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# The Hunting Ground: A Tour de Force Marred by a Dangerous Myth

By Leslie Simon

When Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* blasted into the literary world in 1982, I had the good fortune to be teaching "Women and Literature" to community college students. By the time Steven Spielberg's film version showed up a few years later, I was coordinating a university rape prevention education program. In classroom discussions and public events the film prompted critiques of "the myth of the black rapist"—that "sexually aggressive" black men desire and systematically rape white women—a myth first documented in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by African American journalist and anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells and later analyzed by contemporary feminists Angela Davis, Alison Edwards, and Estelle Friedman, among others. In particular, Davis and Edwards criticized Susan Brownmiller's 1975 book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* for promoting the myth of the black rapist. A deadly form of racism, the myth persists, especially in American cinema, even most recently in *The Hunting Ground*, a feature-length documentary released in 2015.

Davis called Brownmiller's work "pioneering." Likewise, *The Hunting Ground*, an otherwise strong and powerful chronicle of the brave and successful organizing of college rape survivors and anti-rape activists, offers a major contribution to the dismantling of rape culture, while unfortunately repeating the problem in Brownmiller's book. A tour de force like Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*, it will have a lasting impact on the anti-rape movement. So while it succeeded so well in telling the story of how rape survivors have worked to hold colleges accountable for their complicity in promoting rape culture, we need to see where the film failed.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, several black male writers criticized Walker, Toni Morrison, and Ntozake Shange for stereotyping black men as brutes.<sup>[1]</sup> Though their writing does make public the realities of sexist violence in the African American community, a form of violence that pervades *all* cultures, these groundbreaking black women writers acknowledge how the tragedy of racism complicates their stories. Both Walker, in *The Color Purple*, and Morrison, in *Song of Solomon*, reference the lynching of black men. That systematic lynching, often propelled by false charges of raping white women, intensified, along with Jim Crow segregation laws, when Reconstruction ended, a decade after the Civil War was over. Other pressures haunt these writers' black male

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characters. In *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, the man who commits an unspeakable act of violence at the end of Shange's choreopoem is a returning vet suffering from PTSD. None of these black women writers, however, gives their deeply flawed characters a pass, though all of them refer to other systems of oppression as they zero in on violence of men toward women.

Back to Spielberg's cinematic interpretation of *The Color Purple* and those critiques of the "myth of the black male rapist." Although a number of critics returned to the issue of the portrayal of violent black men—one man rapes his stepdaughter and other men beat their wives—none of them noticed a significant problem, one that Walker avoided and Spielberg stepped right into. He refused the other part of the work of Ida B. Wells: the well-documented systematic rape of *black* women by *white* men, something that did not end with slavery.

In Walker's telling, when Sofia (the part played by Oprah Winfrey in Spielberg's film) lands in jail for insulting the mayor's wife and then fighting back after he slaps her, the light-skinned and mixed-race Squeak, aka Mary Agnes, offers to plead Sofia's case with the white warden, since he is actually her uncle. However, rather than releasing Sofia, the white warden, denies his relationship with Squeak and instead rapes her. And here's where the serious lie of omission happens in the Spielberg cinematic version. He removes the warden's rape of Squeak, deleting racist history while leaving the violent black male stereotype in place. Of course, none of us would want to excuse the violence of Mister or other violent black men portrayed in the novel, but by eliminating the scene that refers to the history of white men with institutional power systematically raping black women, Spielberg's *The Color Purple* is left promoting the myth of black men as more violent and brutish than white men.

And that's the problem with *The Hunting Ground*.

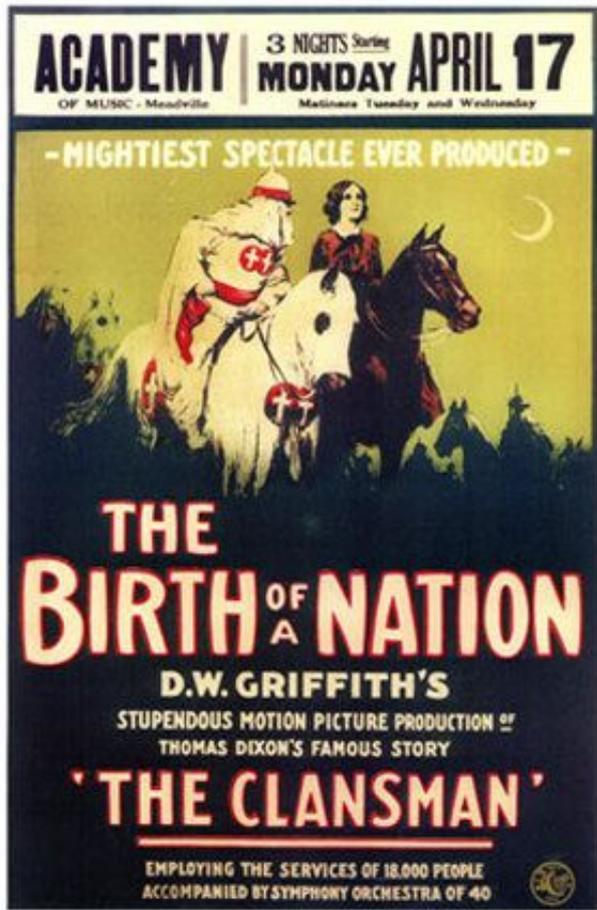
In Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering's film, the convicted, now remorseful, white male rapist remains anonymous. White football player Brendan Gibbons accused of rape gets five seconds as does black player Derrick Washington. We see Washington's name on his jersey but no on-screen name for Gibbons. Somewhat equal treatment of the black and white players here. But then comes the Jameis Winston story. Erica Kinsman, a white woman, accused African American Florida State University football player Jameis Winston, of raping her. The story of the rape, which I believe *did* happen, takes up a full 15 minutes of this 90-minute documentary film. We also learn that Winston has won the Heisman trophy for college football. People old enough to remember the O.J. Simpson trial would recall that Simpson also had been a recipient of that

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award. So, though this connection is not made explicit in the film, it's an easy jump for those white people predisposed to believing the stereotype of the violent black man to nod their heads in recognition: "Oh, yes, those aggressive black football players going after our white women." Never mind that both men were probably guilty (of murder in Simpson's case) or that men involved in central sports like football in the United States or hockey in Canada, whatever their ethnicity, are disproportionately more violent toward women.[\[ii\]](#)[\[iii\]](#)

Since most rapes are intra-racial—white men rape white women; black men rape black women—by focusing on this inter-racial rape with an alleged black male perpetrator and white female victim, but neglecting to balance time spent on this narrative with the story of an *identifiable* white perpetrator, *The Hunting Ground* ends up perpetuating a myth that fueled lynching and still persists in cinema. In fact, American film history is laden with examples of the myth of the black rapist.

D.W. Griffith's 1915 silent film *The Birth of a Nation*, despite widespread protests, became a huge box office and critical success, famous for its production and marketing breakthroughs while infamous for its deeply racist propaganda, promoting the lynching of "sexually aggressive" black men for allegedly raping white women. Today, it remains a standard in film history classes, acknowledged both for its artistry and for its infamy. The film, which stayed true to the Thomas Dixon novel and play *The Clansman*, portrays the lynching of a black man for attempting to rape a white woman. It became a recruiting tool for the revived Ku Klux Klan. Who says art doesn't affect life?[\[iv\]](#)



Then came *Tarzan*. The film, also a novel adaptation, in this case of Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes*, is a cinematic legacy. Since the 1918 silent version, and as recently as 2016, re-makes have popped up in black and white and color, even in animation. In the novel, Terkoz, a large black ape known for abusing female apes, goes after Jane, the defenseless white female character, who is eventually saved by the white Tarzan. The tragic and shameful history of simianization of black people extends from the Enlightenment through racist depictions of African Americans during Jim Crow and the Barack Obama U.S. presidency.[\[v\]](#) The original Scott Sidney film dispenses with the animal "stand-in" and instead shows Tarzan saving Jane from her potential rapist, a black African warrior. The 1932 W.S. Van Dyke version restores the large black ape as Jane's pursuer, and John Derek's 1981 release pivots back to the human aggressor, who is a leader of an African tribe, though his "race" is ambiguous. Later American versions (there are several European ones with sometimes more, sometimes less racialized content) remove explicit references to the myth of the black rapist but retain vestiges of the "black man as savage" stereotype.[\[vi\]](#)

The *King Kong* fantasy and franchise features another black ape. In

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Merian Cooper's 1933 original *King Kong*, the eponymous black ape, makes the fatal error of lusting after a white woman. In pretty much every remake over the next 80+ years, a (usually blond) woman captures the ape's interest. What is it about Hollywood's fascination with its white beauties linked to a particular version of the beast, one that the Jim Crow era personified as the black man? Why so many remakes? Why such an obsession?[\[vii\]](#)[\[viii\]](#)

That's the baggage *The Hunting Ground* is lugging around—which it doesn't seem to get. Kinsman happens to be blond and pale skinned and Winston, dark skinned, which unfortunately plays into the stereotype of victim and rapist portrayed in Hollywood films. Kinsman is highly credible as well as courageous, and I believe her university and local law enforcement failed her. Nevertheless, to make a film about rape in America, no matter how important its overall inspiring message, and not understand the country's history of rape and race and the racism in the "factory" films I have outlined here, is to do a disservice to all survivors. To avoid this problem, Dirk and Ziering needed to make more conscious editing choices. For starters, spend some real time and visuals with at least one identifiable white perpetrator.

*The Hunting Ground* operates in blunt contrast to *NO! The Rape Documentary*, where Aishah Simmons, a female African American filmmaker, documents the more common phenomenon of intra-racial rape: black men raping black women. It's not that black men never rape white women;[\[ix\]](#) it's that most often when rape crosses black and white lines in America, it's the systematic rape of African American women by white men—a story that went untold in documentary American film until Nancy Buirski's *The Rape of Recy Taylor*.[\[x\]](#) Drawing from Danielle McGuire's *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*, Buirski powerfully documents how Recy Taylor, raped by six white men in the Jim Crow South, refused to stay silent. Taylor and other African American women, victims of systematic rape by white men, used their voices to propel the civil rights protests of the 1940s and 50s.

*The Hunting Ground* serves as a powerful and inspiring tool against sexist violence, telling the story of other courageous activist rape survivors. Its strong and clear indictment of the predominantly white power structures at American colleges and universities—administrations, athletic teams, fraternities—that participate in shameful victim blaming tactics and scandalous cover ups, has had positive effects on organizing against sexual assault at college campuses throughout the nation. So why complain when so much of it is worthwhile?

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This is why.

I became a university rape prevention educator in the mid-1980s. When I founded a college sexual violence prevention program ten years later, I vowed that the program I intended to create in collaboration with community college peer educators—along with a course called “The Politics of Sexual Violence”—would defend all rape survivors, no matter their race or gender, or the race or gender of their assailants. It would also take a direct stand against the racism perpetuated in the work by some anti-rape white feminists such as Susan Brownmiller.

Like the film based on Walker’s *The Color Purple*—a novel which tells the whole truth about rape and racism—*The Hunting Ground* repeats Spielberg’s lie of omission. It needs this correction, which I have attempted to do here without calling into question the film’s otherwise important and brave message. Also, unlike fiction films such as *The Color Purple* that either obliquely or explicitly reference the myth of the black rapist, a documentary like *The Hunting Ground* will remain central to the discourse of anti-rape activism in America, as did *Against Our Will*. So it deserves this kind of attention. Do I think Kirby and Ziering are blatant racists? No. Do I think unconscious racism may have affected their editing decisions? Yes. And the effects are damaging.

It’s fitting that African American Childish Gambino (Donald Glover) ends his 2018 music video “This Is America” with him running from a group of white men and that Nancy Buirski opens her Recy Taylor documentary with a black woman running in desperate fear. American cinema has a lot to account for, no less than American history.

## Notes

[i]Mel Watkins. “Sexism, Racism and Black Women Writers.” In *The New York Times Book Review*. June 15, 1986. <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/06/15/books/sexism-racism-and-black-women-writers.html> Accessed March 30, 2019.

[ii]Michael Messner. “The Triad of Violence in Men’s Sports” in *Transforming a Rape Culture* edited by Emilie Buchalter, Pamela R. Fletcher, and Martha Roth. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2005, revised edition (25-45).

[iii]Jessica Luther. *Unsportsmanlike Conduct: College Football and the Politics of Rape*. Brooklyn: Edge of Sports/Akashic Books, 2016.

[iv]“100 Years Later, What’s the Legacy of The Birth of a Nation?” NPR Staff. February 8, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/0>

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2/08/383279630/100-years-later-whats-the-legacy-of-birth-of-a-nation.  
Accessed on March 30, 2019.

[v]Wulf D. Hund, Charles W. Mills, and Silvia Sebastiani (editors).  
“Simianization: Apes, Gender, Class, and Race”(Racism Analysis |  
Yearbook 6 - 2015/16). Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2016.

[vi]Biljana Oklopčić. “Adapting the Adapted: The Black Rapist Myth in  
E.R. Burroughs’ Tarzan of the Apes and Its Film Adaptations.” In  
*Anaphora: Journal of Literary Studies*, IV (2017) 2, 313-331.  
<https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/284405>. Accessed March 31, 2019.

[vii]Mekado Murphy. “The Five Ages of King Kong.” In *The New York  
Times*, March 17, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/07/movies/kong-skull-island-and-other-kong-movies.html>. Accessed March 29, 2019.

[viii]John McDonald. “Rooting for the Monsters.” In *Jacobin*. March 19,  
2017. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/03/kong-skull-island-vogt-roberts-kaiju-apocalypse-now/> Accessed April 1, 2019.

[ix]Roxanne A. Donovan. “To Blame or Not To Blame: Influences of Target  
Race and Observer Sex on Rape Blame Attribution.” *J Interpers  
Violence* 2007; 22; 722: “[The] myth [of the black male rapist of white  
women] appears to persist even though less than 16% of all single-  
offender rapes are perpetrated by black men against white women  
(Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003).”

[x]Oscar Micheaux notably addresses this issue in *Within Our  
Gates* (1920), a fictional film.

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## **Filmography**

*King Kong* [1933, Merian Cooper]

*King Kong* [1976, John Guillermin]

*NO! - The Rape Documentary* [2006, Aishah Simmons]

*Tarzan of the Apes* [1918, Scott Sidney]

*Tarzan the Ape Man* [1932, W.S. Van Dyke]

*Tarzan, the Ape Man* [1981, John Derek]

*The Birth of a Nation* [1915, D.W. Griffiths]

*The Color Purple* [1985, Steven Spielberg]

*The Hunting Ground* [2015, Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering]

*The Rape of Recy Taylor* [2017, Nancy Buirski]

“This Is America” [2018, Donald Glover]

## **Notes on Contributor**

Leslie Simon, a former UCSF Rape Prevention Education coordinator, founded and directed Project SURVIVE, City College of San Francisco’s sexual violence prevention education program. Her publications include “Why Denzel Washington (not Tom Cruise) Is the New Paul Newman” (*Film Comment*) and “Alfonso Cuarón’s *Roma*: A Feminist Film” ([entropy.org](http://entropy.org)).