

The Rebellious Lives of Mrs. Rosa Parks

By **BILL BIGELOW**

THE TITLE OF THIS LESSON IS LIFTED FROM Jeanne Theoharis’s fine book, [The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks](#). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the shutdown of schools across the country, the Zinn Education Project has sponsored seminars we’ve called [People’s Historians Online](#). The first two were conversations between Rethinking Schools editor and Seattle teacher Jesse Hagopian and Brooklyn College professor and author Jeanne Theoharis, about the misrepresentation of Rosa Parks in the dominant narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. The sessions were wonderful — filled with story after story of Mrs. Parks’ lifelong commitment to racial justice. Theoharis emphasized that although textbooks and national tributes often focus only on Mrs. Parks’ courageous gesture of refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus to a white man, Mrs. Parks’ entire life is a tapestry of resistance. And, indeed, she spent more than half her life in the North — which Mrs. Parks called “the Northern promised land that wasn’t” — fighting segregation and injustice there.

Mrs. Parks’ life teaches so much. One of the stories in this mixer activity, drawn from Theoharis’s book, is about the immediate aftermath of Parks’ arrest. She was arrested on Dec. 1, 1955, a Thursday, and, of course, she had not intended to be arrested — in fact, she was distressed because she had NAACP work to do on the weekend, and this was a disruption. On Friday evening, there was a meeting with community leaders and ministers at the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to talk about what to do. Before Mrs. Parks arrived, she wondered “whether my getting arrested was going to set well or ill with the community — the leaders of the



Rosa Parks at the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, March 1972.

Black community.” Yes, she actually thought that people might be displeased with her for taking this stand. And when community leaders decided on a one-day boycott starting Monday morning, no one was certain that Black people in Montgomery would heed the call.

The boycott lasted 381 days.

The point is that on the *Wednesday* before the Thursday Mrs. Parks refused to comply with the bus driver’s order to give up her seat, it would have been utterly inconceivable to think that something



Ericka Huggins and Lisbet Tellefsen

During the 1979–1980 school year, Mrs. Parks visited the Oakland Community School (OCS), an elementary school run by the Black Panther Party. Educator and Black Panther Party leader Ericka Huggins is the woman standing among the children.

was about to happen in Montgomery that would change United States history. As Howard Zinn wrote in his autobiography: “Everything in history once it has happened looks as if it had to happen exactly that way. We can’t imagine any other. But I am convinced of the uncertainty of history, of the possibility of surprise, of the importance of human action in changing what looks unchangeable.” And that is a key lesson that can be drawn from Mrs. Parks’ life. Hers was a life of conscience and activism and principle — but with no guarantees that any one act would have transformative consequences. Rosa Parks’ story — the *real* version — teaches us that we work for justice without being sure that it will make a difference. And in a society like ours, riddled with racism and vast inequalities of wealth and power, this should be a source of hope because in a short period of time, things can change profoundly.

When radicals show up in the conventional curriculum, they are often one-dimensional: strident, loud, unbending. Theoharis calls Rosa Parks a “shy radical.” Parks can complicate how our students think about radicalism. There is not just one flavor. Mrs. Parks never sought the limelight, no matter how radical, how fundamental her critique of the status quo — whether she was working

with high school students, campaigning for John Conyers for Congress, organizing against police brutality, or working to defend women from sexual assault. And, of course, she challenges the wall that textbooks so often build between the Civil Rights and the Black Power movements, as she inhabited both arenas.

Theoharis talks about how traditional Rosa Parks stories “trap her on the bus.” It may be that one reason Parks is celebrated as a safe civil rights icon — even the right-wing, Koch brothers-funded Bill of Rights Institute memorializes her “quiet, dignified courage” — is because she opposed a *long-ago* injustice. She can be used to say, in effect, “Whew. Glad we’re done with that. No more segregation. Justice prevailed.” But as this lesson seeks to show, when one looks more fully at Rosa Parks’ life, one that did not begin nor end on a bus in Montgomery, we see that her activism feels very contemporary: protesting the unjust conviction and execution of Jeremiah Reeves, demanding accountability for the police murders of three unarmed Black teenagers in Detroit, protesting housing discrimination in the not-so-liberal North, and defending women’s right to resist sexual abuse. Rosa Parks’ life offers us a road map from the Civil Rights Movement to

Black Lives Matter and #MeToo.

Listening to Prof. Theoharis tell stories about Rosa Parks' "rebellious life" — from when she was 6 years old after World War I, sitting on her grandpa's porch waiting for the Klan to show up, to marching against South African apartheid in her 70s — it struck me that one way to animate Mrs. Parks' "lives" in the classroom would be for students to encounter some of these through a mixer role play. In this activity, instead of students representing different individuals as they do in other mixers, every student portrays a different rebellious moment in Rosa Parks' life. And through meeting one another, students surface the patterns of defiance on behalf of justice that coursed through her life. By sharing stories with each other, students are able to pry behind the "she was just tired" myth.

I write in the midst of the pandemic, and no one is attending actual in-person schools, so I'll have to wait to borrow someone's class to test out this lesson. However, in meetings with colleagues and other settings with students, I have used the small group features of Zoom, and it strikes me that this format could be easily adapted for this activity. But it would be presumptuous of me to offer a suggested procedure at this time of intense teacher creativity and adaptation. I trust that teachers will find ways to use these materials in our current teaching and learning circumstances.

I have written the roles in the first person, in the voice of Mrs. Rosa Parks to make it easier for students to speak in the "I" voice when telling each other stories about her experiences. I am aware that some teachers are uncomfortable asking their students to assume the personas of other people

throughout history. When I do these activities with students, I emphasize that, of course, we can never know what another person is thinking or feeling, but history is an act of imagination, an attempt at empathy. When we use the "I" voice for another person in history, it is part of our effort to consider the world from that person's standpoint. It is a gesture not of appropriation, but of respect and solidarity — albeit one that needs to be exercised with humility. And in the instance of imagining ourselves as Rosa Parks, it is an invitation to look at social reality from the point of view of someone whose entire life was dedicated to making the

world more equal and more just. It's a stance we hope our students will emulate. (Please see ["How to — and How Not to — Teach Role Plays"](#) at the Zinn Education Project.)

In writing these short scenes, when possible, I have used Rosa Parks' own words. Other times, the descriptions draw on the words of other people recounting their memories of what Mrs. Parks said. Sometimes the roles are taken word-for-word from the elegant prose of Jeanne Theoharis. And, in fact, a few of these roles were written by Theoharis herself, who has reviewed the full activity and has graciously

allowed the use of her book for this lesson. One important caveat: Even though written in first-person, please note that the roles should not be used for the purpose of quotation. Those seeking exact quotations from Mrs. Parks should consult *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, which will also be available as a young reader's edition in December 2020.



Rosa Parks, November 1956.
Library of Congress

Suggested Procedure:

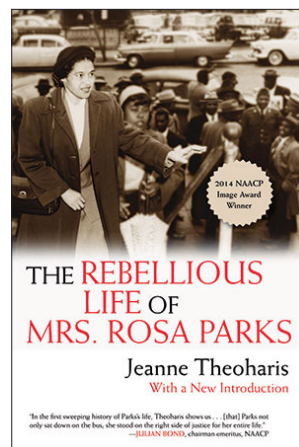
If this were a “normal” lesson and these were “normal” times, this is where I would share thoughts on how this mixer activity might be done in class, grounded in my own experiences teaching it. (See for example, “[U.S.-Mexico War: ‘We Take Nothing By Conquest, Thank God,’](#)” “[Stories from the Climate Crisis: A Mixer,](#)” or “[Unsung Heroes: Encouraging Students to Appreciate Those Who Fought for Social Justice.](#)”) But this lesson grew directly out of the Zinn Education Project’s People’s Historians Online sessions with Jeanne Theoharis and Jesse Hagopian, and has not yet been used with students. For the time being, we are offering this bare-bones version of the mixer, with just the different moments in Mrs. Rosa Parks’ rebellious life — the “roles” — and questions to prompt student conversations. If we were all in a classroom together, I would lead this mixer activity much the same way I lead other mixer activities, with students each receiving a role and then using the questions to guide one-on-one conversations, with students talking with one another, each representing a different point in Rosa Parks’ life. Zoom and other platforms offer new possibilities, and perhaps new obstacles.

You might begin by asking students to indicate whether they have heard of Mrs. Rosa Parks, and to share some of what they have learned. In *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, Theoharis writes, “Rosa Parks may be the most widely known American woman of the 20th century. In 2004,

high school students were asked to name their top 10 ‘most famous Americans in history’ (excluding presidents) from ‘Columbus to the present day.’ Sixty percent listed Rosa Parks, who was second in frequency only to King.” Share this with students and ask why she is so famous.

It makes no difference how much or how little students know about Rosa Parks; the mixer should help them gain a broader appreciation for her life of commitment and, yes, rebellion. Please share your teaching experiences of this activity with the Zinn Education Project, and we will update the lesson as we experiment with it ourselves. As the title of the book of dialogues between Myles Horton of the Highlander Folk School and the Brazilian radical educator Paulo Freire proclaimed: “We make the road by walking.” ❖

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1.

As a little girl, I lived in a small town in Alabama. When I was 6 years old, I saw Black soldiers returning from World War I, acting as if they deserved equal rights because they had served their country — but that is not how they were treated. During the summer of 1919, which became known as Red Summer, whites rioted around the country, and tried to put Black people back in their place. The Ku Klux Klan burned churches, and people were often flogged or found dead. In the face of this growing violence, my grandfather, Sylvester Edwards, would often sit out at night on the porch with his rifle. He almost dared the Klan to come onto our property because he was ready to meet them head-on. He had been born into slavery, and had been beaten and nearly starved as a boy. He was not going to allow the KKK to treat us like we were still in slavery. I stayed awake with him some nights, keeping vigil with him. I wanted to see him kill a Ku Kluxer. Sometimes we would sleep with our clothes on because we were afraid that we might be attacked in our sleep.

2.

My grandmother had been born in slavery. When I was little, my grandmother worried about my “talking biggety to white folks.” I remember her being angry when I told her that a white boy named Franklin began taunting my little brother, Sylvester, and me. I picked up a brick and dared him to hit me. He thought better of the idea and went away. I told my grandmother: “I would rather be lynched than live to be mistreated and not be allowed to say ‘I don’t like it.’” My grandmother said I was too “high-strung,” and that I would be lynched before I turned 20.

3.

I was in my late teens, doing domestic work in 1931. One time, a Black worker, Sam, let a big white man into the house. I’ll just call him Mr. Charlie. He got a drink, and put his hand on my waist and tried to make a move on me. I was ready and willing to die, but give any consent? Never, never, never. Mr. Charlie said he’d gotten permission from Sam to be with me, but I told him Sam doesn’t own me, and that I hated both of them. I was not going to give my consent to him. If he wanted to rape me, he was welcome, but he would have to kill me first.

4.

I married my husband, Raymond Parks, in 1932. Raymond was a very gentle person, very polite. One of the things that attracted me to Raymond is that he expected to be treated like a man, and was not afraid to speak back to white people. And I was impressed that Raymond stood up for justice. Our marriage happened right in the middle of the campaign to save the “Scottsboro Boys” — nine young men aged 12 to 19 who had been wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death in Scottsboro, Alabama, in 1931. They’d been charged with rape, just because they had hopped a train where two young white women were riding. All the young men except the 12-year-old were found guilty of rape and sentenced to death. Raymond went to secret meetings to save the Scottsboro Boys. It was dangerous, and I never knew if he’d come home alive. Sometimes they’d meet at our house, in the middle of the night. Our kitchen table would be covered with guns. We were going to defend ourselves if attacked.

5.

In 1952, Jeremiah Reeves was a 16-year-old young senior and a talented jazz drummer at Booker T. Washington High School, in Montgomery, Alabama. He had a consensual relationship with a young white woman from the neighborhood. She became fearful that the relationship would be discovered and falsely accused Reeves of sexual assault. He was arrested, beaten, and, ultimately, he confessed to rape after being forced to sit in an electric chair. Later he retracted his confession. Still, he was tried and sentenced to death. I took a special interest in his case. The Montgomery, Alabama, branch of the NAACP, where I was the secretary, worked for years to free Reeves. I wrote letters to him in prison and got his poetry published in the newspaper. I tried to find evidence to prove that this white woman was lying. But Jeremiah Reeves was executed on March 28, 1958. The things that young Black men suffered because of white women! Sometimes it was very difficult to keep going, when all our work seemed to be in vain.

6.

In the early 1950s, in Montgomery, Alabama, the main library did not allow Black people to check out books. I helped organize the NAACP Youth Council to stage protests at the main library. Again and again, we would show up and request to be served. But the library refused to change. Just because we protested, didn’t mean we were going to win. But I was so encouraged by the action-oriented nature of the young people I worked with. One of the things I liked about the youth is they started right in to write letters to Washington about anti-lynching legislation. They didn’t spend a lot of time arguing over motions, and there was a difference from the senior branch of the NAACP in their way of conducting their meetings. Many young people were warned by their parents and teachers not to get involved in civil rights. There was this popular phrase: “In order to stay out of trouble you have to stay in your place.” But when you stayed in your place, you were still insulted and mistreated if white people saw fit to do so.

7.

Sometimes I would say that protest must be in my blood. Many years before the famous incident when I refused to give up my seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, my mother had been sitting near the back of the bus next to a young white serviceman. The white bus driver told her to move or he would throw her off the bus. My mother stood up, very politely smiled in his face, and said, “You won’t do that.” The driver returned to the front of the bus. I could hardly contain myself, I was so excited, but before I could say anything, here came a very deep bass voice of a brother in the back of the bus. I don’t know who he was or what he looked like, but he said very clearly, very distinctly, “If he touches her, I’m hanging my knife in his throat.” So the bus driver didn’t touch my mother, and I was happy he didn’t, because he would have been pretty badly hurt by me with what I had, only my fingers. But I also remember my mother telling me, “Too many times I’ve had to get up and stand up so a white man could sit.”

8.

I know that I’m famous for being the one arrested for refusing to give up a seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. But before me, there were others who protested segregation on buses and trains. Here in Montgomery, about nine months before I was arrested, a teenage girl, Claudette Colvin, was arrested. On March 2, 1955, little 15-year-old Claudette was riding the bus home from Booker T. Washington High School with her friends. As Colvin said, “We had been studying the Constitution in Miss Nesbitt’s class. I knew I had rights.” Soon the white section on the bus filled up, and a white woman was left standing. The driver called out, and the three students sitting in Colvin’s row got up. But Colvin stayed seated. The standing white woman refused to sit across the aisle from her. Colvin remembered that the driver yelled out again, “Why are you still sittin’ there?” A white rider yelled from the front, “You got to get up!” A girl named Margaret Johnson answered from the back, “She ain’t got to do nothin’ but stay Black and die.” Colvin was arrested by two cops, one of whom called her a “thing.” Poor Claudette said that she was terrified riding in the police car, not knowing what the police might do to her. Her arrest angered me, and the entire Black community in Montgomery. Members in the Women’s Political Council (WPC) had been talking about a boycott of the buses to protest segregation. I was not a WPC member, but Claudette’s arrest convinced many of us activists that we had to do something. I began to raise money to support Colvin’s case, and got Colvin involved in the NAACP Youth Council meetings.

9.

When little 15-year-old Claudette Colvin was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, in March of 1955 for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white woman, I began organizing to support her, along with Virginia Durr, a white woman who was active in civil rights and social justice causes. Letters and donations poured in to support Colvin. I hoped that Colvin's arrest would embolden other young people and spark interest in the NAACP youth meetings that I helped organize. I encouraged Colvin to get active in the youth chapter. I remember when I first met Claudette. I said, "You're Claudette Colvin? Oh my God, I was lookin' for some big old burly overgrown teenager who sassed white people out . . . but no, they pulled a little girl off the bus." Claudette told me, "They pulled me off because I refused to walk off." I got my mother, Leona McCauley, to bake cookies for a fundraiser for Colvin. When the case finally went to court in May, the judge dropped both the charges of disturbing the peace and violating the segregation law, but found this tiny teenage girl guilty for assaulting police officers, who were big grown men. Black people in Montgomery were outraged.

10.

On Nov. 27, 1955, I went to a mass meeting at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, where I was living, to hear Dr. T. R. M. Howard speak. Dr. Howard had spent the past four months raising attention about the lynching of a 14-year-old Black boy, Emmett Till. Till had gone to Mississippi from Chicago to visit his uncle; he was joking with friends outside a grocery and went inside. No one knows what happened in the store, but Carolyn Bryant, who owned the grocery, claimed he tried to grab her and said things to her. [Note that in 2008, Bryant admitted Till did not grab her.] A couple days later, Bryant's husband and brother-in-law came to where Till was staying, kidnapped him, tortured and killed him and threw him in the river. I was sickened by the detailed description of Till's murder, and I continued to think about this gruesome killing in the days after the meeting. It seemed to me that everything possible that was done by way of brutality and oppression was kept well under the cover and not brought out in the open or publicized. We needed to show that we would not take this kind of treatment. Demonstrating dissent was crucial, even if it did nothing. It should not be taken for granted that Black people were satisfied or would stay quiet.

11.

On the evening of Dec. 1, 1955, I was riding the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, where I was living. I was sitting in the middle section of the bus, a section used by both white and Black riders. The bus driver, James Fred Blake, ordered me to give up my seat to a white passenger. This was the first time I had ever been directly told to give up my seat for a white person. I refused. To give up my seat wasn't making it light on ourselves as a people. I thought about my grandfather, who kept a gun to protect the family. Blacks paid the same fare as white people. Blake could have just removed me from the bus, as he'd done in the past, but he decided to have me arrested. By law, it was his choice. When the policemen were arresting me, I asked them, "Why do you push us around?" One officer answered, "I don't know, but the law is the law and you're under arrest." I didn't even know if I would get off the bus alive. I tried not to think about what might happen. I had been pushed around all my life and felt at this moment that I couldn't take it anymore. I had not planned to be arrested this day. But you died a little each time you found yourself face to face with this kind of discrimination.

12.

When I refused to give up my seat to a white man on that Montgomery, Alabama, bus on Dec. 1, 1955, I was acting as an individual. No one on that bus stood up with me. But I had gained strength from my work against segregation with the NAACP. That summer I had been at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. Esau Jenkins, the African American South Carolina civil rights activist, described Highlander's influence on my action. He said that Highlander taught: "If you have to sit for your rights, sit for it. If you've got to crawl for it or wade for it or march for it or demonstrate for it, do that. If that's what necessary to do at that time to bring the focus, the public, on the evil that is being happening to the people, and [Rosa Parks] said, 'Well, I'm not going to get up this day.'" My experience at Highlander the summer of 1955 had given me new vision and raised my expectations. My friend Virginia Durr said that when I got back from Highlander, she noticed that I "felt so happy and felt so liberated." As the great organizer and teacher Septima Clark wrote about me, "Had you seen Rosa Parks (the Montgomery sparkplug) when she came to Highlander you would understand just how much *guts* she got while being there." Highlander had furthered my sense of outrage and widened my sense of possibility.

13.

After my arrest for refusing to give up my seat to a white man on the city bus in Montgomery, Alabama, on Dec. 1, 1955, I was taken to jail. I was released from jail later that night, after NAACP president E. D. Nixon posted my bail. My husband, Raymond, and I, along with Nixon, and white civil rights activists Virginia and Clifford Durr met in our apartment and drank coffee and talked about next steps. Should we try to get the charges dropped? Clifford Durr thought they probably could. But Nixon saw this as the bigger opportunity they had been waiting for to launch an attack on bus segregation in Montgomery. “Mr. Durr’s right,” Nixon explained, “it’ll be a long and hard struggle. It’ll cost a lot of money. But we’ll get the NAACP behind it, I promise you that. It won’t cost you and Mr. Parks anything but time and misery. But I think it will be worth all the time and misery.” Raymond knew this would be dangerous, and was not sure that the Black community would stand together. He thought the white people might kill both of us for standing against segregation. But after talking with Raymond and my mother, I decided to fight the charges.

14.

People now know that after my arrest on Dec. 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to give up a seat on the bus to a white man, the Black boycott of the city buses went on for 381 days. But to begin with, the idea was that Black people would boycott the city buses for just one day, on the day of my court hearing. The one-day boycott was called by the Women’s Political Council, and they distributed thousands of leaflets calling on people to boycott. The leaflet read “Another Negro woman has been arrested . . . If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue . . .” I was arrested on a Thursday, and the boycott was to be on Monday. I went to work at my job as an assistant tailor on Friday. My friend, E. D. Nixon, a longtime organizer for justice, called to invite me to a meeting that night at the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s church with other ministers and community leaders. I didn’t know how people were going to feel about my being arrested — would it set well or ill with leaders of the Black community? They asked me to speak at the meeting and when I spoke, I told everyone that we had to act together. The ministers all decided to back the boycott. I had been a civil rights activist and NAACP member for years, but instead people talked about my being a “good Christian woman and tired seamstress.” Would people stay off the buses on Monday morning? My most vivid memory from the entire boycott year was waking up Dec. 5, looking out, and seeing the buses almost completely empty. It was a magisterial sight: Nearly every Black person in Montgomery had stayed off the bus. The sidewalks and streets of Montgomery filled with Black men, women, and children walking, waiting, offering rides to people they knew or had never met.

15.

After the first day of our bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama — Monday, Dec. 5, 1955 — to protest segregation and our mistreatment as Black people, there was a mass meeting, where we decided to continue the boycott until our demands were met. We had three demands: first-come, first-serve seating on buses; respectful, courteous service; and the hiring of Black bus drivers. The meeting that Monday night after the first day of the boycott was huge and joyous. There were 15,000 people who showed up, and 5,000 people crammed into the Holt Street Baptist Church. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke and said, “Right here in Montgomery, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, ‘There lived a great person — a Black person — who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.’” People stood and cheered. I didn’t give a speech, but when I was introduced, people gave me a standing ovation. I did as many things for the boycott as I could. By the next week, after the meeting, an elaborate ride and pickup system had been set up. The effect was most startling. People were walking in the worst weather, even for miles. And people had banded together to provide a system of rides, formal and informal, for people who needed them. The boycott was sustained by the development of the car pool. We passed around slips of paper asking: *Can you drive in a car pool? Do you own your car? Insurance? What hours? Who will drive your car? What hours will you serve?* Three hundred people volunteered their cars, and we had 41 stations around the city. I worked as a dispatcher for a while, helping people find rides.

16.

Five weeks after my bus stand, Montgomery Fair Department Store, where I worked, let me go. People at work after my arrest had stopped talking to me. And now I was out of a job. A week later, my husband Raymond was forced to resign his job as a barber, because his boss forbid any talk of the boycott or “that woman” in the barber shop. How could he work in a place where he couldn’t even talk about what was happening to us? We never were able to find steady work again in Montgomery. Throughout the boycott, people would call and say nasty things or threaten us. Even after the boycott ended, these continued. Our health suffered. After a while, we realized we just couldn’t make it in Montgomery and in August 1957 (eight months after the boycott’s end) we made the difficult decision to move to Detroit, where my brother Sylvester and cousins now lived. But our difficulties continued. For years in Detroit, we struggled to find work or a decent place to rent. In 1959, I ended up in the hospital when the ulcers that developed during the boycott worsened. We couldn’t afford the hospital bill. In 1960, I gave an interview to *Jet* magazine on our situation — and they ran a story titled “The Bus Boycott’s Forgotten Woman.” They described me as a “tattered rag of my former self.” Black people all across the country wrote and some sent money, which was very kind but not the same as having a steady job. Finally, in 1961, I got a job at the Stockton Sewing Company. It was hard, tiring work and I got paid by the piece (kind of like a sweatshop) but we were finally able to rent a first-floor apartment in the Virginia Park neighborhood in Detroit.

17.

The best speech I ever heard the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. deliver was in Detroit on June 23, 1963 — two months before the famous March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. (I'd moved to Detroit from Montgomery, Alabama, in 1957, and lived more than half my life there.) The march drew almost 200,000 people. Black people in Detroit were tired of being treated like second-class citizens. Dr. King told everybody that segregation and discrimination were rampant in Michigan as well as Alabama. Frankly, we were tired of the overly cautious stance of the NAACP Detroit chapter, and so this demonstration had been called by local Detroit activists, including the great minister, the Rev. C. L. Franklin, Aretha Franklin's father. We were all dressed in our Sunday best. Even though I was at the front of the march, the newspapers didn't mention me. The march was almost entirely Black people. The Rev. King called this the "greatest demonstration for freedom ever held in the United States." Motown put out a record album of Dr. King's speech, and I played it over and over.

18.

When people think of Rosa Parks, they remember me refusing to give up my seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. But I lived most of my life in the North, in Detroit. And racism in Detroit was almost as bad as in Montgomery. Though they did not post signs, many Detroit restaurants refused to serve Black people. One well-known restaurant, Joe Muer Seafood, served Black customers in the back, wrapping their fish dinners in newspaper. Detroit hospitals separated Black and white patients; some even maintained segregated wards. The Arcadia skating rink, located on Woodward Avenue, didn't allow Black skaters. And it was legal for realtors and homeowners to discriminate against Black people. I became active protesting this treatment. On July 27, 1963, I was in the front of a march organized by the Detroit chapter of the NAACP protesting housing discrimination in the Oak Park neighborhood of Detroit. There were 200 of us marching. I was joined by Myrlie Evers, the wife of Medgar Evers, the field secretary for the Mississippi NAACP, who'd been assassinated the month before.

19.

In Detroit, in early 1964, I became active in the campaign of the civil rights lawyer John Conyers to get elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Conyers' campaign was for "Jobs, Justice, Peace" — he was an early opponent of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and the new antiwar movement supported him, as well as civil rights activists and more progressive members of the labor movement. I didn't play a leadership role, I just helped with whatever campaign tasks needed to be done. Conyers was in a very tight race, and so I called Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who I knew well from our time in Montgomery, and told him, "You've got to come to Detroit and embrace Brother Conyers. We need you." How could he refuse? Over Easter weekend, Dr. King came to Detroit, where he gave a moving speech at Central United Methodist Church and then endorsed Conyers' campaign. It was the only political endorsement Dr. King ever made. John Conyers won the Democratic primary by 43 votes. Congressman Conyers later said, "If it wasn't for Rosa Parks, I never would have gotten elected."

20.

In November 1963, I met Malcolm X for the first time. He had come to Detroit to give a speech (now known as “Message to the Grassroots”) and he told a friend of mine that he wanted to meet. He admired my courage. I admired him too — he was so clear and so outspoken about the kind of liberal racism we encountered in the North. Here, people claimed not to be racist but wanted to keep their schools and neighborhoods segregated nonetheless. Malcolm X reminded me of my grandfather (who also believed in self-defense, as did I). We saw each other three times before he was assassinated Feb. 21, 1965. Activists need other activists; his courage inspired me and people told me my courage inspired him. Some people didn’t love that I admired both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. To me, it’s not a choice — they both were deeply courageous, deeply principled and deeply committed to fighting for racial justice — you can love them both.

21.

In July of 1967, Detroit erupted into a rebellion, following yet another police raid on a bar where people were celebrating the return home of a soldier from Vietnam. It started about a mile from our house. Police often raided Black bars like these and harassed people on the street. People were at a breaking point. Some people began to throw rocks and loot stores and burn buildings. In response the police cracked down. Congressman Conyers called it a “police riot.” The worst incident took place the fourth night and the police killed three Black teenagers in the Algiers Motel. The police claimed self-defense, but no weapons were ever found and witnesses said it had been an execution of the three young men. But the police officers weren’t charged with a crime and even the newspapers wouldn’t investigate. Some young Black Power activists decided to hold a “People’s Tribunal” to try to get the truth out. They asked me if I would serve on the jury. I said yes. It took place in Rev. Albert Cleage’s church (which came to be known as the Shrine of the Black Madonna because earlier that year he’d installed a huge painting of a Black Mary and Jesus). The church was packed; journalists from Europe came to cover the event. It was very controversial and there were death threats. But we listened to all the evidence of what had actually happened that night — and found the officers guilty.

22.

When I was living in Detroit in 1974, I heard about Joan Little (pronounced Jo Ann), a 20-year-old Black woman serving a seven-year sentence for burglary. Her white guard, Clarence Alligood, had threatened her with an ice pick, and demanded that she perform oral sex on him. Little managed to grab the ice pick, stabbed Alligood, escaped, and turned herself in to police days later. Alligood died, and Joan Little was charged with murder. It was important that people stood up to support Little, so I co-founded Detroit's Joan Little Defense Committee. In the mission statement of our Detroit group, we said that women had the right to defend themselves against sexual attackers, and we talked about how, too often, poor people cannot afford to mount an adequate defense. I was in charge of asking for support from other organizations. People all over the country organized to support her. Ultimately, Little was found not guilty, becoming [the first woman in U.S. history](#) to successfully use self-defense against sexual assault in a homicide case.

Mixer Questions

1. Find a time before Mrs. Rosa Parks lived in Montgomery when she stood up for what she thought was right.
2. Find a time in Mrs. Rosa Parks' early life that helps explain her activism.
3. Find information that helps show what Mrs. Rosa Parks did leading up to and during the 1955–56 Montgomery Bus Boycott.
4. Find a time when Mrs. Rosa Parks stood up for justice when she was living in Detroit.
5. Find a time when Mrs. Rosa Parks acted in solidarity to support another individual or group. Who was the individual or group, and what did Parks do?
6. Find a time when Mrs. Rosa Parks stood up against sexual assault — sexual assault against her, or on behalf of someone else.
7. Find an individual or an organization that played a role in Mrs. Rosa Parks' activism. Who is the person or organization and what role did they play?
8. Find a “rebellious” moment in Mrs. Rosa Parks' life that you admire. Why do you admire this?

Use the online role assignment template for remote instruction.

Click [here](#) to make a copy of the Google Doc, pictured below, with links to the online materials. Copy the Google Doc “Role Assignments for Remote Instruction Template,” enter your students’ names in the left column, and the class will be able to access their roles online by clicking on the linked names to the right.

TEACHING PEOPLE'S HISTORY

ZINN EDUCATION PROJECT

A collaboration between Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change.

Remote Instruction Role Assignments

The Rebellious Lives of Mrs. Rosa Parks

By Bill Bigelow

Lesson Link: <https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/rebellious-rosa-parks-mixer>

Teacher Instructions: Assign your students roles and groups by entering each of their names into the left-hand column. The template here comes with spaces for 38 students, or 19 roles assigned twice. Add or remove spaces to fit your classroom size. Delete these instructions, delete “Template,” and share this sheet with your students.

Students'/Participants' Names	Link to Role Assignment
1. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #1
2. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #2
3. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #3
4. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #4
5. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #5
6. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #6
7. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #7
8. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #8
9. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #9
10. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #10
11. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #11
12. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #12
13. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #13
14. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #14
15. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #15
16. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #16
17. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #17
18. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #18
19. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #19
20. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #20
21. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #21
22. Student name	Mrs. Rosa Parks #22

Role assignments for the lesson [The Rebellious Lives of Mrs. Rosa Parks](#)
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Then, share the specific materials you want to use with your students for synchronous or asynchronous learning.