

A More Beautiful and Terrible History

THE USES AND MISUSES OF
CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY

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CHAPTER NINE

Learning to Play on Locked Pianos

*The Movement Was Persevering, Organized,
Disruptive, and Disparaged, and Other Lessons
from the Montgomery Bus Boycott*

If we lock up Martin Luther King, and make him unavailable for where we are now so we can keep ourselves comfortably distant from the realities he was trying to grapple with, we waste King. All of us are being called beyond those comfortable places. . . . We can learn to play on locked pianos and to dream of worlds that do not yet exist.

—Vincent Harding¹

PERHAPS THE MOST depoliticizing aspect of the national fable is the way it removes the organizing from the struggle. It makes it seem like the movement happens naturally, taking the power and the difficulty, the messiness and the magnificence out of it. In James Baldwin's words that began this book, the civil rights movement was longer, larger, more various, more beautiful and more terrible than it has been remembered. And in omitting the work and the collectivity of it, these national fables take the movement away from the people who built it and make it much more difficult to imagine how to construct webs of struggle today.

The Montgomery bus boycott occupies a central place in the fable—the origin story where we meet its two most iconic figures, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. But what it took and how it happened is far different than we know—and this fuller story offers much for thinking about social change today. In the fable, the Montgomery bus boycott just seems to happen. Rosa Parks is arrested, and the community is galvanized to action. “By refusing to give in,” President George W. Bush celebrated, “Rosa

Parks showed that one candle can light the darkness. . . . Like so many institutionalized evils, once the ugliness of these laws was held up to the light, they could not stand." Parks is cast as the candle that can destroy the darkness. A massive, yearlong community boycott follows naturally and inevitably. The action of one right individual becomes the key, not the collective effort that turned her act into a movement nor the vast groundwork that had been laid in the decade preceding her stand nor the accumulation of anger, sorrow, and indignation that pushed people past fear to act. In newer versions of the fable, the community's rejection of fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin is noted, and Parks becomes the "right one," as if one respectable individual is all it takes to carry a movement. King and Parks are put on pedestals, furthering a Horatio Alger mythology that, without preparation, an American can make great change with a single act, and making it difficult for people today to imagine being like either of them. The hard and repeated choices people made to push forward and the collective action required are glossed over.

The how of it—the fact that the Montgomery movement began much earlier, took much longer, was fraught with tension and conflict, and was unbearably difficult and only possible because a few, then some, then many more people joined together—is secondary to the much neater story of the accidental respectable heroine and the movement she helped birth. Today, the injustice seems so clear, the activists so righteous, that their victory seems inevitable—which of course is implicitly contrasted with contemporary struggles, which seem longer, harder, less clear, and less righteous. But, in fact, the movement's righteousness was made through the conviction, imagination, sacrifice, and decades of struggle and tenacity of the Montgomerians who built it. There was nothing natural and preordained about it. People chose, amidst searing conditions, amidst threats to their person and their livelihood, to make it happen.

Looking at a fuller history of the Montgomery bus boycott reveals the work, sacrifice, perseverance, coalition-building, disappointment, disruptiveness, and collective action it took to imagine, build, and sustain it. It wasn't just a matter of shining a light on injustice; it required shining a light over and over and over, often in people's eyes, until the force of that collective pressure became undeniable. Parks and King didn't make the movement; the Black community of Montgomery, including Parks and King, did. There weren't direct roads forward or clear things to do, but as

movement historian Vincent Harding reminds us, community activists "learn[ed] to play on locked pianos." One caveat: the Montgomery bus boycott was a Black, community-wide mass movement; many of the most successful struggles of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were not community-wide but undertaken by relatively small groups of Black people that grew over time. It certainly didn't take a fully unified community for a movement to begin or be successful.

To see how they did it—what it actually took to spark, organize, and maintain a mass boycott—returns the movement to us and makes it possible to imagine how it could be done again. Looking at ten lessons of the Montgomery bus boycott demonstrates the power of local communities—what they imagined, struggled with, organized, and built—and suggests ways to move forward today.

The first and perhaps most important lesson is the role of perseverance—the decade of largely unsuccessful struggle that preceded the Montgomery bus boycott, the small band of people who pushed forward regardless, and how essential that relentlessness was to the emerging boycott. While the boycott was sparked by Rosa Parks's arrest for refusing to give up her seat, a number of acts of bus resistance—as well as the ongoing humiliation on the bus, years of organizing, and growing ties among key Black organizers in Montgomery—turned it into a movement. "I have told the press time after time," longtime organizer E. D. Nixon explained, "that we were doing these things before December 1955, but all they want to do is start at December 1 and forget about what happened . . . over a long period of time to set the stage."²

In the decade before Rosa Parks's bus stand, a small cadre of NAACP activists, including Parks, Nixon, and Johnnie Carr, struggled with how difficult it was to move people to action. Parks joined the NAACP in 1943, in part because she wanted to register to vote; to her it was galling that Black people were serving in World War II but were unable to register to vote at home. Carr and Parks had attended middle school together at Miss White's Industrial School for Girls. Like Parks, Carr had become active around the Scottsboro case. Seeing a picture of Carr in a photo of the Montgomery NAACP convinced Parks that women could be part of the branch, prompting her to attend her first meeting in 1943. E. D. Nixon, a Pullman porter and longtime organizer in the Brotherhood of Sleeping

Car Porters, was spearheading the branch's voter registration efforts and came by Parks's home with materials for voter registration. Here began a partnership that would change the course of American history—Nixon, Parks, Carr, and a small group of NAACP members would spend the next decade transforming the Montgomery NAACP into a more activist branch.

In 1944, Nixon, Parks, and Carr organized around the case of Recy Taylor, a Black woman who had been gang-raped by six white men. They tried unsuccessfully to get an indictment.³ In 1945, Nixon won the presidency of the NAACP branch, opposing its more middle-class leadership and seeking to make the branch more political. Middle-class members of the branch were unhappy with his "politicking" and appealed to the national NAACP to intervene, but Nixon was reelected president (and Parks secretary) in 1946.⁴ This small cadre of activists faced fearsome resistance from Montgomery whites and trepidation from some Black people about what rocking the boat might mean. "The Negroes here are slipping and sliding," one friend wrote Parks in 1948. "I guess it would take an atom bomb to jar them out of their complacency and into action."⁵ This was dangerous work, as Parks traveled through Alabama taking down people's stories of rape and white brutality, hoping to file affidavits with the Department of Justice (DOJ). Most of their efforts produced little change. Parks explained: "It was more a matter of trying to challenge the powers that be and let it be known that we did not wish to continue being treated as second class citizens."⁶ The work was discouraging—the DOJ looked the other way, and many Black people who had been willing to talk to Parks were unwilling to put their name on affidavits or testify publicly. "It was very difficult to keep going," Parks admitted, "when all our work seemed to be in vain."⁷

A small trickle of people stood up to bus segregation in Montgomery in the decade before Rosa Parks's stand. Viola White was arrested in 1944 for refusing to give up her seat; she filed a case against bus segregation and in retaliation, police raped her daughter. The state then tied up her case in court, and she died before anything happened with it. In 1950, veteran Hilliard Brooks (who was Rosa Parks's neighbor at the Cleveland Courts projects), refused to reboard from the back of the bus after paying his fare; the bus driver called the police and the police killed Brooks. Parks herself had been thrown off the bus for refusing this demand by some bus

drivers that Black people pay in front but reboard from the back. Many in Montgomery, including Martin Luther King, Jo Ann Robinson, and Rosa Parks's mother, Leona McCauley, had also had humiliating experiences on the bus.⁸

When the Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Brown v. Board* outlawing school segregation, a legal challenge to bus segregation seemed more possible. The Women's Political Council wrote the mayor saying bus segregation needed to change or there would be a boycott. In March 1955, Claudette Colvin was arrested for resisting on the bus. Colvin's arrest outraged Montgomery's Black community and many stopped riding the buses temporarily. But a mass movement did not result, in part because the city and bus company made promises to change that they did not keep, and in part because many adults saw Colvin as too young, poor, and feisty to rally behind.⁹ Parks fund-raised for Colvin's case and encouraged her to take a leadership role in her NAACP Youth Council—the only adult, according to Colvin, who kept in touch with her that summer of 1955.¹⁰ (Despite popular belief, Colvin was *not* pregnant when community leaders decided not to pursue her case; she got pregnant later that summer.)¹¹

In October, eighteen-year-old Mary Louise Smith was arrested, but again no mass movement emerged. Both arrests brought the community to a breaking point. Much has been made about the respectability politics that led community leaders to deem neither of these young women suitable to organize a mass movement around.¹² And certainly their youth, feistiness, and class status were factors that led adults to not rally behind them. But there is a danger in minimizing the impact of these young women's actions. Had Colvin and Smith not done what they did, adding to the weight of community outrage and growing frustration, it is unlikely Parks's arrest would have galvanized people the way it did. Movements do not result from the first or second outrage but from an accumulation of injustice that brings people to a breaking point.

"Over the years I have been rebelling against second-class citizenship. It didn't begin when I was arrested," Parks explained to a reporter during the boycott.¹³ Part of what made Rosa Parks's bus stand so courageous was that there was nothing to suggest that taking a stand on that day would change anything. For two decades before she refused to give up her seat on the bus, she had made stands, other people she knew had made stands, and by and large nothing had changed—except that people

had been ostracized, hurt, or killed for these actions. This was not Parks's first act of bus resistance. She had been thrown off the bus for refusing the practice some bus drivers insisted on, that Black people pay in the front but reboard in the back. In fact, by that December evening, she had grown quite bitter and pessimistic about the possibility of change.

Four months earlier, she had attended a two-week workshop at Highlander Folk School, an organizer training school started in the 1930s to encourage local leadership development, on implementing school desegregation. Parks found the workshop tremendously inspiring; nonetheless, in the closing session—which focused on what participants would do when they returned home—she told those gathered that “Montgomery was the Cradle of the Confederacy, that nothing would happen there because blacks wouldn't stick together. But she promised to work with those kids.”¹⁴ In other words, Rosa Parks left Highlander not holding out much hope in her generation and placing her hope for change with the young people she was mentoring in the NAACP Youth Council.

On December 1, coming home from work, Parks refused bus driver James Blake's order to move. Parks didn't see her bus stand ushering in a new chapter in American history but felt adults in the community “had failed our young people.”¹⁵ Parks had had enough: “I had been pushed around all my life and felt at this moment that I couldn't take it anymore. . . . We soothe ourselves with the salve of attempted indifference accepting the false pattern set up by the horrible restriction of Jim Crow laws.”¹⁶ One of Parks's most valued traits was the ability to be “stout-hearted,” because she understood how difficult it was to keep on in the face of pressure. Well aware of the dangers Black women faced in getting arrested, she was “resigned to the fact that I had to express my unwillingness to be humiliated in this moment.”¹⁷ But perseverance finds little place in the fable; the fact that activists did things over and over, for years and then decades without success, is a crucial lesson that these memorials do not teach.

The second lesson is the role of anger and the ways people fashion that anger into action. Black anger finds little place in these fables, as seen in the ways King and Parks are regularly cast as “not-angry.” When Colvin was arrested in March 1955, the community was outraged. The city promised change—but gave them “the run-around” as Parks called it. In fact, at the second meeting with city officials the summer after Colvin's arrest, Parks

refused to join a group of Black community leaders taking a petition to the city that called for more courteous treatment on the bus and an end to visible signs of segregation: “I had decided I would not go anywhere with a piece of paper in my hand asking white folks for any favors.”¹⁸ Anger was mounting.

Four nights before her bus stand, Parks attended a packed mass meeting at King's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to hear organizer T. R. M. Howard talk about the recent acquittal of the two men, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam, who had lynched Emmett Till. Despite national attention to the case, the two men had still walked free. Like many of her friends and neighbors, Parks left the meeting deeply angry and despairing. Days later, in the moment when the bus driver told her to move, she thought of Emmett Till and, “pushed as far as she could be pushed,” refused. When the cops boarded the bus, one officer questioned why she did not get up when instructed to. She was *not* quiet in that moment but coolly spoke back: “Why do you push us around?” The officer answered back: “I don't know. The law is the law and you're under arrest.”¹⁹ Parks thought to herself, “Let us look at Jim Crow for the criminal he is and what he had done to one life multiplied millions of times over these United States.” Anger transformed into action.

As Reverend Vernon Johns, who had preceded King as the pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, explained, Parks “caught a vision”—she was able to see an opportunity to strike a blow at the system of white supremacy.²⁰ Late that night, after talking with Nixon, white allies Clifford and Virginia Durr, her husband, and her mother, Rosa decided to pursue her case in court, calling upon attorney Fred Gray for help. Knowing how outrage had been percolating, Gray called Jo Ann Robinson, head of the Women's Political Council, to let her know that Parks was pressing forward with a legal case. The WPC decided late on the night after Parks's arrest to call for a one-day boycott on the Monday when Parks would be arraigned in court. The boycott thus was the result of an accumulation of perseverance, anger, and relationships built over years.

The third lesson is how the sense of possibility grows by being in action. In the middle of the night, Robinson snuck into Alabama State College, and with the help of two students and a colleague, ran off thirty-five thousand leaflets on the mimeograph machine. (Robinson later got in trouble with

the college for doing this.)²¹ The leaflet began, "Another woman has been arrested on the bus."

In the middle of the night, Robinson called Nixon to advise him of the plans. She did not call Parks—in fact, Robinson claims that after talking to Fred Gray on the phone, she jotted some notes on the back of an envelope, including "The Women's Political Council will not wait for Mrs. Parks' consent to call for a boycott of city buses."²² Robinson's belief that she didn't need to get Parks's consent or even apprise her of the one-day boycott likely stemmed in part from the WPC's determination to act quickly (and avoid what happened with Colvin), as well as class differences between the more middle-class Robinson and working-class Rosa Parks (who lived at the Cleveland Courts projects). So, Rosa Parks did not find out till the middle of the next day that a boycott had been called in her name.²³

People galvanized behind Parks for a number of reasons. Solidly working-class, Parks was known to many in Montgomery's working-class Black west side for her community and church work, and for her steadfastness. She was forty-two the day of her arrest, married, active in her church and the NAACP, and known to be brave—so people trusted she wouldn't flinch under the pressure. And many in Montgomery's Black community across class lines saw themselves in her arrest.

In newer versions of the fable, Parks's respectability is cast as the key, as if by picking the right person, grievances will be recognized. This misses the incredible, harrowing, tedious work that went into the yearlong boycott, and the belief in things unseen. And it distorts the actual experiences of Rosa Parks—who was not middle class and whose bus stand would plunge her family into economic trouble. Moreover, Parks was not viewed as respectable by white people at the time. In the first weeks of the boycott, rumors snaked through Montgomery's white community about her. Most white people thought Parks's action had been cooked up by the NAACP, others claimed it was a Communist plot, still others believed the NAACP and Communist Party were in league together. Some whites believed Parks had only been in Montgomery for two weeks, a few going so far as to claim that Rosa Parks was not even her real name, and that she was actually Mexican and had a car.²⁴ The vast majority of white Montgomeries made her a pawn of larger agents and outside agitation—and certainly did not regard her as an upstanding figure.

Early the next morning Nixon, began calling Montgomery's political ministers to get them on board. About 6 a.m., Nixon called twenty-six-year-old Martin Luther King, who'd been in Montgomery for about a year and was active with the NAACP. Nixon wanted to use King's church for a meeting of the ministers; it was centrally located and King was new in town and didn't have enemies. Nixon woke King up. The Kings had a baby only three weeks old and King hesitated: "Let me think about it awhile and call me back."²⁵ There was nothing destined about this, no lightning bolt. Like all of Montgomery's activists, King would have to step into this action. When Nixon called back in a few hours, King agreed. In the days and months ahead, King would assume an important leadership role. But there was nothing easy about it.

Nixon also savvily used the media to get attention for the upcoming boycott, calling *Montgomery Advertiser* reporter Joe Azbell. Azbell was no liberal but Nixon knew to give him the "scoop." Azbell took the bait and published the story on the front page, ensuring that many who had not known about the Monday boycott now did. "We couldn't have paid for the free publicity white folks gave our boycott," Nixon noted.²⁶

At first, many of Montgomery's longtime activists worried about whether people would support the boycott. Having struggled for years to bridge class lines, many feared that Black people wouldn't stand together, and the community would be humiliated. Reverend Vernon Johns often had chastised his middle-class congregation for its complacency; King too had criticized "tacit acceptance of things as they were."²⁷ People's reluctance to act was rooted largely in fear—in fear of being publicly singled out, of economic retaliation, of imprisonment, and of retaliatory violence, all part of the arsenal of weapons whites used well to maintain the racial status quo. Amidst that fearsome climate, Johnnie Carr noted, "many Negroes lost faith in themselves."²⁸

The surprise and delight that rippled through Montgomery's Black community that first day was palpable. Martin and Coretta Scott King got up at 5:30 on the first morning of the boycott to see what would happen when the buses began their routes at 6 a.m. Coretta recalled shouting at Martin, "Come quickly. . . . There was not one person on that usually crowded bus! We stood together waiting for the next bus. It was empty too, and this was the most heavily traveled line in the whole city. . . . We were so excited we could hardly speak coherently."²⁹ Rosa Parks found

the community's reaction to her arrest "gratifying" and "unbelievable" but also wondered why "we had waited so long to make this protest."³⁰ In speeches during the boycott she explained the power the organized protest held for the participants themselves: "We surprised the world and ourselves at the success of the protest."³¹

Buoyed by the power of the one-day stand, the community voted that night in a packed and overflowing mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church to continue on with the boycott. The power of collective protest changed the participants—from a one-day boycott to a long-term one, from the initial demand for courteous, first-come, first-served seating to full desegregation of the bus.

The fourth lesson is the power of collective organizing, which created a car-pool system that sustained the thirteen-month bus boycott. The boycott didn't just succeed naturally. In our popular imagination inspired by Hollywood, the Montgomery bus boycott was all about walking. But what actually enabled a community-wide boycott for more than a year was a massively well-organized car-pool system built by the newly created Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). Built through existing Black community structures, including churches and political groups, it was accomplished through Black organization. As Alabama State professor Reverend Ben Simms, who became the MIA's transportation coordinator, explained, "Of course we had white support but this was a black movement, planned and run by blacks."³² Simms estimated they arranged fifteen thousand to twenty thousand rides per day.³³

The MIA set up forty stations across town, and three hundred people volunteered their cars. People would use the "V for victory" sign to identify themselves to riders and drivers. As the boycott went along, using money donated by churches, organizers were able to buy fifteen station wagons to supplement the volunteer cars. The MIA's elaborately organized car pool required tremendous effort and resolve, and considerable fund-raising. Working-class organizers, such as Nixon, were amazed at the cross-class solidarity of the car pool—middle-class people were willing to take poor people in their cars and have their cars driven by others. Over time, the MIA hired fifteen dispatchers and twenty full-time drivers, all coordinated from a building, known as the Citizens Club, at the edge of Montgomery. Parks briefly served as a dispatcher for the car pool;

her instructions to riders and drivers reveal the effort, patience, and determination the car pool required of both riders and drivers. Reminding riders "how long some of us had to wait when the buses passed us without stopping in the morning and evening," she instructed drivers to "be careful," given the harassment the car pools were enduring at the hands of the police.³⁴ As the boycott continued beyond the first month, the MIA realized—given the scope of the car-pool system it had created—it would need to fund-raise across the country and sent King, Ralph Abernathy, Parks, and others across the country.

Despite popular focus on the ministers involved, women played foundational roles in maintaining and sustaining the boycott. Two groups of women—one calling itself the Club from Nowhere, led by cook and midwife Georgia Gilmore and her friends, and the Friendly Club, headed by Inez Ricks—spearheaded fund-raising and engaged in friendly competition to see who could raise more. None of the women in these groups had much money, but they knew how to fund-raise and began selling sandwiches, dinners, pies, and cakes to raise money each week. Every Monday evening at the weekly mass meeting, they would present their fund-raising accomplishments to a standing ovation. Women also provided the backbone of the boycott as walkers, car-pool riders, drivers, and organizers. The boycott, according to Jo Ann Robinson, had a transformative power, for it allowed people "to retaliate directly for the pain, humiliation, and embarrassment they had endured over the years."³⁵

While the organizational capacity came from the Black community, there were a handful of key white allies: Clifford and Virginia Durr, the Reverend Robert and Jeannie Graetz, Aubrey Williams (publisher of *Southern Farmer*), and librarian Juliette Morgan all lent key support to the movement. The Durrs provided critical legal help, particularly the first night in getting Parks out of jail (Nixon had tried to call but the police station wouldn't give information to a Black person, so lawyer Clifford Durr called to figure out what happened). Virginia Durr, who had become friendly with Rosa Parks years earlier when she hired Parks to do sewing for her, realized the economic trouble the Parkses were in after both Rosa and Raymond lost their jobs because of the boycott. So she raised money for them from friends around the country. Williams provided crucial financial and logistical support, including money for Parks to attend Highlander. The Graetzes and Morgan became particular

targets of incessant white harassment and violence because of their steadfast support of the boycott. The Graetzes' home was bombed twice, and Morgan was so harassed after she wrote a letter to the *Montgomery Advertiser* sympathetic to the boycott (and unsupported, even by her own family), that she ultimately took her own life.³⁶ (Black Montgomerians were forbidden to attend her funeral.) This white support was crucial because it provided an especially potent reminder of the unnaturalness of white supremacist politics.

While typically known only for her role in galvanizing the boycott, Parks played a key role sustaining it, spending much of the year on the road from Los Angeles to Seattle, Detroit to Pittsburgh, raising attention and money for the movement at home. She became one of the MIA's most successful fund-raisers. It wasn't inevitable that the Montgomery bus boycott would become nationally known—people had to work and travel to make sure it was seen, thus turning a local struggle into a national one.

Certainly, the galvanizing leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. proved important. But transcripts from meetings and interviews with boycotters make clear that, alongside his eloquence and charisma, an essential aspect of his leadership was how King's courage made possible other people's sustained courage. When white people went after King during the boycott, Black protectiveness of the young leader bubbled forth. In interviews with Fisk researchers during the boycott, many female Black domestic workers recounted confronting their employers when the people they worked for began to attack King; these women could deal with the slurs of the boycott, but when white people started making stuff up about King—this was a bridge too far.³⁷ When the city indicted King and other boycott leaders, people were determined they would not feel alone. A crowd grew outside the police station. "Black women with bandannas on, wearing men's hats with their dresses rolled up. From the alleys they came," Reverend Simms recalled. "One of the police hollered, 'All right you women get back.' These great big old women with their dresses rolled up told him and I never will forget their language, 'Us ain't going nowhere. You done arrest us preachers and we ain't moving.'"³⁸

The fifth lesson is the power of disruptiveness. The Montgomery bus boycott was a disruptive consumer boycott that used the power of Black consumers to change public transportation policy and force the city to address

Black demands. It worked, and the bus company lost a great deal of money, prompting scaled-back routes and a fare increase. The MIA was accused of being just like the white supremacist White Citizens' Council in using economic means to advance racial issues. Coretta Scott King described how Martin struggled with these very criticisms but decided that such tactics were necessary to increase pressure to get the bus company to change. As Rosa Parks observed, "If you are mistreated when you ride and intimidated when you walk, why not do what hurts them most—walk and let them find \$3000 per day to pay for it . . . until they learn [how] to treat us."³⁹ Seeing the power of the Black community's boycott, white citizens created a counter-campaign, calling on white people to ride the buses to try to reduce the impact of the bus boycott.

The MIA sought to unsettle the status quo, disrupting the order of segregation. To increase the pressure on the city, it called on Black people to boycott downtown businesses and forsake Christmas shopping to underscore Black economic clout in the city and the unacceptability of segregation. It was meant to be disruptive to Montgomery life and economic well-being.

There was nothing passive about this nonviolent direct action. The city, and its white citizens, recognized this—and massively harassed the car pool that sustained the boycott. Police gave out hundreds of tickets to drivers. They staked out the pickup stations to scare riders, and the MIA was regularly forced to change locations. White citizens attacked the cars.

Montgomery's main newspaper, the *Montgomery Advertiser*, steadfastly opposed the boycott, calling it a "dangerous weapon," and refused to print positive letters about the boycott because it did "more harm than good."⁴⁰ In an angry interview that reporter Joe Azbell gave to a Fisk researcher three months into the boycott, Azbell called the boycott "stupid" and the work of a "small proportion" of "big operators" who "have their own cars and they feel important driving a few people around in them."⁴¹

The national NAACP kept the disruptive protest at arm's length, not agreeing with its direct-action tactics, though it did provide support for the legal strategy. Throughout the boycott year, there was much disagreement and tension between the MIA and the national NAACP.

The sixth lesson is the cost and sacrifice activism entails. The activism took a considerable toll. On January 30, 1956, the Kings' house was bombed.

Coretta and the couple's tiny baby, who were both home, managed to escape unscathed. The police commissioner and mayor, curiously among the first people on the scene, seemed disappointed by King's and the assembled crowd's decision not to meet this shocking act of violence with violence. The next day, Nixon's house was bombed.⁴²

Many boycotters saw the nonviolent action and refusal to retaliate after the bombings as a repudiation of assumptions by Montgomery's white leaders and citizens about how Black people would act. At the same time, most boycotters saw no contradiction in their embrace of organized nonviolence and long-standing belief in the right of self-defense. Many Black people in Montgomery, including the Parks family, Jo Ann Robinson, and E. D. Nixon, owned guns. A number of drivers in the car pool were Korean War veterans who carried their guns with them to safely ferry their passengers from one side of town to another.⁴³ At the same time, they relished the power of collective nonviolence to engage on their own terms and disrupt white people's ideas of Black people.

The toll on boycotters was severe. During the first month, Rosa Parks's coworkers "refused to have a conversation or to speak to me at all."⁴⁴ She lost her job five weeks into the boycott. Her husband was forced to give up his job when his employer, Maxwell Air Force Base, prohibited talk of the boycott or "that woman" in the barber shop where he worked. The Parkses never found steady work in Montgomery again. Raymond, angry at their situation, drank heavily as the death threats to their home mounted; he was "furious" at many things during the boycott year, according to Rosa: furious at himself "for being a financial failure," at the bus driver "for causing my arrest," at the Black community for not standing up before this, and at his wife for being a "goat head" and "at least getting off the bus."⁴⁵ Midway through the boycott, he suffered a nervous breakdown. Rosa developed ulcers and chronic insomnia. Even after the boycott's success, the Parks family continued to receive death threats, as did many other boycott leaders, and they still couldn't find work. Eight months later, they were forced to leave Montgomery for Detroit, where Rosa's brother and cousins lived. They continued to struggle to find work in Detroit; it was not until 1966—eleven years after her arrest—that the Parkses registered an annual income on their income tax forms (\$4,026 comparable to what they made the year of her bus arrest (\$3,749 combined annual income)).⁴⁶

The stress also took its toll on many other activists. Nixon developed high blood pressure. Many took to drinking, according to Parks, "to be able to sleep at night." Robinson slept with her gun. Over the course of his life, Martin Luther King Jr. grew deeply depressed. Even after the boycott's successful end, the violence continued. King's house was shot at; the Graetzes' and Abernathys' houses were bombed, as were four Baptist churches in Montgomery. Random violence occurred against Black people waiting at bus stops.

The seventh lesson is the importance of mentoring and building a community of support. Activists need other activists, and mentoring matters. In the years before the boycott, Rosa Parks found mentors in Ella Baker and Septima Clark, who served as models of women in the struggle and talented organizers who persisted amidst deep setbacks. They helped train Parks in the decade before the boycott in developing her own voice and organizing skills. Parks and Baker met in the mid-1940s, when Baker organized an NAACP leadership training event for local organizers that Parks and Nixon attended. Parks and Baker kept in touch, and Baker often stayed with her when she came to Montgomery. During the boycott, Baker provided key support when she helped organize a massive rally at Madison Square Garden in May 1956, with the help of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, to raise money for the Montgomery movement. Sixteen thousand people packed the Garden to hear E. D. Nixon and Rosa Parks, along with Roy Wilkins, Adam Clayton Powell, Eleanor Roosevelt, and celebrities Sammy Davis Jr. and Tallulah Bankhead. The event raised six thousand dollars.⁴⁷

When Parks met Septima Clark at Highlander Folk School the summer before her bus stand, she marveled at Clark's calm strength. Parks felt "tense" and "nervous" from years of unsuccessful struggle. Clark, who led the workshop, had recently been fired from her teaching job because she refused to give up her NAACP membership but was undeterred in her actions. Parks at one point said she hoped some of Clark's "great courage and dignity and wisdom has rubbed off on me."⁴⁸ Clark and Myles Horton, Highlander Folk School's founder, understood that leadership and vision come in different packages, and so they created spaces to enable and nourish them. According to Horton, Parks was the "quietest participant" in the workshop that summer: "If you judge by the conventional standards she

would have been the least promising probably. We don't use conventional standards, so we had high hopes for her."⁴⁹ Despite her reticence, those two weeks at Highlander were transformative ones for Parks, and Clark encouraged her to share more of her experiences organizing in Montgomery with the interracial group at the workshop. "Rosa Parks was afraid for white people to know that she was as militant as she was," Septima Clark recalled.⁵⁰ When Clark heard that Rosa Parks had refused to give up her seat five months after returning from the workshop, she thought to herself, "Rosa? She was so shy when she came to Highlander, but she got up enough courage to do that."⁵¹ Clark and Horton provided key solidarity and material support during the boycott. Parks journeyed back to Highlander a number of times during the boycott to share what was happening in Montgomery, and to be rejuvenated by the Highlander spirit. In turn, Parks would provide crucial support and solidarity in the years to come when Highlander increasingly was red-baited by Tennessee authorities who wanted to put the organizing center out of business.⁵²

Parks mentored others, including twenty-five-year-old lawyer Fred Gray and the young people in her local NAACP Youth Council. The year before the boycott, when Gray returned to Montgomery after finishing at Western Reserve University School of Law (he had been forced to go out of state since no law schools in Alabama admitted Black people), she would often walk from her job at Montgomery Fair department store to Gray's new law office, and the two would have lunch together. According to Gray, Parks helped him "get on his feet" in the early days when he had little business, and she encouraged him to pursue issues of racial justice through his law practice: "She gave me the feeling that I was the Moses that God had sent Pharaoh and commanded to him to 'Let My People Go.'"⁵³ When she decided to pursue her bus case late the night she was arrested, she called him to represent her.

Parks had re-founded the NAACP Youth Council in 1954 and encouraged the small group of young people to take greater stands against segregation, including a read-in at the downtown library, which refused to serve Black patrons. (Most parents didn't want their kids to have anything to do with the dangerous work of the NAACP.) The weekend following her bus arrest, Parks had organized a workshop, but most of her young charges didn't show up. She was extremely discouraged, having spent weeks organizing it, only later learning they had been passing out leaflets about the

upcoming boycott. "They were wise enough to see . . . it was more important to stand on the street corners and pass these papers out to everyone who passed than to sit in a meeting and listen to someone speak."⁵⁴ They had learned her lessons well.

The eighth lesson is the importance of learning. People learned from each other, from their own political experiences, and from previous bus boycotts. In early November 1955, a month before Parks's arrest, E. D. Nixon invited New York congressman Adam Clayton Powell to speak to the Progressive Democratic Association in Montgomery. Many people key to the boycott, including Parks, attended. Powell had helped lead a successful bus boycott in New York in 1941 that resulted in the hiring of two hundred Black bus drivers. In his Montgomery speech, Powell noted that the economic tactics of the White Citizens' Council "can be counter met with our own economic pressure."⁵⁵ Montgomery activists had also watched and been inspired by a successful bus boycott in Baton Rouge in 1953. Parks's trip to Highlander and the comrades she met there, meanwhile, provided additional ideas and support. Following events around the country, Montgomery's activists read, and shared newspaper clippings (Parks read multiple newspapers a day). They had also learned from the way Viola White's case had been tied up in state court in the 1940s and consequently made the proactive decision to file a separate case in federal court in February 1956. They continued to subscribe to the *Montgomery Advertiser*, despite its segregationist politics, to understand what white people were thinking in order to figure out their next moves.⁵⁶

The ninth lesson is the multiple ways that white people in Montgomery tried to thwart the protest and how activists coped and strategized against this opposition. In our public imagination, Montgomery racism is typically portrayed in violence and epithets, which were certainly a fearsome part of white opposition. A number of homes of boycott leaders were bombed, and many received constant death threats. Car-pool drivers had their vehicles pelted with urine, rocks, and rotten food. But the opposition to the boycott wasn't all bombing homes and tossing urine. A much wider variety of tactics and approaches was employed by white citizens and political leaders to squash the boycott. In many ways, whites who opposed it also took up discourses and tactics familiar to us today. One of the first tactics

city leaders employed was to assert that the bus problem was the fault of “a few bad apple” bus drivers or “rough bus drivers”—the problem was not segregation but “rude” drivers who needed to be disciplined.⁵⁷ City leaders then claimed they wished Black people had brought matters to their attention earlier (even though there had been numerous meetings in which Black citizens had raised concerns, particularly after Colvin’s arrest, but Parks said they were “always brushed off and given the runaround.”⁵⁸).

Many white people sought to discredit Parks and King. Rumors swirled through Montgomery’s white community that Parks was an outside agitator—a Communist or NAACP plant. According to King, “so persistent and persuasive” was the idea among Montgomery whites that Parks was an NAACP plant that “it convinced many reporters from all across the country.”⁵⁹ Many white Montgomeries cast King as a middle-class leader “only looking out for himself,” who wasn’t actually concerned about working-class Black people. They portrayed the boycott as the work of ministers who were getting money from it and asserted that ordinary Black people were just too scared to oppose it, and that they certainly would not have come up with it or been able to maintain the protest themselves. King was also suspected of being a Communist sympathizer. By June 1956, the Alabama NAACP had been outlawed in the state as a “foreign organization.” Whites who sympathized with the boycott were publicly attacked; librarian Juliette Morgan was targeted for her positive letter to the *Montgomery Advertiser* on the boycott and ultimately forced to resign from her job.⁵⁸

At critical junctures, the city attempted to treat the MIA and the White Citizens’ Council as two interest groups with competing claims that required balancing, rejecting the frame of morality or rights that King tried to bring to the meetings. When King protested the presence of a White Citizens’ Council member in the negotiating sessions, he was criticized for introducing mistrust into the meeting. White members of the negotiating committee also accused King of dominating the discussion and having “preconceived ideas” himself.⁵⁹ He was treated as inflexible and unreasonable to deflect the MIA’s position and allow city leaders to feel balanced and acting in good faith.

The city fought back in multiple ways. The police repeatedly harassed and ticketed car-pool drivers. They regarded the boycott as confrontational, annoying, and a threat that needed to be dealt with. In doing so,

they criminalized its leaders. Three months in, when ticketing and harassment hadn’t broken the back of the protest, the city dredged up an old anti-boycott law and indicted King and eighty-nine other boycott leaders (including Parks and Nixon).

One of the great myths of the boycott stems from two well-known photos of Parks: her #7053 mugshot and a photo of her being fingerprinted, wrongly attributed to the arrest on December 1, 1955. There was nothing to suggest that December evening that her arrest was newsworthy or destined to change history—and if a mugshot was taken, it’s not been found. These two photos were taken during that second arrest, on February 22, 1956. Parks and Nixon did not wait to be arrested. Upon learning of the indictments, and with crowds of people outside, they went to the police station and presented themselves: “Are you looking for me? I am here.”

The city’s indictment strategy backfired tremendously. The community’s resolve strengthened after the arrests; they had “committed the sin of being tired of segregation . . . and [had] the moral courage to sit up and express our tiredness,” as King put it the night after the arrests, and they were not going to be deterred.⁶² The MIA’s demands grew to full desegregation of the bus. And it was the city’s move to indict these eighty-nine boycott leaders (more than the boycott itself) that garnered national media attention and prompted the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* to begin seriously covering the Montgomery protest.⁶³

The tenth lesson is the value of multiple strategies of resistance. After months of boycott, with the city engaging in numerous tactics to break it, young lawyer Fred Gray, with the assistance of community activists, decided to file a proactive federal case, *Browder v. Gayle*, challenging Montgomery’s bus segregation. Nixon had worried that the state would just tie up Parks’s case, like it had a decade earlier with Viola White. Gray had hoped to get a minister or another man to be a plaintiff, but no one was willing, so the four plaintiffs were Aurelia Browder, Susie McDonald, Claudette Colvin, and Mary Louise Smith. Colvin and Smith took risks in choosing to be part of the case that most adults were unwilling to be part of. (Colvin was eight months pregnant.) A fifth woman, Jeanetta Reese, was named on the case but pulled out the next day because both she and her husband were threatened with physical violence. Parks was *not* on the case because Gray didn’t want to risk having it thrown out on a technicality, since Parks’s

case was already in state court. In addition, Parks's long history with the NAACP might have been a liability, as opposition to the organization mounted in Alabama.

In June 1956, in a surprise decision, two judges in a three-judge panel of the US District Court for the Middle District of Alabama declared Montgomery's bus segregation unconstitutional. Six months later, the US Supreme Court upheld that decision, and on December 20, 1956, after a 382-day boycott, Montgomery's buses were desegregated and Black people could sit wherever they liked.

The success of the Montgomery bus boycott was accomplished through a combination of tactics: years of spadework to lay a foundation for the movement to emerge; Rosa Parks's willingness to pursue her case in state court; the yearlong consumer boycott and corresponding car-pool effort built by local people and their grassroots organization; the federal legal case *Browder v. Gayle*, with four women plaintiffs; a tremendous amount of fund-raising; and a campaign to get the word across the country about what was happening. All were necessary to build momentum, power, and community capacity to gain the national attention that led to decisive change in Montgomery.

CHAPTER NINE: LEARNING TO PLAY ON LOCKED PIANOS

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