

Rosa Parks Redux: Racial Mobility Projects on the Journey to Work

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The iconic image of Rosa Parks sitting at the front of a bus documents the most famous commute in history. Rosa Parks was traveling home from work when she refused to give her seat to a white passenger in 1955, an act of civil disobedience that set the Montgomery bus boycott in motion and propelled civil rights onto the national stage. Sixty years later, cities in the putatively postracial era continue to generate profound racial inequalities. Drawing on Rosa Parks's defiant commute as a framing device, I situate the journey to work as a racial mobility project that extends from historic urban processes of racial discrimination, reveals lived experiences of intersectional inequality, and generates future racial disparities. I define commuting as a racial mobility project that organizes, redistributes, and mobilizes resources along racial lines in conjunction with the movement of bodies across space. This framework links the discourses of race and mobility, both of which highlight the dynamics of politics and power. By positioning the journey to work as a racial mobility project, this article seeks to resituate the commute for geographers—conceptually, empirically, and politically—at the nexus of geography, mobility, and the struggle for racial justice in the city. *Key Words:* commuting, protest, racial inequality, transportation, urban inequality.

罗莎·帕克斯坐在公交车前半部的代表性意象，记载了历史上最富盛名的通勤。1955年，罗莎·帕克斯在下班回家的途中，拒绝让位给一位白人乘客，这是一个公民不服从的行动，不仅引发了蒙哥马利公交车抵制行动，更将公民权搬上了全国舞台。六十年后，在推定为后种族时代中的城市，仍然持续生产深刻的种族不平等。我运用罗莎·帕克斯的违抗通勤作为框架的工具，将上班旅程置放作为一个种族能动性之计划，该计划延伸自种族歧视的历史性城市过程，揭露多元交织的不平等经验，并生产未来的种族差异。我将通勤定义为结合跨越空间的身体运动，寻着种族的界限，组织、再分配并动员资源的种族能动性计划。此般架构连结种族与能动性的论述，而两者皆强调政治与权力的动态。本文透过将上班的旅程置放作为种族能动性计划，企图为地理学者在概念上、经验上和政治上，将通勤重新置于地理、能动性和争取城市中的种族平等的连结之中。关键词：通勤，示威，种族不平等，运输，城市不平等。

La imagen icónica de Rosa Parks sentada en la parte frontal de un bus documenta el más célebre viaje al trabajo de la historia. Rosa Parks estaba yendo a casa desde el trabajo cuando rehusó ceder su puesto a un pasajero blanco en 1955, un acto de desobediencia civil que desencadenó el sabotaje a los buses en Montgomery e impulsó el tema de los derechos civiles a la palestra nacional. Sesenta años después, las ciudades de lo que es putativamente considerado la era postracial siguen generando profundas desigualdades raciales. A partir del desafiante viaje de trabajo de Rosa Parks, a título de artilugio ilustrativo, sitúo el viaje al trabajo como un proyecto de movilidad racial que se desprende de procesos urbanos históricos de discriminación racial, revela vívidas experiencias de desigualdad interseccional y genera futuras disparidades raciales. Defino el viaje al trabajo como un proyecto de movilidad racial que organiza, redistribuye y moviliza recursos a lo largo de líneas raciales en conjunción con el movimiento de cuerpos a través del espacio. Este marco enlaza los discursos de raza y movilidad, los cuales destacan la dinámica de la política y el poder. Al posicionar el viaje al trabajo como un proyecto de movilidad social, este artículo busca resituar para los geógrafos el viaje al trabajo—conceptual, empírica y políticamente—en la conexión de la geografía, la movilidad y la lucha por justicia racial en la ciudad. *Palabras clave:* viaje al trabajo, protesta, desigualdad racial, transporte, desigualdad urbana.

The iconic image of Rosa Parks sitting at the front of a bus documents the most famous commute in history. Rosa Parks, a seamstress, was traveling home from work on 1 December 1955, when she refused to give her seat to a white passenger, an act of civil disobedience that set the Montgomery bus boycott in motion and propelled civil rights onto the national stage. Her refusal crystallized the insidious nature of segregation in

the South and laid bare its brutal banality. Sixty years later, cities in the putatively postracial era continue to generate profound racial inequalities, and commuting continues to embody, reveal, and sometimes contest the twenty-first-century city as a generator of racial inequality.

Drawing on Rosa Parks's defiant commute as a framing device, I situate the journey to work as a racial mobility project that extends from historic urban

processes of racial discrimination, reveals lived experiences of intersectional inequality, and generates future racial disparities. The journey to work sits at the nexus of multiple spatial and temporal processes, providing a window onto past, present, and future trajectories of mobility. Yet, as a racial project, the journey to work is fundamentally political. Urban political economies emphatically shape commutes, even as actors leverage the commute as a political site of engagement to reveal, contest, and remake these urban political economies. By positioning the journey to work as a racial mobility project, I seek to reinvigorate the commute as a strategic research site for investigations of urban inequality and contentious politics.

In this article, I sketch the conceptual, empirical, and political dimensions of the commute that place it at the nexus of geography, mobility, and racial justice in the city. Geographers have long engaged questions of urban mobility and commuting. The brief nature of this article disallows a full accounting of this extensive body of geographic literature, although I offer signposts to direct readers' exploration. Instead, my primary aim is to highlight the distinctly racial experience of commuting in U.S. cities throughout most of the twentieth century that continues today and its significance as a site of political contestation. Tied to a white supremacist racial order (King and Smith 2005) and the logic of the capitalist city (Harvey 1989; Farmer and Noonan 2014), commuting is a sociospatial and political-economic phenomenon I describe, first and foremost, as a racial mobility project.

Commuting as a Racial Mobility Project

Racial disparities in commuting emerge first and foremost from the racialization of urban space in the capitalist city. Under the racial urban order of the twentieth century, black labor was fixed in its reproductive space (home) while simultaneously mobilized for capitalist production (work). The two spaces of home and work historically conjoined only under the most exploitive conditions: the plantation. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the multifaceted practice of racial residential segregation defined the dominant racial order of urban space (Massey and Denton 1993). Yet although African Americans were restricted in their choice of neighborhoods, they were employed in jobs across the space economy (Ellis, Wright, and Parks 2004). The storied spatial mismatch between the spheres of segregated neighborhoods and the economic

demand for black workers has generated a peculiar and pronounced experience of commuting among African Americans that differs strikingly from that of other racial and ethnic groups in a variety of ways (e.g., speed, duration, mode, safety, ease, dignity).

I argue that the experience of commuting in the twentieth and early twenty-first century in U.S. cities is best understood as a racial mobility project. This theoretical framework builds directly on Omi and Winant's (1994) explanation of the role that "racial projects" play in the process of racial formation. A racial project is "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (Omi and Winant 1994, 56). This approach emphasizes the symbolic and representational work of racial projects as well as their material consequences. A racial mobility project organizes, redistributes, and mobilizes resources along racial lines in conjunction with the movement of bodies across space. This framework links the discourses of race and mobility, both of which highlight the dynamics of politics and power.

Racial projects are political contests that produce, mediate, and disrupt racial inequality. In their work on the role of race in U.S. political development, King and Smith (2005) conceived of *racial institutional orders*, "in which political actors have adopted (and often adapted) racial concepts, commitments and aims in order to help bind together their coalitions and structure governing institutions that express and serve the interests of their architects" (75). Notably, King and Smith focused on the interactional dynamic of two primary racial institutional orders in the United States: a white supremacist order and an egalitarian transformative order. Racial projects, then, involve multiple participants and can be driven by perpetrators of racial injustices as well as by those who struggle against these injustices. Racial projects are neither static nor totalizing; instead, they are constantly in flux, in motion, and mobile.

Commuting sits at the nexus of three primary urban racial projects: labor markets, housing, and transportation. I discuss each briefly in turn, before focusing on the distinct aspects of commuting as a racial mobility project. Racial residential segregation stands out as the most visible and well-documented urban racial project, literally reorganizing urban space across the United States by constraining the housing options of African

Americans (Massey and Denton 1993). Through the allocation and redistribution of housing resources along racial lines, the practice of racial residential segregation mediated the availability, flow, and quality of a host of other territorial resources attached to the neighborhood, such as schools, crime, health, recreation, food, pollution, and jobs.

Labor markets also function as racial projects, distributing employment opportunities and outcomes along racial lines (Parks 2012). Racial disparities in employment abound: African Americans experience higher rates of unemployment than other racial and ethnic groups (Western and Beckett 1999), the black–white wage gap persists (Western and Pettit 2005), and multiple experiences of labor market precarity—low-wage work, unpredictable scheduling, insufficient hours—affect black workers disproportionately (Luce and Weinbaum 2008). Labor market processes overlap and embed with patterns of residential segregation, amplifying the spatial impact of residential segregation practices just described (Ellis, Wright, and Parks 2004).

Urban transportation systems enable the movement of workers between the two spheres of home and work yet contribute unique racial disparities. Transportation resources, including mode type, service levels, capital expenditures, fare subsidies, and even safety, have exhibited sharp racial disparities across U.S. cities and continue to do so (Bullard and Johnson 1997; Farmer and Noonan 2014). As Hodge (1990) pithily stated, “Embedded in urban transportation systems are relations that are intimately and inescapably tied to the most fundamental, and often contentious, elements of cities and societies” (97). The fundamental and contentious effects of race in the United States translate into racially unequal transportation systems, a phenomenon Bullard (2004) called *transportation racism*.

Commuting emerges as a discrete interaction of the racial and spatial dynamics of labor markets, housing, and transportation systems. I more narrowly define commuting as a racial mobility project to emphasize the organization, redistribution, and movement of resources along racial lines that is directly connected to the movement of bodies across space. I build on other geographers who have made similar insights, particularly with regard to the concept of mobility as movement embedded within power structures (Cresswell 2006; Alderman, Kingsbury, and Dwyer 2013; Nagel et al. 2015). Critically, commuting as a racial mobility project centers on the movement of bodies, particularly bodies of color, through racially defined

space. Analytically, the racial project framework challenges us to explicate the racial politics and power structure that informs, regulates, and sometimes contests the movement of racially defined bodies along the journey to work.

I focus on three aspects of commuting as a racial mobility project: lived experience, economic process, and site of political transgression and mobilization. First, commuting constitutes a first-order experience of the movement of a body over space between an origin (home or work) and a destination (work or home). At the urban scale, commuting illustrates different patterns of geographic mobility among urban workers, produced by and constitutive of sociospatial processes that link home and work. At the scale of the body, commuting comprises a lived experience of movement and travel. The physical, social, and psychological conditions of this movement and travel are integral to understanding the immediate and visceral effects of racial inequality.

These conditions have long formed the basis of demands by people of color for fair treatment, racial dignity, and equality. The physical and verbal abuse, sometimes fatal, exacted by white bus drivers and passengers against African American bus riders in the Jim Crow South exemplify the racially unjust conditions of travel experienced historically by black commuters on the journey to work (Williams 2006; McGuire 2010). Other conditions include, but are not limited to, safety, comfort, ease, accommodation, sanitation, speed, duration, and frequency. Is a commuter free from the threat of physical violence or harassment while traveling or waiting to board a bus or train? Does a commuter have access to adequate space for his or her body and possessions while traveling? Is the mode of travel comfortably climate-controlled? Does the bus stop or train platform provide protection against the elements? Is the bus or train safely operated and in sound condition? Are the roads and rails properly maintained? These conditions of travel emerge from and reflect the racial politics that structure the larger transportation system, such as lower levels of infrastructure investment and service in neighborhoods of color (Bullard and Johnson 1997).

Second, commutes manifest as indicators of economic accessibility and mobility. Geographic accessibility to employment opportunities is a key determinant of labor market outcomes as well as future economic mobility. The relative ability of workers to physically travel from their place of residence to a

place of work is illustrated through aggregate commute times. When workers are constrained in their housing options, as African Americans were through discriminatory housing markets, commute times reflect conditions of constraint rather than of choice. The preponderance of empirical research testing the spatial mismatch hypothesis shows a significant correlation between lower levels of spatial accessibility to jobs, higher rates of unemployment, and longer commutes among African American workers throughout much of the twentieth century (e.g., Kain 1968; Holzer 1991; Mouw 2000).

Longer commutes are costly in both time and money, especially for lower paid workers. Longer commutes are not always an indicator of relative economic hardship, however. Commutes are contextual—for example, highly paid male commuters have the luxury of trading off the costs of a longer commute for other amenities, such as housing. On average, women have shorter commutes than men and suffer economic consequences as a result. Dubbed the spatial entrapment hypothesis by feminist geographers, women work closer to home to accommodate their dual responsibilities at home and at work (Hanson and Pratt 1988). Shorter commutes, a function of more spatially delimited job search areas, partly explain occupational sex segregation, the gender pay gap, and underemployment (Madden and Chiu 1990; Hanson and Pratt 1991).

Women of color are particularly disadvantaged. Several geographic studies have found that Latinas and African American women experience longer commutes than their white counterparts (Johnston-Anumonwo 1995; McLafferty and Preston 1997). African American women experience the longest commutes, reflecting their heavy reliance on public transit and their poor spatial accessibility to jobs (McLafferty and Preston 1992; Sultana 2003; Parks 2004). Parks (2014) found that among working poor women in Chicago in 2011, African American women experienced the longest commutes. These women commuted eight minutes longer to their low-wage jobs than their white female counterparts, a total of eighty minutes more per week.

The effect of the accumulation of these disparities over the life course is nontrivial, generating negative economic returns not only for the worker but for her children as well. New evidence demonstrates the relationship between geographic accessibility and intergenerational economic mobility. Chetty et al. (2014) found that children from lower income families were more likely to rise into the ranks of the middle class in

cities with lower levels of residential segregation and greater levels of spatial accessibility to employment. Commuting as a contemporary mobility project generates future intergenerational inequalities, bestowing a huge multiplier effect onto each minute captured in the daily commute disparity.

Third, commuting serves as a site of political contestation and mobilization. The mobility of African Americans en route to work stems from processes of racial subordination and directs these discriminatory practices in space. Black bodies on the move literally become a target of subjugation. They are also agents of resistance. When commuters such as Rosa Parks defy racial subjugation on their journey to work, they mobilize political opposition through their immediate mobility for the purposes of an egalitarian agenda. In the next section, I focus on the refusal of Rosa Parks, elucidating how the spatiality of commuting shapes the contentious politics of racial resistance (Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto 2008). Parks's refusal is one node within a more extensive web of political oppression and resistance of African Americans in relation to transportation, movement, and mobility (Alderman, Kingsbury, and Dwyer 2013). Yet her action bears reexamination because of its historical familiarity, its strategic connection to the Montgomery bus boycott, and its direct relevance to ongoing racially disparate experiences of commuting.

Commuting as Political Contestation

The contradictions of racial residential segregation and the capitalist imperative of production render commuting inherently transgressive as a spatial practice: Black workers need to move out of their home spaces to access their work spaces, crossing racially divided urban space en route. Jim Crow laws in Southern cities belied Southern whites' recognition of this inherent paradox. Thus, segregation practices extended from home to work and on the route between. No space was left unregulated or unpatrolled, an insidiousness exemplified by segregated buses. Unwilling to pay the full costs of segregation, bus companies in the South did not operate "separate but equal" buses. Instead, they offered separate and unequal bus service. The demand for segregation was met by segregating space within the buses themselves, designating separate seating areas for whites and blacks.

City ordinances dictated bus segregation, but drivers were given wide discretion in interpreting and

enforcing the law. Rosa Parks, for example, was not sitting at the front of the bus when the driver ordered her to give up her seat. Parks was sitting in a middle row, an area in which blacks were allowed to sit, but they were expected to relinquish seats for white riders. These rows represented the flux and mutability of the boundaries of segregation—boundaries that, because of their instability, focused and mobilized activities of defense and contestation. On 1 December 1955, these boundaries were further unsettled by contextual factors at the scale of the bus itself—it was full. All available seats were occupied, in both the black and white sections of the bus. Blacks in Montgomery had won an earlier provision to the city's segregation code stipulating that they did not have to give up their seats if the bus was full—a law Parks knew well. Yet the driver, acting as a frontline defender of segregation, exercised his discretionary powers to make Parks move, ultimately calling on the police to arrest her (Theoharis 2013). As liminal space, Parks's middle-row seat provided a purchase for resistance and skirmish ground in the fight against segregation.

The significance of Parks's act of resistance stems not only from its location on the bus but also its quotidian timing. Parks refused to stand during her commute home. For black workers such as Rosa Parks, the commute was the spatiotemporal link between the racialized spaces of home and work. Fundamentally, the commute signified access to economic opportunity. Most jobs available to blacks in the Jim Crow economy were of poor quality, but they provided a means of economic support and, for some black workers, upward mobility. Thus, the economic necessity of commuting raised its political significance and sharpened the economic paradox of segregation. The South's racialized political economy depended on black labor, yet the burden of accommodating the irrationality of segregation was foisted on black workers through long, costly commutes under servile conditions. Parks herself emphasized this paradox. Theoharis (2013) wrote:

Parks's frustration came also from how she was expected to act at work, tailoring clothes in the men's department at Montgomery Fair, and how she was treated in public life. "You spend your whole lifetime in your occupation, actually making life clever, easy and convenient for white people. But when you have to get transportation home, you are denied an equal accommodation. Our existence was for the white man's comfort and well-being; we had to accept being deprived of just being human." (65)

The timing of Parks's refusal was also significant in collective terms, both historically and contemporaneously. Parks's act of defiance was not unique; it extended from a tradition of black protest on mass transit (Alderman, Kingsbury, and Dwyer 2013). Black passengers in the South, women in particular, used a range of tactics to resist segregation and incivility on the bus, including sitting in white seats and arguing with drivers and white passengers (Washington 1995; R. D. G. Kelley 1996; B. Kelley 2010). Further, Parks's refusal was rooted in her own political activism, especially her concurrent efforts through the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to organize a campaign around the arrest of Claudette Colvin, the teenager arrested eight months earlier for also refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. Although Parks's act was spontaneous, the groundwork had been laid through months, even years, of collective action to take up her individual case as a cause for mobilization in the struggle for civil rights (Theoharis 2013).

The Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and 1956 that followed Parks's arrest did more than pry open a space of contestation in the fight against Jim Crow: As Alderman, Kingsbury, and Dwyer (2013) aptly described, the boycott created "Montgomery's alternative transportation system" (176). This black-led, alternative system of movement was an intricate collective endeavor, mobilizing social networks and resources within the African American community (most notably developing a free carpool system) and, in turn, fostering solidarity (Alderman, Kingsbury, and Dwyer 2013). As a black-led movement combining dissent and visionary claims-making (calls to end segregation were accompanied by demands to improve service and hire more black drivers), the boycott was an emancipatory racial mobility project: It redistributed black bodies through space as the fundamental resource of justice. By moving African Americans out of the buses and away from spaces of oppression, it repositioned them onto the streets where they reoccupied urban space in an expression of their social power. African Americans denied the bus companies their bodies and their fares; they denied Jim Crow their bodies and their acquiescence.

Parks's site of protest—on the bus, in the middle seats, on her way home from work—was located at an interstitial space in the larger terrain of segregation, revealing the transgression inherent in any form of movement that traverses racialized space. In the case of the Jim Crow South, capitalism propelled black

bodies into motion, rendering the project of segregation ad hoc and incomplete. Although movement of African Americans largely represented experiences of constraint rather than freedom, movement opened spaces of contestation (Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto 2008). The African American experience of rebellion and protest is replete with acts and symbols of movement: the Underground Railroad, the Great Migration, the Montgomery bus boycott, the Freedom Rides. Yet Rosa Parks's act captures the subversion embedded within daily acts of movement, even those as seemingly routine and mundane as the journey to work.

Commuting equity is once again on the urban agenda, framed as transit justice by residents and activists in urban communities of color. Transit justice functions as a collective action frame that negotiates a shared understanding of the problem of transportation inequities, assigns blame, imagines an alternative solution, and urges people to act (Benford and Snow 2000). Transit justice frames extend from an analysis of racial justice that explicitly links class and racial oppression, a grassroots mobilization of intersectionality that locates the plight of poor and working-class communities of color at the nexus of runaway economic inequality and austerity politics.

The Bus Riders' Union/Sindicato de Pasejeros (BRU) in Los Angeles provides a robust example of political mobilization around transit justice, in both the organization's framing activities as well as its organizing tactics. The BRU identifies the redistribution of transit resources away from the system's poorest riders of color to its wealthiest, mostly white, riders as the key pattern of transportation inequality (Mann 2001). Bus riders in Los Angeles, as in most cities, comprise the poorest transit riders who receive the lowest fare subsidies relative to riders on other modes, especially commuter rail. In the early 1990s, 57 percent of all bus riders on the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) system earned less than \$15,000 annually, compared to 20 percent of all county residents. Riders on commuter rail, by contrast, earned \$65,000 (Garrett and Taylor 1999). The bus system received the lowest levels of capital investment, resulting in overcrowding on poorly maintained, older buses. Spatial inequalities abound: The most decrepit buses, often gross emitters, have tended to service the heaviest routes that travel through Los Angeles's lowest income neighborhoods, concentrating the environmental externalities of the geographic home-work divide on the residential side of the equation.

The BRU, founded on socialist principles, identifies class inequality as the basis of transportation inequality. In the contemporary United States, class inequality imbricates with racial inequality, widening the frame for the BRU as a strongly class-inflected racial justice approach. In its call to combat "transit racism," the BRU draws together the economic, environmental, and racial dimensions of transportation inequality (Mann 2001). This framing gave rise to an innovative tactic: In 1994, the BRU sued the Los Angeles MTA for operating a racially discriminatory separate but unequal transit system in violation of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Unable to sue on the basis of class discrimination, civil rights law nonetheless provided an avenue of redress for Los Angeles's poorest transit riders because they were largely people of color. The suit resulted in a consent decree that reinstated the unlimited ride monthly bus and rail pass and guaranteed its existence for ten years and created the first national standard to restrict overcrowding on buses. Later victories included committing the MTA to expand its clean-fuel fleet and phase out diesel buses (Mann 2001).

The BRU builds a vast membership base of bus riders by organizing them where they directly engage the transit system: on the buses. BRU organizers board buses daily, reaching out to bus riders and enlisting them directly in the fight for transit justice (Pulido, Barraclough, and Cheng 2012). These on-the-bus organizers claim bus space as a site of politics and protest. In 1997, tens of thousands of bus riders refused to pay their fares as part of the BRU's "No Seat No Fare" campaign (Mann 2001). Today the BRU has helped build a coalition of locally based community organizations called Transit Riders for Public Transportation to fight for racial equity in transit at the federal level (The Labor/Community Strategy Center n.d.). These organizations, ranging from the Atlanta Transit Riders Union to Communities United for Transportation Equity in New York, continue the fight for civil rights, like Rosa Parks did nearly a half-century ago, on the bus.

Conclusion

1 December 2015 marks the sixtieth anniversary of Rosa Parks's defiant act. Her resistance reveals the possibility of an emancipatory racial mobility project in the urban United States. Racial disparities in commuting are not simply a technical problem to be fixed but

a political project that engages larger questions about justice and the urban experience. Commuting as a racial mobility project connects multiple racial projects in the city—in housing, labor markets, urban transportation systems—and reveals the varied ways in which mobility through the city confers advantage and disadvantage. Empirical analysis remains necessary to focusing and sustaining attention on these racial patterns of inequality. Out on the streets, the case of Rosa Parks illustrates how mobility confers subjective power through which political claims can be mobilized, a lesson exercised daily on the buses of Los Angeles by the BRU and by other transportation activists fighting for racial justice on the journey to work.

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