Scene on Radio

Feminism in Black and White (Season 4, Episode 5) Transcript

http://www.sceneonradio.org/s4-e5-feminism-in-black-and-white/

John Biewen: A content warning: This episode includes a description of a sexual assault.

John Biewen: So, Chenjerai, last time we said that this episode was gonna be about the New Deal, didn't we.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. But I feel like we're changing course.

John Biewen: Yeah, we changed course. The New Deal episode is coming, but we decided to do something else first. And actually, Chenj, you pointed out that an episode from our Season 3 series on this show, our series called MEN, that it would make a very strong addition right here, following up on our Reconstruction episode. And I gotta say, I'm impressed and a little bit touched that you would suggest that, given you were not involved in the making of that series.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, man, it's like everybody gotta hear that MEN series, man! Come on! I learned so much from it. And as I go back and listen to those episodes and think about how it just changes what I thought I knew, I realize this is very much related to democracy. Because one of the reasons we get the story so wrong about democracy is that we look in

the wrong places. Right? And so I feel that episode from MEN really starts to correct that, by covering a lot of important ground about struggles against both racism and sexism in the 19th and 20th centuries. And, if you look at it, they're focusing on women fighting for political participation and political power.

John Biewen: That's true. So at the most obvious level, until 1920, as we all know or certainly should know, all women in the U.S. were denied full rights as citizens. Most obviously the right to vote, but other rights as well, such as the right to represent themselves in court, the right to own property individually. Some of those things were not worked out until later, and in some ways those are things that women are still struggling for. So this episode from our MEN series, which we called "Feminism in Black and White," it begins to look at those struggles starting in the post-Civil War period. Now we know some of you have heard it. but some of you haven't. And even those of you who have heard the episode, it might be interesting to listen again here in the context of Season Four. We opened the episode with this, reaching back to 1851.

> **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? …

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So that's from a speech given by Sojourner Truth, a formerly enslaved black woman who became a preacher, an abolitionist, and a women's rights advocate. She was speaking to a room full of white women in Akron, Ohio.

John Biewen: Yeah, and in this recording, Alice Walker, the novelist, is reading a popular rendering of the Sojourner Truth 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)

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That phrase, "ain't I a woman." There's actually some doubt about whether Sojourner Truth actually said that or if it was added to the text of the speech later by a white feminist. But either way, the spirit of the phrase and what she lived is super important. And it's responding to something that black women have felt at least since the 19th century, right up until today: the way a lot of white feminists de-prioritize or flat out work against black women and other women of color as they fight for their rights as women.

John Biewen: Yeah, and this continues to happen, right? With issues that are of specific importance to black women and some other women of color. We're gonna have more to say about what we mean by that, coming up, and how that's happened over time. And just to be clear here, white men (laughs). As a white male sitting here uttering this implicit criticism of white women, let's just say that white men are always worse.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right.

John Biewen: But what's definitely clear is that Sojourner Truth was both an abolitionist *and* a feminist, fighting for the rights of black people and of women.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And I mean there's just a long tradition of this with black women. I mean, thousands and thousands of black women have struggled for both of those things, and for economic justice, for centuries, for obvious reasons. And let's be clear: Their vision has always posed a radical challenge to the status quo. So if you're interested in finding the real democratic tradition in America, or anywhere else, really, you have to look to the people whose survival and basic human rights depend on building the kind of movements that can lead to radical change.

(MUSIC: Theme)

John Biewen: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, this is Season 4 of *Scene on Radio*, Episode Five in our series exploring democracy in the U.S., past and present. We call the series, *The Land That Never Has Been Yet*. I'm John Biewen. That was Chenjerai Kumanyika. He's a professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University. He's an organizer, artist, and podcaster. He and I will talk a bit more at the end of the episode.

This time out, a look at the movements that fight patriarchy and white supremacy, over time – how they fit together, how they don't, and how, sometimes, they're one and the same struggle. As I mentioned, we've repurposed this episode from our Season 3 series, and at this point we're gonna pick up near the top of that original version, with me and my co-host for the MEN season, the journalist, author, and public speaker, Celeste Headlee.

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 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.

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. Especially when you put it like that. 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, 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 19th century; Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X in the 20th.

Celeste Headlee: That's exactly how we're taught the history, and honestly it kinda makes me angry. Because I grew up in a 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. Anti-semitism, 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 personal and 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 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 many 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’s 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.

(Music)

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 those 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 13th, 14th, and 15th 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, has just been elected in Wilmington, the largest city in the state at the time. The government is made up of white and black Republicans, and members of the Populist Party. Men from the party that lost the election, white Democrats, decide 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 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 20th 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 20th 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 UAEW 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.

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.

(Door opens, slams.) Prince: Bye, Markez!

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

Sandra: Bye.
Prince: Bye-bye
Sandra: 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: We just crossed West Jeff Davis Avenue.
Sandra Arrington: Uh-huh. (Wry laughter) Yeeeaah.

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

> **(Driving sound.)**
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> **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 27th, 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: *At 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. 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 is 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, 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 a number of black women 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. These 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. She was a slave on a plantation in Milledgeville,

Georgia, and she 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 six of her 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. So 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 a wooden shack on a plantation near Atlanta. It's compounded, at least for me.

(MUSIC)

John Biewen: Damn.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Whew. Yeah, man. That nails it, huh?

John Biewen: It does. And thinking, if we were to step back even just a little bit more, in thinking about the broader themes we're exploring here in Season 4, about democracy in the U.S., is there anything else to add? Is there anything more you'd want to say?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Well, you know, I was just thinking about that kind of suffrage organizing work back towards the end of the 19th century. And in our *Seeing White* series, we talked about how whiteness is this kind of seductive tool that powerful people can use to get poor folks to align with them. Right?

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And so I think when you look back to that part of the suffrage struggle, what you see is that whiteness could also be used to convince white women to align themselves with the power of white men.

John Biewen: Right.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So whiteness appears again as this oppressive, anti-democratic weapon. And with Queen Mother Moore--I'm glad you all took a minute to reflect on the work of Queen Mother Moore, who, I mean, I think we just can't study her life enough. But I think about the overlap between her work and the work of Ida B. Wells, and what you see is these black women who are fighting not just their own oppression under white supremacy and Jim Crow, but also they're fighting for Black men. Across all these historical periods. And that kind of thing is going on now. I was just thinking about some of my experiences in organizing with Black Lives Matter. This is a movement that's focused to a large extent on justice for, and protection of, black men, with a lot of queer folks, including women,

fighting for men. Right? So you have this broader power structure and culture that only values black women in the context of exploitation. But then, also in the movement, sometimes that support for black women, or valuing of black women's lives doesn't happen in the same way. And that's unfortunate.

John Biewen: Along those lines, I'm thinking about what you said at the top about how we tend to look in the wrong places when we're telling the story of democracy, at least in our mainstream view of things. And it's such an important insight, isn't it, that a major impetus for the modern Civil Rights Movement was black women, and specifically black women having had it up to here with being sexually abused and assaulted by white men.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That's right. And one of the things I've learned from feminist scholars is that the dominant histories narrate sexual assault as something that's in the private sphere, or maybe even in the work sphere, that's kind of how we think about it, right?

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But those battles are not really about democracy. And so I think we haven't really understood the role that sexual assault plays in fights for democracy. But when we do just better history--and I want to be clear, I'm not talking about just like we do biased history or women's history or partisan history, but just objectively, empirically,

stronger history--what we find is that often the core of other struggles for human rights, and human rights struggle, is inseparable from women's rights to bodily autonomy, and to just various kinds of agency. And so you certainly see that in the history that leads up to the bus boycotts. But you also see that even now, where in some cases, some of the labor struggles have emerged from women's efforts to try to protect themselves against sexual assault, or ensure that there's processes to protect women who are most vulnerable in the workplace. So I think that these are the places that we really have to look if we want to find who's pushing forward the democratic tradition in America.

(Music: Theme)

John Biewen: Dr. Chenjerai Kumanyika. Our Season Four series continues. Watch this space. Lots of good stuff to come.

Thanks, everybody, for listening and for spreading the word about the show. Please leave us a rating and review on Apple Podcasts or your app of choice. That moves us up the charts and helps more people find the show.

Our editor this season is Loretta Williams. Our Season 4 theme song is by Algiers. Other music in this episode by Alex Weston, Evgueni and Sacha Galperine, Kevin MacLeod, and Eric Neveux. Music consulting 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. Scene on Radio* is distributed by PRX. The show comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.