

The Radical Rosa Parks

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In the spring of 1965, Rosa Parks trudged through the cold rain alongside hundreds of weary protesters during the Selma to Montgomery March for voting rights. No one recognized her as the heroine of the 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott. Indeed, few knew who she was. Nearly fifty years later, researchers asked high school students across the United States to name the ten most famous Americans. Two-thirds of the respondents chose Rosa Parks, who was second only to Martin Luther King Jr.¹ Today there is no story more familiar to American students than Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat to a white man on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama on December 1, 1955. Because of its ubiquity, it has become part of American mythology: after a long day at work, a matronly seamstress with tired feet refused to move to the back of the bus. That singular and spontaneous act—an act without thought or premeditation—launched the civil rights movement. And then the walls of segregation come tumbling down.²

As a result, she has been elevated to the status of “mother of the civil rights movement,” awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Medal of Honor; and she was the first woman and only second African American to lay in honor in the nation's capitol—a privilege usually reserved for Presidents. This popular presentation of Parks as a quiet, but courageous woman—whose humble righteousness shamed America into doing what was right—has become a mythic fable—a kind of David vs. Goliath story—present in nearly every school textbook, museum exhibit, and mainstream historical accounts. And although she never spent any time in jail, Rosa Parks has been imprisoned by this fable, frozen in time as a silent and saintly icon whose only real action was to stay seated, so that—in the words of her many eulogists—we could all stand up.³

In this version of events, Rosa Parks lives an invented life outside of history, free from its contexts and constraints.⁴ She is presented as an older, matronly woman who, as Herb Kohl put it, “acted on impulse and

¹ Sam Wineburg and Chauncey Monte, ““Famous Americans”: The Changing Pantheon of American Heroes,” *Journal of American History* 94 (March 2008), 1191.

² See Jeanne Theoharis, ““The northern promised land that wasn't”: Rosa Parks and the Black Freedom Struggle in Detroit,” *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 26, No. 1, p. 23; John Lewis, “ROSA PARKS: 1913-2005: A simple act, a greater cause,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, October 25, 2005, 11A.

³ See, for example, Elaine Woo, “Rosa Parks: She Set Wheels of Justice in Motion,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 2005, p. A1; Ernie Suggs and Tom Bennett, “Heroine of Civil Rights: Rosa Parks: 1913-2005—a Legend with a quiet manner; Alabama native put life at risk for cause,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 25, 2005, 8A.

⁴ See Dennis Carlson, “Troubling Heroes: Of Rosa Parks, Multicultural Education, and Critical Pedagogy,” *Cultural Studies* ⇔ *Critical Methodologies*, 2003 3:44; Edward P. Morgan, “The Good, the Bad, and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement,” in Renee Romano and Leigh Raiford, ed., *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, (Athens, 2006), 137-166.

emotion rather than intelligence, moral conviction” or a history of activism.⁵ There is no sense of her as a leader, or as a member of a politically active community of citizens organized against oppression. Indeed nearly all the photos and statues in her honor show her on the bus alone, as if one person can truly change the world by remaining still. The mythology of Rosa Parks is also, I think, inherently ideological—by telling this simplistic tale of a quiet woman tiptoeing into history, it limits our understanding of her power, her radicalism and her active citizenship. Worse, it obscures a larger gendered and sexed history of black women’s efforts to achieve respect, dignity and bodily integrity and reduces African American’s long struggle for freedom and human dignity to a barely credible conspiracy theory.

The mythical Rosa Parks is a revision that as Edward Morgan put it, “removes the struggle for justice and its potential continuity with today’s world” from the realm of what is possible—limiting similar crusades for citizenship and political change.⁶ Indeed, the story that Rosa Parks’s foot fatigue led to the destruction of Jim Crow, is only really useful if you want to *prevent* mass movements and keep change from happening. It is no wonder that today many students roll their eyes when we mention Rosa Parks. Because what can *that* Rosa Parks teach them? How can *that* Rosa Parks inspire change?

But what if she were presented in a different way? What if they knew more about the *radical* Rosa Parks? I argue that Rosa Parks—as a militant race woman, sharp detective, and an anti-rape activist is far more interesting and significantly more empowering than the mythic and iconic version so ubiquitous in popular memory. Remembering her in a different way can also help us better understand the modern civil rights movement as a national struggle and not just a southern campaign.

A Militant Race Woman

In 1944, in Abbeville, Alabama, an African American woman named Recy Taylor walked home from a church revival. A carload of white men kidnapped her off the street, drove her to the woods, and gang-raped her at gunpoint. Then they dropped her off in the middle of town and told her if she told anyone what happened, they would kill her. That night, she told her father, her husband and the local Sheriff the details of this brutal assault. A few days later, the NAACP called to say they were sending their very best investigator. Her name was Rosa Parks.⁷

Rosa Parks had been a member of the Montgomery NAACP for only a year when she met with Taylor in 1944, but she was already a seasoned activist. Her quiet demeanor hid a steely determination to battle white supremacy that was rooted in her childhood. Her grandfather introduced her to the boisterous exhortations of the Jamaican-born Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey in the early 1900s when she was just in grade school. She learned to take pride in her history and her race. She was especially proud of her grandfather’s willingness to defend

⁵ Herbert Kohl, *She Would Not Be Moved: How We Tell the Story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott*, (New York, 2005), 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁷ “Report” and “Supplemental Report,” submitted by N.W. Kimbrough and J.V. Kitchens, December 14 and 27, 1944, folder I, Chauncey Sparks Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History. Danielle McGuire interview with Recy Taylor Courtney, Abbeville, Alabama, January 19, 20, 2009.

himself and his family—with violence if necessary—from the daily terror of the Ku Klux Klan in Pine Level Alabama. “Whatever happened,” she said later, “I wanted to see it...I wanted to see him shoot that gun.” By the time she was ten years old, Rosa was as defiant as her Garveyite grandfather. “I saw Franklin,” she announced, referring to a notorious white bully. “He threatened to hit me,” she said, “I picked up a brick and dared him to hit me.” Although her grandmother scolded her for this, Rosa felt, as she put it, that she was “very much in my rights to try to defend myself if I could.” “It was passed down almost in our genes,” she said later, “that a proud African American can simply not accept bad treatment from anybody.”⁸

These lessons, learned at her grandfather’s knee, served Parks well in the spring of 1931 when she worked as a domestic for a white family. One evening, after all her work was finished, a white man pushed his way into the house and tried to have sex with her. “He moved nearer to me and put his hand on my waist,” she said. “I was very frightened by now... just plain scared to death.” When the man, whom Parks called “Mr. Charlie” in an essay she wrote about the attack, offered her money in exchange for sex, she was livid. “I was no longer a decent self-respecting teenage girl, but a flesh pot, strumpet to be bargained for and parceled out as a commodity.” She remembered her great-grandmother, who “in slavery days...was bred to serve no other purpose than that which resulted in the bastard issue.” She was, Parks recalled, “mistreated and abused by both Negro slaves and [the] white master.” Parks was not about to let the same thing happen to her. “I knew that no matter what happened,” she said, “I would never yield to this white man’s bestiality. I was ready to die, but give my consent, never. Never. Never.” Parks was defiant: “if he wanted to kill me and rape a dead body,” she said, “he was welcome, but he would have to kill me first.”⁹

Rosa Parks’s harrowing experience may have helped her become an advocate for justice. Indeed, that same year she joined other black activists in secret meetings to raise money for the Scottsboro Boys—nine young black men who were falsely convicted of attacking two white women on a freight train in Scottsboro, Alabama. Parks and other activists spent endless nights sitting around card tables covered with guns, plotting to save the young men from Alabama’s electric chair.¹⁰

While the Scottsboro youth’s cases moved through the courts in the 1940s, Rosa and her husband Raymond, hosted Voters League meetings, where they encouraged their friends and neighbors in Montgomery to register to vote, even though it was a dangerous proposition at the time. These clandestine meetings, like the Scottsboro gatherings, introduced Parks to Alabama’s underground network of black activists who worked for racial justice during the dark days of the depression. That support network was crucial when she served as the secretary for the Alabama chapter of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters—the largest all-black union in the nation—and became secretary of the Montgomery NAACP in 1943.¹¹

⁸ Danielle McGuire, *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* (Vintage, 2011), 9-12

⁹ “Scans of Sample Documents from the Rosa Parks Archive,” n.d., Guernsey’s Auctioneers, a copy of which was given to me by Jeanne Theoharis in August 2011.

¹⁰ Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, (New York, 2000), 16.

¹¹ Rosa Parks with Jim Haskins, *Rosa Parks: My Story* (New York, 1992), 75, 79; Brinkley, *Rosa*, 58.

The humble title belied the importance of her job. She didn't just take notes at meetings or file papers, she spent most of her time traveling down the dusty backroads of Alabama interviewing people and documenting acts of brutality, unsolved murders, voter intimidation and other racial incidents. Her belief in racial equality and her ingrained sense of self-worth helped Parks become known as someone who could be trusted with delicate or dangerous information. "Rosa will talk with you," folks quietly assured victims of racial violence. Having been politicized and deeply affected by the injustice of the Scottsboro case and her own attempted assault, Parks was especially interested in rape cases.¹²

Rosa Parks arrived on Taylor's front porch in Abbeville in the fall of 1944 with a notebook and a pen and she took careful notes about the assault. Then she carried Taylor's testimony back to Montgomery where she and the city's most militant activists organized the "Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor." They planned mass meetings, canvassed neighborhoods, signed petitions, sent postcards to the governor and attorney general—and launched a nationwide protest movement that the *Chicago Defender* called the "strongest campaign for equal justice to be seen in a decade."¹³ They compared it only in scope to the Scottsboro trials of the 1930s—something Parks had been intimately involved in. Eleven years later, this group of homegrown activists would become better known as the Montgomery Improvement Association, vaunting its first president, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to international prominence and launching a movement that would ultimately change the world. But when that coalition first took root, Dr. King was still in high school.

The Montgomery bus boycott is often heralded as the opening scene of the civil rights movement. But it was built upon a decades long struggle to defend and protect African American women and men from racial and sexual violence. Indeed, Rosa Parks cut her political teeth working on similar cases throughout the late 1940s and the early 1950s before turning her attention to the city's segregated buses, which were primary sites of violence for black women.

Bus drivers had police power. They carried blackjacks and guns and assaulted and sometimes even killed African Americans who refused to abide by the racial order of Jim Crow. In 1953 alone, African Americans filed over thirty complaints of abuse and mistreatment on the buses. Most came from working class black women—mostly domestics—who made up 80% of the Montgomery city lines ridership. They complained that drivers hurled nasty, sexualized insults at them, touched them inappropriately, and physically abused them.¹⁴ One woman remembered bus drivers sexually harassing her as she waited on the corner. "The bus was up high," she recalled, "and the street was down low. They'd drive up ...and expose themselves while I was just standing there. It scared me to death." Another remembered that bus drivers "treated black women, just as rough as can be, like we are some kind of animal." Another said that bus drivers, "like to talk under folks clothes."¹⁵

¹² McGuire, 15.

¹³ Fred Atwater, "\$600 to Rape Wife? Alabama Whites Make Offer to Recy Taylor Mate!", *Chicago Defender*, January 27, 1945, I.

¹⁴ JoAnn Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, (Knoxville, TN, 1987), 21-22; Lamont H. Yeakey, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-56*, Ph.D. diss. (Columbia University, 1979), 195.

¹⁵ McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*, 105.

By 1954, the militant Women's Political Council, led by JoAnn Robinson, told the Mayor of Montgomery that black women were ready to boycott the buses to "keep from being insulted and humiliated." Some women, she said, were already boycotting the city buses. But it wasn't until police arrested Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955, that Jo Ann Robinson and the Women's Political Council finally decided to issue a formal call for a bus boycott--with or without Parks's permission. That night, JoAnn Robinson and two assistants copied, cut and bundled 50,000 fliers announcing a one-day boycott as an effort to protect black womanhood.

*Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown in jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down...this has to be stopped...if we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be you, or your daughter or mother.*¹⁶

Before breakfast on Friday December 2, an army of women delivered the notices to schools and storefronts, beauty parlors and beer halls, barbershops and businesses. By mid-afternoon everyone knew the plan. In popular history, Parks's arrest triggers the boycott and men and women march because they are so outraged that a tired, elderly, working-class woman was so mistreated. However, nearly all the historical evidence points to a boycott whether she was arrested or not. She seemed to confirm this when she said in April 1956 that women walked not in support of her, but because "I was not the only person who had been mistreated and humiliated. Some had gone through similarly shameful experiences, most worse than mine."¹⁷

Aside from the popular belief that Parks's famous stand against segregation was triggered by tired feet, today many people believe that Parks was so cunning that she planned the entire event. And yet if you know anything about Rosa Parks's history, the latter scenario is not too hard to believe. She was, as historian J. Mills Thornton argues, "more actively involved in the struggle against racial discrimination, and more knowledgeable about efforts being made to eliminate it than all but a tiny handful of the city's 45,000 black citizens."¹⁸ She knew that E.D. Nixon, head of the NAACP, was searching for a respectable plaintiff who could garner black and white sympathy and she was certain he would support her given her status in the community.

But it is unlikely that she planned her protest on the bus. There is no evidence supporting it for one thing. Instead, when Rosa Parks had an opportunity to resist, she seized it. Indeed, her decision to stay put that fateful day was rooted in her history as a radical activist and years of witnessing injustice. She had grown up in the Garvey movement. She and her husband labored in the Scottsboro struggle as a young married couple. In 1944 her investigation of the Recy Taylor case launched a national crusade. For more than a decade, her work with the NAACP, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and other groups placed her at the center of Montgomery's black freedom struggle long before whites tried to put her at the back of the bus. Her decision to keep her seat on December 1, 1955 was less a mystery than a moment.¹⁹ "There had to be a stopping place," she said. "And this

¹⁶Robinson, *Montgomery*, 45-46; italics/bold mine

¹⁷ Rosa Parks, interview by Sidney Rogers, Pacifica Radio, April 1956, transcript in Stewart Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 86.

¹⁸ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 60; Parks with Haskins, *My Story*, 115.

¹⁹ McGuire, *At the Dark End*, 95-96

seemed to be the place for me to stop being pushed around. I had decided that I would have to know once and for all what rights I had as a human being and a citizen, even in Montgomery, Alabama.”²⁰

From that day forward, however, Rosa Parks’s history as an activist and defiant race woman disappeared from public view. Instead she became a symbol of virtuous black womanhood, sainted and celebrated for her quiet dignity, prim demeanor, and middle-class propriety—the Madonna of Montgomery.

While others elevated her to iconic status—creating, for example, the tired feet myth, she continued to fight injustice. During the yearlong boycott, she answered phones, served as a dispatcher for the indispensable car pool system, and gave endless speeches throughout the country to help sustain the Montgomery movement. She did all of this despite receiving hate mail and death threats every day. Things got so bad in Montgomery that in 1957 she finally left and moved to Detroit—what she critically called the “northern promised land that wasn’t.”²¹

In popular history, Rosa Parks rarely moves off that seat on the Montgomery city bus making her defiance of segregation a thoroughly southern story. But she spent the next forty years as an engaged activist in Detroit, fighting segregation, police brutality and discrimination in jobs, housing, and education, reminding us that racism was not merely a southern phenomenon.

In Detroit, Parks found it difficult to find housing and a job. Although there were no Jim Crow signs signaling segregated spaces, it was nearly impossible to live anywhere except an all-black neighborhood in Detroit. Any attempts to cross the color line into the expanding white suburbs, for example, were met with violence. Open housing protests were common and Rosa Parks was often seen at the front of marches into metro Detroit. On July 27, 1963, for example—just a month after joining Martin Luther King at the head of Detroit’s Great March to Freedom—she helped lead a crowd of 200 people into Oak Park to protest housing discrimination.²²

Her activism on behalf of the open housing movement did not endear her to many white people. Even those white liberals who were totally smitten with Dr. King’s leadership did not have much love for the “mother of the civil rights movement.”²³ She had great difficulty securing a job in Detroit, for example, and continued to receive hate mail from whites who urged her to return South. Still, Parks continued to attend meetings and led marches, and in 1964, she volunteered for John Conyer’s “jobs, justice, and peace” campaign and then worked as his secretary—her first paid political position—until she retired in 1988.²⁴ Again, the title of her job seems to belie what she actually did for Conyers. Parks handled most of the daily constituent work, filled in for Conyers at rallies, and served as his eyes and ears by visiting schools, hospitals, senior citizen facilities and other community meetings to keep Conyers grounded in community concerns and activism.²⁵

²⁰ Sidney Rogers interview with Rosa Parks, *Pacifica Radio*, April 1956 in Stewart Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom: the Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 84.

²¹ Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks: A Life* (New York, 2000), 174; Jeanne Theoharis, ““The northern promised land that wasn’t”: Rosa Parks and the Black Freedom Struggle in Detroit,” *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 26, No. 1.

²² Theoharis, 24.

²³ Theoharis, 24.

²⁴ Theoharis, 25.

²⁵ Theoharis, 26.

When she was not working with Conyers, she was helping to build economic and political empowerment in her neighborhood and throughout black America. According to historian Jeanne Theoharis, Rosa Parks had long been a local leader of her block association and looked for ways to promote local economic development and opportunities for young people. For example, after the 1967 uprising, she helped facilitate the building of the Virginia Park community plaza shopping center, where the riot first began. It would be the only black-owned shopping center in the country.²⁶

While Parks is often remembered in a way that makes it seem as if she was purely devoted to the cause of interracialism, she actively supported the Black Power movement. She was an admirer of Malcolm X, for example, and held Robert F. Williams, the militant NAACP leader from North Carolina who advocated armed self defense in great regard--so much, in fact, that in 1996, she delivered the eulogy at his funeral.²⁷ Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, she made frequent appearances at the all-black Freedom Now Party and participated in helping to create an independent black political agenda at the 1972 Gary Convention called by Amiri Baraka, Charles Diggs, and Richard Hatcher. That same year, she campaigned for George McGovern for president and fought to end the war in Vietnam. And she maintained a strong interest in cases of sexual and racial violence.²⁸

Mirroring the work she did in 1944 for Recy Taylor, Rosa Parks helped found the Detroit chapter of the Joan Little Defense Committee in 1975. Little, an African American inmate from Washington, North Carolina, was on trial for the self-defense murder of a white man who allegedly assaulted her in prison. Arguing that black women had a right to defend themselves from sexual violence, Parks and other women's activism on behalf of Little helped to end the systemic abuse of black women by white men in the deep South—a practice that was rooted in slavery.²⁹

It's been nearly seven decades since Rosa Parks rode down to Abbeville, Alabama to gather the facts in Recy Taylor's case. The national and international campaign that she started in 1944 drew attention to the ruthless heart of the racial caste system and helped to build the infrastructure necessary for the modern civil rights movement—a movement that Parks helped lead in the in the North as well as the South. And yet most history books don't mention anything about this campaign or Rosa Parks's long history as a radical activist who dedicated her entire life to human dignity, bodily integrity and freedom rights. Rosa Parks understood that she was a symbol and in some ways she was complicit in its construction, but she was upset that people reduced her long history of activism to one defiant act. She felt it was part of a strategy to, as Jeanne Theoharis put it, “not only delegitimize her radicalism, but to deradicalize the movement itself.”³⁰

²⁶ Theoharis, 26.

²⁷ Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill, 1999), 307; See also Jeanne Theoharis, “A Life History of Being Rebellious: The Radicalism of Rosa Parks” in Dayo F. Gore, et al., *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York, 2009), 130.

²⁸ Theoharis, “A Life History of Being Rebellious,” 130-31.

²⁹ “Minutes of the Joanne Little Defense Committee,” folder 1, box 3, Rosa L. Parks Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

³⁰ Theoharis, “A Life History of Being Rebellious,” 134.

Instead of a tired seamstress who tiptoed into history, she was a woman who marched proudly with strength, conviction, and purpose, a woman whose tireless efforts at community engagement and activism over seventy years helped make the world a better place for all of us. It is this Rosa Parks that we ought to celebrate and honor and work to understand. Her history as an active citizen engaged in the most pressing issues of her time can teach us how to do the same thing in our time.