

## 1.18

# Rosa Parks Fingerprinted, Montgomery, Alabama, 1956

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On 22 February 1956, Gene Herrick took a series of photographs that captured Rosa Parks being fingerprinted following her arrest for boycotting Montgomery's city buses. Each photograph depicted a well-dressed, diminutive, and compliant Parks being processed by Lieutenant D.H. Lackey. In the most frequently reproduced version (included here), the neatly dressed officer towers above Parks as he grips her left hand and manipulates her ring finger in an effort to coat it with ink.

The scene illustrates Parks's second arrest in Montgomery—eleven weeks after the bus boycott began and almost three months after her famous act of defiance on a bus led to her initial arrest in December 1955. The photograph circulated widely in 1956, appearing in such influential publications as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and *LIFE* magazine.<sup>1</sup> Today it is among the best-known images of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, used to illustrate numerous scholarly and popular books, articles, and documentaries on Parks and the civil rights struggle. Its familiarity suggests the powerful role the mainstream press has played in establishing the visual (and political) terms by which early civil rights history is understood.

In February 1956, a Montgomery grand jury handed down 115 indictments against some of the city's most prominent black religious, business, and civic leaders for the misdemeanor offense of “conspiring to boycott.” Parks was among them. In the weeks that followed, a number of mass-circulation periodicals in the North used the famous Herrick photograph to illustrate their first stories on Parks's struggle and the ongoing black boycott of the city's buses. The indictments, and subsequent arrests, made newsworthy to whites a conflict that had already dragged on for several months. In reproducing the photograph, such publications highlighted the officer's physical control of the petite Parks. The visual emphasis on white authority is in keeping with the captions and stories that accompanied Northern white publications' coverage of the boycott. White reporting consistently focused on the “humiliating conditions” under which blacks suffered and their so-called “passive” protest against the status quo.<sup>2</sup>

What was then called the “Negro press”—publications owned by black businessmen and aimed at a black readership—covered Parks's activism and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in a manner distinct from that of the mainstream media. In contrast to the limited reporting by the white press, most black periodicals devoted attention to events in Montgomery from the start. Early stories were routinely illustrated with passport-like headshots of a respectable Parks gazing out toward viewers, or of larger images of her in domestic or public settings with friends, family, and fellow civil rights activists.<sup>3</sup> And yet,



**Figure 1.18** Gene Herrick, *Rosa Parks Fingerprinted*, Montgomery, Alabama, 22 February 1956. AP/Wide World Photos and Gene Herrick.

despite its generous use of photographs in reporting on Parks, the black press showed reluctance to publish photographs of her in custody. The widespread availability of Herrick's arrest photographs through the wire service of the Associated Press notwithstanding, the photographs were *not* published in the following black newspapers: *Atlanta Daily World*, *California Eagle*, *Chicago Daily Defender*, *Detroit Tribune*, *Journal and Guide*, *Philadelphia Tribune*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. For most black periodicals, the bus boycott was better illustrated through a collection of images (and news stories) that depicted Parks as a respectable middle-class woman, along with photographs of boycotters walking to work, attending rallies, and strategizing. Both the Baltimore and the Washington *Afro-American* and *Jet* did publish a Herrick photograph of Parks being fingerprinted, but in each case the editors presented the event to their readers in a manner unique to the black press. None of the periodicals selected the Herrick arrest photograph reproduced here; instead they each used a version showing the officer bent at the waist as he manipulated Parks's hand. In the black press, Lackey did not tower over his arrestee. And all

three periodicals cropped the right side of the policeman's body, diminishing his visual importance within the frame.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to white publications' penchant for focusing on the abuse of African Americans, black media reports celebrated the strength and resolve of protestors. Periodicals cited pamphlets circulated by the boycotters, which urged black support of "economic reprisal" against the bus line; they quoted approvingly Parks's comment on the need for blacks to "fight it out" and a white reporter's observation that the boycotters exhibited "military discipline." They described the boycott as "a graphic lesson to Negroes in other sections of the South that they, too, have a weapon of devastating and destructive power." Black editors surely knew that photographs of Parks under arrest posed a threat to her respectable reputation as a "Christian, church-going woman" and increased the likelihood of her being defined foremost as a victim of white authorities.<sup>5</sup> They had little interest in furthering the narrative of victimization that was a staple of the white press.

In the 1950s, the Herrick photograph clearly held more appeal to whites than blacks. Its racialized publication history offers a cautionary note to contemporary scholars who reproduce the photograph to narrate the history of the Montgomery bus boycott. After all, it is hard to imagine capturing the story of black activism with a photograph that has historically represented the civil rights movement from the perspectives of whites.

## Notes

- 1 "Negro Leaders Arrested in Alabama Bus Boycott," *New York Times*, 23 February 1956: 1, 23; "10 Pastors Seized in Boycott Case," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 23 February 1956: 15; "A Bold Boycott Goes On," *LIFE*, 5 March 1956: 40–1.
- 2 " 'Crime Wave' in Alabama," *New York Times*, 24 February 1956: 24; "Race Talks Urged by Adlai," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 28 February 1956: 1; "Alabama . . . Why Race Relations Could Grow Even Worse," *Newsweek*, 5 March 1956, 24–5; "City on Trial," *Time*, 5 March 1956: 21.
- 3 "Negroes Stop Riding Montgomery Buses in Protest over Jim Crow," *Jet*, 22 December 1955: 12; "Bus Ban Within States," *Chicago Daily Defender*, 24 April 1956: 1; "Boycott! Montgomery Bus Co. 'On Ropes,'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, 14 January 1956: 1–2; Ethel L. Payne, "The Boycott Story and Montgomery," *Chicago Daily Defender*, 8 May 1956: 5; "Boycott Still On," [Baltimore] *Afro-American*, 17 December 1955: 1.
- 4 [Baltimore] *Afro-American*, 3 March 1956: 7; [Washington] *Afro-American*, "Arraignment Today for 115 Accused in Ala. Bus Protest," 25 February 1956: 1; "Negroes Protest Bus Arrests with Prayer," *Jet*, 8 March 1956: 8.
- 5 "Vote to Continue Ala. Bus Boycott," *Chicago Defender*, 24 December 1955: 1–2; "Negroes Stop Riding," *Jet*, 15; "Boycott!": 1–2; "Bus Boycott Effective in Dixie City," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 17 December 1955: 3. For other examples of the black press stressing the power of Montgomery's black community, see Payne, "The Boycott Story," 5; "Bus Boycotters Stand Firm," [Baltimore] *Afro-American*, 21 January 1956: 2; "Help Needed Now," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 25 February 1956: 8; "Bus Boycotters Won't Give Up!" *Journal and Guide*, 3 March 1956: 1; "Negroes Refuse to Ride Busses in Montgomery, Ala.," *Detroit Tribune*, 17 December 1955: 1; "Montgomery Bus Strike Still Going Strong, Race Holds Out," *Atlanta Daily World*, 23 December 1955: 1, 3.