

The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks Biography by Jeanne Theoharis

By Cathryn Lamour, Aliyah Kilpatrick,
and Harmela Anteneh



Rosa Parks

February 4, 1913-October 24, 2005

"A Life History of Being Rebellious"

Question

When you hear the name Rosa Parks, what comes to your mind? What do you think of? Moreover, what do you think of her?

Video



Introduction

“Accidental matriarch of the civil rights movement” (viii)

Rosa Parks Characterization

- Difficulty with sources – There has been a long legal battle over Rosa Parks' estate since her death, so many of the sources are from notes and clipping written by Parks
- Soon after Rosa Parks passed away on October 24, 2005, The United States worked to commemorate her life by having her lie in honor in the Capitol Rotunda.
- Rosa Parks is often characterized as a “quiet”, “humble”, “dignified”, “soft-spoken”, “not angry women” who accidentally sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This characterization goes against her years of activism and organizing
- Her funeral was characterized by her friends as a blunder, and was disrespectful to Black women, because they did not include close friends of hers, and it was an effort to save face because Hurricane Katrina was happening at the same time



Life of Service

- Rosa Parks has a lifetime of service and activism, before and after her arrest that sparked the Boycott, this was not characterized throughout her memorials
- Her characterization is often talked about in comparison to Claudette Colvin.
- Rosa Park Activism
 - Worked with E.D. Nixon for a decade to transform Montgomery's NAACP
 - Helped maintain the 382 day montgomery bus boycott
 - Hired by congressman John Conyers in 1965 to be part of his detroit staff



Chapter 1

Early life and Rise to Activism

Quote

“While my neck was spared of the lynch rope, and my body never riddled by bullets or dragged by an auto, I felt that I was lynched many times in mind and spirit. I grew up in a world of white power used most cruelly and cunningly to suppress poor helpless black people.” (7)

Influences Towards Activism

- James McCauley – Father
 - She did not see her father growing up
 - He travelled a lot looking for work, and had wandering eyes
 - He later tried to mend their relationship and apologize for being an absent father
- Leona Edwards (later Leona McCauley) – Mother
 - She raised her and Rosa's brother as a single mother
 - Valued education, taught Rosa how to read and the alphabet before she went into school
 - Taught her how to navigate white supremacy by appeasing white people (Rosa was unhappy about this)
- Sylvester Edwards – Grandfather
 - Born a slave, he was the product of his mother and “slave master's” son. He was very light-skinned and almost white passing, however he used this for his advantage
 - He was a fan of Marcus Garvey and his Black nationalism, he would sit on his porch with his rifle with Rosa. He died when Rosa was 10, but left a big impact on her life
 - Rosa wanted to see him kill a “ku kluxer”, they would sleep in their clothes in fear they were attacked at night

Personal Relationships

- Rosa Parks kept a level of privacy, there was a clear division between public presentation and private person. She wanted to be viewed in a respectful manner
- Rosa worked as a domestic worker during the great depression
 - During one night, another black man named Sam had set her up to be sexually assaulted by a white man she named Mr. charlie
 - She put up a fight, and tried to resist him, it is not apparent what transpired
- She met her husband Raymond Parks (13)
 - She is rarely photographed with him, and she did not discuss their personal relationship in public, however, they were known to be in love
 - She never cut her hair because her husband loved her long hair. Most photos of her, she is seen with her hair pinned up and she did not wear her hair down in public
 - They were married during the Scottsboro Trials, Raymond brought food to them and the meetings often happened in their homes, they had guns and this spoke to the militant side of organizing (15)

Chapter 2

“It Was Very Difficult to Keep Going When All Our Work
Seemed to Be in Vain”

Quote

“Feeling proud of the home or the South when negroes every day are being molested and maltreated. No one should feel proud of a place where Negroes are intimidated.” —
Rosa Park, 1948 State Convention

Social Context

- Sylvester McCauley, Rosa Parks brother, served in World War II. After the war, returning veterans were being treated with even more disrespect than before the war. This led to Sylvester leaving and moving to Detroit in 1946
- The Scottsboro case where nine young men from age 12-19 were wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death after being falsely accused of rape
 - This led to Rosa Parks joining the NAACP
 - Many make the comparison to the “exonerated five”
- Jeremiah Reeves – Park took an interest in this case
 - 16 year old had a consensual relationship with a white classmate, the white girl got scared and “cried rape.” He was tried and sentenced to death, the case was thrown out, then at the new case, his sentence was restored he was executed on March 28th, 1958.



Rise to Activism

- Worked with committed local leaders in montgomery a decade before the brown decision, this decade of activism is largely glossed over because it is demoralizing and difficult, white people were violent and there was growing black militancy (18)
- Parks on third attempt passed the test, then was required to pay \$18 in poll tax, a lot of money for a working class family (21)
- Working for the NAACP was unpopular and dangerous in the mid-1950s. E.D. Nixon became president of the NAACP, membership rose from 861-1600, put pressure on the governor to reverse three death sentences (25)
- Activism given a lift after NAACP leadership conference organized by Ella Baker in March 1945, she saw Baker as a mentor (26)
- 24 year-old Recy Taylor Black women was gang-raped in Abbeville Alabama, Rosa Parks took down her testimony
 - Numerous cases of sexual violence against Black women Rosa Parks tried to bring to court, but they were not supported by law enforcement and the governments
- Rosa Parks saw the photo of Emmett Till and was determined that he would not die in vain, and was more committed to activism and social progress

Chapter 3

“I Had Been Pushed As Far As I Could Stand to Be Pushed”

Quote

“The notion that she was the first—or even third—to resist or that she made her bus stand impulsively misses her familiarity with the many instances and dangers of bus resistance, and the considerable thought she had given the matter.” (49)

Fellow Female Faces and Leaders

- By the early 1950s, people knew to bring their complaints about bus segregation to the Women's Political Council.
 - The women of the organization, three hundred strong by 1954, collected petitions, met with city officials, went door to door, packed public hearings, and generally made their outrage around bus segregation publicly known.
- Then on March 2, 1955, **Claudette Colvin** boarded a bus home from school and refused to budge when the driver ordered her to move.
 - "I don't mean to take anything away from Mrs. Parks," lawyer Fred Gray later observed, "but Claudette gave all of us the moral courage to do what we did."
 - Colvin was seen as "feisty," "uncontrollable," "profane," and "emotional" by some community leaders who worried that she was too young and not of the right social standing to organize a broader campaign around. Leaders furthered distance her from the movement after she became pregnant by an older man.
 - According to Colvin, Parks was the only adult leader who kept up with her that summer.
- On October 21, eighteen-year-old **Mary Louise Smith** was arrested for refusing to move
 - Smith's family was poor and her father rumored to be an alcoholic. She didn't fit the "image".





December 1, 1955

The iconic and historic day



The Arrest



- Rosa Parks finished work at Montgomery Fair.
- **BEEF WITH THE BUS DRIVER:**
 - The driver, James Fred Blake, had given her trouble before.
 - She had avoided his bus for 12 years after an incident where she was ordered to reboard the bus in the back after paying in the front
- She was not sitting in the white section but in the middle section of the bus.
 - The middle was liminal space; it allowed space for paying black customers to sit, but that could be trumped on the discretion of the driver by the wants of a white rider.
 - The white section of the bus was full that day, so 4 black people were asked to leave their seats for 1 white man
- Parks said that she had never before that evening been directly asked to give up her seat for a white person.
- “People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired but that isn’t true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. . . . No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”
 - “I didn’t tell anyone my feet were hurting. It was just popular, I suppose because they wanted to give some excuse other than the fact that I didn’t want to be pushed around.”
- Parks had not planned the protest but “had been pushed as far as I could stand to be pushed.”
- “I felt that, if I did stand up, it meant that I approved of the way I was being treated, and I did not approve.”
- She also attributed her courage to the history of the black freedom fighters who had come before her. “I had the strength of God and my ancestors with me.”
- There were other people she knew on the bus, but none came to her defense. Calling it “one of the worst days of my life,” she said, “I felt very much alone.”
- That evening she didn’t feel like history was being made but felt profoundly irritated by her arrest, which seemed a detour from the week’s more pressing political tasks.

The Montgomery Boycott



- After finding out that Parks was safe, E.D. Nixon was, in a measure, delighted, observing to his wife, “I believe Jim Crow dropped in our lap just what we are looking for.”
 - Nixon saw in Parks the kind of test case they had been seeking—middle-aged, religious, of good character, known and respected in the community for her political work, and brave.
 - Perhaps most important for Nixon, Parks was a “real fighter” and wouldn’t be scared off by white backlash.
- The boycott was actually called by the Women’s Political Council. The Women’s Political Council will not wait for Mrs. Parks’s consent to call for a boycott of city buses.
- Gender & the Movement
 - By the end of the boycott, Dr. King had gained a national profile. Nixon, however, always reminded people, “If Mrs. Parks had gotten up and given that cracker her seat, you’d never heard of Reverend King.”
 - With a touch of chauvinistic chivalry, many of the ministers did not want to be on record as abandoning a good Christian woman in need.
 - Nixon took up a highly gendered language chastising the ministers and telling them they needed to catch up to the community. “We need to turn history around and stop hiding behind these women who do all the work for us. I say we stand out there in the open and hold our heads high.”
 - Parks was lauded by the crowd as their heroine but not consulted for her vision of the struggle and subsequent political strategy.



Chapter 4

"There Lived a Great People"

Struggles- Poverty and Family

- One of the hardest things for Parks during the first month of the boycott was the disdainful way she was treated at work. "They'd ignore me as though I wasn't there," she recalled.
 - Parks made about \$23 a week at the time of her arrest
- On January 7, 1956, a month after her bus stand, Montgomery Fair notified Rosa that they were firing her
- A week later, Raymond was compelled to quit his job after his employer, Maxwell Air Force Base, prohibited any discussion of the boycott or Rosa Parks in the barbershop.
- At the time of the boycott, her husband Raymond Parks and her mom Leona McCauley were having a harder time than on Rosa Parks because they were at home answering more of the incessant hate calls and death threats.
- Rosa considered Raymond her partner. She felt he facilitated her activism during the boycott and in the following decades when she continued her public role. The respect he had for her and her work sustained her.

Arrested Again- The Resistance Continued



- On February 21 1956, Rosa was indicted by Montgomery officials looking for someone to target regarding the boycott
 - This was Rosa's more popular arrest: The mug shot of Parks taken that February day—along with a photo of her being fingerprinted by police officer Drue Lackey—would become iconic, often misidentified as the photo from her arrest on December 1.

Chapter 5

"It Is Fine to Be a Heroine but the Price Is High"

The Boycott Reaches Victory

- Throughout 1956, Mrs. Parks traveled throughout the country making appearances on behalf of the bus protest and the NAACP.
- The Supreme Court ruled in *Browder v. Gayle* against Montgomery bus segregation on November 13, 1956, and its order mandating integration was received by city leadership on December 20. **The 382-day boycott drew to an end!**
- On December 20, 1956, a community that had walked and carpooled for more than a year stepped aboard the bus and sat where they pleased. Much of the media that day ignored Parks in favor of King and the other ministers. But Rosa did have another iconic image captured that day.
 - It was *Look* magazine that found her at Cleveland Courts and staged the photo of her that would later become iconic. That man was not some Montgomery rider, however, but reporter Nicholas Chriss. The photo was staged with Chris posing as a fellow passenger.



RACISM



Personal Struggles

- Rosa developed painful stomach ulcers and a heart condition that would plague her for many years. She also had chronic insomnia.
- Despite the boycott being over, hate and violence were still a threat.
- Both Rosa and Raymond still found white establishments unwilling to hire them, and the hate calls had not subsided.
- The Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was blind to Parks's substantial need and didn't offer Parks a position, despite her political experience and administrative skills.
 - Resolutely self-sufficient, Parks said in a 1970 interview that she did not want to "place any blame on the community, because I do feel it was my responsibility to do whatever I could for myself and not to look to the community or to Dr. King or anyone else for my support or livelihood. I felt as long as I was well and could move around, I should be on my own, rather than looking to anyone to reimburse me or reward me for what I might have done."
- Rosa was also red-baited and accused of being Communist

The Move to Detroit

- August 1957, the Parks family bade a bittersweet goodbye to Alabama.
- The Parks family welcomed the chance to be near family in Detroit, and headed to the city with only \$1300. Poverty continued to be a struggle once the family settled into the city.
- Rosa struggled to get a job not only because she was a black woman, but also because of her political activism.
- By the spring of 1961, Parks's health had improved, and she and Raymond had found more steady employment.
 - Rosa had found a job at the Stockton Sewing Company, a storefront factory crowded with sewing machines and ironing boards.
 - The work was difficult and exhausting but steady. She made seventy-five cents a piece and worked ten hours a day.
- The Parks family's suffering occurred against the backdrop of a growing mass movement. As her family struggled to regain its economic and psychic footing, the movement she loved and had helped to cultivate was growing in size and stature.



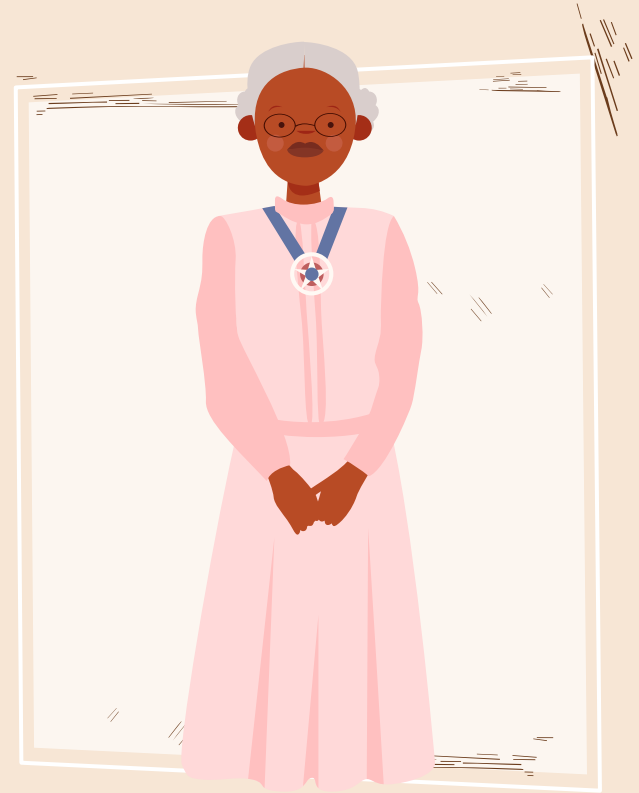
Chapter 6

“The Northern Promised Land That Wasn’t”

The 'Promised Land' Narrative

Parks' activism in the North

- As mentioned, Rosa Parks lived in Detroit's west side for the next 40 years of her life
- Parks did not find too much difference between race relations in Detroit and Montgomery
- She found that while public spaces were more integrated, the schools were overcrowded and there were issues with jobs, housing segregation, differences in public services, and policing practices
 - She noted that while places were not "explicitly marked for whites only, they practiced that just the same"
- Parks' migration to the North was not just some 'happy ending' to her activism in the South - so much of her activism happened in Detroit/after her move to Detroit
- The "Northern Innocence" narrative was an important way that the Rosa Parks story was being diluted and belittled in real time, despite the active protest from both Parks and King urging that racism in America was national in nature



**'Northern
Innocence'**

Parks' work in Congressman Conyers Office - overlooked, undervalued, and harassed

- Even though, through her position working in Conyers office, Parks was taking her own initiative and making a significant impact, her role was viewed in a gendered context ('assistant/secretary')
- "Calling her "a true activist," Conyers recalled the variety of issues Mrs. Parks was involved in, particularly "ones that didn't get the media attention." However, she tended to underplay this work in interviews from the period."
 - "Hidden in plain sight in the Black Power era"
 - Do Black women tend to do that?
 - Parks was one of the founders of the Joanne Little Defense Committee
 - "Little was the first woman in United States history to be acquitted using the defense that she used deadly force to resist sexual assault."
 - Robert Williams - militant civil rights leader- was disturbed by the ways Parks's contributions to the black struggle were overlooked, he took time in his speeches to highlight the fact that Rosa Parks was living in Detroit



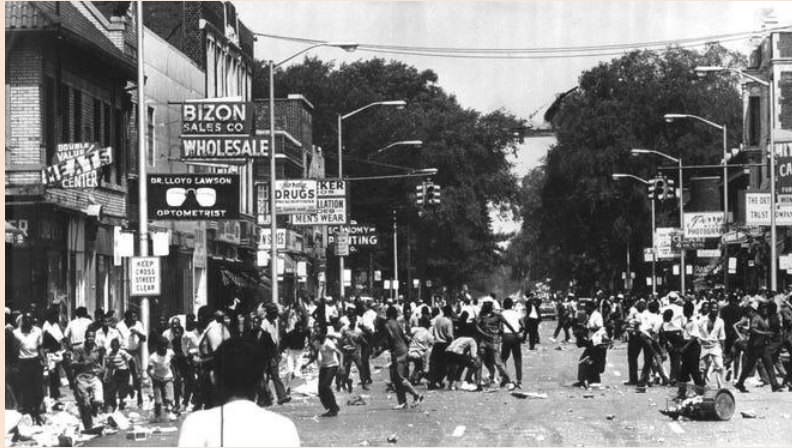
- Detroit's Great March to Freedom
 - Held 2 months before march on Washington, 200,000 Detroiters
 - King made a speech condemning Northern defacto segregation and gradualism
 - Parks "remained unnoticed by the press that wrote about the event, even by Black newspapers"

Rosa's relationship to the youth activism

- she often attended events at Cleage's Central Congregational Church. According to SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) comrade Martha Norman Noonan, Parks gravitated toward political events held at Cleage's church, choosing to align herself with the more radical elements in Detroit.
- SNCC worker said: "We didn't have any sense of her as an icon. Just a fellow freedom fighter.... [We saw her] more like a comrade. We viewed her as a heroine but we were surrounded by heroines"
 - This is important, she wasn't just a figurehead, she was a grassroots activist/struggler
- The dissemination of black history to young people had long been one of her priorities, and in Detroit she supported after-school programs, independent black schools, Afrocentric educational initiatives, and black history curricula



The Detroit Rebellion- 1967



The Detroit Riot of 1967 began on July 23 after a police raid on an unlicensed bar in Virginia Park. It lasted for five days and resulting in 43 deaths, over 7,000 arrests, and more than 2,000 buildings being burned or destroyed.

- During the riots, people were calling up Conyer's office where Parks worked to report what the police were doing, report missing people, and filed complaints
- Parks could understand the uprising as "the result of resistance to change that was needed long beforehand." She saw the ways that "the establishment of white people... will antagonize and provoke violence.
- Detroit residents signed a petition to rename the besieged street in honor of Rosa Parks. On July 14, 1976, Twelfth Street was formally renamed Rosa L. Parks Boulevard

Chapter 7

“Any Move to Show We Are Dissatisfied”

Rosa the Radical vs Rosa the Fable

- Parks refrained from joining the Detroit NAACP because she viewed them as too conservative
 - NAACP was “anti-communist, moderate, and middle-class focused”
- “People called her a troublemaker,”
 - hate mail
 - harassment increased after Conyers hired her
 - A March 8, 1971 letter: “
 - “People seldom complain but inside their hearts they are fully aware that it was YOU, Rosa, who is chiefly responsible for the unholy racial mess this nation is in today. By rights, you ought to be shot at sunrise, or otherwise appropriately taken care of, for your dastardly deed in Montgomery Alabama, and all the subsequent riots etc. You sure started a war, Rosa. Shame on you. Perhaps you are now getting what you deserve.”
- Erica Huggins: “ I consider Rosa Parks a radical woman, a revolutionary woman, showing up in real time at an elementary school run by the Black Panther Party”
- Rosa was increasingly frustrated by the pace of change, “she chafed under the regular admonitions from white moderates that black people were demanding too much.”
- “I don’t believe in gradualism or that whatever should be done for the better should take forever to do.”

Self-Defense

- Rosa Parks believed in self-defense
 - “I am in favor of any move to show that we are dissatisfied”
- She contextualized rising black militancy as a response to the illegal and violent acts civil rights activists had endured at the hands of whites in the 1950s and early 1960s, observing, “And of course when it didn’t [produce change], they gave up the philosophy of nonviolence and Christianity as the answer to the problems.”
- She did not approve of the ‘good movement vs. bad/dangerous movement narrative’ (good 60s/bad 60s narrative)
- “within the emerging literature on Black Power, Mrs. Parks, like many other middle-aged black women, is implicitly treated as too proper...and integrationist to have been compelled by—let alone helped nurture—Black Power”
- many people react uncomfortably with the idea of a Rosa Parks who stood with black radical trade unionists, cultural nationalists, antiwar activists, and prisoners’ rights advocates.
- Parks loved Malcom X, he was her hero
- Ericka Huggins of the Black Panther Party criticized the myth that people in the BPP had no high regard for Parks
 - So Parks had high regard for Black militancy and they had high regard for her

Rosa was action-oriented

“My problem is—I don’t particularly enjoy talking about anything.”-Rosa Parks

She didn’t want to be a figure/symbol, but she understood the way she was being portrayed and how her role in the civil rights movement would continue to be distorted:



“I UNDERSTAND THAT I AM A SYMBOL”: BEING ROSA PARKS

As time has gone by, people have made my place in the history of the civil rights movement bigger and bigger. They call me the Mother of the Civil Rights Movement. . . . Interviewers still only want to talk about that one evening in 1955 when I refused to give up my seat on the bus. Organizations still want to give me awards for that one act more than thirty years ago... I understand that I am a symbol.

—Rosa Parks

Discussion Questions

- How has the media's portrayal of Rosa Parks affected your perception of her activism and life of service? Has the proponent of Claudette Colvin's story affected Rosa Parks story? Is this a good means to and end to get Claudette Colvin's story told?
- Why do you think Rosa Park's preferred a private life? Did her shyness and skepticism of the public eye affect her legacy at all? Do you believe she should have been more open about her life?
- Do you think the civil rights leaders in Montgomery were right to choose Rosa Parks as the spark of the bus boycott over Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith? Why or why not?
- Why do you think the myth that Rosa Parks was simply too tired to get up was so successful?
- Rosa Parks often noted that she did not like/was uncomfortable with any attention she received as a public icon, and preferred to simply "listen and participate, to do what she could and try not to attract attention...if she used her stature, it would be for the promotion of the event or issue." do you think this is a common characteristic of Black female political leadership? Why/how do Black women accept public recognition differently from male leaders?
- Do you think the characterization of Rosa Parks as the 'Mother of the Civil Rights Movement' is harmful? Why or why not?

Resources

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