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Power Dynamics of a Segregated City: Class, Gender, and Claudette Colvin's Struggle for Equality

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**Power Dynamics of a Segregated City:
Class, Gender, and Claudette Colvin's
Struggle for Equality**

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Prologue

In the summer of 2014 I stumbled upon a comedic television program called *Drunk History*. On this television show, inebriated narrators recall historical events while actors interpret the scene. The program makes it very clear in the beginning that the narrators are drunk and this is for entertainment purposes only. The accuracy of the events is up for debate and the audience is compelled to do further research if interested.

Drunk History's segment on Montgomery, Alabama, struck me because it introduced a "new" character to the established narrative of the Montgomery Bus Boycott: a fifteen-year-old girl named Claudette Colvin. Months before Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man on a city bus, Claudette Colvin was arrested for the very same action. According to *Drunk History*, Colvin was taken off the bus, arrested, tried, and later became the star witness in a case challenging the city of Montgomery's transportation segregation ordinance. Afterwards, she left Montgomery for good. It was a ten-minute short segment that left me with many questions. Who was Claudette Colvin? Why have I not heard of her before? Why is she not part of the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement? This thesis is an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the race, class, and gender politics of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and give Claudette Colvin a little bit of the recognition she deserves.

While conducting research for this thesis, I spent a few days in Montgomery, immersed in the world Claudette Colvin had inhabited. The city of Montgomery is an urban landscape in change. As I explored, I noticed more abandoned or under-

construction storefronts than open ones in the downtown area and not many pedestrians. There was the occasional tourist group, but the majority of people were daily workers making the lunchtime pilgrimage to the many area restaurants. The only thing Montgomery had in excess was food and bars. It was not until I was leaving that I finally worked up the courage to ask someone what was going on. My friendly cab driver informed me that the city is undergoing a rebuilding effort. The hotel at which I stayed and all the restaurants I visited did not exist about fourteen years ago. He suggested that if I were to come back in the next three or four years the city would look transformed. It was hard to reconcile what I was seeing in current-day Montgomery with the city I read about that was the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement. How could a city whose downtown area consisted only of government buildings fourteen years ago be the focal point of such a historic movement?

I visited historic sites, did research in the city archives, and visited the Rosa Parks Museum, which surprisingly featured Claudette Colvin. The museum is on the campus of Troy University and was established as a center of learning about the Civil Rights Movement and the Bus Boycott.

The city archives were not as helpful as the museum as I looked for information on Claudette Colvin. Her original arrest report was just one of the many gems I found at the museum. I also found an oral history with Fred Gray, who in his own words discussed his connection to Colvin and what he had hoped would come from her case.

As I conducted my research, I was aware of the fact that I was alone in a new city trying to orient myself to visit the many places I had only ever seen on the Internet. The lack of knowledge of Colvin was frustrating. Creative solutions were required to make the best of what was available. As I further delved into my research in Montgomery, it did not escape me that the woman I was writing about would not have been able to freely partake in the activities I currently did. Walking into a restaurant through the front door, eating without feeling out of place amongst mostly white patrons, and walking into any public place without fear of repercussions were some of the things that, with my new perspective, I was now aware I took for granted. Colvin's story resonated with me on many different levels. This thesis is an attempt to understand her story, and examine her importance to the Civil Rights Movement.

Introduction

For Claudette Colvin, Jo Ann Robinson,
Virginia Foster Durr, and all the other
courageous women and men who made
democracy come alive in the Cradle of
the Confederacy¹

The dedication of the book *Daybreak of Freedom* by Stewart Burns summed up the contribution of the Montgomery Bus Boycott to the black freedom movement. In an untenable situation the black men and women of Montgomery, Alabama decided enough was enough and ignited a nation.

It is widely accepted that the Montgomery Bus Boycott was an important piece of the Civil Rights Movement: one might say it changed the tone of the movement and made the injustices that black citizens suffered in the United States a household topic around the world. The United States was exposed abroad for its hypocrisy.

In 1953, African American residents of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, challenged segregation on the bus system in their community. Activists petitioned the City Council to allow blacks to be seated on city buses on a first come, first served basis. The City Council passed an ordinance saying that bus drivers could not save seats for white passengers. Black and white passengers would still board the bus at the back and front respectively, but both would continue to sit until the bus filled up. How far forward or backward passengers sat was not an issue. City bus drivers ignored the ordinance, which led to a one-day bus boycott by the African American

¹Stewart Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

community. The Attorney General of Louisiana deemed the ordinance illegal, validating the actions of city bus drivers in saving seats. A second boycott was launched three months later and lasted a whole week. Due to the second boycott, a compromise was reached. First come, first served seating was enforced; however, two side seats in the front of the bus were reserved for whites and the long seat at the back of the bus was reserved for blacks. While this was not originally what the African American community desired, it was a small compromise and a step towards civil rights.²

Burns states about the Montgomery Bus Boycott, “never again would a movement of this era, black, white, or brown, be so effective in uniting a community across class, gender, and age.”³ This statement reinforces the legacy of the boycott. Not only was it part of the Civil Rights Movement but also a well-organized memorable protest movement in its own right. For generations people all over the world, have been using the power to organize as a way to let their voices be heard, but not until this movement had their power been wielded in such a way that it not only challenged the establishment but also gained the attention of the world.⁴

The story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott is not a single narrative that has remained unchanged throughout the years. Rather, as time went on memoirs offering first-hand accounts were written and extensive research was done that

² Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years 1954-1965* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 60.

³ Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 4.

⁴ Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 5.

The movement also made Martin Luther King Jr. into the memorable figure he would become. His leadership of the Montgomery Improvement Association and his ability to speak clearly and connect with people in this public movement made him the face of a people abroad.

introduced new characters. Historians took alternate research paths that led them to new conclusions about the story. This trajectory not only complicated the narrative but also led to the introduction of Claudette Colvin. This thesis explores the importance of Colvin's contribution and concludes that she deserves to be a prominent part of the Bus Boycott narrative because of her influence on the movement. Class was the determining factor in Claudette Colvin's exclusion from the dominant narratives of the Bus Boycott, and class is something that is rarely if ever discussed in connection to the Civil Rights Movement. How does Claudette Colvin's organic act of protest change the traditional understanding of the Montgomery Bus Boycott?

There is a wealth of research about the Civil Rights Movement. This thesis will discuss a few histories that represent the Montgomery Bus Boycotts. The sources range from autobiographies to historical accounts. Often accounts differ, in some cases significantly.

In 1987, Jo Ann Gibson Robinson published her memoir, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*.⁵ Robinson wrote not only about the experience of living in Montgomery and her role as a community leader, but gave insight about how the Civil Rights Movement developed, and how it was able to grow and become influential. In Robinson's story she recounted meetings with black community members and attending city council meetings, and talking to judges and law enforcement about making the experience of black passengers better

⁵ Robinson, Jo Ann. *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee), 1987.

on the city bus system. Her organization, the Women's Political Council, worked tirelessly to expose the injustices of the time period, but also steadily controlled the reaction of the black community out of the fear that acting too quickly would not lead to the desired outcome. Robinson briefly discussed Colvin but not as an important figure. This decision furthered the myth that Rosa Parks' actions were completely organic. To gain sympathy and awareness, it was necessary in the 1950s for the white community to believe that a mild-mannered, tired seamstress had been targeted, but this was not necessary in 1987 when Robinson's memoir was published.

In 1997, Stewart Burns published, *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*,⁶ a scholarly book that tells the history of the Bus Boycotts. Burns used documents and first-hand accounts to engage the reader in the story, and emphasized the importance of the boycotts in the overall context of protest movements. Burns's book focused on why Montgomery produced the movement and how the movement became a model for future protests all over the world. At its core, the book discussed what Montgomery "got right" and how that specific and well-organized movement made the impact that was necessary. Claudette Colvin was not an important figure in Burns's narrative. Rather, the well-known "usual suspects" were prominently examined. The goal of Burns's book was to highlight the importance of the Civil Rights Movement in the spectrum of movements in

⁶ Burns, Stewart. *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 1997.

general. Claudette Colvin was mentioned as a piece of the story, but her role and impact were not included.

In 2013, Jeanne Theoharis concluded that Rosa Parks' legacy was stifled by the image of Parks as a demure soft-spoken figure who was arrested for being too tired to move to the back of the bus. In *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*,⁷ Theoharis includes Parks' activism to remind readers that Rosa Parks was much more than a woman who sat on the bus in protest. In rewriting Parks' legacy, Theoharis sheds light on the importance of the lesser-known Claudette Colvin. Theoharis one of the first to acknowledge, in a scholarly text, how Colvin's initial act of defiance on a Montgomery bus set the stage for Rosa Parks and the Bus Boycott. Theoharis offers an in-depth look at Rosa Parks and Claudette Colvin, and does not deny the impact Colvin had on the Civil Rights Movement. By connecting the two, Theoharis takes Parks, an important figure in history, and enhances her story by acknowledging the other figures like Colvin. In doing so, Theoharis changes the narrative and expands our knowledge.

Published in 2009, Phillip Hoose's *Claudette Colvin Twice Towards Justice* is the first published book that focused completely on Colvin's life and her contribution to the Civil Rights Movement. In his book, Hoose wants to give a voice to a woman who has been lost in history.⁸ Hoose explained Colvin's contributions, and the reason she became a shadowy figure. Hoose began to answer the important

⁷ Theoharis, Jeanne. *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*. (Boston: Beacon Press), 2013.

⁸ Phillip Hoose, *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2009), 106 – 107.

question of why she was left out, although he does not expand as much as he could have.

This thesis expands on Hoose's work by examining an element he has not considered, class. While Hoose does an excellent job of setting the scene in the narrative and discussing the feelings of helplessness among the black citizens of Montgomery, he omitted in his discourse an understanding of the class divisions within Montgomery's black community. This thesis analyzes class structure and in particular working-class rage. Claudette Colvin was a product of working-class rage. She was in the class of citizens that endured ill treatment on a daily basis on public transportation without any recourse. Due to their circumstances, the working class had no choice but to take the bus and the city of Montgomery was not interested in making changes to daily bus operations. The injustice enraged the black working class. How this rage sparked and fueled the Civil Rights Movement is the subject of this thesis.

Claudette Colvin was not a prominent, outspoken presence in the Civil Rights Movement, but she played an important part. Colvin's act of resistance influenced Rosa Parks' act, which in turn ignited the Civil Rights Movement. Despite Colvin's influence, she has been relegated to a footnote in history but her contribution is being rediscovered and she is finally getting some recognition for the part she played. Even with her newly gained recognition she is still not part of the dominant narrative, and is known only to scholars, who are just beginning to insert her into their retellings of the history.

This thesis demonstrates that class was a determining factor in Colvin's exclusion from the narrative. Class was the reason for her exclusion from the forefront of the Bus Boycott, which ultimately led to Colvin being lost to history. This thesis incorporates an analysis of class, gender, and race in Montgomery during the era.

The last piece of Colvin's story that this thesis highlights is her connection to Rosa Parks. Rosa Parks in her own right was a fierce activist who dedicated her life to Civil Rights. Colvin's existence did not in any way diminish Parks' contributions to the Civil Rights Movement. This thesis makes it clear that Rosa Parks deserved her accolades, but also argues that Colvin deserved attention, as well.

The chapters of the thesis are laid out as follows: chapter one presents a brief overview of the history of the city of Montgomery, the organizations that were present, and the dynamics that created its social norms and class divisions. This thesis focuses on issues affecting the African American community in the 1950s. Chapter two discusses the story of Claudette Colvin, her early life and the fateful bus ride that should have catapulted her into history. The community reaction to Colvin, her court cases, and her leaving Montgomery for good are also discussed. Chapter three is an analysis of why Colvin was excluded from the dominant narratives of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This chapter examines the class issues she faced and attempts to prove that class was the determining factor. Class divides were present in the Movement and should be part of its discussion.

Chapter 1 – Montgomery

Montgomery, Alabama, a city located on the Alabama River in the United States Gulf Coast, was the cradle of the Civil Rights Movement. Activists flocked to Montgomery to join groups aimed at ending the established Jim Crow laws that personified racism and made life difficult for African Americans in the South.⁹ Before the Civil War, Montgomery was the center of cotton production and slave auctions. It was a bustling city that was vital to the survival of a certain way of life in the South. It was not until after World War II that rural black populations began to move to the city in search of a better life. After Emancipation, most rural blacks had become sharecroppers, but it grew increasingly hard to survive as a sharecropper in the countryside.¹⁰ This created the need to move to cities for employment. In the 1950s, most working-class blacks in Montgomery held jobs in the service industry or as laborers, many of whom were employed by the Maxwell Air Force Base. More than half of working-class African American women were employed as domestics in white households.¹¹

Despite this, a small black middle class rose out of the need for education, medical care, and religion that would not be provided by the white community due to the restrictions of racism. This middleclass was the most visible during the boycott and serve in leadership roles. The middle class operated as an independent force. They worked within the black community, and therefore, their livelihood did

⁹ Marable Manning, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945 – 2006* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2007), 40.

The medium income for blacks in Montgomery in 1956 was under \$1,000 and voter registration was low with only 2,000 black adults being registered.

¹⁰ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 8.

¹¹ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 9.

not depend on white employers. The African American middle class owned businesses that catered to blacks or worked for black owned businesses or black schools. Claudette Colvin was not of this class, and this may explain her exclusion from history. Her family worked as domestics, and their livelihood depended on their white employers.

Montgomery, Alabama's white community considered themselves progressive on the issues of race. In the summer of 1955, racist white men murdered fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in Mississippi, for what they assumed was his flirting with a white woman. The white-controlled media in Montgomery gave the story substantial news coverage. White Montgomery residents saw Mississippi as backwards compared to their forward thinking city.¹² Despite the white community's views, black residents knew another life. African Americans were still treated as second-class citizens in public and subject to the Jim Crow South.

Montgomery was not unlike other contemporary Southern cities that enforced Jim Crow laws. Racism was found in all spheres of life. Jim Crow was entrenched in the system and all citizens were forced to accept it. The simple everyday pleasures of eating in a restaurant, going to the movies, or sitting on a park bench were not to be enjoyed with community members of different races. "Colored" signs around town denoted where African American residents of Montgomery were allowed to go and even where to drink public water. Separate

¹² Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 61.

schools kept white children from mingling with undesirables. The bus system was a microcosm of this segregated society.¹³

On the city buses signs denoted where African American passengers were allowed to sit. Technically, white passengers could sit anywhere. If the seats were filled, blacks were told to give up their seats to white passengers. Neither age nor gender was a factor. Pregnant women, the elderly, and children were forced to give their seat to a white passenger. Skin color was the criterion that afforded a passenger a seat on a city bus.¹⁴ All passengers paid at the front when getting on the bus but only whites were allowed to continue in—blacks had to get back off the bus, walk to the back door and board through there. There were also instances where bus drivers would leave black passengers stranded if they didn't make it to the back door quickly enough to board, even when they had already paid their fares. Bus travel was only a part of the problem, although the racial discrimination in the system was indicative of the wider implications of segregation; for example, African Americans were forced to enter establishments through the back door and if they were allowed to sit, could only do so in the back. The only places blacks found reprieve from Jim Crow were in black-owned establishments.

Montgomery had an active African American middle class that constantly discussed ways to improve the lives of the black community and challenged laws that kept blacks from experiencing their full freedoms. Groups such as The Women's Political Council and the National Association for the Advancement of

¹³ Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 57.

¹⁴ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 8.

Colored People worked tirelessly to bring some semblance of justice and equality to Montgomery.

While a racist city in many aspects, there were still a significant number of members of the white community who were sympathetic to the plight of their African American “neighbors.” During the Bus Boycott members of Montgomery’s Jewish community and a small number of anonymous whites gave financial support. *The Montgomery Advertiser* covered the boycotts and did not censor letters of support that came in from whites.¹⁵ Montgomery was a hotbed of civil rights action and thirteen months of the Bus Boycott would prove just how influential its civil rights action had become.

¹⁵ Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 79.

Chapter 2 – Claudette Colvin **Daughter of the Working Class**

Claudette Colvin was born “Claudette Austin” on September 5, 1939 in Birmingham, Alabama. Her birth mother was Mary Jane Gadson and her father C.P. Austin. At a young age her father, C.P., left her mother in search of work. He returned years later, during which time Claudette’s sister Delphine was conceived. He left again soon after, and Mary Jane could not support her two girls on alone, so she sent Claudette and Delphine to live with her great aunt and uncle, Mary Anne and Q.P. Colvin. The Colvin’s daughter was already an adult and worked as a teacher in another town, so they were happy to accept Mary Jane’s girls. Claudette and Delphine even came to refer to them as “Mom and Dad” and adopted their last name.¹⁶

In the mid-1950s the Colvins were a working class family who resided in King Hill, a working class neighborhood in the city. When Claudette originally went to live with her aunt and uncle, the family resided in the country, in a town called Pine Level. They lived on a farm in a house built by her uncle and the girls attended a one-room school. When Claudette was eight years old, the family inherited a house in King Hill and as a result moved to the city. The neighborhood was poor and composed mostly of shacks with outdoor plumbing. Despite having a reputation as a dangerous place, the community was tight knit and the neighbors protected each other. The Colvin family grew fond of their small house in this poor neighborhood.¹⁷

¹⁶ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 11.

¹⁷ Hoose, *Claudete Colvin*, 15.

Mary Anne and Q.P. Colvin worked as a maid and a gardener, or “house woman” and “yard boy” as the occupations were referred to at the time. They found employment with different families with the one similarity being that both were not particularly wealthy white employers. Colvin recalled her aunt having a particularly strong relationship with the woman she worked for, whose name Colvin could not recall. On certain days Mary Anne would receive rides home from her employer until Q.P. was able to save enough to purchase a family car. Towards the end of 1955 when the Montgomery Bus Boycotts officially started, many African American housekeepers lost their jobs as a result of angry white citizens punishing the African American community for boycotting. Mary Anne luckily was spared. Her employer supported the Civil Rights Movement.

Claudette had a typical childhood in spite of being poor. The family gathered together on Sunday afternoons to listen to the radio and read the newspaper. Growing up she listened to the *Grand Ole Opry*, which featured Hank Williams, the famous country singer from Montgomery. In fact, when Williams died his wife invited the African American community to attend his funeral, but Colvin’s aunt would not let her attend because the funeral was segregated.¹⁸ In Phillip Hoose’s account of her life, Claudette recalled being angry from an early age at the injustices her family faced in downtown Montgomery. In clothing stores, for example, the Colvin girls were not be allowed to try on outfits. Rather, the saleswoman measured them and brought the clothing for them, eyeballing whether they would or would not fit. The Colvins were not allowed to try on shoes, so their aunt would trace the

¹⁸ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 16.

outline of their feet on a paper bag and bring the measurements to the store. They were told their hair was too greasy to try on hats and were constantly spoken in a condescending way in shops.¹⁹

In the summer of 1952, Claudette Colvin's sister Delphine became sick and was diagnosed with polio. The hospital did everything it could at that time but Delphine was one of the many children in the African American community afflicted that summer. Claudette's aunt and uncle would not let her see Delphine as the disease ravaged her, and as a result the last time Claudette saw her sister alive was the day Delphine left the house for the hospital. Delphine was taken to a black hospital, Saint Jude Hospital. African Americans felt they were treated with dignity at Saint Jude and the founder, Father Harold Purcell, was well liked among the black community. On September 5, 1952, Claudette Colvin's thirteenth birthday, Delphine died.²⁰

Claudette entered Booker T. Washington High School in September of 1952, very soon after Delphine's death. The death of her sister had taken an emotional toll on Colvin, who became withdrawn in school. Despite being described as a good student, she was unable to truly connect with her classmates due to grief.

In November of that year, Jeremiah Reeves a popular sixteen-year-old senior at Claudette's school was arrested on charges of raping a white housewife. He confessed to the crime. Due to Reeves' confession, the police quickly expanded his charges claiming he was responsible for the rape of six other white women in Montgomery. The African American community was furious. Many believed that

¹⁹ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 17.

²⁰ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 18-19.

Jeremiah was innocent and police had coerced him into confessing by using scare tactics. According to Dr. Martin Luther King, Reeves had been brought to the electric chair chamber and told that he would be electrocuted if he did not confess.²¹

Regardless of the allegations of a forced confession, an all-white jury quickly found Reeves guilty and he was sentenced to death by electric chair. Reeves would have to wait until his twenty-first birthday for the death sentence to be carried out. The verdict infuriated the African American community who believed even if Reeves were guilty he did not deserve the death penalty. Due to Reeves' popularity and personality the students at Booker T. Washington High, including Claudette Colvin, took the verdict personally. They worked with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's youth group to collect money for Reeves' legal defense and wrote him letters to keep his spirits up while locked away.²² His poetry was published in the *Poets Corner* section of the local newspaper and he kept in close contact with Rosa Parks throughout the next five years, the last of his life.²³ Reeves was never freed but later executed.²⁴

On March 2, 1955, Claudette Colvin's day started out fairly ordinary. After school she took the Highland Garden's bus home, her usual route. She sat in the designated section, and chatted with her classmates. Nothing was out of the

²¹ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 23.

²² Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 23.

²³ Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), 3.

²⁴ "Convicted Rapist Dies In Kilby Electric Chair," *The Montgomery Advertiser*. March 28, 1958. On the morning of Thursday March 28, 1958, Jeremiah Reeves was executed via the electric chair. The death was chronicled in *The Montgomery Advertiser*, which reported that Reeves had told the preacher who accompanied him to "please tell my mother that I left this world clinging to the scarred hands that were nailed to the cross for me." The newspaper described in detail the last breaths of a scarred young man, clinging to his faith in the last moments of his life, as ten witnesses watched.

ordinary. Claudette's intentions were hardly to start the series of events that would follow that fateful bus ride.

As the bus began to fill up with white passengers, the black passengers were asked to vacate their seats. Eventually the bus driver came up to Colvin and her friend sat. The other black passengers had given up their seats to whites but Claudette had a different idea. She decided to stay seated. In school, Colvin's teacher had recently discussed Jim Crow and injustice in school and had seen firsthand the wrongful conviction and awaiting execution of her classmate Jeremiah Reeves.²⁵ Thoughts of Jim Crow, injustice and the bus driver's rude demands encouraged Colvin to decide not to relinquish her seat to a white woman. She recounted to Hoose that instead of moving, she offered the passenger a seat next to or across from her since her whole row was now empty.²⁶

In its discussion of Colvin, Jo Ann Robinson's memoir does not mention that there were empty seats around Colvin. Clearly, fifteen-year-old Colvin had a legitimate rationale for not moving but Robinson chose to ignore this. Robinson's motives are unclear, and it could have been an innocent mistake or a tool used to further the myth of the uncontrollable teenager. It is believed that part of the reason the Women's Political Council excluded Colvin was because her age and actions made it clear she might have been experiencing a rebellious faze, and was therefore hard to predict. By leaving out this part of the narrative, the author

²⁵ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 30.

²⁶ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 31

A few minutes into the incident a heavily pregnant woman unaware of what was happening sat down in the seat next to Colvin. The policeman asked her to get up and she too refused because of her current condition. Not wanting to bully a pregnant woman the policeman made one of the men in the rear get up for her and continued to have a standoff with Colvin over the seat.

allowed doubt to settle on the course of events. The reader is forced into a sort of tunnel vision, only seeing the event from the author's perspective, rather than contemplating alternative scenarios or motives.

The white passenger and white bus driver were offended by Colvin's suggestion to sit next to her. The driver angrily called the transit police to deal with the situation. He was told that they did not have the authority to make arrests and he should keep driving until he saw city police officers that could make an arrest.²⁷ The driver found two officers who attempted to coerce Colvin into moving, and when unsuccessful, proceeded to drag her off the bus. Colvin did not go quietly. The police forcibly removed her and in the process she screamed and kicked. Colvin explained that she did not intend to hurt them, but acted out of fear and reacted to the situation.²⁸ On the ride to the police station the officers berated Colvin and made sexually inappropriate comments about her body.²⁹ Colvin recounted to Hoose that: "All ride long they swore at me and ridiculed me. They took turns trying to guess my bra size. They called me 'nigger bitch' and cracked jokes about part of my body."³⁰ The officers took Colvin to the city jail where bail was later posted by her pastor and aunt. She was not allowed a phone call but unbeknownst to her and the officers her classmates on the bus called her mother to inform her of Claudette's arrest. Colvin had been charged by police with violating the city's segregation law,

²⁷ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 31.

²⁸ This action would come back to haunt Colvin whose arrest record claimed she kicked a police officer in the stomach and was belligerent.

²⁹ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 32

According to her account to Phillip Hoose, Colvin claims the officers took turns trying to guess her bra size and nicknamed her "nigger bitch".

³⁰ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 32.

disturbing the peace, and assault. Once Colvin was on bail and home her neighbors embraced her and the community, who felt her treatment was disgraceful, took pity on her. This would later change once her felony assault charge was upheld in court.³¹

When the time came to prepare Colvin's defense the agreed upon fact was that due to the seriousness of her charges she would need the best lawyer possible. Eventually, E.D. Nixon, president of the local NAACP chapter, was able to call upon Fred Gray, a young black attorney, to represent Colvin. They believed that this case depending on the outcome could be a good civil rights test case. Fred Gray was a young lawyer fresh out of law school. He was one of the only two black lawyers in Montgomery. Gray was educated in the North but his intention was always to come back to Montgomery and help his community. Colvin's case and the 1956 trial *Browder v. Gayle* would jumpstart his career.³²

In the days leading up to Colvin's trial E.D. Nixon got Rosa Parks involved because she was in charge of the Youth Group and he thought the arrest would pique interest in this group's sparsely attended meetings. Nixon tasked Parks with calling on Colvin to become involved with the youth group. The first time Colvin and Parks ever met was a Sunday afternoon before her trial at one of the youth group meetings. Colvin fondly remembered Parks who was surprised at Colvin's size.³³

³¹ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 30-32.

Once the felony assault charge was upheld, Claudette was seen as a troublemaker and some members of the community started to believe that her reaction was too extreme.

³² Jo Ann Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee, 1987), 44.

³³ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 50 - 51.

Parks expected a huge teenager who was pulled off the bus by the authorities not a little girl, which was what Colvin still very much looked like.³⁴

One of the reasons Fred Gray jumped at the chance of taking her case was because of her charges, specifically breaking the city's segregation law. He planned to prove that this law was unconstitutional.³⁵ It would be the first time the chance to challenge the constitutionality of this law came up, because Colvin was the only one to ever plead not guilty to its violation, an important fact that could not be ignored because the chance might never come again that quickly.

The charges were also the main reason the community reacted so strongly to the arrest of Colvin. Boycotting the bus system had been something that was discussed for a very long time in community organizing meetings, but the actual act had yet to come to pass. On the day Colvin was arrested outrage spread throughout the black community of Montgomery, specifically among the working-class who were the ones using public transportation. The calls to boycott the system were renewed to the horror of the middle-class Women's Political Council who still felt the time was not right and Colvin might not necessarily be the right person to lead this movement. For the next several days, working-class members of the community refused to ride the bus, opting instead to walk or get rides from others.

The WPC took a different more conciliatory approach and cooled tensions between the black community and the bus operators. By attending a City Council meeting with the then Police Commissioner Birmingham they were assured the city had no intention of ruining Colvin's life with these charges. The main purpose of the

³⁴ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 43.

³⁵ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 44.

court case was to ascertain the truth not punish a young girl.³⁶ They agreed to a sufficient “ceasefire” and members of the community went on to ride buses once again with these “new regulations.” The WPC’s wishes were heard and the list of grievances mentioned earlier was now enforced.

Claudette Colvin’s assault case went to trial and she lost. In the weeks leading up to the case Commissioner Birmingham had been ousted from his position and a new hard-line Commissioner, Clyde Sellers, was appointed. With this change Colvin was no longer tried under city law but now the extremely harsh state law. She was found guilty of all charges, was placed on probation, and became a legal ward of the state. She was released into the custody of her aunt and uncle but with a felony assault charge on her record. Her future was now tainted.³⁷

Colvin’s appeal was not as newsworthy as her original case. Fred Gray stayed on as a committed lawyer and made sure Colvin was not forgotten. He was able to get two of the three convictions reversed, but the conviction for assaulting a police officer stuck with her. In the weeks after the trial community sympathy and support began to decline. People saw Colvin as a troublemaker rather than an innocent victim. This was in part due to propaganda from the WPC, a detail examined in the next chapter.

One of the last things that Colvin publically participated in was the court case *Browder v. Gayle*, which challenged the constitutionality of segregation on city bus systems. Fred Gray was the attorney on record for the case and Colvin was a star witness. Her testimony was cited by one of the three presiding justices, Frank

³⁶ Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, 41.

³⁷ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 45.

Johnson, as the reason the case was successfully made that segregation was illegal.³⁸ Johnson would go on to receive death threats for his stance.

“ She was a fifteen-year-old student at Booker Washington High School – an ‘A’ student, quiet, well-mannered, neat, clean, intelligent, pretty, and deeply religious.”³⁹ Jo Ann Robinson described Claudette Colvin in this manner in her biography. This was how her contemporaries described her. She was a straight A sweet young girl who was treated like a criminal by the Montgomery police department for taking a stand against a long history of discrimination in her community.

Jo Ann Robinson was a prominent African American professor at Alabama State College, located in Montgomery. An African American University with strong ties to the African American middle class, Alabama State became a center of unification for middle class movement leaders of the Civil Rights Movement in Montgomery. Robinson, a member of the middle class, had a strong voice in the community in her role as one of the leaders of the Women’s Political Council. The organization was one of the many black organizations at the time that was founded as a reaction to racism. In 1946, Dr. Mary Fair Burks, chairman of the English Department at Alabama State College and the WPC’s first president, founded the organization.⁴⁰ As Robinson states, the organization was founded with “[...] the purpose of inspiring Negroes to live above mediocrity, to elevate their thinking, to fight juvenile and adult delinquency, to register and vote, and in general to improve

³⁸ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 92.

³⁹ Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, 37.

⁴⁰ Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, 22.

their status as a group. We were ‘woman power’ organized to cope with any injustice, no matter what, against the darker sect.”⁴¹ The members, all women, were connected with Alabama State College and therefore members of the middle class. Their status in society allowed them to wield considerable power and influence when negotiating with white local lawmakers and the larger African American community in Montgomery.

The influence the WPC maintained during the saga that followed the arrest of Claudette Colvin is a prime example of the power the group maintained. The news of Colvin’s arrest spread like wildfire throughout the African American community. Mothers feared for the wellbeing of their children and refused to allow them to ride the bus in the immediate aftermath, men were encouraged to seek rides from friends, and the community was ready for action.⁴² However, as the seeds of a protest began to quietly grow, the Women’s Political Council (WPC) quickly squashed any thought of rebellion. Robinson told the story of meeting with the mayor and the city council to initiate the *détente*.

In order to quiet the reactionary African American community black middle class leaders met to discuss Colvin’s arrest and what next steps to take. A mini transportation protest stemmed from the African American working class and the leadership needed to control the message before anything got out of hand. It is important to note that there were few exceptions to Civil Rights Movement leaders being part of the black middle class. Two strong voices in particular,

⁴¹ Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, 23.

⁴² Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, 39.

E.D. Nixon⁴³ president of the local chapter of the NAACP and Rosa Parks⁴⁴ the chapter secretary were from the working-class, but were able to transcend their financial limitations. These two individuals were able to “pass” as part of the middle class and hold leadership positions in organizations outside of their working class roots. However they still faced many obstacles. Rosa Parks famous during the boycotts later in life became destitute for a long period of time and E.D. Nixon cut ties with the Montgomery Improvement Association, MIA,⁴⁵ an organization formed during the boycott and led by Martin Luther King Jr, over the class divisions. The lack of influence that came with not being a member of the middle class caused a rift that could not be repaired between Nixon and the MIA.

In order to understand why the WPC had faith in negotiating with lawmakers, the period prior to Claudette Colvin’s arrest must be examined. Before Colvin’s arrest, meetings with transportation officials were held on the matter of discrimination on city transportation. The WPC took leadership roles in these

⁴³ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 41.

“When black people had serious problems in Montgomery, they went to E.D. Nixon. Employed as a railroad sleeping car porter, Nixon worked tirelessly throughout his life to advance the rights of black people. A tall, rugged man with a commanding voice and an earthy sense of humor, Nixon seemed to know everyone: jailers, white policemen, judges, newspaper reporters, lawyers, and government officials. An early president of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, Nixon was often able to fix common people’s problems through plain talk and informal dealing before they hardened into legal cases.”

⁴⁴ Rosa Parks at this time was a forty two year old seamstress who was secretary of the local NAACP chapter. She was soft spoken and very well respected amongst the middle class despite her working class background and level of education compared to the women leaders. She was not a member of the Women’s Political Council.

⁴⁵ David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: HaperCollins, 1986) 22-24

The Montgomery Improvement Association, also known as MIA, was created on December 5· 1955 to direct the protests during the boycott. The middle class black leadership founded the organization, and the participants elected Martin Luther King Jr without any opposition as president created this. King was chosen because he was a dynamic speaker and new to town so therefore not involved in the squabbles of the existing leadership.

meetings and presented at the public hearing a list of grievances for the City Council to consider. Jo Ann Robinson recounts the list in her memoir:

1. Continuous discourtesies with obscene language, especially name calling in addressing black patrons.
2. Buses stopped at each block in neighborhoods where white lived, but at every two blocks or block and a half in black neighborhoods.
3. Bus drivers' requirement that Negro passengers pay fares at the front of the bus, then step down off and walk to the back door to board the bus. The practice was a dangerous one, for people standing in the aisle blocked the view of the driver so that it was possible to catch a rider in the door and drag him a distance without knowing that he was there. In many instances the driver drove away before the patrons who had paid at the front could board the bus from the rear.
4. That the front ten double seats on each bus (out of a total seating for thirty-six) were reserved for whites, whether there were enough whites riding the bus to occupy them or not. Even when no whites were aboard, those seats were reserved, just in case one or two did ride. In many instances black riders had to stand over those empty seats. Since about 70 percent of all bus patrons were black, especially on certain buses and in certain areas, it seemed to many riders that the reservation of seats was unnecessary.⁴⁶

As a result of this public hearing, the WPC's demands were met. Buses began to stop at every block in African American neighborhoods and for a short time African American passengers were treated in a courteous manner while on the buses. However, life on these same buses soon returned to what it was and African American passengers again faced the injustices outlined by the WPC. Out of this continued mistreatment came Claudette Colvin's act of resistance.

After Claudette Colvin's arrest the will to boycott became a topic of conversation. Opinions differed on Colvin amongst the WPC and the black middle class leadership. A few members of the WPC believed that Colvin was too young to be put in the position of becoming the face of a movement; she would become an

⁴⁶ Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, 31.

unfair target and possibly be hurt.⁴⁷ As a result a successful meeting was held with Commissioner Birmingham and Mayor Gayle addressing the concerns of the black middle-class leadership. The law officials promised that Claudette Colvin would not be harshly tried and changes to the bus system would be made to ease the daily life of commuters. These promises did not come to be, in March of 1955 a new commissioner, Clyde Sellers, took office and the strides made with Commissioner Birmingham were no longer honored. The city tried Colvin under the state law, a law that placed the defendant under strict scrutiny in comparison to Montgomery city ordinance and carried a very harsh punishment. Unfortunately, Colvin was found guilty of all charges.⁴⁸ The reaction from the African American towards Colvin was sympathy,⁴⁹ but all except her lawyer Fred Gray who stuck with her through her appeal to ensure she saw some justice, eventually forgot her.

⁴⁷ Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, 39.

⁴⁸ Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, 42.

⁴⁹ Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, 42.

Chapter 3 – Class, Gender, and Politics of the Bus Boycott

Before Claudette Colvin decided to leave Montgomery officially, she participated in the trial of *Browder v. Gayle*. While Colvin was not the featured plaintiff, that honor went to Aurelia Browder whose name was on the lawsuit, she certainly was the standout one. When later defending his ruling, Justice Frank Johnson cited Claudette Colvin's testimony as the key factor in his decision.⁵⁰

Browder v. Gayle, filed on February 1, 1956 in the Federal District Court for the Middle Districts of Alabama, challenged the segregation law on public transportation in the city of Montgomery. Brought on behalf of five women who had been previously arrested for failing to adhere to this law, the main goal of the case was to legally integrate Montgomery's public transportation systems. The five women involved in the suit were Aurelia Browder, the main plaintiff, Claudette Colvin, Mary Louise Smith, Susie McDonald, and Jeanette Reese. Browder was forty-five years old at the time of the trial; Smith and Colvin were teenagers, and Reese and McDonald were senior citizens. Due to her age, Browder became the logical choice for lead plaintiff.⁵¹

Despite it being a particularly grueling trial for Colvin who had a young baby at home, she excelled on the witness stand. Colvin did not fall into the trap of the defense lawyer who tried many times to get the women to admit that the lawsuit was a ruse connected with the Montgomery Bus Boycotts.⁵² Not once did Colvin falter in her convictions on the stand. The three-court judge panel ruled two to one

⁵⁰ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 91.

⁵¹ Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 88.

⁵² Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 86 - 88.

in favor of the plaintiffs.⁵³ The ruling was controversial and angered members of the white community of Montgomery, and Justice Frank Johnson received death threats for his decision to rule that segregation on public transportation was illegal.⁵⁴

The case was dangerous, but Colvin dutifully participated despite any fears of threat or repercussion. One could ascertain from these descriptions that Colvin was not the type of person to act without putting any thought into her actions. She knew the world in which she inhabited well and understood the laws of Montgomery. *Browder v. Gayle* was Claudette Colvin showing the middle class black leadership that she was capable of everything they tried to “protect” her from by not making her arrest the rallying point of the Montgomery Bus Boycotts. She was strong and did not need to be coddled or protected. Her actions on the bus may not have been enough to convince the black leadership that she truly was a strong intelligent woman, but *Browder v. Gayle* should have been that event. From the moment *Browder v. Gayle* ended Claudette Colvin’s legacy should have been changed. Colvin should have been included in the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement because her testimony led to a landmark ruling in the case for Civil Rights.

Before *Browder v. Gayle* Claudette Colvin’s life began to change after her appeal, in which all convictions except for assault were dropped, the community slowly began to harden towards her. Where there was once sympathy, now there was contempt. When Colvin returned to school after her appeal, the students at Booker T. Washington began to see her in a different light. The students saw the

⁵³ Knabe, *Gayle v. Browder U.S. Supreme Court Transcript of Record with Supporting Pleadings*, 2-19.

⁵⁴ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 92.

“bus girl” as a troublemaker.⁵⁵ They began to mock her actions. No longer was she the brave classmate who stood up to the establishment.

This thought was further cemented when Colvin performed the simple act of no longer straightening her hair. In my opinion, the significance of the way black hair is styled has been a point of contention in the black community for a long time. In fact, it was hair that was the breaking point for Claudette Colvin and her community in Montgomery. Hair exposed the community’s feelings towards Colvin and caused a rift that inevitably cost her a starring role in the narrative of the Montgomery Bus Boycotts. Straightening her hair was the one factor that helped Claudette fit the societal norms of beauty. Claudette Colvin described herself as dark skinned with kinky hair, a combination that not only contrasted with the established African American standards of beauty but also defined her as a member of the working class. Claudette was a pretty girl, but without straightening her hair she did not fit the mold for high school popularity and social standing.⁵⁶ Colvin made the conscious decision to no longer straighten her hair. She did not understand why black women adhered to the standards of beauty of white women.

Defeated and tired by the court case, her only recourse was to take back ownership of her physical appearance. She decided to embrace her hair and appreciate the beauty of her natural hair. Not straightening her hair was the only form of protest that she could still control. Everything else was lost with the trial. “By wearing it natural I was saying, “I think I am as pretty as you are.” Colvin reflected “All of a sudden it seemed such a waste of time to heat up a comb and

⁵⁵ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 50.

⁵⁶ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 50 – 54.

straighten your hair before you went to school. So I just quit doing it. I felt very emotional about segregation, about the way we were treated, and about the way we treated each other. I told everybody, 'I won't straighten my hair until they straighten out this mess.' And that meant until we got some justice."⁵⁷

Claudette's noble intentions were not well received at school. Her own teachers as well as classmates questioned her motives and sanity. She was isolated and no longer allowed to appear in the school play. Her natural hair cemented her reputation of a "troublemaker." Students began to outwardly blame Colvin for everything that had happened to her. No longer did they believe that the police were completely wrong but rather that Colvin knew the consequences of her action and that she should have followed the rules. Students and the community at large disassociated themselves with Colvin. However, Colvin still found a home in advocacy work alongside Rosa Parks and the NAACP. She continued to attend weekly youth groups and analyze issues of civil rights.

Isolated from her school and community, Colvin met a Korean War Veteran who recently separated from his wife. He listened to her, and understood the choices she made about her appearance and hair. Colvin was starved for acceptance and she found it with this older man. Her liaisons with this man would lead to her pregnancy. He was never identified in her interviews with Hoose, only known as the "light-skinned man" who lived with his mother and paid attention to Colvin. On December 2, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give her seat to a white

⁵⁷ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 50.

passenger on the bus, soon after Claudette Colvin found out she was pregnant.⁵⁸

Colvin did not know she was pregnant at the time of Parks' arrest, therefore the idea that pregnancy inhibited her ability to be the face of the boycotts is false.

One of the myths that is still purported by historians is that Colvin was not chosen to be the face of the boycott because she was pregnant. This narrative was easy to accept. The American public would not sympathize with a pregnant teenager. However, the research of this thesis points to a different understanding. Class was the determining factor in Colvin's exclusion. Class is an ugly word in the context of the Civil Rights Movement and any indication that class was part of the Movement was buried in favor of other subjects, like race. If Colvin's pregnancy and age were the reasons for her exclusion, then it is hard to understand why the WPC would perform a background check on her prior to her pregnancy. Colvin was obviously considered, but when the WPC found out that her aunt and uncle were poor and that she lived in the King Hill neighborhood they no longer felt that she could represent a movement. Her class roots coupled with the fact that she was a dark-skinned young girl, were the main factors that worked against her.

Fred Gray in his oral history at the Rosa Parks museum recalled his desire to file a lawsuit against the bus companies on behalf of Claudette Colvin. The black middle-class leadership would not allow it. According to Gray, the leadership felt that it was not the right time. However, a few months later, Rosa Parks sat on the bus and on February 1, 1956 *Browder v. Gayle* began. The time in-between Colvin's case and *Browder v. Gayle* was less than a year. In that year, everyday life had not

⁵⁸ Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 53-60.

gotten worse for the African American community in Montgomery. Life was as it always was. Nothing had changed except that the black leadership finally found someone they could stand behind, Rosa Parks.

Conclusion

“We must keep the Negroes, West Indians, and Indonesians poor. Otherwise they will get ambitious: they will seek strength and organization: they will demand to be treated as men, despite the fact that we know they are not men: and they will ask social equality for civilized human beings the world over.”⁵⁹ W.E.B DuBois’ powerful statement on the white world’s views of people of color is as true today as it ever was. There is only so much freedom the white patriarchal society permits. In order to keep a certain segment of the population from demanding more, subjugation is necessary.

Such was the world of Claudette Colvin. Under Jim Crow, which is what Du Bois knew as his reality, Colvin and other members of the African American community faced a system that not only told them that they were less than full citizens but forced them to live this way for a period of time or all their lives. Some died without ever knowing what true freedom felt like. Freedom from the slave plantation was only step one, true freedom was what Colvin and every African American person who participated in the American Civil Rights Movement truly desired.

Claudette Colvin, despite the circumstances of her class, transcended barriers with her act of courage. The WPC and the black-middle class leadership of Montgomery were not able to see past the poor-working class family into which Colvin was born, but that does not diminish her actions. Her story belongs in the

⁵⁹ W.E.B. DuBois, *On Sociology and the Black Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 298.

canon of the Civil Rights Movement. Colvin was an activist in every sense of the word. She understood her reality and the consequences she faced, but was brave enough to believe that the African American community of Montgomery deserved more. Until the day Colvin left Montgomery, she fought for freedom and justice. Claudette Colvin deserves to have her story told. Colvin was more than the teenage girl who sat on the bus in protest before Rosa Parks; she was the girl who influenced a Movement. Young people today deserve to hear her story. Her actions prove that the ordinary can achieve the extraordinary, a message that transcends any barrier.

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