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"In a Matter of Hours We Could Corral the Whole City": How a Women's Group Used a Half-Page Leaflet to Mobilize the Montgomery Bus Boycott

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Abstract

On Friday morning, December 2, 1955, less than 18 hours after Rosa Parks's arrest, copies of an anonymous, half-page leaflet began circulating in Black neighborhoods of Montgomery, Alabama. It called for a 1-day boycott of city buses on Monday, December 5. The leaflet was the work of the Women's Political Council (WPC), namely, its president, Jo Ann Robinson. After drafting the text on the night of December 1, she drove to her office at Alabama State College (ASC) to copy it, then, the next day, with helpers, distributed those copies across the city. By evening, nearly everyone in Montgomery's Black community knew of the boycott plan. This article offers the fullest examination yet of that leaflet, one of the most impactful texts of its kind in U.S. history. It analyzes its composition, which drew on years of activism by the WPC; its reproduction, using a mimeograph machine at ASC; and its distribution, by car, foot, and hand, across a divided urban landscape. Rhetoric and writing studies help us uncover the material

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resources, social context, and situated processes that enabled that text; history reminds us of its extraordinary mobilizing power.

Keywords
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The decades-old shift in writing studies from a focus on *texts* to investigation of *contexts* has intensified in recent years as researchers have troubled the idea of context itself: seeing the "place" of writing as shifting and fluid, texts as unavoidably linked with other texts, agency as distributed across humans, objects, and actions. Thus, in circulation studies, rhetoric is always embedded in "an ongoing social flux" (Edbauer, 2005, p. 9); in new materialist theory, reality is "socially, materially, and discursively co-constituted" in the play of "human bodies, nonhuman entities, energies, and practices" (Gries, 2019, p. 352); in an ecological framework, public discourse is "enacted through a complex system of multiple, concatenated documents and rhetorical actions" (Rivers & Weber, 2011, p. 195). These insights help us resist the impulse to make the central scene of our research "a single author writing a single text for a single audience" (p. 189).

But such approaches also risk flattening rhetorical experience, making it difficult to discriminate among situations, texts, and acts, leaving us ill-equipped to appreciate moments of heightened rhetorical urgency, writing of uncommon resourcefulness, texts especially well fitted to situation, readers unusually responsive to those texts. Take the term "circulation," so useful in accounting for the *movement* of texts across space and time: it is arguably less useful when one wishes to emphasize a text's narrative arc, how particular writers in a particular situation attempt to mobilize particular readers for particular "ends"—the word itself is out of place in a circulatory framework. Such an approach need not mean subscribing to outmoded models of communication. Indeed, contextual investigation and textual analysis can be usefully *combined* to provide accounts of public writing and rhetoric that are both inclusive and searching, on the one hand, and sensitive to pivotal moments and acts, on the other.

This article examines a single text from a year-long social action campaign that took place in the U.S. South in the middle of the twentieth century, a campaign in which a multitude of rhetorical acts emerged from a "vibrant interpersonal and intertextual network" (Rivers & Weber, 2011, p. 198).

Acknowledging that longer and larger context, the analysis nonetheless focuses on one 24-hour period, telling the story of a particular text from invention to delivery. The point is not to glorify a heroic rhetor or reinscribe a rhetorical myth; indeed, the text examined here is one that history has largely overlooked, a mundane, ephemeral text that barely survived the 24-hour period under investigation. And yet, as the article will try to show, it was an extraordinarily consequential text, responsible in large part for initiating one of the most important events of the campaign. Its story is thus hard to tell from an "intransitive" point of view, in which rhetoric is "an unfolding event—a distributed, material process of becomings" (Gries, 2015, p. 7). That said, in shining a light on such rhetorical elements as writerly initiative and carefully devised distribution plans, the analysis does not neglect the dependence of such elements on the role of diverse helpers, myriad resources, and sheer happenstance.

In fact, other writing studies scholars have examined the same campaign through a much more expansive, ecological approach, an alternative to "atomistic models that highlight isolated rhetorical acts" (Rivers & Weber, 2011, p. 196). Such research takes in many more years, agents, texts, and events, and sees any single rhetorical act as existing "within a diverse environment of mundane, concatenated texts and counter-rhetorics" (p. 197). The research presented here does not argue with any of that. Both things, after all, can be true: that we should be careful about extracting any one moment, agent, or text out of rhetorical history and that we should be open to noticing and appreciating objects and acts of uncommon rhetorical power. What follows is an attempt to satisfy both dictates in the case of one important episode in U.S. history.

Introduction

The Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-1956 is often hailed as the first successful mass protest of the U.S. civil rights movement (Glennon, 1991, p. 107; see also Branch, 1988; Garrow, 1989; Thornton, 2014; Williams, 1987). For 382 days, beginning December 5, 1955, the local Black community stayed off city buses to protest their harassment there, only returning on December 20, 1956, after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down Alabama's bus segregation laws. Numbering around 45,000 total, spread across a fractured urban landscape, divided along lines of gender, class, religion, and ideology, and unaccustomed to mass political activism, the community came together with courage and commitment—and stayed together for 13 months.[1]

Especially notable was the support of the community's working-class members, those dependent on public transportation for their livelihoods.

These were people for whom participation in the boycott was a true sacrifice. As Williams (1987) later put it, "Asking blacks to protest for their rights in Montgomery was asking a lot. They could expect to be fired from their jobs and harassed on the streets, and could possibly become the victims of an economic boycott on the part of white segregationists" (p. 63). The boycott benefited from its dedicated leaders, but many of them had never set foot on a Montgomery bus (Wilson, 2005, p. 308); what made the protest a success was the widespread participation of the town's regular bus riders.

And their numbers were impressive. At a hearing in May, 1956, a representative of Montgomery City Lines claimed that it was losing 30,000-40,000 fares a day. Since most riders averaged two fares per day, that amounted to 15,000-20,000 boycotters, as many as 99% of regular Black riders (Browder v. Gayle, 1956, p. 61).[2] With Black riders 75%-80% of total passengers (Robinson, 1987, p. 58), the boycott was thus stunningly effective.

A key factor in keeping the participation rate going so long was the support of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), founded on the afternoon of the boycott's first day. It managed the carpool system, organized regular mass meetings, coordinated with the legal team, and financed it all through fund-raising. The MIA's president, a young Martin Luther King, Jr., also provided the protest's rhetorical and ideological frame, laid out in the boycott's "first oration" (Wilson, 2005, p. 299), delivered at Holt Street Baptist Church on the night of December 5, 1955.

But the participation rate on the boycott's first morning, when at least 90% of Black riders stayed off the buses (Honicker, 1955, p. 2A), was already remarkably high, and this was before the MIA was formed, before King became its president, before the Holt Street meeting at which the protest was extended and its rhetorical and ideological tone set. Indeed, the scale of the protest that morning was a surprise to everyone. King (1958) called it a "miracle" (p. 54). Without that success, it is possible there would have been no MIA, no Holt Street meeting, no 382 days, no King. The civil rights movement itself might have unfolded differently.

How did it happen? How was Montgomery's large, diverse Black community, including so many who had never participated in a protest before, mobilized so quickly and so completely? One possibility: *it just happened*. When Rosa Parks was arrested on a city bus on the evening of December 1, 1955, for refusing to give up her seat for a White passenger, the community spontaneously rose up to support her. She was so well-regarded, the injustice of her arrest so blatant, the community so tired of such treatment, they came together, unprompted, to end the injustice. As appealing as such a narrative is, it is untenable. There had been years of mistreatment on Montgomery's buses, including multiple arrests of Black riders in 1955, but there had never

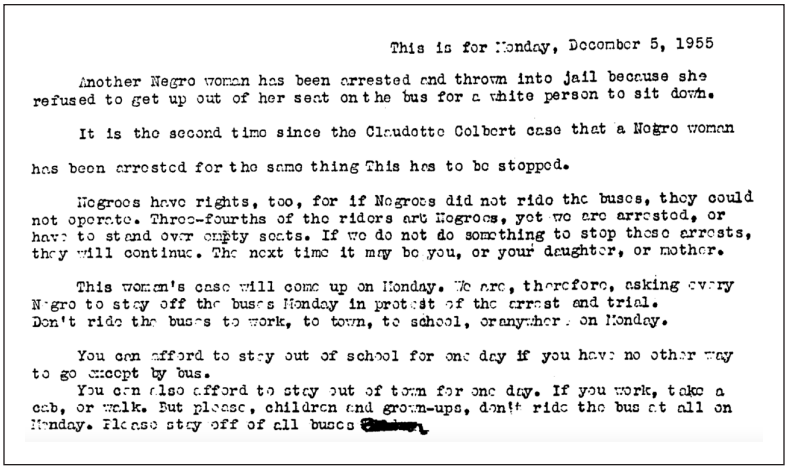
been such a response. As for Parks, her saintly image was as much a *result* of the boycott as its cause (Wilson, 2005, pp. 312ff). It is true that hundreds showed up on the morning of December 5 for her trial (Nixon, 1979), but it is unrealistic to claim that nearly 20,000 bus riders all decided to protest, for the first time, on the same day, in the same way.

The boycott's first day must therefore have been *organized*. But before midday on December 5, 1955, there was no MIA and no evidence that any other group, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), ordered the boycott. Nor did a leader suddenly emerge on December 1 to direct events. We now think of Martin Luther King, Jr., as the other face of the boycott, alongside Rosa Parks, but he played no major role in the boycott's "twilight period" (Fields, n.d.), between December 1 and 5. Indeed, only 26 years old, he had just moved to Montgomery in 1954 to accept a pulpit there. His description of the boycott's first day as a "miracle" is an implicit acknowledgment that he had little to do with it.

Even later, when King was presiding over the MIA, he was as beholden to "the people" as they were to him. In the transcripts of the May 11, 1956, hearing for *Browder v. Gayle*, it is striking how resistant the boycotters are to name him their "leader." When asked if King and the MIA had told her to stop riding the buses on December 5, Aurelia Browder replied, "We, the Negroes, request the Rev. King, and not he over us" (p. 5). Likewise, when Mary Louise Smith was asked, "Did you get together and agree to stop riding on December 5th?" she replied, "No, we didn't get together. We just stopped ourselves" (p. 15). As for King, "We appointed him as our leader" (p. 16). Similarly, when Claudette Colvin was asked how the group started boycotting, she replied, "Did we have a leader? Our leaders is just we ourself. We are just a group of people" (p. 23).

Regarding the local Black church, it too played only a marginal role in mobilizing the boycott's first day. An interdenominational ministerial meeting was held on Friday evening, December 2, to respond to Parks's arrest, but as Thornton (2014) has shown, by the time the ministers met that night, the December 5 boycott was a "*fait accompli*" (p. 74). They jumped aboard a train already moving down the tracks. The same can be said of E. D. Nixon, perhaps the leading Black organizer in town. As we'll see below, he helped arrange the December 2 meeting but was himself gone all day.

If the success of the boycott's first day was neither the result of organizational fiat nor a spontaneous uprising by the people themselves, what then accounts for it? We get closer to the truth if we heed Robnett's (1996) claim that, in the civil rights movement, there was an intermediate layer of activity between the people and their leaders, a "substructure" (p. 1663) often occupied by women, who informally bridged the established movement



This is for Monday, December 5, 1955

Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown into jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down.

It is the second time since the Claudette Colbert case that a Negro woman has been arrested for the same thing This has to be stopped.

Negroes have rights, too, for if Negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate. Three-fourths of the riders are Negroes, yet we are arrested, or have to stand over empty seats. If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother.

This woman's case will come up on Monday. We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial. Don't ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday.

You can afford to stay out of school for one day if you have no other way to go except by bus.

You can also afford to stay out of town for one day. If you work, take a cab, or walk. But please, children and grown-ups, don't ride the bus at all on Monday. Please stay off of all buses [redacted]

Figure 1. Image of a surviving copy of the leaflet.[3]

organizations and "those already predisposed to movement activity" (p. 1661). In fact, a local women's group, the Women's Political Council (WPC), did have a hand in mobilizing the first day of the Montgomery bus boycott. But its planning of the protest was far less direct than the MIA's leadership would later be. Indeed, in the period between Rosa Parks's arrest and the first day of the boycott, the group held no formal meeting, issued no official statement, and led no overt campaign.

How then was the December 5 boycott mobilized? At the time, without a dedicated newspaper or radio station, and before the regular meetings of the MIA, the main means of political communication within Montgomery's Black community were the church and word of mouth (Reddick, 1989, p. 74). While both means of communication clearly played a role in the protest's first day, quick mobilization of 15,000-20,000 widely dispersed bus riders—largely working class and without experience in mass action—cries out for the kind of coordination provided by *written* communication.

And in fact there was such communication. On Friday morning, December 2, 1955, not 18 hours after Rosa Parks's arrest, copies of an anonymous, half-page leaflet began appearing in Black parts of Montgomery (see Figure 1).

The leaflet was mainly the work of the WPC's president, Jo Ann Robinson, a 43-year-old English professor at historically Black Alabama State College (ASC), though most residents, Black and White, never knew who wrote, copied, and distributed it. Whatever its provenance, by Friday evening, December 2, it was all over town. As Azbell (1955) put it in the December 4, 1955,

Montgomery Adverstiser: "Yesterday [*sic*] Negro sections were flooded with thousands of copies of mimeographed or typed letters asking Negroes to refrain from riding city busses Monday" (p. 1). In March 1956, ASC professor L. D. Reddick (1989) described the scene similarly: "Out of nowhere, it seems, written and mimeographed appeals appeared in the Negro community" (p. 70). And in October 1956, another ASC professor, Norman Walton (1989), wrote, "when the Negroes of Montgomery heard of Mrs. Parks' arrest, thousands of circulars were distributed urging Negroes not to ride the city buses on the following Monday" (p. 6).

In Martin Luther King, Jr.'s own account of the boycott, published in 1958, he does not say who was behind the December 2 flyers, but he describes them this way: "By two o'clock [on Friday] an enthusiastic group had mimeographed leaflets concerning the arrest and the proposed boycott and by evening these had been widely circulated" (pp. 45-46). In 1962, another minister, Rev. E. N. French (1989), gave a picture of the scale involved: the announcement reached "50,000 Negroes" within hours (p. 176).

When the ministers met on the evening of December 2, they thus endorsed a plan that had already been widely disseminated. Then they authorized a *second* leaflet, based on the first but adding a new piece of information, that there would be a mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church on the evening of the boycott's first day (King, 1958, pp. 47-48).[4] The original leaflet, meanwhile, was leaked to the *Montgomery Advertiser*, which printed it in full on Sunday, December 4 (Azbell, 1955), alerting Whites to the protest but also getting the message out to members of the Black community who hadn't yet seen it. The leaflet's message was further endorsed in Black churches that day. And it was no doubt a topic of conversation in Black homes all over town that weekend.

The leaflet was not the sole reason for the success of the boycott's first day, and it does not explain the ultimate success of the protest a year later. It was, however, the key factor in mobilizing the town's Black bus riders on December 5, 1955. Yet it was soon forgotten. Its disposable nature, its anonymous origins, the emergence over time of Parks and King as the faces of the boycott, all conspired to push the flyer into the background. King's framing of the boycott, a constitutional, religious struggle, became *the* framing of the boycott—indeed, of the civil rights movement itself—a framing that in many ways differed from that of the leaflet.

Eventually, the story of the leaflet came out. But it has rarely been given full credit for its role in the boycott. A search of the literature has turned up no rhetorical analysis of the kind lavished on King's December 5, 1955, oration. Nor has there been a complete accounting of its composition on December 1, teasing out the parts played by Robinson, the WPC, and others;

its reproduction that night, using resources from the local HBCU; or its distribution across town, by car, foot, and hand, on December 2.

Why does the story matter? First, because it shines a light on a part of U.S. history that has been largely overlooked: namely, the 24 hours after Rosa Parks's arrest on December 1, 1955, when a brief written text helped mobilize the bus boycott that began on December 5. In a movement that has often been seen through such rhetorical genres as the sermon, speech, and song, this story showcases the role of a clearly ephemeral type of written text that was nonetheless highly deliberate: a leaflet that called for a 1-day social action that also instructed its readers in local history and elevated them as citizens of their own city, with rights and responsibilities. It was, in other words, a powerful piece of persuasion that was also self-consciously expendable.

But if the document was short, its life brief, and its message largely the work of one woman working late at night on her own, the story of its composition, reproduction, and distribution is extraordinarily complex, involving many diverse helpers, drawing on years of activism, relying on a multitude of resources, and taking place across dozens of square miles of fractured urban space. When one puts all those pieces together, the story not only highlights an otherwise neglected moment in U.S. history, it serves as a potentially revealing case study of written communication, combining close textual analysis with expansive contextual examination.

Jo Ann Robinson, the WPC, and the Buses of Montgomery

Rosa Parks was arrested on Thursday, December 1, 1955, at 6:06 p.m., near the Empire Theater in downtown Montgomery.[5] A 42-year-old seamstress, she was on her way home from work. Though active in the local NAACP and recent graduate of a summer seminar on race relations, she was not looking for trouble that evening. She just wanted to get home after a long day. But she had been mistreated on city buses before—by the same driver abusing her now—and she would not put up with it again.

From the jail, she called her mother, who called their friend E. D. Nixon, a 56-year-old railroad worker active in local politics. Nixon called Clifford Durr, a White lawyer whose wife Virginia employed Parks on occasion. It was Durr who got details from the police. Then he, his wife, and Nixon drove to the station to bail Parks out.

Back home, in Parks's living room, the group shared their frustrations. Before leaving, Nixon asked Parks if they might use her case to test the state's

laws. A year after the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled against segregated schools, wasn't it time for the courts to end *this* kind of segregation too? Later that night, either Nixon or Durr called Fred D. Gray, a young Black lawyer in town, to elicit his help.

It was Gray who, even later that night, called Jo Ann Robinson, his former teacher. She then called her fellow WPC officers. They confirmed her initial thought, that this was the case *they* had been waiting for—not for a lawsuit but for a *boycott*, which the WPC had been threatening since mid-1954.[6]

It is not simply that Black passengers in Montgomery were not allowed to sit in the front of city buses and, if in the middle, had to give up their seat if a White passenger lacked one; they often had to pay in the front, exit, and re-enter in the back, a humiliating experience. In addition, Black neighborhoods were less well served than White ones, and there were no Black bus drivers, although Black riders made up three-fourths of all passengers (Robinson, 1987, p. viii). Mistreatment affected Black *women* especially. Twice in 1955, young Black women in Montgomery had been arrested for refusing to give up their seats, cases which had been considered—by Nixon, Robinson, and others—for legal and/or direct action but rejected for one reason or another.

The arrest of Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955, was different. And whatever others did to promote the idea of a 1-day boycott on December 5, it was Jo Ann Robinson who got the ball rolling that night. As one of her colleagues later put it, "Although others had contemplated a boycott, it was due in large part to Jo Ann's unswerving belief that it *could* be accomplished, and her never-failing optimism that it *would* be accomplished, and her selflessness and unbounded energy that it *was* accomplished" (Burks, 1990, p. 75). That said, she had much assistance from the WPC.

The Women's Political Council was founded in 1946 by Mary Fair Burks, herself an English professor at ASC. The group would become an anchor of middle-class Black life in Montgomery and play a key role in the 1955-1956 bus boycott, but for nearly a decade before that, it was just one of many civic organizations in Black Montgomery. Robinson (1987) would claim that, at the time of the boycott, there were 68 such organizations: "men's groups, women's groups, and political, religious, social, economic, educational, fraternal, and labor organizations" (p. 39).

Most of those groups were focused on mutual support; the WPC was different. Burks (1990) tells the story of how the group got its name: "The majority were in favor of a vague title that included the phrase human relations. I was vehemently opposed. Our goal was political leverage and I wanted a title that made this unequivocally clear. We voted on two titles—The Women's Political Council and the Women's Human Relations Council. The former won by a narrow margin" (p. 79).

In its early years, the group's main effort revolved around voter registration. There was also an education project called Youth City and attempts to improve the park situation for Montgomery's Black citizens (Burks, 1990). Robinson joined the group in 1949, soon after arriving, aged 37, to take up a faculty position at ASC. In 1950, she was elected president, and, under her leadership, the WPC came more and more to focus on the buses. Robinson, like her pastor, Martin Luther King, Jr., was not a bus rider herself, but she knew first-hand the mistreatment of Black passengers. In December 1949, she had taken a city bus to the airport for a holiday trip and had a traumatic experience with a White driver that she never forgot (Robinson, 1987, pp. 15-17). The goal of early protests, however, was not integration per se but greater rationalization of the system as it was. The WPC wanted the city to follow the "Mobile plan," in which Black bus riders filled seats from the back forward, White riders from the front backwards, all on a first-come, first-served basis, with no one having to give up a seat already taken. In Montgomery, Black riders often had to relinquish their seats, a fraught and demeaning process, the treatment of Black women especially galling (Millner, 1989, pp. 434-435).

In 1950, women outnumbered men in Montgomery's Black community: 23,840 vs. 18,698 (Millner, 1989, p. 436). Despite urban migration, Black men were still involved in agricultural work in the countryside; they were also more likely to be working up north, serving in the armed forces, or incarcerated. Among Black women workers in Montgomery, meanwhile, an unusually high proportion were "domestics": 63%, according to King (1958, p. 27). Getting to such jobs made them especially dependent on city buses. But there was something else: to avoid conflict, Black men in Montgomery had begun staying off buses altogether, preferring to walk (Robinson, 1987, p. 37).

It is unsurprising, then, that nearly all of the Black bus riders arrested in Montgomery in the mid-1950s were women and that the leading organization pushing for change in this area was a women's group. In fact, the WPC became increasingly confrontational on the topic. By the time of the boycott, Thornton (2014) would claim, the WPC was "the most militant and uncompromising organ of the black community" (pp. 50-51), forcing other Black groups to develop correspondingly aggressive appeals (Millner, 1989, p. 436). Wilson (2005) argues that King, in his December 5 speech, which cast the boycott as a spiritual, constitutional struggle rather than an economic protest against daily humiliations, effaced gender and class divisions in the Black community, even though it was Montgomery's working-class Black women who "bore the greatest burden of segregation" and "made the greatest sacrifices" during the boycott (p. 309). Indeed, more than the community's

male-led organizations and churches, the WPC was intensely focused on the daily lives of ordinary Black people, especially around issues related to work, mobility, and dignity (see, e.g., Robinson, 1987, p. 23).

By 1953, the group's energies were concentrated on the bus issue (Thornton, 2014, pp. 50ff). At the end of that year, representatives met with city commissioners to lodge their complaints; a follow-up meeting in March 1954 occasioned a forceful letter from Robinson, dated May 21, 1954, discovered by Garrow (1987) in the archives of the Montgomery County District Attorney and reprinted in Robinson (1987, p. viii). In the letter, Robinson reiterates the WPC's demands regarding city buses: that seating be conducted according to the Mobile plan, that Black riders not be "forced to pay fare at front and go to the rear of the bus to enter," and that buses stop as frequently in Black neighborhoods as White ones. She reports progress on the last demand but not the other two. She then reminds the mayor that "three-fourths of the riders of these public conveyances are Negroes. If Negroes did not patronize them, they could not possibly operate." And she cautions him that "there has been talk" of a "city-wide boycott of buses," though she hopes that "agreeable terms can be met" without such action.

Garrow (1987) describes the letter as "the most remarkable sheet of paper I had ever seen in some eight years of research on the civil rights movement" (p. x). It was "stunning" in two respects: first, it was evidence for Thornton's 1980 claim "that it had been this group of black women, and not simply or largely Parks, Nixon, King, and other ministers, who really had taken the lead in creating the Montgomery boycott." Second, the date of the letter, "more than one and a half years *before* the actual boycott had gotten underway," showed that there was more of a story "underlying this letter" than scholars of the black civil rights movement realized (p. x).

The WPC's efforts came to a head in 1955. In January, there was another meeting with city commissioners, and in February, at a candidates' forum organized by Nixon, bus complaints were the first topic. After the March 2 arrest of Black teenager Claudette Colvin, there were more meetings with the city, the WPC growing impatient with what it saw as foot-dragging by Nixon, the ministers, and other activists (Millner, 1989, pp. 436ff). There was another arrest in October, but as with the Colvin case, it was deemed unsuitable for appeal. Then, in December, came the arrest of Rosa Parks.[7]

Robinson implied more than once that, before Parks's arrest, the WPC had a generic leaflet drafted and distribution plan mapped out—which is why she could act so quickly on December 1.[8] But in other sources, it seems that the WPC had only talked in general of such matters and that specific documents had not been drawn up. In her memoir (1987), she writes of "drafting" the

boycott leaflet (p. 45), though it seems plausible that the distribution plan had been devised earlier (p. 46).

The Leaflet Text

The flyer that Robinson produced on December 1-2, 1955, has been treated by historians, if at all, as the kind of "ephemeral" document often associated with political protests, such as a handbill stapled to a telephone pole or a rolled-up leaflet stuck in a door.[9] Composed quickly, copied in the thousands, meant to be discarded, it appeared in town on December 2 "out of nowhere" (Reddick, 1989, p. 70), was later confused with another flyer, and was eventually relegated to the background of the narrative.

Admittedly, a flyer is not the kind of text that usually enters the rhetorical canon. Indeed, this one has been referred to as a "circular," "notice," "handbill"—all terms belittling in their connotations. The terminology is not inaccurate: Like the kinds of texts discussed in Scollon (1997) and Nieubuurt (2021), the boycott flyer was brief, anonymous, mass produced, tied inextricably to time and place, and expendable. But it also contained a complex, multipart argument: it recounted recent events in which "Negro" women had been arrested on city buses; it tied that history to an unjust system that needed to be changed, that the leaflet's readers had the *power* to change; and it exhorted those readers to participate in an upcoming collective action.

The obvious comparison here is to the most famous text of the Montgomery bus boycott: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s address at Holt Street Baptist Church on the evening of December 5, 1955, the boycott's "first oration" (Wilson, 2005).[10] In that speech, King describes his audience as "American citizens" who "love" their democracy. He identifies Rosa Parks as a "fine Christian person," known for her integrity and character. And he claims that, like her, his hearers are tired of being oppressed. Their response to that oppression, however, is not violence—after all, "we are Christian people"—but protest. In the speech's most famous passage, King tells his audience that they are not wrong to protest the bus situation: "If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong!" But moving forward, he says, we need more than moral certainty: we need to stick together: "Unity is the great need of the hour."[11]

The speech not only launched King's career, it set the rhetorical and ideological tone for the civil rights movement itself: a national, constitutional struggle guided by the principles of Christianity and nonviolence. But if its immediate goal was to unify his audience, that had already been achieved that morning, when 90% of regular Black riders stayed off city buses, a unity

created largely by the WPC flyer. Let's turn then to its text, which has been printed in multiple places, from Azbell (1955, p. 1) to Robinson (1987, pp. 45-46) (see also Figure 1 above).

> This is for Monday, December 5, 1955
>
> Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown in jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down.
>
> It is the second time since the Claudette Colbert case that a Negro woman has been arrested for the same thing. This has to be stopped.
>
> Negroes have rights, too, for if Negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate. Three-fourths of the riders are Negroes, yet we are arrested, or have to stand over empty seats. If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother.
>
> This woman's case will come up on Monday. We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial. Don't ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday.
>
> You can afford to stay out of school for one day if you have no other way to go except by bus.
>
> You can also afford to stay out of town for one day. If you work, take a cab, or walk. But please, children and grown-ups, don't ride the bus at all on Monday. Please stay off all buses Monday.

The text of the flyer is 223 words long, including the header, organized into 15 sentences and six paragraphs. It fits neatly on half of a letter-sized sheet of paper. There are indications in surviving copies that the text was composed and typed quickly and under pressure: it is single-spaced except for the second paragraph which is double-spaced; there is an extra line space between all the paragraphs except between the fifth and sixth. And there is a verbal slip in the second paragraph, in which Claudette Colvin, the 15-year old girl arrested on a Montgomery bus in March, 1955, becomes Claudette Colbert, the movie star. There are also typing errors and missing punctuation.

But it would be a mistake to treat this text as disposable. For one thing, it accomplishes several ends in its half-page span. The first section, covering the first two paragraphs, conveys important news to its readers about something that happened the day before, embedding that event in a shared history

of injustice. The second section, coinciding with the third paragraph, empowers its readers to put a stop to that injustice. The third section, the last three paragraphs, provides specific instructions for how to do so. Given that clear organizational logic, it is a shame that the flyer is often reproduced, even by Robinson herself (1987, pp. 45-46), as a single block of text, without paragraph breaks, though in the actual flyer, the paragraphing is strikingly visible.

The text begins abruptly, its readers dropped without introduction into local history. "Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown in jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down." The sentence reads like a news flash, the diction concrete and visual, the woman "thrown" in jail, not because she refused to give up her seat for a White passenger, the way the story is usually told, but because "she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down," the scene painted in terms as active as possible.

And it is not just that this *has* happened, but that it has happened *again*. Indeed, there is an intense focus on events in the text. Greek rhetoricians called this aspect of a speech its *kairos*, its timeliness or occasion, the way its situation is seized by a skilled speaker (Kinneavy, 2002). This leaflet is "timely" in multiple ways. First, it was written in the fullness of an event: "[a] nother Negro woman . . . thrown in jail." Second, it was produced in a timely fashion—indeed, so rapidly that there are errors in it. Third, it is directed toward yet another time, Monday, when a collective response will take place. Time is everywhere here: the word itself appears twice, "Monday" three times. In fact, one reason the leaflet is easily belittled is that it *is* so tied to time and place.

But the leaflet does not just respond to one event and point toward another. It embeds the arrest in a history that its readers have the power to change. Thus, the first section of the flyer, about those repeated incidents of mistreatment, culminates in a thesis: *this has to be stopped*. In what follows, the text is no longer about events in the past; it is now about the present, a here and now in which "Negroes have rights, too, for if Negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate. Three-fourths of the riders are Negroes, yet we are arrested, or have to stand over empty seats." If the first two paragraphs were all about particular "Negro wom[e]n" recently arrested on city buses, readers must now reckon with *themselves*. After all, *they* have the power to stop this situation; if they do not, the abuse will continue, and *their* loved ones will be next.

It is perhaps a little surprising that we do not get language here from, say, the Declaration of Independence—"that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights," etc. Instead,

we get a very localized notion of rights: *we* are the main riders of buses in this city; we should be treated with respect on them. If King's speech is all about his audience's status as American citizens, Christians, disinherited by history, the leaflet text is more about its readers' rights as customers of their city's transportation system, seeking only to be treated fairly on it.

The final section of the text is the request. On Monday, "We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial." The "we" here is noteworthy. Although the text, from beginning to end, is firmly situated in the Black community, it is, in fact, unsigned, and only one name appears in it: Claudette Colbert, standing in for the girl arrested on a Montgomery bus nearly a year before. Other than that, there are no specific references of any kind. The word Montgomery does not appear, nor do any of the names we associate with the boycott, like Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King, Jr. No churches are mentioned, no organizations referenced, no addresses given. Further, the authors of the text are themselves anonymous—in fact, the only first-person pronouns are these three instances of "we" in the middle of the text. Before that, the first section is all third person: "another Negro woman has been arrested." And the final section is all second person: (please, you) "stay off the buses"!

That last section has a teacherly quality to it, as if Mrs. Robinson were talking to her students: I know this is not something you want to do, or think you are able to do, but you *can* do it, and you *must* do it. Indeed, the text is highly gendered. Although it is not explicitly *from* women *to* women, it very much centers women. There is the "Negro wom[e]n" of the first two paragraphs, thrown in jail for sitting on a bus. Then, at the end of the third paragraph, if nothing is done to stop this situation, "The next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother." The fourth paragraph includes a reference to "this woman's case," but is otherwise generic, "every Negro" asked to stay off the buses. The third sentence of the final paragraph, however, is subtly gendered: "But please, children and grown-ups, don't ride the bus at all on Monday."

Yet stylistically, the text is written for a very wide audience. At the end of the fourth paragraph, readers are told: "Don't ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday." The prose is monosyllabic, with brisk parallel construction naming all the places anyone would go on a weekday morning. It is again the voice of a teacher giving commands. When objections are raised, she will have none of it: "You can afford to stay out of school for one day. . . . You can also afford to stay out of town for one day. If you work, take a cab, or walk. But please, . . . stay off all buses Monday."

The text thus culminates on an intimate note: from the third person past of the first two paragraphs (she and they) to the first person present of the third

and fourth paragraphs (we have rights, we are asking), to the second person imperative of the final two paragraphs. The leaflet ends, rhetorically and literally, in the hands of its readers.

ASC, "Communitas," and the Mimeograph Machine

It is not clear whether Robinson drafted the leaflet text at home or in her office, but at some point on the night of December 1, she made her way to the campus of Alabama State College (ASC). Accounts vary as to whom she met there. One person would not be named for years: John R. Cannon, head of ASC's Business Department, who had access to a mimeograph machine (Robinson, 1987, p. 45).[12]

But first, Robinson had to type the text onto a stencil, using the metal keys of a typewriter without the ribbon attached, so the "cut" stencil could be filled with ink. Robinson was a good typist (Millner, 1989, p. 569) and, as a teacher, knew how to use a mimeograph machine. She was also advisor to the school's newspaper and used to writing under deadline. That said, she made mistakes. But once the stencil was cut to her satisfaction, she began running the notices off—with Cannon and perhaps one or more of her students—in a basement room on ASC's campus.[13]

The role of the mimeograph machine in the civil rights movement has not received much attention. Hawley (2014) traces the technology to an 1876 patent by Thomas Edison, developed in the early twentieth century by the A. B. Dick Company into an "office-friendly duplication system" (p. 41). By the 1950s, mimeography was "a mainstream practice" (p. 42), making print accessible outside of large commercial and government entities. The "mimeograph revolution" of the postwar decades, according to Cran (2021), was "a global turn toward self-publishing and small-press publishing" (p. 475). It came about because of the increased availability of the machines, "which facilitated quick, cheap production and circulation" (p. 480). Relatively inexpensive, "but not so cheap as to enable widespread personal ownership," mimeograph machines were often located "in shared spaces, including bookstores, libraries, or print co-ops, where they might be used after hours, enabling a variety of people to come and go, printing flyers, political handouts, posters, and, of course, books, pamphlets, and little magazines" (p. 480). According to Hawley (2014), "mimeography linked marginalized groups to a recurring motif of independence and aided in the construction of community" (p. 43). The example studied there is *The Ladder*, "the first national lesbian magazine with broad distribution," produced mimeographically by the Daughters of Bilitis

from 1956 to 1972 (p. 45). McMillian (2009) examines the role of mimeography in the rise of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), whose 1962 *Port Huron Statement* was first circulated via 20,000 mimeographed copies, sold for 35 cents each.

The use of ASC's mimeograph machine to copy the boycott flyer was different; for one thing, the machine's owner was a public institution of higher education. On the night of December 1-2, 1955, however, it was used by two employees to facilitate a local protest. The number of leaflets produced that night varies by account; there were "thousands" in town in the days leading up to the boycott. In the late 1970s, Robinson herself gave two conflicting figures, both almost unbelievably large. In one account, she fit three copies of the leaflet per sheet of paper; in another, two. But in both accounts, the number of sheets of paper was the same: 35 reams, or 17,500 sheets, which would have meant either 35,000 or 52,500 total copies.[14] At least one researcher (Millner, 1989) has doubted these figures, claiming that the actual number must have been more like 10,000 (p. 569). King's (1958) reference to 17,500 Black bus riders in Montgomery (p. 71) makes one wonder if Robinson picked up that number from him. Perhaps the safest tally of copies is in Garrow (1985): "thousands upon thousands" (p. 25).

In fact, Robinson (1987, p. 48) was later called into the office of ASC president H. Councill Trenholm to account for this brazen use of college resources. Trenholm was concerned that the state-financed college not appear to have supported the boycott, so Robinson promised to pay the school back for the paper (p. 50), though it is not clear if she ever did so. Either way, ASC was a significant, if unwitting, sponsor of the bus boycott. On the night of December 1-2, 1955, it provided Robinson with the technology and paper to reproduce her leaflet, as well as the privacy and colleague(s) needed to do so. Yet, if Robinson's connection with the WPC has been much touted in stories about the boycott, the role of ASC has been less noted.[15] Interestingly, like the WPC, ASC often appeared nonthreatening to local Whites, though in the years leading up to the bus boycott, it was actually a vital center of Black activism.

Alabama State College was founded in 1867 in Marion, Alabama, as Lincoln Normal School, a teachers college, later moving to Montgomery and becoming the Normal School for Negro Students. In 1928, just a few years after Trenholm began his long presidency, it became the State Teachers College, a 4-year institution. In 1948, it was renamed Alabama State College for Negroes and in 1954, Alabama State College. In 1955, the school had approximately 200 faculty and staff and 2,000 students (King, 1958, p. 29). During its years under Trenholm, according to Favors (2019), ASC was able to achieve something quite remarkable: fostering its students' self-respect

and racial self-consciousness while flying under the radar of the local White ruling class.

As Favors puts it, HBCUs since their establishment in the nineteenth century have been "the only noncollapsible space for African Americans" in U.S. society for the simple reason that the White power structure in this country has traditionally seen Black education as "a control mechanism" for pacifying Black youths (p. 3). Yet those colleges sponsored a powerful antiracist learning environment.

> Beyond the written course of study, at Black colleges, an unwritten *second curriculum* thrived. This second curriculum defined the bond between teacher and student, inspiring youths to develop a "linked sense of fate" with the race. This second curriculum was a pedagogy of hope grounded in idealism, race consciousness, and cultural nationalism. (p. 5)

And it was not just their teachers who supported HBCU students; students emboldened one another, and they were exposed as well to traveling Black literati. Favors borrows the term "communitas" from Victor Turner to "describe the vital space that Black colleges provided, offering shelter from the worst elements of white supremacist society" that sought to "render impotent the intellectual capacity of Black youths" (p. 5).

Because HBCUs were considered "benign and nonthreatening" (p. 6), they could paradoxically foster "budding activists" prepared to launch "a full frontal assault on white supremacy" (p. 11). But they weren't completely shielded. Favors shows how, during his tenure at ASC, Trenholm was increasingly confronted with a moral dilemma: "allow the freedom dreams of Blacks to manifest through the overt protests of students, or yield to forces that controlled the purse strings" (p. 13). If he helped create at ASC "an oasis of race consciousness," in a place otherwise enveloped by hostility (p. 105), the college was nonetheless dependent on state funds. He had to walk a fine line.

As a faculty member, Jo Ann Robinson had to worry less than Trenholm about the school's interface with White Alabama. From the beginning of her time at ASC, she not only taught English courses but oversaw two student newspapers: the *Hornet* and *Fresh-More* (Favors, 2019, p. 117). Both papers published "searing editorials" against segregation during these years, the state's "aloofness" from the college giving cover for students to "launch their public crusade for justice" (p. 119). The December 1955 issue of the *Fresh-More*, published just as the boycott was beginning, was perhaps the most politically charged yet, including a scathing indictment of White supremacy (p. 120).

During the boycott, the college shielded faculty and students from White reprisals. Unfortunately, later protests would not end so well. On February 25, 1960, 39 ASC students began a sit-in at the Montgomery County Courthouse. This time, the pressure on Trenholm from state officials was intense. Nine students were expelled, and 20 were placed on probation. More than a thousand students took to the streets to protest, dozens of them arrested. The governor demanded that Trenholm fire any faculty member who had broken college rules, the best-known victim being L. D. Reddick, chair of the History Department. In solidarity, Robinson and 20 other faculty members resigned. Trenholm himself was forced into retirement a year later.

Both the WPC and ASC provided Robinson with indispensable resources for the bus boycott. That said, one is struck by her singular capabilities. She brought to the protest her own traumatic experience on a Montgomery bus. She brought her love of and facility with language, evident in the composition of the leaflet text. And she brought organizational energy and skill to the campaign. To King (1958), she was "indefatigable" (p. 78); to Burks (1990), "[s]he did the work of ten women" (p. 74). That Robinson was divorced, childless, and without family ties to Montgomery no doubt contributed to the remarkable independence with which she operated in 1955-1956.

Robinson's courage and resourcefulness can be seen most clearly in her actions on the night of December 1, when she initiated the boycott plan and drove to her office in the dark to set it in motion.[16] But there is also the May 1954 letter, in which she boldly challenged the White government of Montgomery. There is the story of the phone call she made to City Hall around that time, the mayor testifying that "Mrs. Robinson called him angrily 'and said they would just show me, they were going in the front door [of the buses] and sitting wherever they pleased'" (Thornton, 2014, pp. 54-55). And there is King's (1958) story of Robinson on a boycott negotiating committee, demanding an equal number of Black and White members (p. 118). During the boycott itself, she was marked out for harassment: she received 17 speeding tickets, was arrested in February 1956 with other boycott leaders, and saw her beloved Chrysler vandalized.[17]

Rhetorical theory has been criticized for too often approaching public discourse from the point of view of "the great speaker," usually a he who seizes the moment with winning words. It is a limiting perspective: rhetors rarely act alone and are often as much the product of their situations as creators of them. And yet, in this case, after all the contextual elements are named and appreciated, there is a remainder that is unaccounted for. At midnight, grabbing her keys, Jo Ann Robinson truly did "seize the moment." She could have waited for others, even just held off until Friday. Instead, she acted *that night* in a way that set history in motion.

In any event, by 4:00 a.m. Friday, December 2, 1955—less than 12 hours after Rosa Parks's arrest—the boycott notice had been written and typed, thousands of copies run off, and the copies bundled into packets. Between 4:00 and 7:00 a.m., Robinson (1987, p. 46) mapped their distribution, continuing the calls she had begun the night before, soliciting helpers in her plan to inundate the community with the text.

The "Handing" of Leaflets Across the City

After Robinson (1987, p. 46) taught her two Friday morning classes, at 8:00 and 9:00 a.m., she and two students headed out in her car to distribute the flyers. What happened next is a crucial, largely unexamined part of the leaflet narrative. The mobilization of the community required more than a text rhetorically linking its members to the cause and one another; that text needed to be reproduced and then distributed into every Black business, school, church, and home in town. After all, in a boycott, *everyone's* participation is needed, regardless of circumstances or inclination.

As written texts, leaflets are a kind of communication that do not fit well the conventional rhetorical narrative of the civil rights movement, centered as that narrative is on such genres as the sermon, speech, and song. Research on literacy in the movement, meanwhile, has focused on rural communities and literacy *instruction* (e.g., Schneider, 2007). But by midcentury, the Black population of the United States, even in the South, was generally quite literate. As Brandt (2001) puts it, "despite rather wholesale exclusion from economic and education opportunity through most of the twentieth century, basic literacy rates among African Americans rose from 30% in 1910 to more than 80% by 1930 to over 95% by 1970" (p. 106). A large, capital city, Montgomery in the mid-1950s had well-developed Black schools, churches, and organizations that actively fostered literacy throughout the community.[18] In Black parts of town, a written text could not only spread information efficiently and effectively, it could be a tool of genuine consciousness-raising—as well as raw mobilizing power.

We need, however, to distinguish the boycott leaflet from the kind of leaflet that's dropped from an airplane or passed out on a street corner, containing, say, a public health notice (Nieubuurt, 2021; Scollon, 1997).[19] The leaflet examined here was a strikingly deliberative text, whose movement across Montgomery on December 2, 1955, involved a correspondingly deliberate process, less one-to-many than one-to-one many times over, less a way to "inundate" the town with a message than to rapidly distribute an argument across a wide, variegated space until every node in it had been reached.

This required transporting bundles of leaflets to distribution points, where they were picked up by helpers, who left smaller bundles at establishments like beauty parlors, passing out the rest one by one. Robinson (1987) described the process this way:

> After class my two students and I quickly finalized our plans for distributing the thousands of leaflets so that one would reach every black home in Montgomery. I took out the WPC membership roster and called the former president, Dr. Mary Fair Burks, then [she names eight members], and a dozen or more others. I alerted all of them to the forthcoming distribution of the leaflets, and enlisted their aid in speeding and organizing the distribution network. Each would have one person waiting at a certain place to take a package of notices as soon as my car stopped and the young men could hand them a bundle of leaflets. (p. 46)

In 1977, WPC member Johnnie Carr recalled her first contact regarding the boycott: "It was from Mrs. A. W. West who called and asked if I would take an area to distribute the leaflets. I told her I was going out of town to Birmingham for a meeting but that I would see to it that there would be people in the community that got those leaflets out. So I got about five people in my neighborhood to do that" (Millner, 1989, p. 528).

Key here were Robinson's contacts at ASC—many faculty, staff, and students were bus riders—and in the town's Black schools, whose principals and teachers were almost all WPC members and whose young students could fan out across town with notices.[20] Bundles went to Black-owned businesses like Dorothy Posey's Beauty Salon and Malden Brothers Barber Shop. There were also grocery stores, insurance offices, and other institutions where Black people worked and shopped. One imagines leaflets handed out on street corners and distributed door to door in neighborhoods. There must have been a rhetorical effect in holding the leaflet in one's hands, knowing that others were also holding it, and a secondary effect on those who passed out the leaflets and thus felt especially motivated to make the boycott successful. Indeed, although it is hard to avoid metaphors of "flooding" when talking about the flyers' movement, it is more accurate to say, with Scollon (1997, p. 46), that each copy was "handed" from one person to another, becoming public by that act—although Scollon's example of handbills distributed on street corners does not capture the way the boycott flyers moved methodically from Black person to Black person in Black parts of town.[21]

Of course, the decentralized nature of the leaflet's distribution plan is one reason stories about it would later be so muddled. This was not about a known speaker addressing a large audience in a single event. It was about thousands

of copies of an anonymous text making their way across an intricately networked urban space with thousands of end points. Here's Robinson in 1979: "We had members in every elementary, junior high and senior high school. . . . [W]herever there were more than 10 blacks employed we had a member there and we were organized to the point that we knew that in a matter of hours we could corral the whole city."

But Robinson downplays here the large number of individuals reached (20,000-40,000), the large area covered (25 square miles), and, most daunting, the fractured social landscape involved. Indeed, if it is well understood that Montgomery in 1955 was rigidly segregated Black from White, it is less well understood that the Black community itself was divided. There were differences of education, employment, religion, and politics, differences reflected in and exacerbated by the physical landscape.

King (1958) later wrote about the fractious Black community he found when he moved to Montgomery: "[T]here was an appalling lack of unity among the leaders" (p. 34), who were at "loggerheads" with each other. There was E. D. Nixon's Progressive Democrats, Rufus Lewis's Citizens Committee, Mary Fair Burks and Jo Ann Robinson's Women's Political Council, and R. L. Matthews's NAACP, whose "separate allegiances made it difficult for them to come together on the basis of a higher unity" (p. 34).[22]

There was tension as well between those groups and the ministers, themselves divided by denomination and intensely focused on their own congregations. Even among allies, class distinctions were drawn—for example, between the "silk stocking" Dexter Avenue Baptist Church (King, 1958, p. 25) and Ralph Abernathy's less refined First Baptist Church (Brick-A-Day). Skin color factored into these distinctions: King (1958) described Nixon as dark-skinned (p. 39) and Robinson as fair-skinned (p. 78).

There were also differences in residents' inclination to join in political protest. King complained in 1958 that, in addition to the disunity of its leaders, Montgomery's Black community was "crippled by the indifference of the educated group" (p. 35) and the "passivity of the majority of the uneducated" (p. 36). Yet the community's bus riders had many factors to consider in deciding whether to join the protest: would the boycott cause them to be late for work, extend an already long day, annoy people they depended on? Black men especially were averse to conflict with Whites. The stakes were high, and daily life was hard enough without hurdles thrown up by one's own community.

And here we must talk about geography. Traveling across Montgomery on December 2 in her Chrysler, Robinson would have been acutely aware of the fractured landscape, social and physical, of Black Montgomery. Scholars of the boycott have only recently begun to pay attention to its spatial aspects.

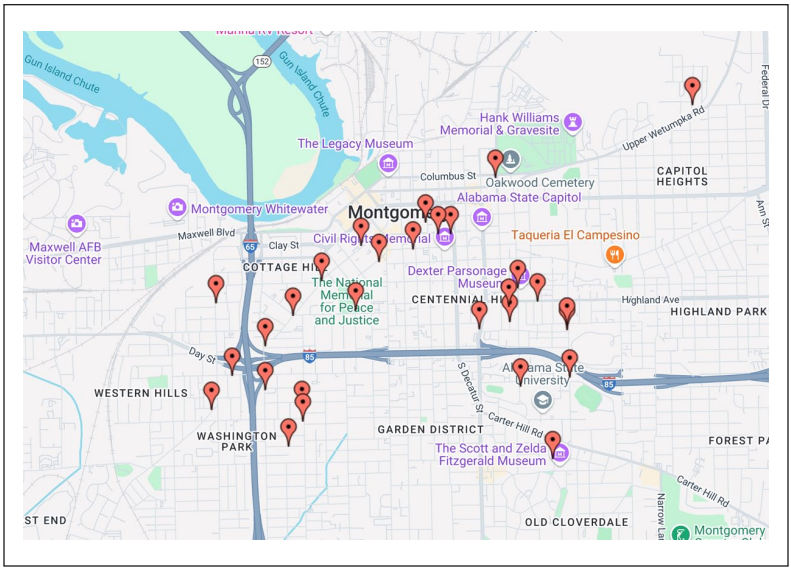


Figure 2. Author's map of boycott-related sites from hmdb.org.[24]

Alderman et al. (2013), for example, have studied how the boycotters created their own transportation system (p. 175), including Black-run taxis, an "intricate, free carpool system" (p. 177), and a new political appreciation for *walking*. Also relevant here is Retzlaff's (2021) study of Montgomery's mid-century social geography. The biggest spatial division in the Black community, she writes, was between working-class west Montgomery, home of Nixon and Parks, and the middle-class neighborhoods southeast of downtown, where King and many ASC faculty lived (Robinson, 1987, p. 24). There was also a low-income northern area where Claudette Colvin and others lived. None of these areas was contiguous with the others. Robinson had to get leaflets into all of them.[23]

Figure 2 is my own map from hmdb.org, the Historical Marker Database, which I have used to flag 29 sites from the Montgomery bus boycott. Visible here are the two Black neighborhoods described by Retzlaff (2021). On the west side of town were the homes of E. D. Nixon and Rosa Parks, the Loveless School, Trinity Lutheran Church (where Parks's NAACP youth group met), Bethel Missionary Baptist Church (Nixon's church), Holt Street Baptist Church (site of the December 5 evening meeting), Mount Zion AME Zion Church (site of the December 5 afternoon meeting), and the Four and Five Points Business Districts.

The central part of the map, meanwhile, includes the downtown site of Parks's arrest, the Johnson Federal Building and Courthouse, the Montgomery County Courthouse, E. L. Posey's Parking Lot (staging area for carpools), the home of Fred D. Gray, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, and First Baptist Church (Brick-A-Day). On the east side of town are the former homes of Rev. Abernathy, WPC member Johnnie Carr, arrestee Aurelia Browder, Georgia Gilmore (who cooked for protesters), Rufus A. Lewis, and Rev. King. It is also the site of ASC, Booker T. Washington School, and Hall Street Baptist Church (where Carr worshiped). In the upper right is the home of Claudette Colvin.[25]

Robinson and her helpers had to cover this extensive, variegated space. And they had to treat every part of it equally, the goal to get the whole community on board, regardless of differences and distances. Of course, it was not just the leaflet that transcended divisions in Black Montgomery. Rosa Parks bridged different parts of the community, as did King. Later, the MIA—its committees, carpools, and newsletter (edited by Robinson!)—knit the Black community together. But the main force for unity on the morning of December 5 was the flyer: both its text, linking readers in a shared history of injustice and a plan for collective response, and its distribution, which linked them physically through repeated handings of pieces of paper.

As mentioned above, recent research on rhetorical circulation has been helpful in understanding the "spatiotemporal flow" (Gries, 2018, p. 3) of discourses like that analyzed here. Take, for example, Edbauer's (2005) theory of rhetoric as "trans-situational" (p. 20), distributed across events and enactments. This is useful for understanding the boycott leaflet: those thousands of flyers passing through tens of thousands of hands, each movement a distinct happening with different actors in different situations—to say nothing of the "concatenation" of events and enactments leading up to and following the leaflet campaign. But in positing a rhetoric of constant movement and emergence, "circulation" misses the obvious directionality of the leaflet—the effort not simply to *move* the text within its wider ecology but to get it into the right hands in order to facilitate the right actions. Edbauer quotes Michael Warner's line, "No single text can create a public" (p. 5), but if there ever *was* such a text, surely it is the boycott leaflet—if by "public" we mean the tens of thousands of Black citizens who stayed off Montgomery's buses on the morning of December 5.

Around midafternoon on December 2, Robinson ended up at a church (1987, p. 53): Hilliard Chapel AME Zion, at the corner of Highland Avenue (also called High Street) and Hall Street, just north of the ASC campus, where she had begun that morning. As she recalled in 1979, she and her helpers walked in on a gathering:

> The ministers were meeting that afternoon, or sometime during the day on High Street. They were having the International [*sic*] Ministerial Association Meeting. And after we had circulated those thirty-five thousand cut circulars, then we went by the church. That was about 3:30 in the afternoon and we took them to the ministers. And it was there that they learned there was to be a boycott and they agreed to meet at Dr. King's Church, Dexter Avenue, that night to decide what should be done about the boycott after the first day.

In fact, the afternoon meeting was intradenominational, a gathering of the Methodist Ministerial Alliance (cf. King, 1958, p. 45). The evening meeting at Dexter Avenue Baptist was held under the aegis of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance.

To this day on its website, Hilliard Chapel AME Zion Church commemorates the Friday afternoon visit of Robinson and her flyers: "On Friday, December 2, 1955, a large number of Montgomery Black ministers were meeting at Hilliard Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church on the corner of High and Hall Streets. Mrs. Joann [*sic*] Robinson, a professor at Alabama State College and two students entered without being noticed and left a handful of circulars that were notices of a bus boycott planned to take place in the coming days."[26] WPC member Erna Dungee Allen later claimed that it was Reverand Abernathy who came in with the "pamphlets"; she and Reverend L. R. Bennett later took some over to their church (Mount Zion AME Zion Church), duplicated them, "and passed out hundreds of them on this side of town" (Millner, 1989, p. 522).

Whoever came in with the leaflets, the fact that it was at a Methodist church is noteworthy, given the clear Baptist bias among the boycott organizers.[27] That morning, for example, the first five phone calls that E. D. Nixon made to drum up support for the boycott were all to Baptist ministers.[28] How did the protest become so ecumenical by that night? It was arguably because of the leaflet. In both its text and its distribution, it was denominationally inclusive; indeed, it said nothing about religion at all.[29] According to Robinson (1987), "Many of the ministers received their notices of the boycott at the same time, in the same place. They all felt equal, included, appreciated. . . . [F]or the first time in the history of Montgomery, black ministers united to lead action for civic improvement. There was no thought of denomination. Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Congregationalists, and others joined together" (pp. 53-54). Indeed, one might read the leaflet from the perspective of "invitational rhetoric" (Foss & Griffin, 1995), which advocates nonpatriarchal forms of communication, motivated less by "a desire for control and domination" (p. 3) than by the principles of "equality, immanent value, and self-determination" (p. 4).[30]

By late Friday afternoon, the work of distributing the flyers was done. Over the next 48 hours, the community coalesced around the plan: a second leaflet, based on the first, was distributed; the first leaflet appeared in the local newspaper; the church and word of mouth played their roles. The flyers themselves receded into the background, most of them ending up in the trash. Yet, on Monday morning, when nearly every regular Black rider in town "stayed off the buses," it was *exactly* as the leaflet had urged.

Conclusion

The half-page flyer that appeared in Black parts of Montgomery on December 2, 1955, may be one of the most impactful texts of its kind in U.S. history, especially considering its size, the speed with which it traveled across town, the number of people it reached, and the success it had in mobilizing them for the December 5 boycott, despite their lack of experience in protest and the risks involved in participating.

Why was it so impactful? Surely, the text itself had something to do with it: though brief, it was a simple but powerful argument, organized in parts, with a short history lesson, a declaration of rights, and a request for collective action. It was also extraordinarily egalitarian: treating each reader, no matter their circumstances, as important. This clearly came from the WPC's years of activism on this issue.

Indeed, the gendered aspect of this story is inescapable. Black women were the largest group of bus riders in 1950s Montgomery, they were the ones most subject to harassment, and it was a Black women's group that fought the hardest to end that abuse. The WPC's focus on the community's ordinary members, all of whom deserved dignity in their daily lives, was clearly linked to their status as women.

At the same time, the leaflet could not have succeeded without the resources of the local HBCU, including ample stocks of paper, a mimeograph machine, colleagues, and the privacy of a nighttime campus. ASC provided something else: a "communitas" (Favors, 2019) of racial solidarity, invisible to the White community. Without the resources of *both* the WPC and ASC, the December 5 boycott would not have succeeded.

Finally, there was the distribution of leaflets across town on December 2. Once written and copied, Robinson and her helpers had to quickly but methodically move the text across that wide, fractured landscape, first via bundles of leaflets dropped off at key locations, then leaflet by leaflet, until the text had penetrated every corner of Black Montgomery. The "velocity"

(Ridolfo & Devoss, 2009) with which this happened made the December 5 boycott plan a *fait accompli* by that night. The combination of a skillfully composed text, reproduced in the thousands, and distributed across the city, via that network of helpers, all within 24 hours, was an astonishing feat.

Why then did it take so long for the full story of the flyer to come out? The main reason was the need to protect ASC from reprisal.[31] But there was also the "distributed" nature of leadership in the movement (Handley, 2024), Robinson's "self-effacing" manner (Garrow, 1987, p. xii), and outright sexism. Eventually, though, the story got out. A 1968 M.A. thesis (Gilliam, 1989) is the first account I have found to link the leaflet to Robinson (p. 208), though its author does not appear to have talked to her. A later biography of King, citing November 1968 "correspondence" with Robinson, first gives her credit in a national publication (Lewis, 1970, p. 52). But as late as 1976, Alabama Judge William F. Thetford, who prosecuted boycott leaders in 1956, claimed that he had never been able to ascertain "the origin of the handbills" (Thornton, 2014, p. 74, n. 36).

In fact, the full story would not come out until Robinson herself began telling it, granting at least five interviews between 1977 and 1983, followed by her own 1987 memoir.[32] There are now historical markers to Robinson in her Georgia hometown and on the ASC campus. And yet there is something tragic about the way the leaflet's story was neglected for so long and the way its argument, about ordinary Black people and their embodied, daily lives, failed to become the boycott's dominant argument.

But perhaps that's drawing distinctions that the participants themselves would have rejected. After all, in the end, the main facts about the boycott were the unity of the community behind it and their persistence to its end, a unity and persistence that changed Montgomery and the United States, as well as the individuals involved. As Robinson (1987) herself would write, "The boycott was the most beautiful memory that all of us who participated will carry to our final resting place" (p. 11).

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Notes

1. "By 1955 Montgomery contained about 120,000 people, of whom some 63 percent were White [i.e., 75,600] and 37 percent were black [i.e., 44,400]" (Thornton, 2014, p. 44).
2. The midpoint of 15,000-20,000 is 17,500, the figure often used to estimate the number of boycotters (see, e.g., King, 1958, p. 71).
3. This image of the leaflet can be found at https://www.crmvet.org/docs/mbbleaf.pdf (accessed March 23, 2025). The same image was once available on the website of Stanford University's King Institute, at https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/dont-ride-bus, but has since been removed. An image of a different copy of the leaflet can be found in Williams (1987, p. 68).
4. The second flyer can be seen at https://archive.plaintalkhistory.com/items/show/29 (accessed March 21, 2025).
5. Parks's arrest warrant can be seen at https://catalog.archives.gov/id/596074 (accessed March 21, 2025).
6. For a summary of the dispute as to who originated the idea of a 1-day bus boycott during the overnight hours of December 1-2, 1955, see Branch (1988, p. 132). Regarding the word itself, Robinson (1987) uses "boycott" proudly (p. 27); King (1958) was uncomfortable with it (pp. 49ff).
7. Another factor raising the temperature in the Black community at the end of 1955 was the August murder of Emmett Till. I am indebted to one of the journal's anonymous reviewers for pointing me to the visit of Mississippi-based activist T. R. M. Howard to Montgomery on Sunday, November 27, 1955. He spoke at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church with Rosa Parks in the audience, just 4 days before her arrest.
8. In the 1979 interview, Robinson says that her colleagues told her on the night of Parks's arrest, "You have the plans, put them into operation." Similarly, in her memoir (1987), she writes that the WPC had planned for 50,000 notices; only the time and place needed to be added (p. 39).
9. I take "ephemeral" from the page at the Stanford online archive of King materials dedicated to the December 2, 1955, flyer (see note 3 above). Cf. Scollon (1997, p. 41): "Handbills are among the lesser items of public discourse."
10. For more on the speech, see King (1955) and Menand (2018). Audio recordings can be found online.
11. According to Branch (1988), the speech made King "forever a public person" (p. 142).

12. In other places, Robinson claimed to be alone that night: "I couldn't afford to let anybody help" (quoted in Millner, 1989 p. 569).
13. For a short video about Robinson and the leaflet, including a mimeograph machine from the time, see https://vimeo.com/257728981.
14. Compared here are Robinson (1979) and (1987). The former posits two notices per sheet and 35,000 copies, the latter, three notices per sheet (p. 45) and 52,500 copies (p. 50).
15. Robinson was also a member of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church's Social and Political Affairs Committee, a group started by her pastor, Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1954 (King, 1958, p. 30).
16. In the process "casting off the old rules about how Negro women should never travel alone at night in Southern towns" (Branch, 1988, p. 131).
17. See Branch (1988, p. 159) and Robinson (1987, p. 140).
18. "Dr. King and I often discussed the probability that Montgomery was the only city that a boycott could have thrived in" (Robinson, 1987, p. 7).
19. Also appearing in Montgomery at this time was a very different flyer, from the Central Alabama Citizens' Council, advertising a White supremacy rally in Montgomery on February 10, 1956 (Phibbs, 2009, p. 59).
20. See Millner (1989, pp. 451-452); there is irony in the fact that the racial segregation of Montgomery's public schools facilitated the spread of the leaflet in Black parts of town.
21. I am grateful to Dylan Dryer for pointing me to this research.
22. Observers noted the tension between Nixon and Lewis especially (e.g., Branch, 1988, p. 137).
23. Figure 1 from Retzlaff (2021, p. 1304) shows the two main Black neighborhoods in boycott-era Montgomery, on the west and east sides of town. The figure is based on a 1929 Racial Zoning Map of Montgomery, still accurate in 1955, distinguishing the "commercial" district, "residential" or White parts of town, and "unrestricted" or Black areas. Retzlaff overlays the map with lines indicating the future paths of Interstate Highways 65 and 85, which would bisect, disastrously, both of the main Black parts of town.
24. My list of 29 Montgomery sites connected to the bus boycott is available at https://www.hmdb.org/results.asp?Search=Tag&Tag=5&u=18873&n=MontgomeryBusBoycottsites; online readers can click on the Google icon in the upper left corner to display an interactive version of the map pictured here.
25. Not included in my map are the Ben Moore Hotel and Hilliard Chapel AME Zion Church, on the east side, George Washington Carver School, on the west, and St. Paul AME Church (Rosa Parks's church) on the south side.
26. See http://www.hilliardchapelamezion.org/Civil-Rights-Movement (accessed November 1, 2024).
27. For more on the denominational history of the African American church, see Dickerson (2021). In a November 11, 2024, email message, J. M. Thornton cautions that there were as many divisions *among* the Methodists (including AME, CME, and AMEZ churches) as *between* Methodists and Baptists; there were

differences among the Baptist congregations as well. For more on how the boycott furthered denominational unity in Montgomery, see Valien (1989, p. 92) and Walton (1989, pp. 29-30).

28. On the phone calls Nixon made that morning, see Branch, 1988, pp. 132-33; Fields, n.d.; King, 1958, pp. 44-45; and Nixon, 1979.
29. I believe Garrow (1995) overstates the religious spirit at the heart of the boycott. Certainly, the December 5 evening meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church is infused with Christian spirit. But when it began, on the *morning* of December 5, 1955, the boycott that Robinson and the WPC mobilized was not a religious event.
30. I am indebted for this observation to *Written Communication* editorial assistant Dani English.
31. In a November 11, 2024, email message, J. M. Thornton writes that Robinson told him in a 1978 interview that Trenholm made her promise not to tell anyone about the leaflet because of his fear of reprisal against ASC; she kept the promise for more than a decade.
32. These include an August 1977 interview for Millner (1989); a January 1978 interview for Thornton (2014); an August 1979 interview for the PBS documentary *Eyes on the Prize* (Robinson, 1979; cf. Williams, 1987, pp. 70-71); a November 1983 interview for Branch (1988); and a 1984 interview for Garrow (1985).

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