audience laughter.) But what's all this here talkin' about? ...

**Celeste Headlee:** A lot of us have heard some version of this, from Soujourner Truth. It's billed as a speech she gave at a women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, delivered to a room full of white women.

**John Biewen:** In this recording, Alice Walker, the novelist, is reading a popular rendering of the speech at a public event some years ago.

**Walker/Truth:** I could work as much and eat as much as a man, when I could get it, and bear the lash as well. And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain't I a woman? (smattering of applause)

**Celeste Headlee:** Sojourner Truth was born into slavery – in New York, not in the South. She was freed in 1827, when slavery was outlawed in New York State, and became a traveling minister and abolitionist. Named simply “Isabella” as an enslaved person, she renamed herself Sojourner Truth in 1843. And according to her own writing, she had five children, not thirteen, and she lost one son when he was sold to another slave owner.

**Walker/Truth:** And ain’t I a woman?

**John Biewen:** Celeste, that refrain, “ain’t I a woman,” or “aren’t I a woman” as it’s rendered sometimes: It turns out that Sojourner Truth may or may not have said those words.

**Celeste Headlee:** Really?

**John Biewen:** The historian Nell Irvin Painter, who was such a huge presence in our series last season, *Seeing White*, she wrote a biography of Sojourner Truth years ago. In doing her research, Nell Painter found an account of the speech, published right afterwards in an anti-slavery newspaper, that just doesn’t include “ain’t I a woman.” That recurring phrase was included in a version of the speech published years later by a radical feminist, a white woman --- who did attend the speech, though.

**Celeste Headlee:** So there's some doubt. But there's a reason that phrase has resonated with so many for more than 150 years. No matter who wrote them, those four words get to the heart of intersectionality, a good century before that term was even coined. With that phrase, "ain't I a woman," Sojourner Truth seems to be saying to the white feminists, hey, you're overlooking me – it's a complaint that, I gotta say, really resonates to this day with a lot of us women of color.

**John Biewen:** In other ways, though, the two versions of the speech are consistent. Sojourner Truth apparently did say something like this, for example.

**Walker/Truth:** Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men 'cause Christ wasn't a woman. Where did your Christ come from? (crowd laughs, applauds) Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with him. (Applause.)

**Celeste Headlee:** So what's clear from the speech is that Sojourner Truth was an abolitionist *and* a feminist. At a time when her very freedom and safety were not secure, she was already fighting for gender equality.

**[MUSIC]**

**John Biewen:** From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University and PRX, this is *Scene on Radio*. Part 4 of our series, MEN.

**Celeste Headlee:** It's a season-long look at sexism and male dominance, mainly in the United States. How patriarchy as we know it took shape, and how it really works. I'm Celeste Headlee.

**John Biewen:** I'm John Biewen.

**[MUSIC]**

**John Biewen:** In this episode, feminism in black and white. We'll tell some stories from the last couple of centuries in the United States, and try to unpack some of this intersectionality – as well as that seven-syllable word itself.

**Celeste Headlee:** A look at the movements that fight patriarchy and white supremacy – how they fit together, how they don't, and how, sometimes, they're one and the same struggle.

**John Biewen:** Celeste, I have to admit, and I don't know about you. When I'm reminded of moments like the one we just heard from Sojourner Truth – this woman that I think of as an iconic black abolitionist, speaking at a women's rights convention – it brings just a touch of surprise. Makes me do a little double take. Almost like somebody's taken two separate stories and mashed them together.

**Celeste Headlee:** Two stories, meaning antislavery efforts on one hand, and the fight for women's rights on the other.

**John Biewen:** Yeah. Or when you read that Frederick Douglass, also of course a major black abolitionist who escaped from slavery – and a *man*, even – that he attended the very first women’s rights convention ever held in the U.S., at Seneca Falls in 1848. Douglass helped to push for a resolution there calling for woman suffrage.

[MUSIC]

**Celeste Headlee:** So, what you find surprising is the fact that black people, male or female, who knew better than anyone what it meant to have someone else claim ownership over their bodies, would care not only about the rights of black people but also the rights of women?

**John Biewen:** Yeah, well, of course that sounds clueless. (**Celeste:** A little, yeah.) But in my defense, I think that’s how those histories are presented to us, almost all the time. If you get your history like most of us Americans do, from our schools and the major media, maybe documentaries, you’ll get the idea that the fights against sexism and white supremacy are pretty much separate matters. Over on one side, the feminist movements. Led by, let’s face it, white women.

**Celeste Headlee:** People like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton back in the 1800s when women were fighting for the right to vote. In the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 70s, it’s Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem and so on. Feminism is its own thing, right, and overwhelmingly, most history books tell us that it’s a story about mostly white women.

**John Biewen:** And then, separately, the fights against white supremacy: In the black freedom struggles, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X in the 20<sup>th</sup>.

**Celeste Headlee:** That's exactly how we're taught the history, and honestly it kinda makes me angry. Because I grew up in a very different reality. My Jewish grandmother married my black grandfather in the 1930s, when it was illegal for black and white people to get married in California. So they went to Mexico to get married. And that same grandmother was enough of a feminist that she kept her own name when they got married in 1939. I gotta say, for her, and for some of the black women that I grew up around in my family, these things were *not* separate. Antisemitism, white supremacy, misogyny, they were all about the abuse of power against a minority – to her and to me, her Jewish, black, female grandchild. Oppression was oppression and you fought all of it. And yet, as I grew up and left home, I had to learn in very personal and sometimes painful ways how determined people are to separate the issues, and to draw distinctions between people. I was not accepted among a lot of African Americans because of the lightness of my skin. And I've been asked to speak about feminism or about racism, but never about them TOGETHER, as though they're these two different problems instead of two different flavors of the same awful dish.

**John Biewen:** I talked to Glenda Gilmore about this chronic failure to see the connections and intersections between racism and sexism. She's an historian who just retired after a couple of decades at Yale.

**Glenda Gilmore:** I write about race and gender, generally in the South but sometimes nationally and internationally.

**John Biewen:** Glenda Gilmore told me what we miss when we present feminist movements as separate from other struggles for social justice, especially fights against racism.

**Glenda Gilmore:** I believe we're missing the entire story as it was lived by the people in both movements in any time and any place. The intersections of what happened with race and gender constantly come up, from the abolitionist movement of the first part of the 19th century through the last election, really.

**Celeste Headlee:** The truth is, feminist and antiracist movements have inspired and instructed each other, they've collaborated, they've competed, they've often pissed each other off. They're entangled in a lot of ways.

**John Biewen:** And not just the movements but the oppressions themselves. Sexism and racism – economic inequality for that matter – they're all deeply entwined, overlapping and intersecting. To take one rather obvious and important example, white feminist women are ... white.

**Celeste Headlee:** Yeah. There's also the fact that racism, in our culture, is heavily coded with notions of sex and gender, which we'll unpack in this episode. So even though we try to peel these things apart, in the real world you just can't.

**John Biewen:** Before we dig in, I'd like to pause for just a second to acknowledge what we're doing, and not doing, with the "feminism in black and white" thing. We are not going to examine how intersectionality plays out with every racial and ethnic group.

**Celeste Headlee:** Right. We know that some of these dynamics also apply, in roughly similar ways, to folks who are neither black nor white. I mentioned my Jewish heritage, but I'm also part Native American on both sides. We could talk about Latinos and Asians and every other wonderful racial and ethnic group, color and creed. But as you've talked about before on *Scene on Radio*, the invention of whiteness and blackness was the original sin, the sin that set the framework for the exclusion and exploitation of all sorts of people who are deemed non-white.

**John Biewen:** There is so much history there with blackness and whiteness. And, to be honest, things are complex enough when you're trying to make sense of intersectionality. So to keep it somewhat more manageable, we're gonna focus for now on black anti-racist movements and feminism.

**Celeste Headlee:** OK, John, you've done a number of interviews and gathered some stories that can bring all this to life. Take it away, and we'll meet up afterwards and talk more.



**John Biewen:** See you soon.

As we said a few minutes ago, Frederick Douglass attended the Seneca Falls woman's rights convention in 1848, where a couple hundred attendees drafted a Declaration of Sentiments, modeled on the Declaration of Independence but demanding rights for women. At that point, Douglass and women's leaders like Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were all ostensibly working for both equal rights for women and the abolition of slavery. Some years later, in 1866, right after the Civil War and emancipation, Douglass would join with these women, and Susan B. Anthony and some other people, to found the American Equal Rights Association. Its stated mission was, quote, "to secure Equal Rights to all American citizens, especially the right of suffrage, irrespective of race, color or sex." But the coalition was soon deeply divided, and the group disbanded within three years. Here's Glenda Gilmore.

**Glenda Gilmore:** The problem with solidarity is often that one cause will win out over another when the power structure ultimately comes down on movement. What happened to abolitionists who became women suffragists, is that they had to choose.

**John Biewen:** The power structure, controlled by white men, pushed back hard against those fighting either racism or sexism, and made it seem almost impossible to fight both at the same time. As far as race, especially, the late 1860s were a real pivot point in U.S. history. The Union has just defeated the Confederacy, and the country's leaders are debating what historians now call the Reconstruction Amendments to the Constitution. The Thirteenth and Fourteenth, outlawing slavery and guaranteeing equal protection of the laws. And then the Fifteenth Amendment, giving formerly enslaved men, not women, the right to vote. That last one drove a wedge between abolitionists and woman suffragists. Glenda Gilmore says the white women leading the suffrage movement were not happy.

**Glenda Gilmore:** The bargain they wanted to make was that women got the right to vote, and then perhaps freedmen and freedwomen got the right to vote. But when they had to choose, they knew that they couldn't promote their own cause if they were going to be accused of promoting African American welfare over white women's welfare.

And so they, they literally bailed on African-American suffrage. *Most* of the white women suffragists did. There were some who never did. Some of those people were in the Society of Friends, were Quakers, some of them were sort of outliers in the woman suffrage movement. And obviously there were many black women

who came to espouse both of those goals, votes for women and votes for freed African-Americans, after the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> amendment.

**John Biewen:** On the flipside, there were squabbles in the abolitionist movement about working with woman suffragists. The men who wanted to give women a voice in the antislavery movement got severe pushback from other men. One of Glenda Gilmore's books is called *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*. Throughout the book, she shows how white supremacy sits on a foundation of patriarchy. Take the shocking story of Wilmington, North Carolina, 1898. What was called a Fusion government, progressive and pro-Reconstruction, had just been elected in Wilmington, the largest city in the state at the time. The government was made up of white and black Republicans, and members of the Populist Party. Men from the party that lost the election, white Democrats, decided they weren't having it.

**Glenda Gilmore:** Two days after the election white men, town leaders, stage a coup and take over the town government, kill probably 150 African-Americans in the streets, and run most black prominent leaders out of town. Many leave never to come back. So it's a bloody massacre. They had ordered a Gatling gun, a repeating gun which is like a Gatling gun, mounted it on the back of a truck, and shot people.

**John Biewen:** It's the only successful coup in U.S. history. It put a bloody end to Reconstruction in North Carolina and ushered in one-party, white-supremacist rule for several generations to come. It sounds like a story about racism, plain and

simple. But Gilmore says white Democrats justified what they did with a propaganda campaign – a familiar racist lie drenched in patriarchy.

**Glenda Gilmore:** The idea that men are not being manly by protecting their families, or that giving even an inch, is going to cause an eruption of black men pursuing white women, it's the oldest trick in the book. And we see it really across the world in many places with many races. People in power who demonize people of other races often do it by talking about them being a threat to your daughters, being rapists, being violent.

[MUSIC]

**John Biewen:** So, a generation after the end of slavery and Reconstruction, black men's citizenship rights are almost completely shut down in the South. White supremacy reigns across the country, excluding black people from political and economic opportunity and threatening black lives with a new wave of lynchings. Meanwhile, women still have few rights, including the right to vote. So at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, black people and women of every color still have gigantic struggles on their hands. Of course, there's one demographic that falls into both categories. The fights to make life better for black people, and for women, literally come together in the bodies and the lives of black women.

[BREAK]

**Audley Moore, archival interview:** And so we went, thirty-five hundred people was in that hall. And so when Garvey came, we applauded very much.

**John Biewen:** This is the voice of Audley Moore, often called Queen Mother, in a 1985 interview. She's talking about a visit to New Orleans in the 1920s by Marcus Garvey, the black nationalist leader who was inspiring millions of black Americans with his calls for a global pan-African movement and economic empowerment. Moore recalls that the white mayor of the city had blocked Garvey from speaking the night before, so Garvey rescheduled the event. This time, those in the audience came prepared to back him.

**Audley Moore:** And we all was armed. Everybody had bags of ammunition, too. So when Garvey came in, we applauded, and the police were lined man to man along the line of each bench. So Mr. Garvey said, "My friends, I want to apologize for not speaking to you last night. But the reason I didn't was because the mayor of the city of New Orleans committed himself to act as a stooge for the police department to prevent me from speaking." And the police jumped up and said, "I'll run you in." When he did this, everybody jumped up on the benches and pulled out our guns and just held the guns up in the air and said, "Speak, Garvey, speak." And Garvey said, "As I was saying," and he went on and repeated what he had said before, and the police filed out the hall like little puppy dogs with their tails behind them. So that was radical enough. I had two guns with me, one in my bosom and one in my pocketbook, little 38 specials.

[MUSIC]

**Ashley Farmer:** Yeah, she was a really incredible woman. She was born we think in 1898, around that time, and she lived until 1997. And during that time she was at the forefront of pretty much every major moment in organization of the radical Black freedom struggle.

**John Biewen:** Historian Ashley Farmer of Boston University. She's written about Audley Moore, among other radical black feminists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She says Moore, who was born in Louisiana, was an organizer with the Communist Party in New York in the 1920s and 30s. By the 1950s, Moore had moved back to Louisiana and founded the Universal Association of Ethiopian Women, the UAEW.

**Ashley Farmer:** This group of women, they were kind of middle aged to older black women, come together and try to fight for the civil rights of black people in New Orleans. Both men and women. And while they're doing this work they kind of start to say, you know, somebody should really be paying for all of this injustice. And I think from there they get the idea that some kind of redress or some kind of reparation is needed.

**John Biewen:** Audley Moore was a pioneer in calling for reparations for slavery. She delivered a petition on the subject to the United Nations in 1959. Also in the 1950s, Moore and her group campaigned for two black men in Louisiana, Edgar Labat and Clifton Poret, who'd been accused of raping a white woman.

**Ashley Farmer:** It was very clear from the moment that they were arrested that both had alibis and did not know this woman and had no probable cause to be anywhere near this. It even came out the fact that she had lied, as often was the case when white women found themselves in positions they didn't want to be known as being in.

**John Biewen:** In other words, when their consensual relationship with a black man had been discovered.

**Ashley Farmer:** The kind of go to excuse was to blame a black man for rape in order to keep one's respectability and kind of womanhood intact.

**John Biewen:** Farmer says Audley Moore and her group got to work.

**Ashley Farmer:** Labat and Poret were both working class or poor, you know, black men so they didn't have great representation and people to go dig up information. It seems that under the leadership of Moore, the women in the UAW were able to identify, for example, Labat's girlfriend and, you know, help get an alibi for him, and raise other key inconsistencies in the prosecution's case against the two men. They literally would take this information and take it down to the courthouse in support of these men. They got several stays of executions. These men were both on death row. And they were eventually both released although it would take another 10 years to do so.

[MUSIC]

This is one of the cases that the UAEW, the Universal Association of Ethiopian Women, and Audley Moore, took up to try to not only exonerate these men but also to kind of shine a light on the fact that black men were either being jailed or lynched for the supposed rape of white women that wasn't true.

**John Biewen:** The false rape accusation of those two black men is a familiar story. It highlights one of the more bitter points of tension between black and white women in America, who might otherwise have interests in common. On one hand, the perennial racist canard about the black male rapist threatening white women, and on the other, a brutal 400-year history of real sexual violence that a lot of white folks would rather not talk about. Historian Glenda Gilmore.

**Glenda Gilmore:** There wasn't a problem with black men raping white women. Those occurrences if they happened at all were extremely rare. But it was fairly common for white men to rape black women in the South, and to have common law families. So the hypocrisy of that equation has always been there.

**John Biewen:** Of course, like men of all races and ethnicities, some black men do commit rape, but most often against black women. Gilmore's point is that the threat posed by black men to white women was vastly exaggerated, for generations, to justify excluding and controlling all black people. So for African American women, activism has often meant defending black men against rape allegations, and speaking up about rapes committed by white men.



**[Sound: Jangling keys.]**

**Sandra Arrington:** Okay. Come on now.

**John Biewen:** It's about seven o'clock on an April morning in Montgomery, Alabama.

**[Sound: Keys turn, car starts, windshield wipers]**

**John Biewen:** Sandra Arrington climbs into her brown SUV with her two grandsons, to drive them to school.

**Sandra Arrington:** Put your seatbelt on. Prince.

**John Biewen:** Prince is seven. His big brother Markez, who's 14, gets dropped off first, at a private, all boys' school.

**[Sound: Door opens, slams.]**

**Prince:** Bye, Markez!

**John Biewen:** Sandra then drops Prince at his public elementary school, named for George Washington Carver.

**Sandra Arrington:** Bye.

**Prince:** Bye-bye

**Sandra Arrington:** And have a good day.

**[Sound: Car starts, driving]**

**John Biewen:** You can't go far in Montgomery without passing a site or a sign referring to Alabama's history of slavery, Jim Crow, and movements for black freedom. There's the street named for the president of the Confederacy...

**John Biewen, on tape:** We just crossed West Jeff Davis Avenue.

**Sandra Arrington:** Uh-huh. (Wry laughter) Yeeeah.

**John Biewen:** ...and signs marking where Martin Luther King, Jr. led thousands of marchers.

**[Sound: Driving.]**

**Sandra Arrington:** The 1965 march from, the Selma to Montgomery March Route.

**John Biewen:** It was in Montgomery in nineteen *fifty*-five that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus. But the story I've come to hear from Sandra

Arrington is one that far fewer people have heard. It happened six years before the Montgomery bus boycott.

**Sandra Arrington:** So, when they picked her up here, she was headed east, and this was going east toward home.

**John Biewen:** In a quiet working-class neighborhood on the west side of town, Sandra tells me what happened to her mother, Gertrude Perkins. It was well before Sandra was born, late one night in March, 1949. Gertrude Perkins was twenty-five at the time.

**Sandra Arrington:** And they were walking home, so at one point Bernice, her friend was named Bernice, she went a different way to go home and my mom was headed home, too, and that's when they found her walking, and made her get in the car with them.

**John Biewen:** "They" were two police officers in a squad car. White men.

**Sandra Arrington:** They I guess saw her walking and told her that she was drunk, get in the car, they was going to take her to jail for being drunk. And once they put her in the car with them, they took her down this street right here, which is Oak Street. And took her down there, and at the end of the alley is where the train tracks were, and that's where they raped her at. And once they raped her, they put her back in the car and took her back to the corner of Day St. and Davidson and put her out.

**John Biewen:** It might have ended there. Another act of racist, sexual violence suffered in silence. But Sandra Arrington says her mother's parents, especially Gertrude's father, had raised Gertrude to fear no one. She went straight to the nearby home of a black pastor, Solomon Seay.

**Archival audio, Solomon Seay:** And when they put her out, she came to my door... and she told me what had happened to her.

**John Biewen:** This is Reverend Seay in an interview recorded in the 1980s by Emory University.

**Solomon Seay:** I sat down and wrote what she said had happened to her, word by word. When she had finished, I had it notarized and sent it to Drew Pearson in Washington, and Drew Pearson went to the air with it.

**John Biewen:** Drew Pearson was a liberal white newspaper columnist and popular radio host.

**Solomon Seay:** And when the power structure knew anything here in Montgomery, what Gertrude Perkins said happened to her was all over the nation.

**John Biewen:** Gertrude Perkins and Reverend Seay also went to the Montgomery police that night. Sandra Arrington says the black community rallied around her mother.

**Sandra Arrington:** It was a big story 'cause it ran in the newspapers from, she was raped March 27<sup>th</sup>, so just about every week up until May, they ran articles in both the black and white newspapers, and it was like just a big old racial thing with the whole entire city.

**John Biewen:** The rape allegation led to a rare grand jury hearing, but the case never went to trial. The city government even managed to protect the two police officers from ever being named publicly. So, it seemed that was that, and for a long time, the case of Gertrude Perkins really didn't figure in the rich and troubled history of Montgomery. But fifty years later, in the late 1990s, historian Danielle McGuire was listening to her public radio station.

**Danielle McGuire:** It was a program about the Civil Rights Movement, an oral history of veterans from the movement talking about their experiences. And this particular episode was on Montgomery. And Joe Azbell, the city editor of the Montgomery Advertiser, which was like the white newspaper, was talking about the bus boycott.

**John Biewen:** The historic bus boycott of 1955 and '56.

**Danielle McGuire:** And he said something that totally caught my attention. He said Gertrude Perkins is never mentioned in the history books but she has as much to do with the bus boycott...

**Joe Azbell, archival audio:** Gertrude Perkins is not even mentioned in the history books. But she had as much to do with the bus boycott, and its creation, as anyone on earth.

**Danielle McGuire:** And it stopped me in my tracks because it was the opposite of everything I thought I knew about the Montgomery bus boycott. I thought, well, that's silly. You know, it's Rosa Parks. Everyone knows it's Rosa Parks. And so I was really curious about Gertrude Perkins, so I went looking for her story in the Montgomery Advertiser microfilm, and I found her in 1949.

**John Biewen:** Danielle McGuire tells Gertrude Perkins' story in her book, published in 2010: *The Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance*. Along with the stories of other black women, whose sexual assaults helped to spark Civil Rights activism across the South and beyond in the 1950s and 60s. McGuire says it took her awhile, but she came to understand why Joe Azbell put so much importance on the case.

**Danielle McGuire:** The Perkins case helped to mobilize the black community. It was divided in many ways by class issues, and it brought everyone together. And it brought everyone together around the protection of black women's bodily integrity. And there were other cases that continued to pile up in Montgomery

during those years that were particularly about black women's right to their own bodies and their right to move freely through the world. And those cases centered on police violence that was also sexualized, and it centered on violence on the buses. Once I put all those pieces together, Joe Azbell's comments made perfect sense.

[MUSIC]

**John Biewen:** McGuire says the organizing that happened around the Perkins case laid the groundwork for the moment six years later, when Rosa Parks and other black women in Montgomery had had enough. They were tired not just of being forced to the back of the bus, as the story is usually told. But of being physically and sometimes sexually assaulted by white men on buses, often drivers and police officers – who leered at them, flashed them, sometimes beat them if they showed even a hint of resistance to the humiliations of Jim Crow.

**Danielle McGuire:** Most of these women were working class. They worked as domestics in white homes, and they needed transportation across town every single day. And so they had no choice but to get on those buses. For most of those black women the buses were really the bane of their existence.

**John Biewen:** McGuire says when the bus boycott broke out in December, 1955, black men in the community got behind it – and in front of it. The young Martin Luther King, Jr. was recruited as the main spokesman, along with other male pastors and local leaders who became the public face of the movement.

**Danielle McGuire:** But behind the scenes, in the everyday, what Ella Baker would call the spade work of the movement, it's women. Women led the boycott. They were the ones who walked, they filled the pews at every mass meeting, they raised all of the local money to sustain the movement, they ran the carpool system. You know, without women there would be no Montgomery bus boycott. And without the movement being about women's issues there would be no boycott. So, I like to think of the bus boycott, really, as a women's movement for bodily integrity and a women's movement for dignity.

[MUSIC]

**John Biewen:** Celeste Headlee, welcome back.

**Celeste Headlee:** Thanks.

Danielle McGuire's book makes clear that this Montgomery story is not unusual.

**Celeste Headlee:** That book was eye-opening for me, too, because it tells a different story about the history I thought that I knew. In this case, that the abuse, and often sexual abuse, of black women by white men, was a really important driver of the Civil Rights Movement, and not just in the case of the bus boycott.



**John Biewen:** Obviously, the other things that we always hear about were also real and important. The separate and unequal schools, the indignities of separate restrooms and water fountains...

**Celeste Headlee:** Lynchings and other violence against black men, and of course the whole systemic exclusion of black people from politics and from all but the most menial jobs.

**John Biewen:** But McGuire's point is that this factor has been seriously underestimated in explaining the whole Civil Rights Movement: sexual violence against black women, and an urgent desire *among black women themselves, above all*, to do something about it.

**Celeste Headlee:** You know, the word intersectionality, it's been used a lot in recent years. It's a buzzword that's overused and sometimes mis-used. But when the term was first coined by UCLA law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, she was trying to get at exactly what your sources are talking about: the crossing of paths. This dual burden carried by women of color. I'm not sure many people really understand its full meaning.

**John Biewen:** I talked about that with Ashley Farmer, the historian of black radical feminism. She points out that a lot of people, especially white people, tend to use the word just to refer to diversity within movements.

**Celeste Headlee:** Right, so for example the Women’s March, held after the inauguration of Donald Trump, was criticized for being a white woman’s thing.

**Scarlett Johansson, Women’s March speech:** I pledge my relentless devotion to support women’s healthcare initiatives. I will not stop fighting to make basic women’s healthcare available to all....

**John Biewen:** That’s Scarlett Johansson, but there were women of color in the leadership of that movement, and who spoke at the march.

**Celeste Headlee:** Yes, but still, a lot of black women felt unwelcome because they were not encouraged to talk about racial discrimination, only gender discrimination, and for women of color, those issues cannot be untangled. Fighting for equality means so much more than equal pay and access to health care.

**John Biewen:** Race issues, but also class and inequality. Notice that Audley Moore, Queen Mother, who we heard about earlier, she was a communist in the 1920s and 30s, and called for reparations for slavery in the 1950s. Those are *definitely* not typical positions for feminist movements led by white women.

**Celeste Headlee:** And that takes us back to Kimberlé Crenshaw and what she was trying to describe when she first used the word “intersectionality.” Her insight was that black women, being marginalized both by racism and sexism, are not just “doubly” oppressed – affected by sexism in one moment and racism in another.

The effects are compounded, layered on top of each other. “Injustice squared,” is how she puts it.

**John Biewen:** I would really encourage people to read some Kimberlé Crenshaw, or at least watch her TED talk. Celeste, do you have any other last thoughts on all this, based on your own experiences, of what it’s like to be a woman *and* not white in this society?

**Celeste Headlee:** You know, I wrote an essay in 2015 and I was trying to describe my identity as a mixed race woman, and I mentioned my great great grandmother, who was a slave on a plantation in Milledgeville, Georgia, had six children by several different white men. I wrote that none of those relationships were consensual, but a reader commented that I couldn’t possibly know whether she was raped or not. She lost five of her six children to slavery, she was raped multiple times, and when the Civil War ended, she was the single mother of a mixed race child. That’s my history. When you talk about compounding oppression, that’s the family story that was passed on to her daughter and her daughter’s son and eventually to me. And so I see media coverage of black women, calling them angry or unfeminine, or what Gwen Ifill called “missing white woman syndrome”, with all the headlines about white women who disappear and almost none about violence against black women, and that feels not like a current injury, but like a pain that goes back to that wooden shack on a plantation near Atlanta. It’s compounded, at least for me.

[MUSIC]

**John Biewen:** I follow a lot of people of color with my @SceneOnRadio Twitter account.

**Celeste Headlee:** As you should.

**John Biewen:** Including a lot of black women and other women of color. I learn SO much. All the time.

**Celeste Headlee:** Listen to black women.

**John Biewen:** Which is something people say on social media. Including other white women, and black men, and white men sometimes say listen to black women.

**Celeste Headlee:** It's good advice.

**John Biewen:** So, when I was fresh out of college – that's a long time ago – working my first job as a public radio cub reporter up in the Midwest, in my spare time I took a college course in feminist philosophy.

**Celeste Headlee:** By choice?

**John Biewen:** Yeah. I was planning to go back to grad school in philosophy at that time, and also I think my friend Lisa encouraged me to take that class. She was

getting her Ph.D. in philosophy and was one of the people who influenced me to be a better feminist back then ... as my mother had.

**Celeste Headlee:** So, what'd you get from the feminist philosophy course?

**John Biewen:** The big takeaway was something called standpoint theory, coined by the philosopher Sandra Harding. The theory basically says that people on the receiving end of oppressive systems, people at the bottom of social hierarchies, will see things more accurately than the people at the top, the ones benefitting from the system. Black women, for example, will share a general body of knowledge about how society is, about how it works, because of their common experiences. And, according to Sandra Harding, that shared understanding won't just be distinctive, it'll actually be *better* knowledge, more true, than the collective picture of the world that privileged people like me will soak up from our surroundings.

**Celeste Headlee:** That makes intuitive sense to me, and it's just a philosophical way of stating everything we've been talking about with intersectionality. But it's true, that's not how Western societies have usually described who the knowledgeable people are.

**John Biewen:** Exactly. The traditional image of the wisest, most knowledgeable person, is the elite sage. The guy – and it's a guy – sitting alone in his room lined with books, maybe he's got the pipe going, with time to contemplate. So almost by definition, a privileged person who isn't struggling to survive.

**Celeste Headlee:** But standpoint theory comes along and says, no, the people you should rely on to see the truth about society are gonna be marginalized people.

**John Biewen:** One objection to standpoint theory, as you might imagine, is that this isn't *always* true.

**Celeste Headlee:** Sure. Not every individual black woman, or every queer person, or every person with a disability, is going to see things more clearly than every individual straight white cis-gender non-disabled male. But as a general observation about how the world is? It rings true to me. And it reminds me of something you've pointed out before on *Scene on Radio* – the “unmarked” quality of whiteness, and this would apply to maleness, too, I think. The idea that people *other* than straight white males have distinct interests and biases, but you guys don't. You're the default – the generic, “neutral” people.

**John Biewen:** When in reality, white men – and even moreso, straight, financially comfortable white men – are the gold standard of special interest groups. We've got turf to protect, advantages we don't want to see threatened, and an identity that's so precious, such a delicate treasure, we get uneasy, some of us get really angry, when someone even points it out by calling us white.

[MUSIC]

**Celeste Headlee:** White folks are the *champions* of identity politics. You all have been practicing it for hundreds of years, if not more, though these days it's mostly spoken in what's called a dog whistle. And as we've seen through history, a whole lot of white women, when push comes to shove, will align themselves with whiteness ... and with the benefits that come from being in proximity to white men ... rather than fighting those power structures.

**John Biewen:** Remember what the historian Glenda Gilmore said near the top of this very episode – that the intersections of race and gender come up constantly...

**Glenda Gilmore:** ...constantly come up, from the abolitionist movement of the first part of the 19th century through the last election.

**Celeste Headlee:** Ah, the 2016 election. I figured we'd get there at some point.

**John Biewen:** And let's just go ahead and say this. Whatever your party politics, this is a fact. On the ballot was a man who had shown himself to be a racist and a misogynist, by any common understanding of those terms, in his words, his personal behavior going back decades, and in his promises about what he would do as president.

**Celeste Headlee:** Either Donald Trump was a racist and sexist or he was very good at playing one on TV.

**John Biewen:** And when you're running for president of the United States, what's the difference.

**Celeste Headlee:** And look at the huge gulf in how Americans voted, depending on their gender and race. 62-percent of voters who look like you, John, white men, voted for Donald Trump. So did 53-percent of white women. And who voted against Trump, and for the first major-party female candidate? 69-percent of Latina women, 82-percent of black men, and **94-percent** of black women.

**John Biewen:** I'm sure virtually all of those white voters would *say* their votes for Trump were not in support of racism or sexism, and I suspect a lot of those people believe that when they say it.

**Celeste Headlee:** Sure. But science tells us we are not very good at identifying our own biases. They are called unconscious biases for a reason. So there's a disconnect there, a blind spot, some sort of well-practiced process of denial, that flows from the white supremacist, patriarchal waters that we swim in as Americans.

**John Biewen:** White people, and men, have to recover from our racism and sexism, that's been pumped into us all our lives, we have to train ourselves out of it. (For the race part, see: *Seeing White*, the previous series on this podcast.)



**Celeste Headlee:** Look, having privilege doesn't mean your life is not hard or that you haven't worked for what you have. Life is hard for just about everybody. Privilege just means that, had you been disabled or queer or a member of a minority, things probably would have been harder. But for women and *especially* women of color, a clearer vision comes naturally. Not because women of color are better or smarter than anyone else. They just see the advantages some have while they're left out, excluded, and disrespected, again and again.

**John Biewen:** Listen to black women, people.

[MUSIC]

**John Biewen:** Next time: Women in the workplace. What is it really like out there, where do we really stand, in the time of the #MeToo movement? Including a rough personal experience that you went through, Celeste, while working with one of the men taken down by #MeToo.

**Celeste Headlee:** Yeah. Thanks, everybody, for listening and spreading the word about MEN. Please leave us a rating and review on Apple Podcasts or your app of choice. That helps more people find the show.

**John Biewen:** Editorial help on the MEN series from John Barth. Music by Alex Weston, and by Evgueni and Sacha Galperine. Music and production help from Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. Alice Walker's reading of Sojourner Truth came from *Voices of a People's History of the United States*. The recordings of The Reverend Solomon Seay and Joe Azbell were in the Public Radio International documentary series, *May the Circle Be Unbroken*.

**Celeste Headlee:** This show's website is [sceneonradio.org](http://sceneonradio.org). *Scene on Radio* comes from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, and PRX.