

COLLECTIVE FORGETTING AND THE SYMBOLIC POWER OF ONENESS:
THE STRANGE APOTHEOSIS OF ROSA PARKS

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Collective forgetting refers to what is unregistered in the imagination of the individual, unchronicled in research monographs and textbooks, and/or uncommemorated by monuments, relics, statues, and ritual observances. A metaphor for failure to transmit information about the past, collective forgetting refers not only to people's forgetting events they once knew but also to having never known them in the first place. One example of this phenomenon involves America's most prominent civil rights heroine: Rosa Parks. Why have so many men and women whose conduct was more consequential than Mrs. Parks's been forgotten? What does society gain from their oblivion?

William Goode (1978) observed many years ago that "winners in various kinds of competition, even when they are marked off from the losers by minute differences in performance, or, (as in science) by narrow differences in the time of discovery or achievement, seem to be given far greater amounts of prestige than those differences would appear to justify"(p.66). Because it usually costs less (in terms of attention) to admire a field's best (a single task) than to admire its first *and* second best (a multiple task), Goode's explanation of why the magnitude of reward is often out of proportion to achievement is persuasive, but it skirts the related questions of (1) whether people are *unwilling* or *unable* to admire slightly less adept performers, and (2) why these performers not only fail to receive due credit but are often forgotten altogether.

COGNITION AND MEMORY: CAPACITY LIMITS

Two premises frame our present understanding of forgetting. First, the central nervous system's capacity to organize, store, and retrieve information is severely limited. Although human long-term memory is almost infinite (during an average lifetime it will have accumulated more than five times the information contained in all the printed material in the world [Marois

2005:30]), much of this material fades from disuse, is “overwritten” by more recently acquired knowledge, or coded to make it irretrievable by working memory (Vockell 2006).

Direct demonstration provides the most accurate measure of cognitive limits. The parietal cortex, according to recent magnetic resonance image (MRI) studies, becomes more active as more objects (visual images, concepts, plans, people, and other chunks of information) are held in working memory, but once its limit of four objects (on average) is reached, the adding of more objects causes no further increase in cortex activity (Marois 2005. See also Ricoeur 2004)

The second premise is that individuals adapt to the limits of their long- and short-term memory by “heuristic” strategies enabling them to ignore most of the information to which they are exposed. History buffs, therefore, can name all American presidents; few vice-presidents. The typical baseball fan can identify last year’s division winners in both American and National leagues but probably knows few if any of the respective second-place winners. Olympic (first place) Gold Medal recipients are far more likely to be remembered than (second and third place) recipients of Silver and Bronze Medals. In science, literature, and artistic award ceremonies, all nominees are known but winners alone are remembered. However, this tendency toward “oneness” cannot result exclusively from cognitive limits.

Oneness

Oneness is a confusing term beset by contradictory definitions: in the popular realm it concerns singularity and uniqueness; in many religious belief systems, it is the condition of being at one with fellow believers and transcendent powers. In this essay, *oneness refers to the recognizing of one exceptional individual and ignoring of others, many of whom may have performed as well as or better than the one acclaimed.*

Oneness, as an adaptation to cognition's limits, is always "realm-specific." In baseball, for example, separate awards are given for the "Most Valuable Player," for the highest batting average, most home runs, most strikeouts, most wins, lowest earned run average, and other offensive and defensive achievements. Beauty pageants produce a general winner (Miss America) and winners in various sub-competitions (talent, bathing suit, evening gown, congeniality). In the academic world, awards are given in different disciplines and sub-disciplines for the most distinguished careers, books, and articles. The Pulitzer Prizes, Academy Awards, Tony Awards, and Nobel Prizes are also examples of single awards given within different realms of achievement. These awards not only reflect organizations' need for exemplars to articulate their ideals but also the convention of exemplifying each ideal by one person.

Contingencies

The relationship between nature and convention, between cognitive capacity limits and the practice of limiting recognition to single recipients, must be qualified.

1. Because working memory's limit, according to most investigators, is four bits of information (Cowan 2005), nature alone cannot account for the phenomenon of oneness.
2. Cognitive limits can be transcended at will. Baseball experts, for example, possess vast knowledge of many categories of offensive and defensive performance. This is possible because their working memory encodes every relevant chunk of new information, transfers it to long-term memory, where it is aligned *meaningfully* through typing, classification, and schema, then stored, with relevant existing information. The constant interplay between efficient encoding and organizing of information in working and long-term memory distinguishes "experts" from "novices" (Ericsson and Kinch 1995: 239-240).

That many individuals are motivated to acquire vast knowledge in one or more realms of activity (usually occupational) means that oneness is the *default* option, not the *sole* option, for human cognition. But individuals mastering one or more bodies of knowledge cannot master all there is to know. Even they are “cognitive misers” because they oversimplify reality by ignoring its “details;” but they are also “motivated tacticians” because deliberate ignoring of information allows them to attend to the most relevant and complex tasks. Short cuts, no less than prolonged attention to complex problems, are tactically motivated (Fiske and Taylor 1991, p.13).

3. The more knowledge one has of the achievement realm within which a person is recognized, the more likely he or she will know of others who have accomplished at least as much or more. Singular recognition is most likely to promote resentment among insiders.

4. The singling out of winners reinforces or undermines social structures. Among individualistic communities, “winner take all” situations are most common, while egalitarian communities believe singling out winners undermines group solidarity and individual esteem. Differentiation of a field also affects the feasibility of single awards. Between 1902 and 1949, for example, 85 percent of Nobel Prizes in physics were given to single recipients; 2 percent, to three recipients. Between 1950 and 1999, single recipients received only 26 percent of the awards; three recipients received 38 percent. In six of the first seven years of the twenty-first century, three recipients shared the prize. Physics produces more winners as it becomes more complex and innovative. It should be noted, however, that the Nobel Committee has never awarded its prize to *more* than three physicists in any one year—a number that happens to be within working memory’s limits.

5. The media through which information is transmitted restricts the amount any individual can possess. A history text can devote only a limited number of pages to a given

event; a newspaper or magazine, only so many columns; television and radio stations, only so many minutes (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). Media limits add to the effect of cognitive limits.

6. When no single representative can be selected to symbolize a field of activity, the pool of “contestants” can be condensed into a single unit and identified by their number. The Little Rock Nine, namely, the three boys and six girls chosen by the NAACP to integrate the Little Rock Central High School in 1957, is a relevant example. Nine individuals are easy to forget, but when condensed into one name are readily remembered.

7. Not all events in the collective memory are symbolized by a single person or collectivity. In the sport of baseball, for example, pairs and trios often represent something special about a team or an achievement. The Boston Braves of the late 1940s depended heavily on two pitchers, Warren Spahn and Johnny Sain—hence the cautious war-cry: “Spahn and Sain, and pray for rain.” Likewise, early twentieth-century baseball fans represented the difficult double-play by its supposed virtuosi, “Tinker to Evers to Chance.” In other fields, including entertainment, duos and (Sonny and Cher) trios (Peter, Paul, and Mary) are recognized individually. Future work will determine whether duos and trios are exceptions to, or different forms of, oneness, but raising the question must not prevent us from exploring the phenomenon of oneness itself.

The concept of oneness describes a *non-universal* but powerful *tendency* for individuals and groups to simplify complex comparisons by choosing one prominent performer. This tendency is reinforced by memory’s limits, but such a hindrance does not make single awards imperative. Why, then, does a conventional limit—the recognition of one person—exaggerate a natural (cognitive) limit which, although obdurate, permits the recognition of several people. Why is human convention so stingy, why does it cause us to remember so few and forget so

many, what social realities does it reinforce, and how does the answer to these questions bear on our general understanding of collective forgetting? Rosa Parks, as noted, is the case in point.

THE RISE OF ROSA PARKS

Forgotten Events and Protesters

Throughout the Jim Crow era, many African Americans rebelled against segregated seating in public transportation, but their number vastly increased after World War II. By the mid-1950s, defiance of bus segregation had become common. A host of unrecognized men and women (“invisible leaders,” as Bernice Barnett [1993] calls them [see also Hendrickson 2005]), preceded Rosa Parks. “Invisible leaders” are in fact quite visible to scholars whose business is to search for them, but to the general public they are unknown. The following chronology includes a sample of the unknown persons and events that helped end bus segregation in Montgomery.

May 21, 1954. Jo Ann Robinson, president of Montgomery, Alabama’s Womens’s Political Council, complained in a letter to Mayor W.A. “Tacky” Gayle about humiliations endured by black bus passengers (including herself) and warned of a boycott against Montgomery’s bus company.

March 2, 1955. In Montgomery, Alabama, Claudette Colvin refused to move to the back of a segregated bus; she was arrested, convicted, and fined.

April 19, 1955. Aurelia Browder of Montgomery refused to take her legal bus seat; she, too, was arrested, convicted, and fined.

October 21, 1955. Mary Louise Smith of Montgomery was arrested, convicted, and fined for violating the city’s bus segregation code. Several days later, Suzi McDonald was arrested and fined for the same offense.

December 1, 1955. Rosa Parks was arrested, then convicted and fined for refusing to surrender her seat to a white passenger. Next day, the Montgomery bus boycott, planned for a single day, went into effect.

December 3, 1955. Active leaders of Montgomery's black community formed a new entity, The Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), in order to distance themselves from conservative ministers and avoid legal entanglements with the local NAACP branch. The Association appointed Martin Luther King, Jr. its president.

December 5, 1955. Several hours after Rosa Parks was fined, thousands gathered for a meeting at a local church under the black community's new (MIA) leadership. King's speech electrified the audience, which voted to extend the boycott indefinitely.

February 1, 1956. Realizing that the boycott had failed to achieve its modest goals of improving courtesy and convenience within a segregated transportation system, attorney Fred Gray convinced his MIA colleagues to bring legal suit against the city. He named Browder, Colvin, Smith, McDonald, and one other woman, Jeanetta Reese, as plaintiffs against Montgomery's mayor, claiming bus segregation violated their 14th Amendment (equal protection) rights. Jeanetta Reese had also been ejected from a Montgomery bus for refusing to give up her seat, but she removed her name from the suit after receiving threats on her life.

February 21, 1956. Rosa Parks, among eighty-nine other black resisters, was arrested and fingerprinted for violating the city's anti-boycott law.

June 5, 1956. Six months after the filing of the *Browder v. Gayle* suit, the three-judge Fifth Federal Circuit Court ruled against the city of Montgomery and its mayor. The city immediately appealed to the Supreme Court.

November 13, 1956. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the district court ruling. Five

weeks later (December 20) federal marshals served the enforcement order.

December 21, 1956. The NAACP marked the desegregation order by asking Rosa Parks to pose for a photograph on a city bus.

Because pictorial information is more readily remembered than verbal (MacInnis 1987), this photograph reinforced the public's belief in Rosa Parks as the symbol of the civil rights movement. It also takes us to the nub of the problem. Why did the NAACP choose Rosa Parks to represent a boycott in which so many played equally important roles?

Singling Out Rosa Parks

When two or more investigators make an identical discovery within a short time span, Robert Merton (1957) observes, credit is assigned to the person who makes the discovery first. If this priority rule is generalized to social movements, then one must recognize that Rosa Parks was last, not first, to challenge Montgomery's bus segregation practice. After Claudette Colvin was arrested in March 1955, Jo Ann Robinson, president of the Women's Political Council, E.D. Nixon, director of the Montgomery NAACP, and attorney Fred Gray thought the youngster would be a good plaintiff in a lawsuit to end bus segregation and a good symbol to mobilize Montgomery's heretofore compliant (King 1958, pp.34-37) black community. But the plan fell through. Although a member of the NAACP youth organization, Miss Colvin was pregnant with a married man's child. In October, 1955 eighteen year-old Mary Louise Smith refused to give up her bus seat, but her father's alcoholism ruled her out as a plaintiff and symbol. To the extent that Colvin and Smith deviated from what Barnett calls "The cult of black women's respectability and womanhood," their arrests, according to E.D. Nixon, would be less likely to impress a court and arouse the indignation of Montgomery's African Americans (Raines 1977, pp.43-44). Little personal information on Suzie McDonald, 78 at the time of her protest and

arrest, is available; however, the Montgomery police had also arrested Aurelia Browder, an NAACP member and activist. Browder worked for years as a seamstress, then finished high school, entered college, and graduated with honors with majors in mathematics and science. Not until Rosa Parks was arrested, however, did Robinson, Nixon, and Gray believe they had found the plaintiff and symbol they sought. Two attributes made Rosa Parks the most effective plaintiff and symbol: (1) she had no skeletons in her closet and (2) as NAACP secretary, she was better known throughout the black community than any of the other arrested women, including Browder (King 1958, p.44; Williams 1987, pp.63, 67; Parks 1992, pp.124-125). Her arrest, however, plays a minor part in the boycott's history.

The full story of the Montgomery bus boycott is the story about black representatives confronting Montgomery municipal officials, even as their homes are bombed and their families threatened; about black attorneys countering city and state legal maneuvers; about weekly meetings in churches (also bombing targets) to reinforce the motivation of the protestors; about ordinary people struggling to maintain their livelihood by pooling resources and supporting one another. In these stories Rosa Parks plays no visible role. Reverend Robert Graetz, white minister of Montgomery's black Lutheran congregation and boycott participant, reports: "Sadly, Mrs. Parks had very little to do with the boycott. Once it was past the beginning, she faded into the background" ([*Montgomery*] *Advertiser Company* 2005, pp.113). Between her February arrest and the November Supreme Court decision, Rosa Parks traveled the country on speaking engagements, but she had no part in the front line of battle, as did Graetz. Besides making his own fund-raising trips, Graetz served as secretary of the Montgomery Improvement Association, was particularly hated by white segregationists, lived under continual surveillance, suffered nightly telephone threats on his children's lives, endured an attempted murder and two bombings

(Graetz 1991).

Fred Gray, Montgomery Improvement Association attorney, was also exposed to a wide range of harassment. While threatened with disbarment and summoned for review of his draft status by Montgomery's Selective Service Board, Gray designed and executed the *Browder vs. Gayle* action. His role in the Supreme Court's bus desegregation decision was indispensable (Gray 1995; Burns 1997, pp.147-152).

Nevertheless, Rosa Parks emerged as the symbol of the struggle and the victory.

When Rosa Parks Became a *National* Celebrity

Rosa Parks refused to pay the \$14 fine imposed for her December 1, 1955 violation, and on February 22, 1956 was sentenced to fourteen days in jail. Appealing to the State Supreme Court, she was released on bond. She was also arrested on February 26, 1956 on an anti-boycott charge, fingerprinted under the eyes and cameras of the press, and indicted. At this time, when the state's mass prosecutions dominated national attention, Rosa Parks's name appeared most frequently in the national media.

Apotheosis

In early 1956, no one knew or could have known how brilliantly the light of the mass media would soon shine on Rosa Parks and how much more intensely it would shine as decades passed. Indeed, when Rosa Parks died in her Detroit home in October 2005, fifty years after the boycott, state and local establishments reacted with extraordinary reverence. Following the pattern of a "royal progress," the ceremonial form by which kings and queens take possession of their realm (Geertz 1983), the NAACP moved her body to Montgomery's St. Paul A.M.E. church, where she had been a member. Many officials, including the U.S. Secretary of State, participated in the service. Throughout the city, the first row of seats on all buses remained

empty in her memory. From Montgomery, her body was flown to the Baltimore-Washington International Airport, named after Thurgood Marshall, with whom Fred Gray consulted during the legal battle. The motorcade, accompanied by a symbolic 1955-era bus, carried her remains to the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, where they were placed in state. Emergency legislation, initiated by the Michigan House delegation led by John Conyers and signed by the president, provided for this honor, previously reserved for presidents, statesmen, and military heroes. After signing a bill authorizing a statue of Rosa Parks to be erected in the U.S. Capitol Building, the President of the United States ordered all flags to be flown at half-staff; he and other federal officials visited the Rotunda privately to pay their respects. Then the great Rotunda doors were opened and tens of thousands wound their way around the military guard and coffin.

Mrs. Parks's remains were next moved to Detroit's Greater Grace Temple for a seven-hour service. Entertainers, including Aretha Franklin, civil rights leaders, and political and business leaders attended, as did Michigan's two senators and many House members, black politicians from many states, and prominent white figures including Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Nancy Pelosi, and Bill Ford, CEO of Ford Motor Company. Her body was finally placed on a gold-trimmed horse-drawn carriage for the seven-mile procession to the cemetery. The release of scores of doves coincided with her arrival and entombment.

Commemoration: Primary Vehicle of Oneness

History records events over time; commemoration lifts from the historical record events that best symbolize the ideals of the society. History informs; commemoration inspires and motivates (Schwartz 2001). For most people, commemoration alone tells who is worth remembering and why.

That commemoration, not history, preserves Rosa Parks's *oneness* was never more

evident than when she lay in state in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda. She was honored so spectacularly, according to CNN's announcer Gary Nurenberg, because the remarkable gains of the civil rights movement resulted from the will of "one woman on one bus in Montgomery fifty years ago." Joseph Lowery agreed: Yes, "she sat down so we could stand upShe was the one woman whom God chose to do extraordinary things." To list all comments would be tedious, but it is important to note they are profuse, attribute the boycott's success to her alone, and originate from the widest array of people conceivable; black and white, liberal and conservative, Southern and non-Southern.

Because commemoration could not perform its function if it were not selective, the outpouring of attention on Rosa Parks would have been impossible if she had to share the spotlight with other women, including those who risked as much, enjoyed less protection, and displayed as much courage. What if the federal government had to organize spectacular funerals for the entire cast of resisters? CNN announcer Carol Lin, present at the Capitol Rotunda when Mrs. Parks laid in state, raised this question simply and clearly: "Really, I think people are grasping *what it must have been like* for this woman back in 1955 to be so brave" (Italics added.) Many women back in 1955 were brave, but if all these women received their due, grasping "what it must have been like" would be difficult. Multiple commemoration rites—the making of the calendar into something resembling a sequence of funeral and award announcements—would make incoherent the very ideal these rites affirm.

DETERMINANTS OF ONENESS

Condensation

The figure of a single black woman who refused to give up her seat to a white passenger is more easily representable than all the Montgomery women who worked on behalf of civil

rights. Foreshadowing a fundamental premise of cognitive psychology, Emile Durkheim ([1915] 1965) declared: “we are unable to consider an abstract entity, which we can represent only laboriously and confusedly, the source of the strong sentiments which we feel. We cannot explain them to ourselves except by connecting them to some concrete object of whose reality we are vividly aware” (p.251). This “concrete [singular] object,” Rosa Parks, helps represent morally and emotionally what the civil rights movement meant to its beneficiaries. Promoting attachment rather than enlightenment, Rosa Parks’s image encouraged commitment to the civil rights movement as an undifferentiated whole. She was, as Sherry Ortner (1973) would define her, the civil rights movement’s “summarizing symbol.”

Matthew Effect

In the first phase of her public career, the figure of Rosa Parks condensed a local resistance campaign, but as her renown grew she became dissociated from local protest and situated on the national scene. The mother of a bus boycott became the “mother of the civil rights movement.” As the media broadcast the image of Rosa Parks, it grew, as Edward Sapir (1930) would have said, “deeper and deeper roots in the unconscious and diffused its emotional quality to types of behavior or situations apparently far removed from [its] original meaning” (p.493).

Robert Merton’s (1968) “Matthew Effect” describes further this diffusion process. The Gospel of Matthew is Merton’s source: “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance, but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.” The Matthew Effect is actually a variant of what general systems scholars call “positive feedback,” a process that creates new meanings by converting initial responses into virtuous cycles (Buckley 1967). Observers, thus, react toward the beneficiaries of recognition in ways that exaggerate their initial prestige and cause competitors to be forgotten. The beneficiary is invited to events,

seated next to leaders, asked to judge the merit of others' traits and achievements. The Matthew Effect thus vindicates earlier reward decisions, regardless of whether or not they were the wisest.

Rosa Parks's fate exemplifies the power of the Matthew Effect. Her initial recognition set off a virtuous cycle: she accompanied Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy, E.D. Nixon, and other leaders on trips around the country to raise funds for the Montgomery Improvement Association. Invited to national NAACP meetings, she met for the first time such celebrities as A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and Eleanor Roosevelt. Highlander School in Tennessee, where she once studied non-violent resistance, recruited her to teach a course on reform tactics, as if she were the boycott's tactician. She was invited to appear around the country and the world, met with heads of state, including Pope John Paul, and she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom and Congressional Gold Medal. She found places named for her: twenty-one streets in fourteen states; thirty-two public and commercial establishments in thirteen states. Not one comparable site is named for the other bus segregation resisters.

FUNCTIONS OF ONENESS

Rosa Parks's renown reflects mainly on the illusions of achievement. That she was the Mother of the Civil Rights Movement is false. That she was first to challenge bus segregation in Alabama is false. That she spearheaded the struggle against Montgomery's white establishment is false. That hers was a "test case" against segregation is false. Martin Luther King, Jr., E.D. Nixon, and Ralph Abernathy, not Rosa Parks, mobilized the black community to resist bus segregation. Fred Gray devised the law suit that ended bus segregation, and it was Aurelia Browder whom Gray chose for his test case.

Given the limits of human cognition, however, complete information confuses. If we saw all there is to be seen of the 13-month boycott, if we experienced the long walk to work by all

those unable to find a ride, if we heard and read what every participant said about the boycott and how it affected him, if we could grasp every aspect of it, the result would be not understanding but perplexity. The action of a single individual, on the other hand, is easy to grasp and remember. Nothing makes this clearer than the way human nature and society protect us from remembering too much.

Oeness: Font of Idealism

Nature limits the power of cognition, but society alone can press these limits to the service of oneness. “Singling out” and “setting examples” do more than reward individuals; they provide the community with concrete exemplars of its moral values, standards, virtues, and powers.

The underlying structure of the ideal is its singularity. According to the *Standard College Dictionary*, an ideal is an “ultimate object of attainment” or “standard of perfection,” which can only be conceived as a single thing and represented as such. As an adjective, the ideal “conforms to an absolute standard of excellence. . . representing the best of its kind” In these representative statements the ideal is never plural; it is a unique model to which people orient their aspirations and conduct.

It may be said, without twisting the term too much, that there is something “sacred” about ideals and their symbols. In modern societies, the sacred, according to Emile Durkheim, surrounds every individual, and modern societies are sustained by what he calls the “cult of the individual” (1974a, pp.58-59; Goffman 1967, pp. 47-48). But if “objects become sacred and judgments attribute value when they reflect a social ideal” (Durkheim 1974, p. xxv), then this ideal must dramatize the gap between ordinary and extraordinary events and beings. Society cannot sustain itself without creating standards in its various spheres (Durkheim 1974b, p.93).

This is why, “in the present day as in the past, we see society constantly creating sacred things out of ordinary ones” (Durkheim [1915] 1965, p.245). Sacred things cannot be adored, however, if their aura is blurred by competitors. The greater the number of *beau ideals* within any realm of activity, the more ambiguous their referent becomes. The natural limits of cognition, therefore, reinforce the ideals which express culture’s most valued traits and achievements.

Oneness, Schema, and Reality

What is owed to the principle of oneness can be known by imagining the result of our doing without it. Remove Rosa Parks, and the average person will have a much vaguer notion of both the origins of the civil rights movement and the ideals that drove it. Remove Rosa Parks, and the story of a wronged innocent is replaced by tedious details about carpools, pickup points, fundraising, weekly MIA meetings, petty internal disputes—details which conceal the schema of the larger struggle.

Rosa Parks’s story is “schematic” (Fiske and Taylor 1991; Bartlett [1932] 1995; DiMaggio 1997) because it simplifies the Montgomery protests and aligns them with classical stories of oppressed people’s struggle for justice. A humble seamstress finishes a day of hard work, boards a bus, pays her fare, takes a seat, is ordered to move to the back of the bus when a white passenger appears, refuses because she is tired of a lifetime of humiliation. She is arrested, tried, and fined. Montgomery’s longsuffering black community, angered by her arrest, boycotts the city’s buses for a year, forcing the white government to relent and desegregate. Such is the schema abstracted from Rosa Parks’s conduct. People who cannot remember the bus boycott as a whole can retrieve the schema in which its elements are stored: a mild woman’s run-in with an angry bus-driver in a Jim Crow city sums it up.

The story presents a self-flattering as well as concise account: segregation is conquered by the iron will of a tyrannized community, exemplified by a black seamstress, not by a white court and its judges. Indeed, the narrative presumes that federal courts would have ruled against integration if not pressured by black resistance. “So when you ask why the courts had to come in,” JoAnn Robinson, President of the Women’s Political Council, explains, “they *had* to come in. You get 52,000 people in the streets and nobody’s showing any fear, something had to give. So the Supreme Court had to rule that segregation was not the way of life” (Williams 1987, p.71; 89). Robinson’s statement has two implications: (1) the boycott broke the back of the segregationists by putting unbearable pressure on the bus company and downtown merchants, and (2) the boycott forced the courts to rule against the city. Both implications underestimate the autonomy of the courts and overestimate the power of public demonstrations.

Long before Montgomery’s boycott began, the Supreme Court had handed down a series of liberal decisions on jury selection, housing, public education, voting rights, professional school integration, equal access to publicly funded resources, including golf courses, swimming pools, beach houses, and public parks. By the time of the (1954) *Brown* decision, not made under the pressure of public protest, little was left of the Plessy-Ferguson principle. Furthermore, the Fifth Circuit Court’s unpressured integration of Columbia, South Carolina’s bus system in *January* 1956 makes implausible the claim that a boycott forced the Fifth Circuit Court to integrate Montgomery’s bus system in *November*, 1956.

Martin Luther King believed the *Browder* decision was significant because it broke the deadlock between resisters and the city (Williams 1987, p.89). In fact, there was no deadlock. After eleven months, the black community was far worse off than the white, and the city had no incentive to give in. When an Alabama circuit court was about to prohibit the use of car pools,

the boycott was, in fact, on the verge of collapse (Glennon 1991:83), and it would have collapsed had not the federal district court issued its *Browder* ruling. No direct cause and effect relationship, observes legal scholar Robert J. Glennon, exists “between the boycott and the end of segregated buses in Montgomery.” The *Browder* case “could have proceeded without the attendant boycott and the Court result would have been identical” (p.93). Put differently, Montgomery’s buses would have been integrated whether or not Rosa Parks had given up her seat.

The memory of the Gray/*Browder* litigation has been replaced by the more resonant story of Rosa Parks’s defiance and an oppressed black community’s arising on its own to overcome white oppression. But if the Rosa Parks story distorts history, its appeal does not reside in its distortion. Rosa Parks’s occupying the fateful bus seat, her arrest and subsequent apotheosis are real episodes in a historic movement. Her renown, whatever the NAACP’s role in creating it, keeps alive the memory of 381 days of authentic courage, perseverance, and sacrifice.

The boycott’s consequence, then, was real, but not in the way we usually think about it. As a cause of bus segregation’s demise its effect was questionable; its true function was to (1) enhance the dignity and solidarity of the black community by demonstrating its members’ willingness to go to jail for their beliefs (Valien 1989, pp.90), which whites were unprepared to do when the courts ruled against them; (2) impress the legitimacy of black grievances on fair-minded whites; (3) draw national attention to the cause of racial justice, and (4) inspire protests in other places.

To represent every protester as dramatically as Rosa Parks and every leader as clearly as Martin Luther King—and this point cannot be overemphasized—would blur the two realms of protest, leadership and following, and would confound, not clarify, the meaning and consequence

of their struggle. In 1955, it would have made no difference if one of Mrs. Parks's peers had been chosen to be Mother of the Civil Rights Movement, but once a unique presence is established it becomes indispensable. In fact, Rosa Parks symbolizes a revolution of such significance as to make her selection over others a trivial matter. Her aura resides in the social realities she marks.

CONCLUSION

Man's limited memory is understood better now than ever before, but the question remains as to why a humanly instituted deficit should be added to a natural one. If working memory's capacity were independent of culture, then this essay would be about the symbolic power of fourness, not oneness, for human working memory readily manages several chunks of information. The most natural path, then, would be to recognize the several women who defied Montgomery's bus laws.

However, social conventions are limited by, not hostage to, nature. Condensation (a cognitive heuristic) and the Matthew Effect (a social process) work together, transforming fourness into oneness by deliberately simplifying complexity, distinguishing one contributor to a project—in this case, Rosa Parks—and forgetting others, thus symbolizing the ideals all participants in the project pursue. The power of oneness is in this sense overdetermined: however weak the condensation effect in promoting any one reputation, human memory limits recognition—sometimes *to* one person or event, always *toward* one. Even if man's working and long-term memory capacities were greater, the Matthew Effect's positive feedback process would limit recognition— sometimes *to* one person or event, always *toward* one. Cognitive deficit, thus, reinforces rather than creates the symbolic power of oneness.

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