

Framing Black Power Through the Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks

By Tiffany Mitchell Patterson and Jessica Rucker

The goal of this lesson is for students to understand the core ideas of Black Power and the connections to Mrs. Rosa Parks' philosophy and activism. Through this lesson, students learn about the various organizations Mrs. Parks was involved with and connected to, and the direct action organizing tactics she employed in the name of Black liberation.

Learning Goals

Students will be able to define Black Power, describe the goals and actions of Black Power activists, and explain how Mrs. Parks was connected to the Black Power movement and philosophy throughout her life.

Introduction

There is a wonderful photograph of Rosa Parks attending the [National Black Political Convention](#) in Gary, Indiana, in 1972. In this photo by LeRoy Henderson, Parks gazes admiringly at a poster of Malcolm X.

[*The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*](#), by Jeanne Theoharis, sheds light on Parks' feelings about Malcolm X:

In the 1990s, Parks shocked Black-nationalist lawyer Chokwe Lumumba when she told him that her hero was Malcolm X.

Lumumba had assumed that her work and close personal relationship with Martin Luther King meant that he would be her personal inspiration. No, she clarified, she had certainly loved and admired King greatly, but Malcolm's boldness and clarity, his affirmation of what needed to be done for Black people, made him her champion.

If you do a quick Google search for or flip through any textbook section about Rosa Parks, you will find her name tightly tethered to two words: civil rights. She is called, "the mother of the Civil Rights Movement," a "civil rights pioneer" and "civil rights icon." She is described as a "civil rights activist" and often credited with "sparking the Civil Rights Movement." But Parks' hero, Malcolm X, made a point of rejecting the mantle of "civil rights" as too limiting.

In fact, Rosa Parks attended Malcolm X's famous "[Ballot or the Bullet](#)" speech in Detroit in 1964, in which he said,

Whenever you are in a civil rights struggle, whether you know it or not, you are confining yourself to the jurisdiction of Uncle Sam . . . Civil rights keeps you under his restrictions, under his jurisdiction. Civil rights keeps you in his pocket. Civil rights means you're asking Uncle Sam to treat you right. Human rights are something you were born with. Human rights are your God-given rights.

In [Understanding and Teaching the Civil Rights Movement](#), historian Hasan Kwame Jefferies provides context for this struggle over terminology in the Black Freedom Movement.

. . . the term civil rights began to dominate mainstream public discourse in the late 1950s. As the Cold War heated up, Black moderates, such as NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins, whose approach to change revolved around political and moral appeals to liberal whites, favored framing the struggle solely as a pursuit of civil rights. At a time when red-baiting was rampant, civil rights sounded less un-American. . . But rebranding the struggle as a pursuit of civil rights did much more than simply ease liberal white anxiety.

It fundamentally changed how people outside of the African American community understood the movement. For them, the struggle became strictly about securing federal legislation to end segregation in public accommodations and to increase Black political participation. Gone were the movement's much broader economic and political goals, from nondiscrimination in employment to control of local governments. The movement's core human rights objectives, including gaining access to decent housing and desperately needed healthcare services, also disappeared.

The traditional curriculum portrays Malcolm X and the Black Power Movement as the evil twins of the Civil Rights Movement while over-simplifying the Civil Rights Movement and treating the Black Power Movement as "too hot to touch."

As a result, students learn very little about the Black Power Movement and what is introduced is often reduced to images of unreasonable men with guns — with no connection to Rosa Parks.

Suggested Procedure

1. To help students reflect at the end of the lesson on what they have learned, start with a T-chart of their current understanding of Black Power and Rosa Parks. Ask what they know about the Black Power Movement. What comes to mind (people, places, ideas, actions) when they think about Black Power.

At Opening of Lesson	At End of Lesson
What I know (or think I know) about Black Power and connections (if any) to Mrs. Rosa Parks.	What I know now about Black Power and connections (if any) to Mrs. Rosa Parks.

2. Once they list what they know (or think they know) about the Black Power Movement, ask what, if anything, Rosa Parks had to do with the Black Power Movement.
3. Explain that you are now going to explore both those topics — Black Power and Rosa Parks’ connections to the movement and philosophy.
4. Introduce the tenets of Black Power, some of which students may have listed. Below are some of the tenets of Black Power, drawn from the [Rosa Parks Biography](#) website and [NMAAHC](#).)
 - self-defense
 - demands for more Black history in the curriculum
 - economic justice
 - internationalism
 - independent Black political power
 - African Americans should have power over their own schools, businesses, community services, and local government.
 - self-respect and racial pride, as well as celebrating Black people’s cultural accomplishments around the world.
5. Note that these are not concepts that get much attention in textbook narratives about the era, so students will engage in a gallery walk to learn about these concepts and determine if Rosa Parks’ life had any connection to them.
6. Invite students to engage in the gallery walk. As they walk around, have them record their insights on the *See, Think, Wonder* handout (at the end of the procedures) to reflect on the images or text and identify the relevant tenet of Black Power. Use whatever gallery walk protocol you prefer. They can be silent

for the first block of time and then engage in conversation, or suggest they talk throughout. Or give them sticky-notes, and they can write on and post these in a “silent dialogue” with other students.

7. Once they have completed the gallery walk (for however much time makes sense for your class schedule), invite them to discuss their thoughts and insights on Mrs. Rosa Parks and Black Power.
8. Revisit the T-chart with students to discuss any shifts in their understanding about Black Power and Mrs. Rosa Parks. Complete the other half of the chart, “What I know now about Mrs. Rosa Parks and Black Power.”

Extension Options

1. Invite students to critique their textbook or a children’s book. Based on what they have learned, how would students rewrite or expand textbook entries or children’s books that limit her role to the traditional confines of the Civil Rights Movement. They can use their own U.S. history textbook, a children’s book from the library, or this online reading of the problematic picture book, [Little People, Big Dreams: Rosa Parks](#).
2. If your students have access to the book, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, they can learn more about Black Power through the life and activism of Mrs. Rosa Parks as she was involved in multiple movements connected to the tenets of Black Power. Assign to students, in small groups, the excerpts below from the young readers edition of *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*. (You may need to have more than one of each group to create group sizes that work best for your class.)
 - Group 1: Republic of New Afrika: pp. 253-54 (two pages)
 - Group 2: NAACP Youth Council (Youth Council, Montgomery NAACP): pp. 58-59, 75, 87, 117 (five pages)
 - Group 3: The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense: pp. 220-21, 246-47, 251, 255 (six pages)

Have students read the text for their respective group. They can use the handout, “Exploring Black Power Through the Life and Activism of Mrs. Rosa Parks Small Group Reading Activity.” Each group should create a brief presentation of their choice (i.e., art-based, PowerPoint slides, film) to teach the class what they have learned and how their readings help to explain a tenet(s) of Black Power through Mrs. Rosa Parks’ life and what she was fighting for.

Additional Resources

[What We Don't Learn About the Black Panther Party — but Should](#) by Jesse Hagopian and Adam Sanchez

Books for K–12 and adults on the [Black Panther Party and Black Power](#)

Black Lives Matter at Schools Movement [13 Principles](#)

[Black Power Chronicles](#) online archive

[The Sword and the Shield: The Revolutionary Lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.](#) by Peniel Joseph

More Lessons

This lesson is from *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks Teaching Guide*, a collection of lessons to accompany the book and film of the same name.

Feedback Requested

Most of the lessons, including this one, have yet to be field-tested. Please [share your feedback](#) — what worked, what didn't, student responses, adaptations, and more. In appreciation, we will send you copies of the young readers edition of *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* and other resources.

Credits and Permissions

This lesson was written by educators Jessica Rucker and Dr. Tiffany Mitchell Patterson. They are based in Washington, D.C., with many years of classroom teaching experience. They are both [Prentiss Charney Fellows](#). Rucker is an American Studies Doctoral Student at the University of Maryland and Mitchell Patterson is a Social Studies Manager for D.C. Public Schools. They were part of a team of writers for *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks Teaching Guide*, along with Jeanne Theoharis, Say Burgin, Jesse Hagopian, Cierra Kaler-Jones, and Ursula Wolfe-Rocca.

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HANDOUT

Note: This can be shared as a handout or done as a group activity on a flip chart or smart screen.

Black Power and Rosa Parks

At Opening of Lesson	At End of Lesson
What I know (or think I know) about Black Power and connections (if any) to Mrs. Rosa Parks.	What I know now about Black Power and connections (if any) to Mrs. Rosa Parks.

HANDOUT

Gallery Walk: See, Think, Wonder

Tenets of Black Power

- self-defense
- demands for more Black history in the curriculum
- economic justice
- internationalism
- independent Black political power
- African Americans should have power over their own schools, businesses, community services, and local government.
- self-respect and racial pride, as well as celebrating Black people’s cultural accomplishments around the world.

Image #	See	Think (include which tenet of Black Power)	Wonder

HANDOUT

Name:

Date:

Exploring Black Power Through the Life and Activism of Mrs. Rosa Parks Small Group Reading Activity

Directions: Each group will learn about Mrs. Rosa Parks as she was involved in multiple movements connected to the tenets of Black Power by reading excerpts from *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks Young Readers' Edition*. As you read, take notes and summarize big ideas that help you answer the question: How does the assigned reading help to explain the tenet(s) of Black Power through Mrs. Rosa Parks' life and what she was fighting for?

Assigned Chapter Title and Page Numbers:

Summary (Main Idea) of the Chapter:

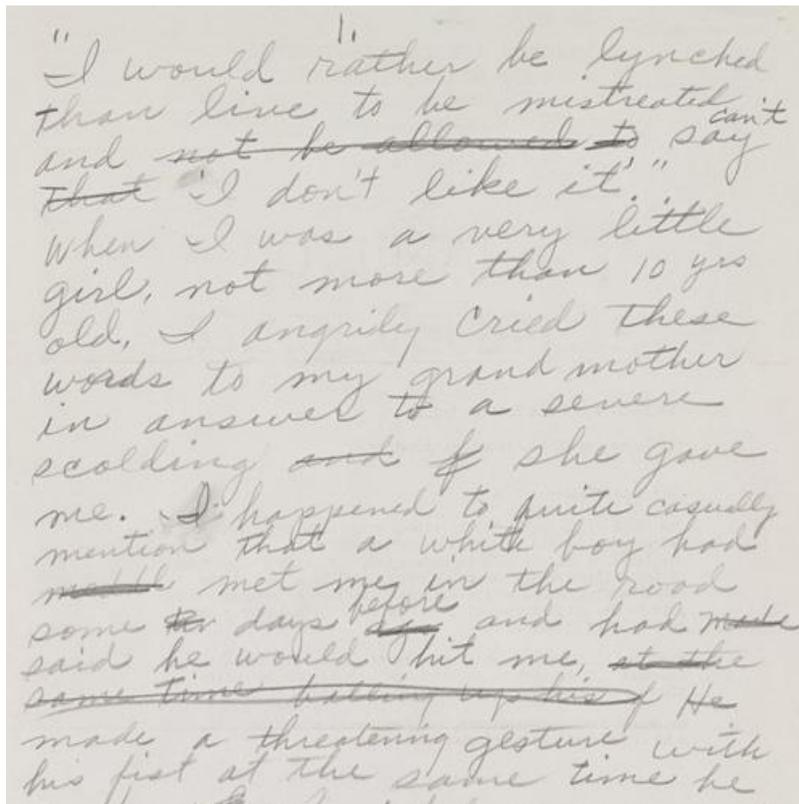
Key Details from the Chapter (people, places, events, ideas, etc).

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Black Power

Gallery Walk Pages

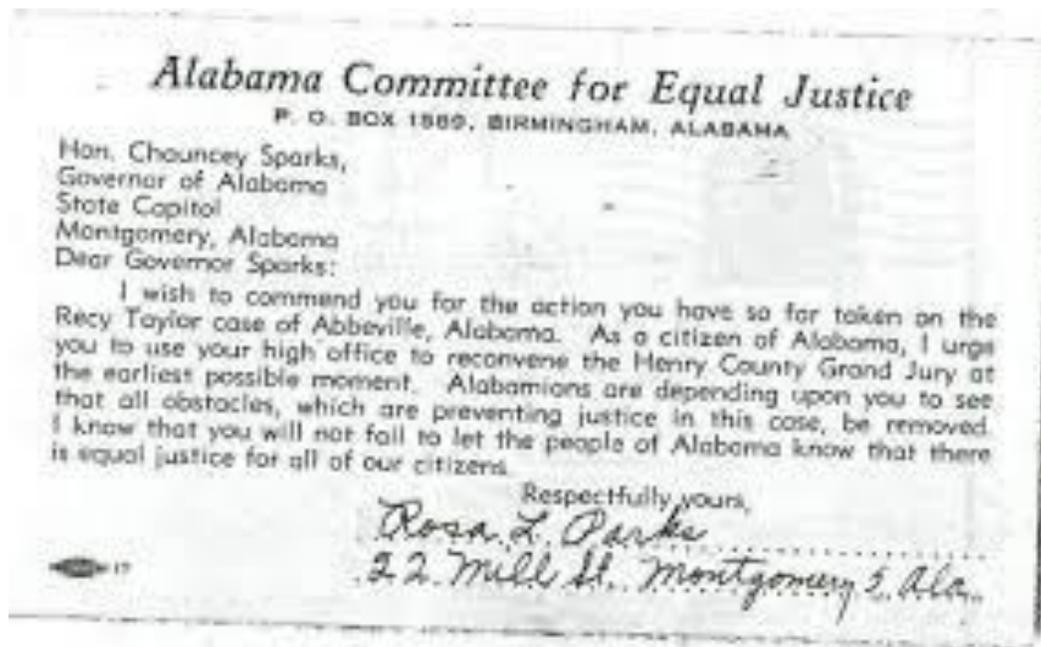
Note to instructor: The timeline pages can be displayed in chronological order. The quotes can be interspersed throughout or added at the end of the timeline. It is not expected that students will get to all the images in the gallery walk. Suggest that they start anywhere in the gallery walk, spreading out so that they can get close enough to look at the images and read the text.

A photograph of a handwritten manuscript snippet on aged paper. The text is written in cursive and includes several corrections and deletions. The main text reads: "I would rather be lynched than live to be mistreated and ~~not be allowed to say~~ ^{can't} that 'I don't like it.'" Below this, it describes a childhood incident where she angrily cried these words to her grandmother in response to a scolding. She then mentions a white boy who threatened her in the road some days before, making a threatening gesture with his fist.

Timeline: [ca. 1923](#)

"I would rather be lynched than live to be mistreated and can't say 'I don't like it.' When I was a very little girl, not more than 10 years old, I angrily cried these words to my grandmother in answer to a severe scolding she gave me. I happened to casually mention that a white boy had met me in the road some ~~for~~ days ~~ago~~ before and had said he would hit me. He made a threatening gesture with his fist at the same time he spoke. I picked up a small piece of brick and drew back to strike him if he should hit me. I was angry, though he seemed to be half teasing and half bullying me. He went his way without further comment." — **Rosa Parks**

Image: Rosa Parks recounting a childhood encounter with a white boy who threatened to hit her, ca. 1955–1958. Source: Autograph manuscript. Rosa Parks Papers. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.



Timeline: 1945

Recy Taylor was seeking criminal justice for the men who sexually assaulted her. As an African American woman, it would be rare for there to be a trial and prosecution. Mrs. Rosa Parks signed a card to Governor Sparks on the Taylor case.

Source: *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks Young Readers' Edition*, page 41



Timeline: 1960

In **October of 1960, Amzie Moore** attended a SNCC staff meeting in Atlanta and encouraged the group of student activists to direct their efforts toward voter registration, rather than sit-ins, believing that it is **through the vote that Black people will gain power and structural change.**

Text Source: SNCC Digital Gateway



Timeline: 1964

“We have to build our own power. We have to win every single political office we can, where we have a majority of Black people. . . . The question for Black people is not, when is the white man going to give us our rights, or when is he going to give us good education for our children, or when is he going to give us jobs — if the white man gives you anything — just remember when he gets ready he will take it right back. We have to take it for ourselves.” — Fannie Lou Hamer, spokeswoman for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

Text Source: [SNCC Digital Gateway](#) Image source: [Library of Congress](#)

A VOTE FOR THE LOWNDES COUNTY

FREEDOM ORGANIZATION



Mr. Sidney Logan, Jr.
Sheriff



Mrs. Alice Moore
Tax Assessor



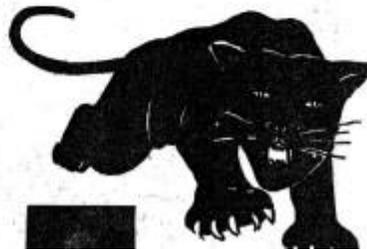
Mr. Emory Reax
Coroner



Mr. Frank Mylax, Jr.
Tax Collector



Mr. John Hanson
Bd. of Education



Timeline: 1966

SNCC's staff in Lowndes County proposed that local residents form their own **independent political party to secure Black political power**. After a series of educational meetings in Atlanta, Lowndes County leaders began to organize the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, with a Black Panther as its logo.

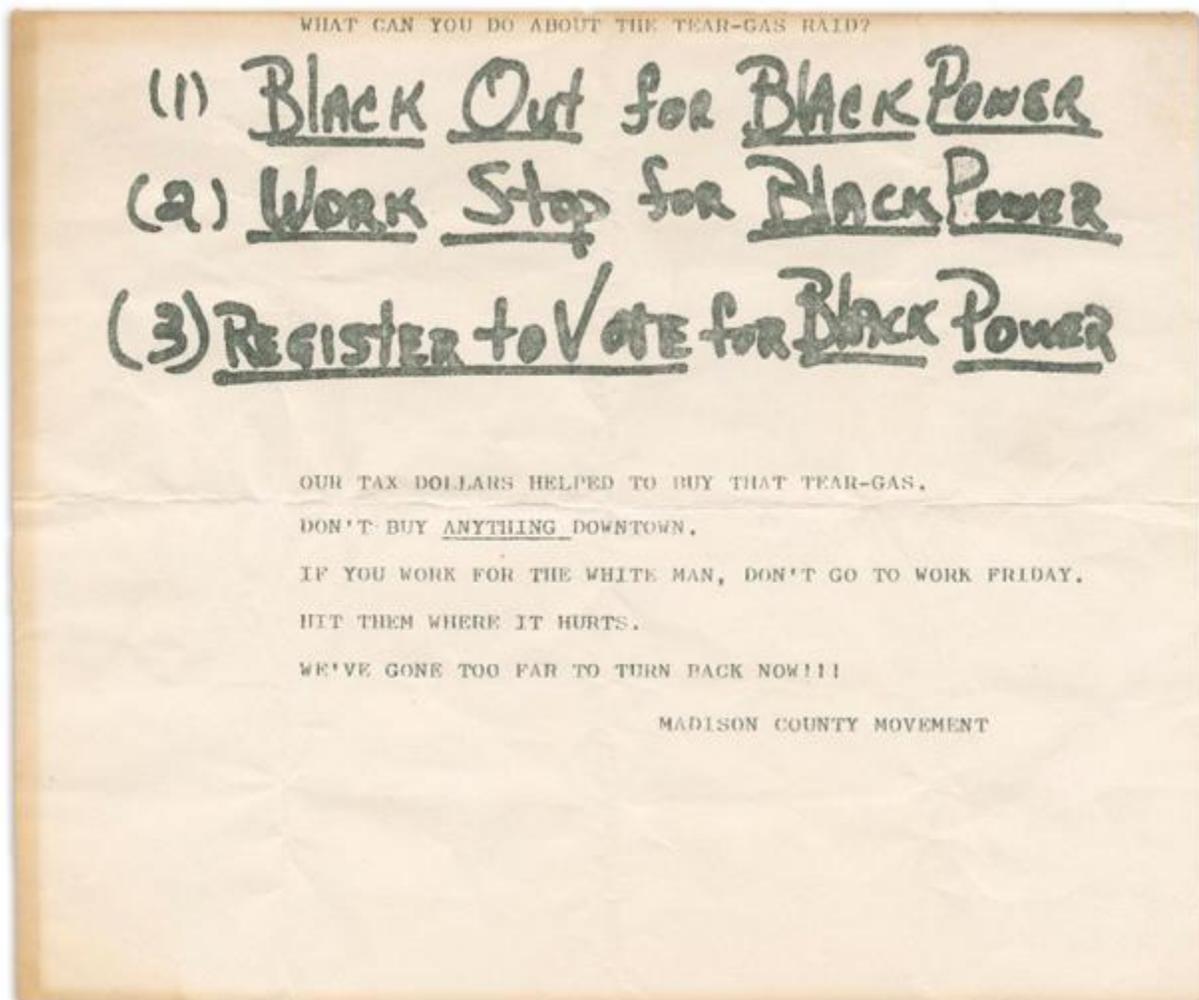
Source: SNCC Digital Gateway



TIMELINE: 1966

On Jan. 3, 1966, Sammy Younge Jr. was killed at a gas station in Macon County, Alabama, for using the “whites-only” bathroom. Younge was a 21-year-old African American Tuskegee Institute student and a voting rights activist. He had lost a kidney while serving in the U.S. Navy.

During protests, Black Power was written on the Confederate statue. (Parts of the lettering can be seen in the photo above, covered by other paint.)



TIMELINE: 1966

Organizers made no distinctions between Black Power and nonviolent civil rights boycotts in Madison County, Mississippi, 1966.

Image: Flier for the Madison County Movement, founded 1963. Source: [Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture](#), Gift from the Trumpauer-Mulholland Collection



Timeline 1967

The “Wall of Respect,” located on Chicago’s South side. In 1967, a group of African American artists formed the Organization for Black American Culture – OBAC, which sounds like the Yoruba word for chieftain. Inspired by ongoing civil rights struggles and the emergent Black Power movement, the Visual Arts Workshop of OBAC decided to collectively paint a mural celebrating African American heroes on the side of a building at 43rd Street and Langley Avenue.

From the Jeff Donaldson papers, 1918–2005. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [Read more.](#)



TIMELINE: 1968

Gold medalist [Tommie Smith](#) (center) and bronze medalist [John Carlos](#) (right) showing the [raised fist](#) on the podium after the 200 meter race at the [1968 Summer Olympics](#); both wear [Olympic Project for Human Rights](#) badges. [Peter Norman](#) (silver medalist, left) from Australia also wears an OPHR badge in solidarity with Smith and Carlos.

[OPHR had four central demands](#): restore Muhammad Ali's heavyweight boxing title, remove Avery Brundage as head of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), hire more African American coaches, and disinvite apartheid South Africa and racist Rhodesia from the Olympics.



Timeline: 1972

Thousands of Black leaders gathered to create a cohesive political strategy at the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana. Rosa Parks attended the convention.

Photos by LeRoy Henderson at the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana.



Timeline: 1974

Joan Little was accused of murder after she used deadly force to resist sexual assault in 1974. While incarcerated, she had killed a guard in self-defense. Her case received national attention, with “[Joanne Little Legal Defense Committees](#)” all over the United States, including a local chapter formed by Rosa Parks in Detroit.

Note that Joan is pronounced Jo-ann so often spelled Joann or Joanne.

Source: [Zinn Education Project](#)



Timeline: 1979–1980

In the 1979–1980 school year, Rosa Parks visited the Black Panther Party School in Oakland, California. Students performed a play they had written in her honor. The school’s director Ericka Huggins recalled Parks’ delight at the visit and how “touched” students and teachers were that Parks “came all the way.”

Photo by Donald Cunningham. Courtesy of Ericka Huggins. Source: [Rosa Parks Biography](#)



Timeline: 1979–1980

News clipping about Rosa Parks' visit to the Oakland Community (Black Panther) School, as well as the children's play.

Unknown author, "Rosa Parks Visits OCS," Black Panther Intercommunal News Service, May 12 1980, 2, [The Berkeley Revolution](#)



Timeline: 1984

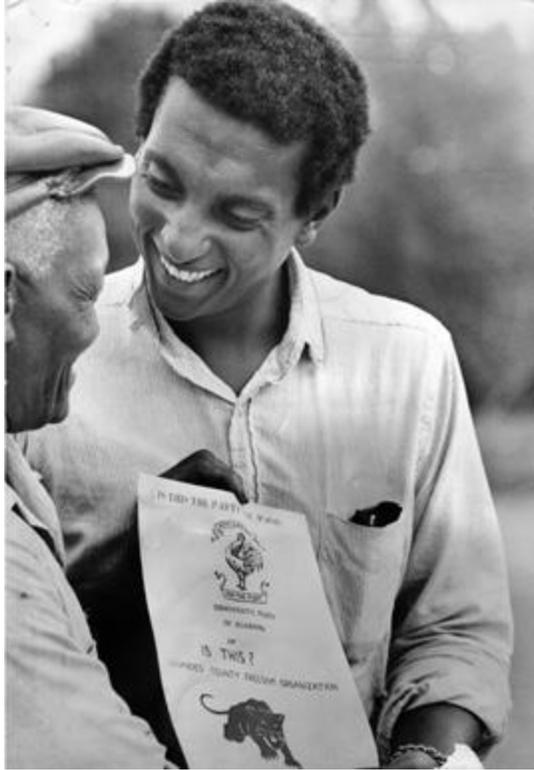
Mrs. Rosa Parks joins in a march at the South African Embassy in Washington, D.C., Dec. 10, 1984, protesting that country's racist apartheid policies.



Timeline: 1986

Mrs. Rosa Parks and U.S. Congressman John Conyers Jr., picketing in front of General Motors corporate headquarters, Detroit, Michigan, 1986. They were protesting the company's decision to close five Michigan plants. Conyers holds a sign reading: "GM has made the most inhumane decision in its history."

Photo source: [Library of Congress](#)



Quote

“This country knows what power is. It knows what Black Power is because it deprived Black people of it for over 400 years. White people associate Black Power with violence because of their own inability to deal with Blackness.” – **Stokely Carmichael**

Text source: SNCC Digital Gateway Image source: [Encyclopedia of Alabama](#)

Quotes

By Rosa Parks

“I’m in favor of any move to show that we are dissatisfied.” —**Mrs. Rosa Parks**

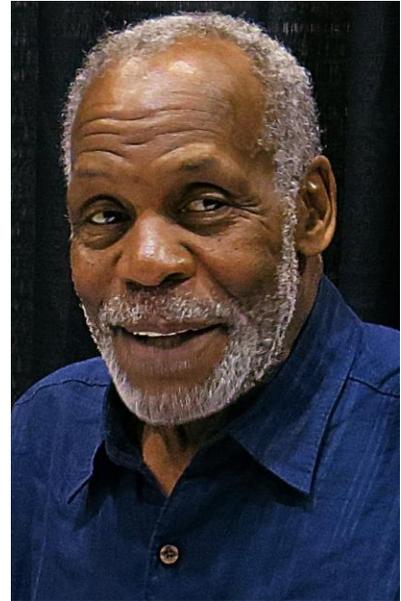
Believing that it was “better to protest than to accept injustice,” Mrs. Rosa Parks stood with young people who were organizing and their attempts to get justice.

“I don’t believe in gradualism or that whatever should be done for the better should take forever to do.” —**Mrs. Rosa Parks**

“I have never been just what you would call an integrationist. I know I’ve been called that. . . . Integrating that bus wouldn’t mean more equality. Even when there was segregation, there was plenty of integration in the South, but it was for the benefit and convenience of the white person, not us.” — **Mrs. Rosa Parks**, from the start of the documentary, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*

Quote

The Civil Rights Movement didn't deal with the issue of political disenfranchisement in the Northern cities. It didn't deal with the issues that were happening in places like Detroit, where there was a deep process of deindustrialization going on.



So you have this response of angry young people, with a war going on in Vietnam, a poverty program that was insufficient, and police brutality. All these things gave rise to the Black Power Movement. The Black Power Movement was not a separation from the civil rights movement, but a continuation of this whole process of democratization. — Danny Glover, actor

Image source: [Creative Commons](#)

QUOTE

“We reject the American Dream as defined by white people and must work to construct an American reality defined by Afro-Americans.” — [SNCC statement on Black Power](#)

By the mid-1960s, SNCC’s organizational work had shifted toward gaining political and economic power for Black communities. But Black Power encapsulated more than controlling resources. It was also about expanding consciousness — whether through increasing awareness of African liberation struggles and embracing of African culture or by claiming the power to define and asserting Black is Beautiful.

One of the authors of the SNCC statement on Black Power was SNCC staffer, Zoharah Simmons.

Source: SNCC Digital Gateway



QUOTE



“The phrase ‘Black Power’ was liberating, and the whole concept that we are going to define what is beautiful was liberating. We allowed ourselves to now challenge people and begin to understand that we are also powerful in our own way.” — SNCC staff person Courtland Cox

Text source: SNCC Digital Gateway Image source: Smithsonian Magazine