

You Belong to Me: An African American Narrative

You Belong to Me, directed by John Cork

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You Belong to Me is a compelling documentary film that examined the underpinnings of racism, prejudice, and discrimination in the United States. John Cork's superlative and honest writing depicted the dichotomous view of African Americans as free agents endowed with rights versus African Americans as a subordinate group. The film addresses the narrative about racism in America and defines the connection between subordinate groups and learned helplessness, a connection that likely reinforces the glass ceiling for women and African Americans. On the surface, the Ruby McCollum story is a tantalizing tale of sex, murder, and racial tension in the small community of Live Oak, Florida. On a deeper level, however, the writer captured the psychological consequences of racism, passed down from one generation to another. These psychological consequences affect every social organization in the United States. This article is not currently being considered for publication in any other journal.

Introduction

Organizations are social microcosms that often reflect the overarching view of race relations in America, vis-à-vis racial disparity. The documentary explores the macro and micro consequences of overt and covert racism in larger and smaller social constructs. We hear about the larger implications of racism daily. The evening news highlights the chasm between races and reinforces the notion that America is experiencing a societal regression to an era marred by racism and discrimination. Recent killings of unarmed African American men point to the need for continued dialogue about racism in America. Moreover, the obvious

disagreement about the rights of African Americans involved with the legal system is still palpable. *You Belong to Me*, a riveting film that explores the story of Ruby McCollum is timely and profound. The film, written/directed by John Cork, produced by Hilary Saltzman and Jude Hagin, and executive produced by Kitty Potapow, explores the 1952 murder of a prominent White doctor by an African American businesswoman in Jim Crow's South, and the ensuing narrative about race relations.

You Belong to Me compels viewers to explore the prevailing and often hidden assumptions that African Americans are unequal to White Americans. John Cork's honest writing depicted the dichotomous view of African Americans as free moral agents endowed with rights versus African Americans as a subordinate group. Schaefer (2012) posited that members of a subordinate group lack power and control over their lives. Consequently, African Americans, in 1952, were neither represented in corporate America nor adequately protected by the legal system. Although this group now wields significantly more political and economic power than in the 1950s, one hidden assumption that remains is an African American person involved with the legal system is guilty until proven innocent. This sentiment also permeates the organizational culture, which limits upward mobility for subordinate group members and sanctions minorities for lesser infractions.

This multidimensional documentary raises the social and cultural consciousness of viewers. John Cork elevates our awareness and unwittingly connects to several themes (e.g., posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD], sexual harassment, and learned helplessness) that affect subordinate groups and thus their interaction with members of the in-group. This historical documentary centered on the life of Ruby McCollum and racism

in the south. However, this film will also serve as a catalyst for dialogue about African American skepticism toward organizational systems. Moreover, the title, *You Belong to Me*, echoes the sentiment that African Americans hold a subordinate role in the relationship with the in-group.

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Ruby McCollum's Story

Mrs. Ruby McCollum was born Ruby Jackson in 1909 in Zuber, Florida, to Gertrude and William Jackson. She attended a segregated school until her parents recognized her academic prowess and transferred her to Fessenden Academy, a private school for Black students. In 1931, Ruby married Sam McCollum, also known as Bolita Sam, and moved to Nyack, New York. By 1934, the couple relocated to Fort Myers, Florida, to assist Sam's brother, Buck McCollum, with his successful gambling business. The couple ultimately settled in the small community of Live Oak. By the early 1950s, the couple reportedly amassed a considerable fortune, elevating them to royalty status in the eyes of African Americans in Live Oak. Ruby and Sam's influence extended beyond members of the African American community. According to Live Oak residents, the McCollums were involved in business ventures with members of the police department and social elites like Dr. Clifford Leroy Adams. The McCollums had four children, Sam Jr., Sonja, Kay, and Loretta (reportedly fathered by Dr. Adams).

Ruby McCollum, an African American businesswoman, changed the history of the small town of Live Oak. On Sunday, August 3, 1952, apparently unprovoked, Ruby walked into Dr. Clifford Leroy Adams's office and shot him four times with a 32-caliber revolver. Why would a successful Black woman kill a prominent physician and prospective senator? Many questions surfaced during

the trial, unfolding the dirty laundry of Live Oak's most upstanding citizens. The trial became a black eye on the community, exposed racist undercurrents, and uncovered a carefully guarded sex scandal hidden by the façade of proper racial etiquette. Ruby's action unleashed feelings of hate in Whites and fear in Blacks. White citizens lifted their voices in unison and demanded a public lynching. People immediately took sides! White citizens and law enforcement officers perpetuated the narrative that Ruby killed Dr. Adams because he demanded she pay her \$116 medical bill. Conversely, Ruby's proponents believed that Dr. Adams raped her and fathered her daughter Loretta and the unborn child she was forced to abort while in jail.

According to some reports, Ruby met Dr. Adams in his office to confront him and demand he stop the sexual assaults—when he refused, she shot him four times and killed him. In transcripts from the trial, Ruby said: “I walked in and I told the doctor that I had a pain in my right shoulder or arm; I couldn't hardly get in and out of my clothes when I first get up in the morning. He gave me a shot of penicillin.” Additional information regarding Dr. Adams's involvement with the McCollums' illegal gambling surfaced and was substantiated by a clinic employee who saw him receive large amounts of cash from Ruby. These and other salacious claims fueled the idea that Ruby's husband Sam's subsequent death was not the result of a heart attack but something more insidious.

Anthropologist and journalist Zora Neal Hurston (voiced by Zondra Wilson) was on assignment from the *Pittsburgh Courier* to cover the trial. Zora, an African American, watched the trial unfold from the segregated gallery. According to her report, the trial gained national attention, especially in African American communities, placing Live Oak on the radar. Although African Americans and other minorities are no longer

segregated in the courtroom, a sense of separation is still noticeable. The trials of O. J. Simpson, Michael Jackson, George Zimmerman, and many others underscored persistent racial division and a general sense of distrust of the legal system and other institutions.

Ruby was found guilty and sentenced to death, but the Supreme Court overturned her sentence because the judge was not present during the entire tour of the crime scene. Following Ruby's appeal, the court rendered her mentally incompetent, after the psychiatrist found her under the covers of her jailhouse cot with tissue in her nose. She refused to eat or sleep and plugged her nose because she feared someone was trying to poison her. Ruby was ultimately committed for 20 years to the Chattahoochee state mental hospital in Florida. In 1974, attorney Frank Cannon filed papers to have Ruby released under the Baker Act, which allowed the release of nondangerous mentally ill patients.

Movie Themes

Learned Helplessness

The theory of learned helplessness was originally used to describe the failure of animals to respond to repeated electric shock (Seligman, 1975). This theory has since been employed to describe the reaction of individuals who accept a defeated posture, as a result of repeated exposure to aversive events. According to Dr. Martin Seligman (1975), traumatized individuals learn to avoid negative situations because of past experiences. People transfer the perception of uncontrollability, the perception that nothing can be done to influence the outcome of events, from an uncontrollable situation to a new or changed situation where it may not apply (Foa, Zinbarg, & Rothbaum, 1992;

AQ1 Garber & Seligman, 1980; Kaplan & Sadock, 1989). Moreover, when people transfer the expectation of uncontrollability, it reduces motivation and interferes with their ability to problem-solve (Mikulincer, 1986). Faced with the realities of racism, African Americans embrace a distorted view of the future and thus embrace learned helplessness.

Learned helplessness is often viewed through the lens of traumatic events such as severe physical or sexual abuse, but seldom linked to racism and discrimination. However, Jay Uomoto (1986) described a link between racial discrimination and learned helplessness. Uomoto explained this phenomenon in the context of noncontingency, or what he described as response-outcome independence. According to Uomoto (1986), members of minority groups, such as Ruby, formulate casual explanations that account for current and future noncontingencies. Matute (1996) explained Uomoto's response-outcome-contingency by stating that humans employ illusions of control to protect self-esteem. In other words, Ruby's alleged consensual relationship with Dr. Adams may have been a veiled attempt at controlling the perceived outcome of sexual abuse. In similar fashion, lower-income African Americans accept less-than-adequate conditions that lead to failure, and women endure sexual harassment in the workplace because of fear of being fired.

Racial etiquette in the Jim Crow South dictated that White men and Black women did not engage in sexual relations. In the 1950s, African Americans were hung for simply disrespecting a White person. Claiming sexual abuse by an upstanding White member of the community would be akin to signing one's death certificate. Subsequent interviews with community members revealed that many Whites did not believe Dr. Adams had a sexual relationship with Ruby. However, one of Florida's White citizens, who remembered

the scandal, stated that Ruby herself felt honored to be having an affair with a prominent White man. This sentiment was echoed across racial lines, including Ruby's sister, who stated, "I don't know why Ruby did this to our family," referring to Dr. Adams's death. Similar attitudes in organizations speak to limited upward mobility among members of minority groups.

Members of the community could not understand why Ruby submitted to Dr. Adams's sexual advances unless she was a willing participant. In fact, many of Live Oak's citizens were outraged (Whites and some Blacks), stating that Ruby should have been pleased to be the recipient of Dr. Adams's attention. Bargai, Ben-Shakhar, and Shalev (2007) posited that cultural influences that sanction male supremacy and female inferiority may, in fact, increase the likelihood of a passive and submissive sense of perception. Moreover, people who are passive and lack power or control over perceived uncontrollable circumstances are likely to submit to an abuser. For example, Ruby McCollum, a Black woman in 1952, lacked the power to reject the advances of a White doctor. Thus, Ruby's apparent willingness to engage in an affair with a White man in the 1950s may have been a direct result of learned helplessness. Similarly, women endure sexual harassment in the workplace. Helplessness is not necessarily an innately and uniquely feminine characteristic; it is a predictable response to social conditioning. Persistent exposure to Dr. Adams's sexual advances created an inescapable situation for Ruby. Moreover, she accepted a subordinate role and thus tolerated his sexual advances and alleged subsequent assault.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD is characterized by avoidance of situations or thoughts associated with a traumatic event. In addition, the individual experiences numbing,

increased arousal (hypervigilance), and intrusive thoughts or dreams about the traumatic event. According to the American Psychiatric Association (2000), symptoms must be present for more than a month, and the disturbance must cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (Foa et al., 1992). PTSD is often associated with a catastrophic event, such as sexual assault; the victim's perception of powerlessness over the situation renders him/her helpless.

Bargai et al. (2007) posited an indirect relationship between learned helplessness and PTSD, affirming that learned helplessness may be a mediating link between exposure to violence and mental health disorders. In fact, severely distressing events such as sexual assault are associated with higher risk for PTSD (Johansen, Wahl, Eiertsen, & Wisæth, 2006). Shortly after her sentencing, Ruby McCollum exhibited a number of symptoms related to PTSD (avoidance, hypervigilance, depression, difficulty sleeping, and mental/physical discomfort). However, prevailing wisdom regarding PTSD suggested that Ruby would have had to endure a prolonged psychological reaction to the alleged sexual assault. Johansen et al. (2006) agree, but asserted that an individual may also experience peritraumatic dissociation (PD), an acute psychological reaction. After shooting Dr. Adams, Ruby got into her car with her two young children and drove home. Apparently in a fugue state, she went home and engaged in daily household activities—a hallmark of emotional numbing or PD. Unfortunately, a relationship between learned helplessness, PTSD, and racism is less obvious. Thus, more research to increase the understanding of subordinate group members' reaction to perceived racism is vital.

Helms, Nicolas, and Green (2010) noted the obvious absence of racism and ethnoviolence

as catalysts for PTSD in contemporary trauma literature. African Americans in the 1950s were subjected to violence, a predictor of PTSD (Houskamp & Foy, 1991) and relegated to subordinate status (Schaefer, 2012) with little or no decision-making control, a predictor of learned helplessness (Uomoto, 1986). Although racism in contemporary America has taken on a different tone, a significantly more covert form of racism still exists. Wealthy and middle-class African Americans have greater control over their lives and are seldom subjected to blatant acts of racism or discrimination. However, poor African Americans who reside in urban areas are subjected to police brutality, redlining, and other discriminatory practices (Schaefer, 2012).

Racism in America: Then and Now

Racism Pre–Civil Rights

How we define racism determines our view of this construct. Moran (2005) described racism in the 1950s and 1960s as the belief that non-Whites were inferior. He posited that Whites, or members of the in-group, avoided social contact with Blacks, who were considered members of an inferior group. Although this openly accepted rule permeated the social structure in the South, White men often engaged in sexual relations with Black women. The imbalance of power placed Black women in a precarious position regarding their ability to reject the sexual advances of a White man.

Florida's racial segregation provided the backdrop for the Ruby McCollum story. Blacks in the segregated South were disenfranchised, systemically excluded from jury pools, provided substandard public education, and faced erected barriers that kept them from voting. Inability to vote meant that African American citizens could

not participate in the legislative process or run for political office. Thus, Blacks were viewed as second-class citizens relegated to a passive role in society. Excluding Blacks from the jury denied Ruby her right to have a jury of her peers. Furthermore, an African American jury may have been more sympathetic to reasons that would compel a mild-mannered Black woman to snap and kill her White doctor. Moreover, excluding minority groups from corporate decision making reinforces the one-dimensional view of our increasingly diverse world.

The unbalanced relationship between Ruby and Dr. Adams was not unlike the sexual encounters during slavery, in which female slaves were forced to serve as concubines or objects of sexual relief for their master. An assumption that powerful White men could take a Black woman as a sexual partner, regardless of her desire or marital status, undergirded the decision to sentence Ruby to death. Ruby's story elucidated the uneven distribution of power and cultural divide. This story sheds light on the pressing need to openly address the psychological consequences of racism and discrimination.

Racism Post-Civil Rights

In an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) report, the Chicago police department was accused of targeting people of color and disproportionately stopping and frisking minority motorists. Racial minorities accounted for 80% of stops and 89% of frisks (The Sentencing Project, 2015). A socioeconomic system in crisis increases the intensity and complexity of the ongoing ideological war on class, unity, and the principles and practice of equality. Marshall (2015) posited that an increase in racism should be placed in the context of the crisis of capitalism, suggesting that it is the capitalist class that benefits from racism. Racism in

post-Civil War America has taken on a different tone. Although racism and prejudice have diminished, covert racist views persist.

According to John Cork (director/writer), Ruby's story elucidated that without basic human dignity and equality there can never be true consent. Cork stated that one of the most telling comments in the documentary came from Brad Rogers (former editor of the *Suwannee Democrat*), who stated, "I don't know whether she had a choice to enter into it, but I guarantee once she was in it, she didn't have a choice of whether to get out." Conversely, writers such as Dr. Art Ellis spoke to the issue of consent in terms of paramour rights. He coined this construct in reference to powerlessness among African Americans, which gave White men the right to take a Black married woman as his concubine and force her to have his children (Bush, 2008). While not surprising during slavery, this practice continued after the end of the Civil War, becoming institutionalized in the segregated South. Buttressed by Jim Crow legislation, the practice stripped African-American women of their rights to sue for paternity and child support and further reinforced their status as members of a subordinate group (Silverstein, 2009). These practices take on a more subtle tone in contemporary organizations; women and minority groups are subjected to the whims of those in power.

Interviews With Cast, Crew, and Others

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Exclusive interviews with the director and producer provided insight into Ruby McCollum's story and its relevance to contemporary race issues. John Cork and Jude Hagin graciously gave me access to their time, insight, and information to write this article. Hilary Saltzman and Kitty Potapow were equally accommodating by granting

access to the trailer and other Ruby McCollum resources.

The Director/Producers

Director John Cork's commitment to *You Belong To Me* is unmistakable! "I would love to write and direct this story" was his response to Hilary Saltzman and Jude Hagin's request to participate on the project. Their desire to present the real Ruby McCollum to the world is reflected in the title *You Belong to Me*. According to John, the title embodied the sentiment that Ruby and African Americans in the Jim Crow South physically, sexually, and emotionally belonged to Whites, believed to be superior to Blacks. John is a humble and brilliant individual, who during the interview exuded a passion for giving a voice to faceless Americans, as did Hilary Saltzman, Jude Hagin, and Kitty Potapow, who poured 15 years of their lives and money into telling Ruby's story.

Jude Hagin dedicated over 15 years of her life to capture and recount Ruby's story, after reading *Ruby McCollum: Woman in the Suwannee Jail*, written by renowned author William Bradford Huie. Her journey to share Ruby's story included in-depth research and many years of interviews with Ruby's reluctant family members and living Live Oak residents. Jude could not have successfully done the documentary without the help of producer Hilary Saltzman and support and financial backing from Kitty Patapow (Ocala Film Commission president). This powerful team is in the process of making a feature film sharing Ruby's life, and invited me to visit Live Oak, Florida.

Actor

Zondra Wilson, who voiced Zora Neal Hurston, said, "I was captivated by the film. Although I was not familiar with the Ruby McCollum story, I was happy when presented with the opportunity

to participate in the project." Zondra, an African American, introduced me to the film and the producer. She felt that the team, led by John Cork, did a magnificent job presenting Ruby's story. Moreover, being a real-life reporter in the past gave Zondra a unique perspective to play the part of Zora.

Conclusion

You Belong to Me supersedes the story of one family; it presents a historical perspective of a group still struggling to escape the shadow of subordination. These forces influence how people feel and interact in social microcosms. Both macro and micro social systems are influenced by hidden assumptions about race and therefore determine the success or failure of leadership in organizations. Hilary Saltzman and Jude Hagin's tenacity and intuitiveness to have John Cork write and direct this story paid off. Filming was made possible by Kitty Potapow's financial involvement. This documentary was accepted into several film festivals, including La Femme International Film Festival in Los Angeles, October 16–19, 2014; the Tampa Bay Underground Film Festival, December 6, 2015; the San Diego Black Film Festival, January 29–February 1, 2015; Flagler Film Festival, January 9–11, 2015; Toronto Black Film Festival, February 10–15, 2015; Beaufort International Film Festival, February 11–15; Fort Myers Film Festival, March 27–28, 2015; Silver Springs International Film Festival, April 8–11, 2015; Fort Myers Beach Film Festival, April 22–26, 2015; and Women's International Film Festival, June 2–7, 2015.

On May 23, 1992, at 4:45 a.m., 82-year-old Ruby McCollum died of a stroke at the New Horizon Rehabilitation Center, taking with her many unanswered questions. Her brother, Matt Jackson, preceded her in death. The family buried Ruby next to Matt and his wife in the cemetery behind

Hopewell Baptist Church in Live Oak. Producer Jude Hagin hopes Ruby's story will transcend her death and serve as an educational platform to discuss race relations in academia. ♦

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