NOURISHING THE MOVEMENT: GEORGIA GILMORE'S CLUB FROM NOWHERE DURING THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT, 1955-1956

by

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ABSTRACT

SYLVIA ANTINIA MARSHALL. Nourishing the Movement: Georgia Gilmore's Club from Nowhere during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1956. (Under the direction of DR. KAREN L. COX)

On December 1, 1955, news of the arrest of Rosa Parks swept through the city of Montgomery. Though not the first African American to challenge segregated seating on public transportation, Parks' arrest sparked a carefully organized thirteen-month protest of buses in the city. The carpool system enacted by the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) proved highly effective in maintaining the boycott. However, the costs associated with the carpool and propelling the boycott led to the creation of local fundraising entities such as Georgia Gilmore's Club from Nowhere. Georgia Gilmore founded the Club from Nowhere, an organization of black working-class women that sold food to raise money for the Montgomery Improvement Association. In 1956, Gilmore started a home restaurant that served as a safe meeting spot for civil rights leaders. This research examines Georgia Gilmore and other Black domestic workers through the framework of food studies and recent literature on the civil rights movement. Such a merging of fields reveals how black women during the Civil Rights Movement utilized food as a tool of resistance that fostered and sustained activism. Through a case study of Gilmore and her club, this paper investigates the dynamics of class, gender, and food politics and their effects on black-working class mobilization in 1950s Montgomery. Georgia Gilmore and the Club from Nowhere did more than simply fill the stomachs of their patrons. These women helped nourish one of the most pivotal events in the Civil Rights Movement.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, stepmother, and father — Kimberly, Mavis, and Dennis — for their support and encouragement throughout this entire process.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

As the clock ticked toward 7 o'clock on December 5, 1955, roughly 5,000 African Americans and local reporters gathered inside Holt Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Men and women crowded into the auditorium, the balcony, and the aisle of the church. Still, more people assembled on the grounds around the building near the loudspeakers mounted outside. After a long day of walking and hailing cabs from home to their places of employment, black residents gathered to hear whether the boycott worked.

Four days earlier, on December 1, 1955, news of the arrest of Rosa Parks swept through the city.[1] The following day, the Women's Political Council (WPC) distributed thousands of flyers calling for black residents to stay off city buses on Monday, December 5. Soon, African American clergy joined the WPC and E.D. Nixon in their efforts and organized an evening mass meeting on the day of the planned protest. In the days leading to the boycott, local African American radio stations called for those interested in the protest to attend the mass meeting on Monday evening. When the day of the protest arrived, bus drivers began their usual routes in the early morning hour with police escorts. Members of the WPC and other civic organizations waited anxiously to see whether locals would heed their call. As empty buses drove through Montgomery without the usual flow of African American riders, it became clear that their plans had worked.[2]

Black leaders met that afternoon at Mt. Zion AME Church to establish the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), an organization composed of local black ministers and

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[1] On December 1, 1955, Montgomery city police arrested Rosa Parks for refusing to give her seat to a white passenger. A secretary of the Montgomery National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and a highly regarded member of the local African American community, Parks' arrest sparked the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott.

[2] Jo Ann Robinson and David J. Garrow. *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: the Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 18.

community leaders to guide the boycott. The organization drafted resolutions and formed a special committee to tackle their biggest hurdle, transportation. Headed by volunteers and later by the Rufus Lewis and Dr. Benjamin Simms, the committee devised carpool routes to transport workers to all parts of Montgomery and organized volunteers to drive protestors. The eventual success of the 1955 boycott stemmed from this extensive carpool system and the tenacity of black locals.[3]

The black community displayed its steadfastness at the first mass meeting that evening at Holt Street Baptist Church. The atmosphere resembled a church service with prayers and hymns filling the air. Religious leaders of various denominations filled the pulpit alongside local civic leaders. As the evening progressed, leaders gave speeches denouncing the treatment they endured over the decades and congratulating protestors on staying off the buses to the thunderous joy of the congregation. The young Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., minister of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and the newly elected president of the MIA, delivered his pivotal Holt Street Address. He preached a message of unity among black men and women across socioeconomic classes in the battle for racial equality in Montgomery. All around Holt Street Baptist Church, attendees felt the spirit of change.[4] Men in work shirts and women in maid uniforms shouted their approval for extending the boycott. Reverend Robert Graetz of Trinity Lutheran Church —

[3] The Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) began in response to growing calls to extend the one-day boycott launched by the Women's Political Council and E.D. Nixon. Black ministers and local community leaders met in the afternoon on December 5, 1955, at Mt. Zion AME Church to establish the association to oversee the planning and continuation of the extended boycott, as well as improve race relations in the city. The members elected the twenty-six-year-old Martin Luther King Jr. to act as president of the organization.

[4] Emily Blejwas, *The Story of Alabama in Fourteen Foods (*Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2019), 211; John T. Edge, *The Potlikker Papers: A Food History of the Modern South* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 15.

the only local white clergyman to support the boycott — captured the mood of the night in his memoir when he wrote, "A new day had dawned in Montgomery."[5]

After walking in the cold of a December morning to her job as the head cook at the National Lunch Company, a restaurant in downtown Montgomery, Georgia Theresa Gilmore stood among the crowd. She listened as Reverend King described the mistreatment of black passengers on city buses, and his assertions that their nonviolent protest showcased the Christian tenets of love and reflected the democratic tradition of legal protest in the United States.[6] Like other African American residents in Montgomery, Gilmore was intimately acquainted with the discrimination King described during his speech. The thirty-five-year-old single mother of six children relied on public transportation to get to and from her job at the National Lunch Company. When she heard about the planned boycott on the radio, Gilmore joined the throng of residents who walked or hailed cabs to carry them to work. Moved by the words of Reverend King, she introduced herself after the mass meeting and joined the Montgomery Improvement Association.

A native of Montgomery County, Georgia Gilmore (see Appendix A) was born in February 1920 to Janie Gilmore. A heavyset woman with a smooth dark complexion and knack for cooking, everyone knew Mrs. Georgia around the black sections of Montgomery. The devout Catholic woman carried herself in a gentle manner and offered a kind smile to those she knew around town. But underneath that kindness stood a backbone of steel and a mouth that could cut down even the strongest of persons. When people remembered Mrs. Georgia Gilmore, they made

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[5] Robert S Graetz, *A White Preacher's Memoir: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Montgomery: Black Belt Press, 1998), 63.

[6] "Holt Street Address," Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers (Series I-IV), Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., Atlanta, Ga., T-18.

sure to mention that despite her abundance of generosity, one did not underestimate Mrs. Georgia.[7] A bold, fiery woman with a firm belief in the civil rights of Black Americans, she did not scary easily, nor did she back down from adversaries. “She was not afraid of white men. She was not afraid of anybody,” recalled Dr. Richard Bailey, “Georgia Gilmore could use the English language and that other language too. And she used it very well.”[8] That other language —that mother wit— guided her during the boycott.[9]

When she attended the first assembly of the MIA, Gilmore saw an opportunity to utilize her culinary talents to provide financial and social support. As the crowd listened eagerly to the sermons and speeches, Gilmore moved through the attendees where she collected $14. She used the money to buy chicken, lettuce, and white bread, and prepared a basket of fried chicken sandwiches to sell for the next mass gathering. From then on, hungry attendees looked for Georgia Gilmore and her friends selling chicken sandwiches in the parking lot and on the front steps of the building.[10] As men and women made their way from work to black churches around Montgomery, few had time to stop and eat. Meeting after meeting, she sold sandwiches to audience members and donated the profits to the Montgomery Improvement Association. The more sandwiches Gilmore and her friends sold, the more money the group funneled into the MIA. This informal group of women formed into a fundraising entity known as the Club from Nowhere. The organization of maids, service workers, and cooks baked and cooked to financially support the Montgomery Improvement Association and the carpool.

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[7] Valda Montgomery. Interview by author. 5 October 2021.
[8] Richard Bailey, author interview, 1 October 2021.
[9] Vernon Jarrett, “Their Jobs Were on the Line: ‘Nobodies’ Paid Boycott's Way.” *Chicago Tribune Press* (Chicago, IL), 4 December 1975; 1930 U.S. Census.
[10] Edge, 16.

Georgia Gilmore's story encapsulates that of the dozens of lesser-known men and women who sustained the boycott movement in Montgomery.[11] Her experience encompasses the thousands of black residents who protested the discriminatory treatment they faced on buses operated by Montgomery City Lines, Inc., and whose actions ultimately helped herald the modern Civil Rights Movement. This thesis argues that food and food spaces acted as a tool of activism and resistance among black working-class women during the 1955 Montgomery boycott through a close examination of the impact and use of food within the life of Georgia Gilmore. The emerging field of food studies guides this research as it examines the function of food within the history of the Civil Rights Movement. The field of food studies utilizes food as a material source to study elements of culture, identity, and history in society. Recent scholarship by Southern food historians explores the connection between food and resistance during the civil rights era. Such scholars argue that food acted as a subtle method of resistance because we view it as divorced from politics and as a necessary substance for human survival. While the former contains truth, the cooking and preparation of food does not exist in a vacuum.[12]

Premilla Nadasen challenged the invisibility of Black domestics in the historiography of progressive social movements and argued that Black domestic workers weaponized the practice of storytelling, their social networks, and their proximity to white families for political mobilization. Nadasen found evidence of cross-class solidarity that produced collective action to

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[11] Though commonly known as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, civil rights leaders in 1955 did not refer to the movement as such. Alabama had an anti-boycott law instituted in 1921, and the MIA wanted to avoid conflict with authorities over the legislation. Thus, black residents referred to the movement as a protest and that they were staying off the bus, rather than boycotting Montgomery City Lines, Inc. As such, I refer to the historical event as a protest and as a boycott interchangeably in the paper; Richard Bailey interview by author, 1 October 2021.

[12] The creation of the Southern Foodways Alliance in 1999 helped meld southern studies with food studies, which turned a critical lens on the constructions of food and its presence in Southern history. Southern food carries narratives of migration, interaction, and conflict among Native Americans, African Americans, and European settlers. For scholars like Marcie Cohen Ferris, Psyche Williams-Forson, and Jennifer Wallach, the study of Southern foodways provided an investigative method to understand the physical relationship of racism, sexism, and class struggle in the region.

secure civil rights. Her arguments about Black working-class women using their position as cooks and their culinary skills to negotiate respect connected with themes presented by food scholars.[13] Psyche Williams-Forson used chicken as the medium to study the process of self-definition among Black women and to showcase food as a marker of race. Despite the prevalence of stereotypical images, cooking allowed Black women a measure of autonomy and agency.[14] Jennifer Wallach showcased the duality of food as a substance of African American economic and social survival and as a tool of oppression. In her discussion of food spaces, she denoted the symbolic importance of consuming food and how the goals of the sit-in demonstration went further than a protest to desegregate a public space.[15]

Frederick Opie defined food as a strategy for the mobilization of African American political, social, and economic power. The exclusionary codes of Jim Crow both underscored the injustices faced by African Americans in the United States and encouraged the creation of African American eateries.[16] Rafia Zafar used literature as a source to understand resistance and self-definition among African American cooks. She defined food as a field of Black social action and Black culinary literature as another material form of resistance. Commensality, the practice of eating together, and the denial of a seat at the welcome table acted as a tool for maintaining racial barriers.[17] John T. Edge presented a similar argument in *The Potlikker Papers*, which

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[13] Premilla Nadasen, *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women who Built a Movement* (United States: Beacon Press, 2015), 35.
[14] Psyche A. Williams-Forson, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 2.
[15] Jennifer Jensen Wallach, *Getting What We Need Ourselves: How Food Has Shaped African American Life* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 60-68.
[16] Frederick Douglass Opie, "Southern Food and Civil Rights: Feeding the Revolution (Mount Pleasant, South Carolina Arcadia Publishing, 2017), 42.
[17] Rafia Zafar, *Recipes for Respect: African American Meals and Meaning* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2019), 2; Ibid., 56.

examined Southern history and social dynamics through food. Food represented creative expression and political activism throughout Southern history.

Marcie Ferris in *The Edible South* illustrated the culture of power and place in southern history and exposed the presence of privilege and deprivation in the regional cuisine. The legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and disfranchisement shaped the construction of food practices and food meaning.[18] Ferris agreed with Zafar over the role of food as a marker of racial boundaries during the civil rights era. The exclusionary nature of Jim Crow permitted Black cooks to prepare and serve food to white employers and patrons but denied them the ability to dine with them.

Similarly, Angela Cooley framed her discussion in terms of modernity and the reaction of white southerners to the changing economic position of African Americans. Eating became a particular concern during racial segregation as city ordinances made health and sanitation codes synonymous with white fears about moral propriety and racial purity.[19] Like Opie, Cooley analyzed the complicated status and the role of Black-owned businesses. Their restaurants and eateries operated in opposition to the restrictive codes of Jim Crow and served as a symbol of empowerment. Rebecca Sharpless exposed the blurred lines between the personal and public lives of African American domestic workers from Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement. The income earned from domestic work sustained African American families, however, Sharpless argued these women risked conflict with their employers.[20] The low wages, long hours, and constant surveillance in white homes made domestic work a less than an ideal profession for Black women.

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[18] Marcie Cohen Ferris. *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina. University of North Carolina Press, 2014),4.
[19] Angela Jill Cooley. *To Live and Dine in Dixie: The Evolution of Urban Food Culture in the Jim Crow South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 9-10.
[20] Rebecca Sharpless. *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South,1865-1960* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 110.

Black men worked as caterers and cooks in restaurants and participated in agricultural work as well. Yet, the politics of gender, sexuality, race, and space were on full display within domestic work, an occupation dominated by black women. For them, food functioned as an everyday occupation in their jobs as cooks and domestic workers in white households, and as wives and mothers. Food also served as a covert means of socially and financially sustaining their community against the effects of a white supremacist system. Even before Emancipation, African Americans practiced a sort of autonomy over themselves through food. Free black women and enslaved women sold fried blackeye pea fritters, pepper pot stew, and other foodstuffs. They used the funds they earned to manumit themselves and family members or, if freed, to provide for their family in the wake of limited employment opportunities for free persons of color.[21] After Emancipation, black women continued to use their culinary skills—acquired from an elder or from previous employment as an enslaved cook or caterer— to sell fried chicken and other food to supplement their household income.[22] The act of cooking and selling food allowed many black women, who usually had white employers, to use their culinary talent to the advantage of their communities. Food allowed black working-class women, historically defined by their lack of economic capital, to contribute to the movement financially.

"Nourishing the Movement" joins recent civil rights scholarship that shifts the focus of historical inquiry away from formal organizations and mainstream leaders to grassroots mobilization efforts and the role of black women during the Civil Rights Movement. Over the last fifty years, the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement has taken a more critical approach to the dynamics of gender and class. Civil rights scholars increasingly recognize how

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[21] Psyche A. Williams-Forson, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 9.
[22] Ibid.,1.

vulnerability of black women, and their struggles shaped the movement. Kurt Wilson brought an awareness of the gender concerns intertwined with the discrimination faced by the black community on Montgomery buses. The reports of profanity and verbal abuse leveled at black women led the Women's Political Council to file a complaint to the mayor in 1953.[23] The binary of white-male/black-female interactions reinforced the matrix of oppression that encompassed race, class, and gender. Danielle McGuire explained that public transportation provided an opportunity for white men to sexually humiliate and assault black women in an overt display of power. The lack of bodily autonomy and the constant risk of assault made public transportation a dangerous space for black women, particularly black working-class women.[24] Robin D. G. Kelley asserted that public transportation represented the most embarrassing of interactions for the black working-class as they attempted to move through white-dominated public spaces.[25] He uncovered the role of the black working-class in the mobilization of black social and political movements.

Alan Graper in his examination of class within the Mississippi Freedom Movement noted the importance of class within the civil rights struggle. He emphasized the importance of grassroots organizations, stating that these groups voiced the concerns of locals and acted upon local issues faced by them to enact specific change within their town or county. The inequalities in class participation exposed the limitations on the political involvement of African Americans working under a white employer in the Mississippi Movement. He defined land-owning farmers as key activists in Mississippi because they did not rely on institutions controlled by a white

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[23] Kurt H. Wilson, "Interpreting the Discursive Field of the Montgomery Bus Boycott: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Holt Street Address," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (2005): 310.
[24] Danielle L McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance--A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), xviii.
[25] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994),56.

employer, which protected them from economic backlash.[26] Taking a step further in his analysis of the local, John Dittmer explored how local activism contributed immensely to the daily battles against Jim Crow in *Local People*. Dittmer revealed the undercurrent of local struggles that took place beyond national headlines and articulates the importance of the actions undertaken by black Mississippians by bringing civil rights issues to the forefront in remote areas of the South.[27] The power of local organizers, especially those that controlled their labor and owned businesses, reinforced the arguments about the role of black businesses articulated by Louis Ferleger and Matthew Lavallee. They asserted that black business owners contributed resources and organizational skills to the movement. Having analyzed the decision of black-owned taxi companies to offer rides at the same rates as bus fare, the authors found a web of black businesses that offered assistance when the city introduced a minimum taxi fare. Ferleger and Lavallee discovered the prominent civic roles business owners played as facilitators of interracial committees and community leaders. Food enterprises comprised a notable sector of "activist entrepreneurs."[28]

The focus on Georgia Gilmore and the use of food showcases the role of black businesses during the Civil rights Movement. Gilmore —with the support of Reverend King Jr. — began a restaurant from her home on Dericote Street after losing her job at the National Lunch Company in 1956. A closer examination of her home restaurant reveals how black-owned food spaces became a part of the fight against Jim Crow by fostering a space for interracial communion and providing a safe space for civil rights leaders to escape the threat of white surveillance. The

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[26] Alan Draper, "Class and Politics in the Mississippi Movement: An Analysis of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Delegation," *Journal of Southern History* 82, no. 2 (2016): 274. doi:10.1353/soh.2016.0100.
[27] John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 19.
[28] Louis A. Ferleger and Matthew Lavallee. "Lending a Hand: Black Business Owners' Complex Role in the Civil Rights Movement." *Enterprise & Society* 21, no. 2 (2020): 496; Ibid., 511.

actions of Georgia Gilmore and the members of the Club from Nowhere exemplified how black working-class women weaponized their social network and skills to support *ad hoc* organizations like the Montgomery Improvement Association. The Club from Nowhere employed a type of mobilization that did not rely on the rhetorical devices deployed by the mostly middle-class leaders in the MIA. Instead, they grounded their activism and motivation from their collective lived experiences. These women highlight the importance of local activism and complicate our understanding of leadership and political mobilization during the Civil Rights Movement.

A difficulty of this research stemmed from the lack of literature from members of the Club from Nowhere and Georgia Gilmore during the boycott. Such source material may have provided detail into the daily operations of the group and how members viewed their contributions to the MIA. However, these women left an indelible mark on their community. Oral histories conducted with community members and memoirs provided an abundant resource for excavating the role of the Club from Nowhere and its impact on the bus boycott. The interviews Gilmore did for the *Eyes on the Prize* docuseries and local newspapers gave insight into her personality and an awareness of her activism.

Rather than analyzing the food itself, this research examines how historical actors interact with and narrate their experiences with food. These interactions give food meaning and functional purpose within the lives of individuals. Food possesses an embedded language. It carries memories and hidden messages about power, politics, and acts of self-definition. Because of the innocuous and subtle nature of food, these messages may not be apparent to the person preparing or consuming food. I attempt to recover the voices of black working-class women and understand the tangle of food and black women's activism through an interpretative approach that closely observes the language and actions surrounding food within oral histories and

memoirs.[29] By focusing on the life of Georgia Gilmore, I illuminate the diverse methods of political participation among black working-class women and bring them to the forefront in the historiography of progressive social movements.

[29] Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History a Critical Reader in History and Theory* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), 232.

CHAPTER 1: "A BLACK PO' PERSON CAN'T AFFORD TO GET TIRED:" BLACK DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE JIM CROW SOUTH

Betty Gilmore recalled how hard her sister Georgia Gilmore worked during her life in a 2006 oral history interview with the Alabama State University Archives. While discussing her childhood, Betty drew a parallel between her older sister's hard-working spirit and that of their mother. Born around 1892 in Alabama, Janie Gilmore worked in the service industry as a laundress and domestic worker for white households like countless African American women during the post-Civil War period.[30] Janie would have walked door to door in white neighborhoods in Montgomery gathering clothing and linens to bring home and wash, hauled water into a cast iron pot, set a fire underneath it, boiled the clothes, scrubbed them clean with soap, rinsed and rung the water from them. She would then hang them on the clothesline to dry and used a series of heavy irons to press the garments.[31] The job resulted in strenuous work and long hours with little pay. Betty remembered watching her mother toil in their home and recalled an instance where her mother said that "A black po' person can't afford to get tired."[32]

The sentiments expressed by Janie Gilmore reflected the lived experience of many African Americans living in the Jim Crow South in the twentieth century. Race, gender, and space featured prominently in Montgomery's bus boycott. This section seeks to understand the influence of Jim Crow on the economic opportunities of African Americans and to highlight the experiences of black working-class women in Montgomery. The nature of black working-class women's work placed them in closer proximity to white spaces that increased their encounters

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[30] Betty Gilmore interview 1, interview by Dr. Howard Robinson, Dr. Shirley Jordan, and Stephanie Jordan, ASU Archives Oral History Collection, Alabama State University, 13 April 2006.
[31] Tera W. Hunter, *To "Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 57.
[32] Betty Gilmore interview 1.

with racialized abuse. I argue that these experiences defined the participation of black working-class women in mass protests such as the Montgomery bus boycott and guided their methods of resistance.

Defining the black working class remains a difficult task because of the various factors that interact to create a class of people. Education, economic wealth, and occupation in the black community in Montgomery did not hinder a sense of racial solidarity created by the conditions of Jim Crow. The shared experience of discrimination and racial violence strengthened the racial consciousness of all African American residents. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the vestiges of the plantation economy and social hierarchy continued to operate in Southern society. In the late-nineteenth century, the end of Reconstruction saw the rise of Jim Crow laws.[33] The Alabama legislature formalized racial codes in the Alabama Constitution of 1901. The constitution included clauses that disenfranchised African American voters and mandated the physical separation of the races. Through physical, economic, and psychological intimidation, white Alabamans maintained white supremacy in the region.[34]

Jim Crow laws hindered African Americans politically and made possible the economic exploitation of African American labor. The laws reinforced racial inequities in the limitations of income and employment opportunities of African Americans. Black women experienced a double burden in the face of gender and racial inequality. In the aftermath of the Civil War, formerly enslaved women sought to leverage their skills as free laborers to support their families.[35] In *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs,* Psyche Williams-Forson described the

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[33] C. Vann Woodward and William S. McFeely, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow (*New York: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1994), 7.
[34] William H. Stewart, "The Tortured History of Efforts to Revise the Alabama Constitution of 1901," *Alabama Law Review* 53, no. 1 (2001), 295-296; Woodward and McFeely, 141-142.
[35] Sharpless, 110.

process stating that "paramount in the minds of black people was progress—familial, social, economic, and political. To this end, black women sought employment wherever it could be found, and this often thrust them into the homes of white people in domestic capacities."[36]

Most black women in Montgomery worked in low-paying jobs such as domestic service, factory work, and in the restaurant industry. Domestic work provided the bulk of employment opportunities for black women. In Montgomery, sixty-three percent of black women worked in the domestic field by the 1950s.[37] The exclusion of domestic work and farming in the 1930s Fair Labor Standards Act negatively affected domestic workers. The lack of representation in the act denied them access to a minimum wage, Social Security, and disability benefits. Domestic workers faced low wages, long hours, and constant supervision in white households. Most women worked from sunup to sundown seven days a week. Household workers in Montgomery received as little as $2 a day with work times extending from eight o'clock in the morning to five o'clock in the evening with an average of $15 a week.[38]

Some employers denied their workers' wages or reduced their monetary earnings. Leftover food—often food prepared by these women— clothing, and secondhand household goods functioned as an alternative to monetary payment in some cases. These low wages even allowed working-class whites to afford domestic labor. Despite the economic downturn during the Great Depression, demand for black household workers did not cease, though constraints of depression made working conditions more exploitative.[39] The image of the idyllic antebellum

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[36] Williams-Forson, 46.

[37] Anne Valk and Leslie Brown, *Living with Jim Crow: African-American Women and Memories of the Segregated South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 81; Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story (*Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 14.

[38] Robinson, 107.

[39] Wallach, 68.

South and mythology of the happy enslaved servant absorbed by white society became inscribed onto the bodies of black women, especially those who worked in white households.

Black professional, middle-class women like schoolteachers and professors also faced limited economic opportunities due to racist employment practices. Gender and racial disparities affected middle-class women who also received lower salaries that did not reflect their social status or education level.[40] These women often lived near lower- and working-class women in all-black enclaves. Montgomery was no different. Georgia Gilmore and other working-class people lived alongside professional, middle-class black residents in Centennial Hill.[41] The area housed many prominent African American professionals and business owners but possessed an economic diversity. The area coalesced around Alabama State College and encompassed Union Street, Adams Street, Hall Street, and Thurman Street with the heart of the community at the intersection of High and Jackson Street.[42] Maids, day laborers, and porters lived within blocks of doctors and business owners. Georgia Gilmore could walk onto the front porch of her white wood-framed home and have a conversation with Rufus Lewis, a local activist who taught at a night school for World War II veterans. A ten-minute walk around the corner of Dericote Street took her to the home of Dr. Richard Harris, Jr., the pharmacist who owned and operated

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[40] Stephanie J. Shaw, *What A Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era (*Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 118; Pamela E. Brooks, *Boycotts, Buses, and Passes: Black Women's Resistance in the U.S. South and South Africa* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 105.

[41] Freedmen founded the Centennial Hill neighborhood during Reconstruction. The Swayne Primary School, opened in 1867 by the American Missionary Association and the Freedman's Bureau anchored the neighborhood. The neighborhood received its name from the centennial celebrations of the Revolutionary War in 1876. Key members of the bus boycott lived in the neighborhood and many black businesses that helped support the bus boycott operated in that space; Karren Pell and Carole King, *Classic Restaurants of Montgomery* (Charleston, SC: American Palate, 2020), 90.

[42] Valda Montgomery, *Just a Neighbor: A Child's Memoir of the Civil Rights Movement* (Montgomery, AL: McQuick Printing Company, 2010), 7; Valda Montgomery, interview by author, 5 October 2021; Alabama State College, a historically black university founded in 1867, changed its name in 1969. The college now operates as Alabama State University.

Montgomery's oldest black pharmacy, Dean Drug Store.[43] Dr. Valda Montgomery described her younger brother Ricky Jr. as being friends with Morris, the son of Georgia Gilmore. An eight-year-old girl at the time, Dr. Montgomery accompanied her five-year-old brother to the white wooden house on the corner of Dericote Street. Her youngest brother loved to visit Morris, and both boys loved to partake in his mother's cooking. Whatever she cooked, they would eat. "They loved it," laughed Dr. Montgomery, "and she loved them. I don't think they paid for anything." [44]

Racial consciousness superseded economic class differences to a degree because black residents shared a community and faced the burdens of Jim Crow as African Americans. [45]A sense of community created by shared experiences of racism bound household workers, laborers, teachers, and business owners together. The proximity to one another in Centennial Hill and a common goal made the organization and sustainment of a thirteen-month boycott possible.[46] As historian Robin D.G. Kelley explained, they desired "more space for themselves, they wanted to receive equitable treatment, they wanted to be personally treated with respect and dignity, they wanted to be heard and possibly understood, they wanted to work on time, and above all, they wanted to exercise power over institutions that controlled them or on which they were dependent."[47] Besides their proximity to each other in black neighborhoods, both middle and working-class black women shared in the experience of gendered racial violence on Montgomery city buses.

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[43] Richard Bailey interview; To understand the spatial context of the Montgomery bus boycott and to learn more about other key sites during the period, please view "Georgia Gilmore and the Montgomery Bus Boycott" on Clio, https://www.theclio.com/tour/2180.

[44] Valda Montgomery. Interview by author. 21 February 2021.

[45] Shaw, 41.

[46] Valda Montgomery. Interview by author. 5 October 2021.

[47] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 75.

Middle-class African American women played key roles in the launch of the Montgomery bus boycott and early efforts to improve riding conditions for black riders on city transportation. The Women's Political Council (WPC) strove to address civic issues within the black community and to confront the racial injustice faced by the black residents. Members of the WPC included primarily professional women who lived in Centennial Hill.[48] These women worked tirelessly for the central goal of improving the race conditions in their city, and they understood the mistreatment of black bus riders. For years, the WPC deliberated on organizing a boycott of the Montgomery City Lines after they received numerous reports of discrimination. Stories of enraged bus drivers hurling insults, shortchanging black riders, and other abuses disseminated throughout the community in churches, at dinner tables, and gatherings in Montgomery.[49]

Public transportation highlighted racial tensions and conflict because the confined space heightened the dynamics of race and power.[50] The Montgomery city code required the separation of races on Montgomery city bus lines. Under the guise of "separate, but equal," the city law mandated that Montgomery city buses be divided into two equal segments with whites at the front and blacks at the back of the bus. The law allowed bus drivers the power to assign passengers to seats on the buses to maintain the physical separation of the races. Another section of the law granted bus drivers the power to police the buses when in operation.[51] The interpretation of the color line by bus drivers created an environment that reproduced racial discrimination on public transport.[52] Bus drivers forced black riders to stand when the black

[48] Robinson, 23.
[49] Robinson, 32.
[50] Kelley, 55.
[51] "Section of the city code of Montgomery, Alabama, requiring segregation on buses," 1952, Alabama Department of Archives and History.
[52] Kelley, 60.

section filled up, even if seats in the white section remained vacant. Black riders relinquished their seats for white riders or faced verbal and physical assaults from the bus drivers.

Georgia Gilmore boarded the South Jackson line bus in October 1955. As she tried to enter the bus, a redheaded, freckled-faced bus driver tersely demanded, "Nigger, give me that money" and directed her to enter through the back of the bus.[53] Handing the driver her bus fare, Gilmore exited the vehicle and walked towards the back. As soon as Gilmore stepped off, the driver drove off with her money and left her at the bus stop. She decided that "then and there not to ever ride a bus again."[54] Many black bus riders shared similar experiences. The 1955 incident reflected a long legacy of humiliating and discriminatory treatment of black passengers on Montgomery city buses. Montgomery police dragged fifteen-year-old high school student, Claudette Colvin, off the city bus after she refused to move from her seat when the bus driver ordered Colvin to give her seat to a white passenger on March 2, 1955.[55] Bus operators physically assaulted black passengers or risked hurting them as they pulled off into the road while black riders attempted to find a seat, or while patrons exited the bus. While Martha Walker helped her blind husband off the bus, a driver slammed the door shut on her husband's right foot and drove away. The action resulted in Mr. Walker being dragged before he managed to get his foot free. Other instances proved fatal for African American patrons.[56] Thomas E. Brooks, a black Korean War veteran, died when the bus driver called police on him in 1950. Dressed in a pressed khaki army uniform, Brooks boarded a Montgomery city bus and paid his fare. The bus driver told Brooks to leave the bus and re-enter through the rear door, which Brooks failed to do

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[53] Edge, John T. "The Welcome Table." Oxford American (2000). http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/hiddenkitchens/stories/week13/edgearticle.pdf.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Robinson, 41-42.
[56] Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Beacon Press, 2010), 139.

so when ordered. An argument ensued and the bus driver called the police, and upon their arrival, they repeatedly beat Brooks and shot him.[57]

The racial attacks faced by African Americans carried the influences of gender dynamics and race. Bus drivers called African American women gendered derogatory names such as "heifer," "black bitches," and "whores."[58] Drivers frequently cursed at black women, an unthinkable transgression toward a white female passenger, and physically assaulted black women on their bus. In her memoir, Jo Ann Robinson, the president of the WPC in the 1950s and English faculty member at Alabama State College, remembered the hurt and humiliation she felt after her encounter on the bus.[59] In December 1949, Robinson packed her bags and drove to the airport to check in her luggage. She decided to take the bus to her friend's home so that they could arrive at the airport together. She boarded the bus and sat down in the proper section designated for black riders. Excited to begin her Christmas holiday and her journey home, Robinson failed to notice the bus driver demanding that she move until he stopped the bus. The driver, enraged that Robinson did not immediately comply, stormed down the bus to her and ordered her to move as he raised his arm as if to strike her. Shaken, Robinson leaped to her feet and exited the bus in fear of being assaulted. She walked back to the college campus as tears of humiliation filled her eyes. She wrote," In all these years I have never forgotten the shame, the hurt, of the experience. The memory will not go away."[60]

Montgomery bus drivers used city police to reinforce their power and maintain control over black passengers. Police officers brutally beat Ella Ree Jones in July 1942. While riding the

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[57] King, 14; Donnie Williams and Wayne Greenhaw, *Thunder of Angels: The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the People Who Broke the Back of Jim Crow* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2006), 10-12.
[58] Danielle L McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance--A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 81.
[59] *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It : The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*
[60] Robinson, 16.

bus home from studying at Alabama State Teachers College, the bus driver told her to move for a white male passenger. Jones felt ill that day and knew she sat within the boundaries set for black passengers, so she refused. The driver pulled over and called for the city police. When he returned with two officers, he pointed at Jones and claimed, "I'm going to teach you to do what the white man tells you to do."[61] Viola White dared to appeal her case after the judge found her guilty of "disobeying a bus driver," after she refused to move out of her seat on a city bus in 1946. Montgomery officer A.A. Enger detained White's daughter and raped her in a cemetery in retaliation for the perceived challenge against white male control.[62]

The interactions between white men and black women on city buses reinforced the matrix of race, class, and gender oppression faced by black working-class women.[63] Black domestic workers experienced a double burden in public spaces and the private residences of white Montgomery. They endured the manifestations of power placed upon their bodies and time in white homes. White female employers controlled the uniforms, the entrance, the breaks, and other daily functions of black domestic workers. White male employers exercised their power through sexual harassment and assaults upon black women employees.[64] Black domestic workers experienced reinforcements of patriarchal and white supremacist power on public transportation when white bus drivers sneered “nasty thangs and dey talk under folks’ clothes.”[65] The murder of Hillard Brooks in 1952 and Thomas E. Brooks in 1950 aided in the development of a local political voice within Montgomery’s black community. The infamous Scottsboro case and the rapes of Recy Taylor in 1944 and Gertrude Perkins in 1949 highlighted the interconnectedness of

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[61] McGuire, 60.
[62] Ibid., 76.
[63] Wilson, 310.
[64] Premilla Nadasen, *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement* (United States: Beacon Press, 2015), 10.
[65] McGuire, 113.

race, sex, and class in the South and illuminated the contradictory treatment of white and black women in public spaces.[66]

Class remained an important factor in the boycott despite the close associations of African Americans of different socio-economic statuses in Centennial Hill. Jim Crow affected the lives of all African Americans in Montgomery. However, working- and lower-class groups experienced discrimination with more regularity. Mrs. Gilmore did not own a car before the boycott, nor did she know how to drive a car. Like many others, she relied on the bus to transport her from home to her place of employment due to the modes of transportation available to her. The termination of the streetcar railway system in 1936 pushed more commuters towards the bus system, and the costs associated with purchasing and owning a car acted as a barrier for many. The money Gilmore earned as a cook at the National Lunch Company helped to support of herself, six children, an aging mother, her youngest sister, and a niece. With no vehicle or other form of transportation, riding the bus remained the most logical and only choice for Gilmore and residents in her position. In Robinson's account of her experiences with the derogatory treatment of African Americans on the bus, she decided to ride the bus after she parked her car in the airport's parking garage. In her memoir, Dr. Valda Montgomery explained how her mother and friends, dressed elegantly in heels and stockings, took the bus to downtown as it proved more convenient than walking or driving downtown with packages. These women certainly endured negative encounters with white bus drivers and passengers, and riding public transportation was not limited to the black working class. Yet, for black working-class women, the bus proved less

[66] Pamela E. Brooks, *Boycotts, Buses, and Passes: Black Women's Resistance in the US South and South Africa* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 126; On March 25, 1931, nine black youths from Tennessee were arrested on accusation of the rape of two young white women while traveling through Alabama. The trial lasted three days, before the all-white male jury handed down the verdict of the death penalty verdict. Interventions from several organizations and demonstrations halted the executions. In 1937, charges against four of the nine were dropped. The last two of the five remaining men were set free by the state of Alabama and another paroled in 1950.

of a convenience and more of a necessity since it functioned as their primary form of conveyance.[67]

Black working-class women comprised the bulk of the patrons of the Montgomery bus lines and faced the volatile atmosphere of public transportation in the Jim Crow South. They frequently navigated between white and black spaces where they encountered humiliating racial incidents daily. Black domestic workers were among the few in their community that frequently went into the private homes of whites. The women served as communicators of how race and class affected black southerners as participants in both social worlds.[68] Unlike their middle- and upper-class counterparts, domestic workers and cooks could not avoid white spaces because they worked within their households and establishments. The nature of domestic work required African American women to commute from black neighborhoods to the white neighborhoods of Montgomery, like Cloverdale and the Garden District. The lateness of some drivers caused household workers to miss their transfer to buses headed to white neighborhoods on the eastside of town. This caused workers to pay an additional fare as they attempted to hail another bus. As the women attempted to commute home after work, they faced similar inconveniences.[69] The decades of abuses endured by working-class women culminated into the driving force behind their decision to organize and join the boycott in 1955. Black residents in Montgomery were fed up with their treatment on public transportation and fed up with their status as second-class

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[67] Montgomery, 17; 1950 U.S. Census; "Streetcars' Abandonment Approved; Change to Buses Due Next Month." The Montgomery Advertiser (Montgomery, AL). 22 January 1936; Historical Sketch of the Public Transportation System of Montgomery, Alabama, 1885-1936, PR406 Folder 7, James H. Bagley Papers, Alabama Department of History and Archives; 1986 Georgia Gilmore.

[68] Susan Tucker, *Telling Memories Among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the Segregated South* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 10.

[69] "To The Montgomery Public," *Alabama Journal* (Montgomery, AL), 25 December 1955.

citizens. The dangers associated with challenging white authority became a small price to pay in their determination to protest city buses.

The black working class resisted their dehumanization and degradation by white society in ways that made sense within the context of their environment and their access to resources. They practiced resistance through informal and varied methods that operated outside of official black organizations, such as the Women's Political Council. Domestic workers, cooks, and laundresses built mutually beneficial communities and social networks to bridge the gaps left by the laborious and time-consuming work. Laundry work provided a clear example of the creation of informal networks of women because of the communal nature of the work. Washerwomen and women engaged in domestic labor aided each other with childcare, instances of sickness, and other life events. Janie Gilmore fostered these relationships in her life in the Centennial Hill neighborhood. She organized a hog killing day where women in the community gathered to kill and clean hogs her brother brought from the country. Laughter and conversation would have filled the air as the women worked together, and everyone went home with meat for their families.[70]

Though not explicitly subversive, the act of communion and community care allowed working-class African American women to sustain each other in the Jim Crow South. Sharing ingredients or a meal together forged and strengthened relationships within their neighborhoods. The relationships served black working-class women well in the Montgomery bus boycott as they made use of their social networks to mobilize the skills they refined in domestic service in their fight against injustices. The political consciousness and methods of resistance among black working-class women developed in these acts of community. Cooking became a tool in their

[70] Hunter, 62; Betty Gilmore interview 1.

arsenal because those women knew how to cook.[71] "Food, as politics, is subtle and unexpected," Williams-Forson argued, "because it is not seen as a tool of opposition but as a necessary substance."[72] Food and the practice of cooking concealed the subtlety of their collective power and everyday acts of survival.

[71] Valda Montgomery. Interview by author. 5 October 2021.
[72] Williams-Forson., 69.

CHAPTER 2: BLACK AMERICANS AND THE DUALITY OF FOOD IN THE SOUTH

Strolling confidently down the aisle of the local black church for that week's MIA meeting in 1956, Georgia Gilmore sang "Shine on Me."[73] "Whoa, shine on me, Lord, shine on me. Let the light from the lighthouse, shine on me," she sang as she dropped $300 into the collection plate. Ecstatic shouts of "Amen" and "Bless her Lord, bless her" filled the air from the men and women in the crowd as she announced the contribution from the Club from Nowhere. [74] The African American spiritual captured the essence of the boycott and as well as the thousands of black residents in Montgomery. A light had shone on the protestors as they persevered in their refusal to ride city buses. The women of the Club from Nowhere continued to reach into their community to raise money to support the efforts of the MIA. The club that Georgia Gilmore founded that first week of the bus boycott grew into a network of black working-class women who sold food and baked goods to locals.

This section follows the legacy of cooking in Georgia Gilmore's life to uncover the role of food as a means of oppression and resistance among African American women The access to food and restaurants for African Americans functioned as one of many contentious elements in the relationship between whites and blacks during Jim Crow. Food scholar Mary Douglas described food as "a field of social action."[75] Through food, one can understand the history of human survival and kinship-building processes. The centrality of food within human history positions it as a medium through which individuals come together to achieve community goals. In Montgomery, Georgia Gilmore, and the women of the Club from Nowhere exemplify the use of food as an agent of social action among black working-class women.

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[73] Edge, *Potlikker Papers*, 18.

[74] Vernon Jarrett, "Their Jobs Were on the Line: 'Nobodies' Paid Boycott's Way."

[75] Mary Douglas, *Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2003), 30.

Food matters as an essential part of life, critical to sustaining the body so much so that it becomes an unconscious part of the human experience. However, the function of food extends beyond nutrition. Humans use food as a manifestation of cultural practices and identity. They ascribe meaning to food in ways that make sense to them in relation to their environment.[76] The culture of food develops from the practices associated with growing, preparing, and consuming foodstuffs. What a person chooses to eat, where they eat, and who they eat with communicates aspects of that person. As multi-faceted material, food becomes a vehicle for investigating the complex relationship between individuals and groups within a society.

The history of migration, cultural diffusion, conflict, and resistance in the South becomes entangled with the tales of food in the region. Culinary transmission between European Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans established a language of cuisine that bound members of the Southern region together. In the hands of enslaved cooks, this cultural dialogue through food solidified into Southern consciousness. The use of European recipes, African ingredients and techniques, and indigenous ingredients transformed the Southern landscape and linked the various cultures in the South together despite the social and legal restrictions designed to subjugate black and brown individuals.[77]

Michael Twitty refers to this cultural exchange in his food memoir, *The Cooking Gene*. Through the circumstances of what Twitty calls the "Old South," southern food came into being. In this pre-Civil War society, the South became "a place in the mind where we dare not talk about which came first…We just know that somehow the table aches from the weight of so

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[76] Marion Nestle and W. Alex McIntosh, "Writing the Food Studies Movement," *Food, Culture & Society* 13 (2010): 160.

[77] Jessica B. Harris, and Charles Reagan Wilson. "African American Foodways." In *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 7: Foodways*, edited by John T. Edge, 15–18 (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 15-16; Emily Blejwas, *The Story of Alabama in Fourteen Foods* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2019), 33.

much…that we prop it up with our knees and excuses to keep it from falling."[78] The weight that bears down upon the table Twitty references refers to the violence and conflict that took place on the frontiers of the South. Conflict over space and racial designations steeped in notions of white superiority over the land and its people. The amalgamation of cultures, tastes, and difficult histories gave rise to the South's regional cuisine and its culture.

From its inception, the regional cuisine of the South contained the politics of power and place that reproduced systems of privilege and deprivation. The ability to control one's access to foodstuffs or their interactions with food reveals food as another vehicle to exert authority. Slaveholders established their role as the patriarch over their enslaved workers through an allowance of cornmeal or pork. The plantation mistress exercised her power through her control over the household, and thus, the enslaved cook and their culinary labor. In each setting, food served as a reminder of one's place within the social structure of the slave society. In opposition to the control over their bodies and their access to food, enslaved families grew their gardens and trapped or hunted animals to supplement the rations allotted by the slaveholder.

The cycle of subjugation and resistance through food continued after Emancipation, as white southerners used food as a tool of maintaining white supremacy. The southern economy in the twentieth century still relied on cheap black labor, and African Americans encountered the same exploitative labor system as they transformed their free labor into wage work. Employment for black women remained limited to agricultural work and the gendered labor of domestic work. Jobs that required cleaning, childrearing, laundering, and cooking in the homes of white families comprised the bulk of black women's economic opportunities.[79] Women and girls decided to

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[78] Michael Twitty, *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South* (New York: Amistad, 2017), xii.

[79] Ferris, 23; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 486; Wallach, *Getting What We Need Ourselves*, 75.

become a cook because they wanted to avoid field work, circumstances regulated them to the kitchen, and it could increase their wages and employable skills. Cooks learned from their mothers, received some formal training, or entered the profession with no prior knowledge of food preparation. Some women started catering businesses with their culinary knowledge and experience working in the homes of others. Working as a domestic worker or cook remained undesirable for many black women. However, the ability to cook provided them with a path toward better financial freedom.[80]

Like other black women during the era, Georgia Gilmore and her sister, Mary Elizabeth, undoubtedly learned to cook as a trade skill from their mother and older female relatives. In the 1940s, both women worked as household workers in private residences and both women likely learned how to cook, clean, and launder clothing from Janie.[81] The decision to pass on culinary knowledge stemmed from a desire to secure greater financial stability. Although often tasked with additional labor associated with domestic work like cleaning and childcare, skilled cooks could potentially command $20 to $30 a week.[82] The increased wage reflected the time-consuming work of food preparation and the skills needed to cook. The process of meal planning, grocery shopping, food preparation, and the maintenance of the kitchen required women to rise earlier to prepare meals for their employer's family and leave later after serving the evening meal. African American cooks had to adapt and learn to cook to the preferences of their employer, which meant working with sometimes unfamiliar food or foods they would not have access to in their homes.[83]

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[80] Sharpless, 10-11; Hunter, 111.
[81] 1940 U.S. Census.
[82] Robinson, 107.
[83] Wallach, 73; Sharpless, 15.

Despite the potential increase in wages from the addition of cooking to the repertoire of household workers, the low wages paid to domestic workers stood in stark contrast to the other expenditures in a middle-class household.[84] In 1950, the annual median incomes for whites and blacks highlight the economic disparities faced by the community, with whites possessing a median income of $1,730 compared to $970 for blacks. For two weeks' worth of work as a domestic worker, Georgia Gilmore only earned $6. Her sister, Mary Elizabeth, worked 28 weeks and earned roughly $84. Low wages made it difficult to maintain a household despite the overwhelming reliance on black women's labor in the Jim Crow South.[85]

White southerners leveraged food to maintain their control over the labor market and as a weapon of white supremacy, which allowed employers to gain access to more of black women's labor for the exchange of food rather than money. Georgia Bays' description of her workday in Dentontown, Mississippi, brings to light the full extent of black women's work inside and outside of their formal employment. Her story showcased the transcendent quality of food that nourishes the body and power relations between groups. Bay and her husband worked as sharecroppers, and she helped the landowner's wife with cooking and household chores. As quoted in *Living with Jim Crow*, Bays explained, "That's all I ever did around white folks, clean house and cook. They didn't pay any money. No money, period...When we worked around white folks, we worked extra [for] meat and sometimes lard, a little sugar, a little meal, and flour... I'd put it in a bowl, bring it home, feed my children."[86]

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[84] Hunter, 53.
[85] 1940 U.S. Census; Linda Watts et al., *Social History of the United States* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 345.
[86] Valk and Brown, 61.

Bays spent most of her day working for them because she needed the extra food to sustain her family in a practice called pan-toting.[87] She rose early in the morning before her family to churn butter or do household chores for the landowner's wife in exchange for butter or eggs. She came back before her family awoke to use the eggs or butter to cook breakfast. During the day, she worked with her husband in the field and once she came home her second shift began. In the evenings, she cooked the greens or peas for tomorrow's supper, cleaned her house, cared for her children, and prepared for the next day.[88] In Montgomery, the working-class women lived similar realities to Bays, who struggled to support her family through agricultural and domestic work while balancing her duties as a wife and mother.

Maids, laundresses, and cooks in Montgomery possessed similar experiences shared with black women across the United States during Jim Crow. The women, like Georgia Gilmore, likely grew up in a poor or working-class household in Montgomery County. They contributed vitally to the household income and supported dependents with some women acting as the only source of income to their households and sometimes as the primary earner within the home.[89] As the head of the family, Janie Gilmore maintained her household on the wages of "servant" and laundress in 1930 and 1940, respectively. Her daughter experienced a similar reality. According to the 1940 census, Georgia Gilmore lived with her mother and sister as a married woman. At some point in the 1930s, she married Henry Merritt and had three children, but the circumstances leading to her residence at her mother's home remain unclear. At twenty years old, Gilmore supported her children as a maid.[90] By the 1950s, Gilmore lived on Dericote Street as a widow

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[87] The custom of "pan-toting" involved domestic workers and cooks taking home pans of pantry goods or leftover foodstuffs to supplement their wages; Hunter, 74.
[88] Ibid., 62.
[89] Elizabeth R. Haynes, Negroes in Domestic Service in the United States," *Journal of Negro History* 8, no. 4 (1923):390-393.
[90] 1940 U.S. Census; "Funerals", *The Montgomery Advertiser* (Montgomery, AL), 13 July 2008.

caring for six children and her youngest sister on a cook's salary at the National Lunch Company. The struggle to raise and feed her family positioned food as both a source of anxiety and an avenue for possible employment. At the same time, working-class women understood this duality of food and recognized how to use food practices to their advantage.

Within the first week of the boycott in 1955, the Montgomery Improvement Association expanded the boycott beyond a one-day affair and issued a challenge to white authority in the city. King and the leaders of the MIA attempted to negotiate with city and bus officials. The association proposed the assurance of more courteous treatment from bus operators and a first-come-first-serve seating arrangement that allowed black passengers to sit from back to front and white passengers from front to rear until all seats were taken. Once all seats were no longer vacant, bus drivers could not no order a passenger to relinquish their seat. The MIA also proposed the employment of black bus drivers on routes that served predominantly black areas. The terms drafted by the MIA did not seek to step outside the bounds of social segregation, yet Mayor Gayle and the city refused the compromises. Since its establishment in 1935, Montgomery Bus Lines, Inc. operated without interruption even during World War II.[91] Twenty-six days into the protest, the gross passenger revenues for Montgomery Bus Lines, Inc. declined 67 percent ($52,380).[92] The bus lines cut routes in predominantly black neighborhoods, reduced their services to thirty-three percent, and increased bus fares by fifty percent by March 1956.[93]This did not bother the protestors as they continued to walk around Montgomery. Walking alone or sometimes with a group, Gilmore walked one to two miles a day while traveling between her home and the downtown area. Her spirit and that of other protestors can be

[91] Montgomery Information, PR406 Folder 5, James H. Bagley Papers, Alabama Department of History and Archives.
[92] " Hard-pressed capital bus line gets fare increase", *Birmingham News* (Birmingham, AL), 5 Jun 1956.
[93] "Twelve Sunday Runs of Buses Halted," Alabama Journal (Montgomery, AL), 8 March 1956.

seen in their response to white youth heckling them about walking instead of riding the bus. Remembering the incident, Gilmore laughed as she recalled how they told the young white "no, cracker, no we wanted to walk."[94]

The MIA established a highly coordinated and flexible system for sustaining the boycott that made use of local black businesses and adapted to efforts to suppress the boycott from white authorities. Several black-owned cab companies worked with the Montgomery Improvement Association to offer cab rides at a reduced fare to boycotters. In the first few days of the boycott, black-owned cab companies offered protestors rides for a dime. Peoples Cab Stand was one of the companies that helped transport people before the carpool. Black residents climbed into their signature cars with the sky-blue body and salmon pink top, handing their 10-cent fare to the cab driver.[95] However, city officials stopped the rides citing a city law that mandated all cab companies charge a minimum of 45-cents. This shifted the mode of transportation to the carpool system. The MIA tried to cover the entire city with 325 private cars that picked up passengers from forty-three dispatch stations and forty-two pickup stations. The dispatch stations were designated areas, where workers congregated early from five o'clock in the morning until ten o'clock in the evening.[96] Black businesses in Montgomery created a network of local support for the carpool system. Local business owners, Eddie L., and Dorothy Posey owned the parking lot in Montgomery's black business district and used the space as a transit station for the carpool. Dr. Richard Harris, owner of Dean's Drugstore, proved instrumental in the dispatching process of the carpool. As Dr. Harris aided customers in his store, he dispatched cars to and from the black-

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[94] Interview with Georgia Gilmore, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on February 17, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, 5.

[95] Montgomery, 8.

[96] Robinson, 91.

owned parking lot a block away. The decision to use black-owned properties as pickup locations like Dean's Drugstore and the Posey lot allowed the MIA to minimize the ability of authorities to harass African American riders.[97] This highly effective system came at a cost. The MIA needed funds to support its alternative transportation system and to assist community members in need because of their participation in the boycott. A financial report from November 1, 1956, to December 15, 1956, listed transportation costs as $11, 432.09. Driver and office salaries cost the organization $4,537.03. Gas, oil, and tires ran $5, 998.33 and car repairs at $733.73.[98]

Georgia Gilmore knew how to raise money, and she did so before the start of the bus boycott. As a member of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, she offered her cooking services in favor of the congregation. Customers attending church sponsored suppers and festivals may have purchased a pound cake or sweet potato pie made by Mrs. Gilmore. Her fundraising skills helped raise the money to furnish the convent for the nuns at the church.[99] Black women across Montgomery engaged in similar acts by baking a cake or making a savory dish to be sold for the benefit of the church or social organization. Gilmore understood that for women with similar credentials and backgrounds as her, they did not possess the capital to contribute financially to the movement as individuals. During the first few weeks of the boycott in December 1955, Gilmore gathered maids, cooks, nurses, and other domestic workers to form the Club from Nowhere. The women made plates of fried fish and stewed greens or cooked up juicy pork chops with rice that customers bought on their way home from work or the mass meeting that night. They sold cakes and slices of sweet potato pies all around Montgomery to an interracial

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[97] Robinson, 93.

[98] 1956 Financial Report, Montgomery Improvement Association Papers, Alabama State University Archives, and Special Collections.

[99] Valda Montgomery. Interview by author. 5 October 2021.; Mark Gilmore, interview by Dr. Howard Robinson and Shirley Townsend, ASU Archives Oral History Collection, Alabama State University, 25 March 2005

customer base.[100] The members channeled profits from their sales into the Montgomery Improvement Association to its transportation system.

When recounting memories from the mass meetings, Gilmore remembered the police presence from the governor's and mayor's offices. "They sit right up front at all our meetings, checking names to see what colored folks was doing what," she remembered, "Some colored folks or Negroes could afford to stick out their necks more than others because they had independent incomes, but some just couldn't afford to be called 'ring leaders' and have the white folks fire them."[101] Protestors faced possible job loss, including educators and professors at Alabama State College and those with white employers. When Mrs. Gilmore decided to be the sole figurehead of the Club from Nowhere, she knew the risk. The FBI monitored Georgia Gilmore and other individuals suspected as members of the "Luncheon Committee" for the MIA such as Mrs. Essie Garrison.[102] Gilmore was no stranger to civil rights activism and scrutiny as a worker for the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which went underground after the Alabama legislature outlawed the organized in June 1956.[103]

Constant white surveillance did not constitute a new development in the lives of household workers, since they routinely worked under the scrutiny of white housewives. The boycott did not halt such practices among white employers as they sought to uncover whether their cook or maid was involved in the boycott or to find out more about the plans of protestors. Irene Stovall, a domestic worker for a city bus driver and his wife, remembered the wife trying to

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[100] Edge, 17.

[101] Jarrett.

[102] 157-6-61-129-157-6-61-228 September 1962-July 1963, Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma, and Memphis Collection, ProQuest History Vault, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001339-006-0427&accountid=14606.

[103] Bailey interview*; Montgomery Bus Boycott; Montgomery Fair date book, used as a notebook by Parks*, 1955-1956, Rosa Parks Papers, Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/item/mss859430178/.

mine her for information about the mass meeting after giving her some bacon grease. When Irene explained that they sang and prayed, her employer became enraged, stating "We could starve y'all maids for a month."[104] The threat to starve their maids for a month reveals the role of food in upholding white supremacist power and subjugating African Americans. Stovall's employer's claim stood in contrast to the continued employment of domestic workers in Montgomery as white households continued to depend on black labor for meal preparation, childcare, and home care.[105] White residents still hauled household workers to and from work, and the undermining effort of those actions caught the notice of whites in Montgomery. On October 17, 1956, the *Montgomery Advertiser* reported white housewives —who provided transportation to their black workers— receiving harassing, midnight calls from men threatening physical violence and cursing them. Some homes in South Montgomery received a list of residents who continued to transport their African American maids and cooks, stating "This must be stopped. These people [those transporting household workers] would appreciate a call from you, day or night."[106]

The boycott shattered the false sense of racial harmony and order that white citizens operated under. This mythology of racial harmony depended on African Americans adopting a veneer of compliance and servitude in their interactions with whites during Jim Crow. Black men and women often tailored their behavior and mannerism to fit the expectations of white society. "We wear the mask that grins and lies," wrote Paul Lawrence Dunbar in his 1895 poem, "We Wear the Mask."[107] In the poem, Dunbar makes explicit the subtle process of concealment that African Americans took part in as participants in a segregated society. He refers to this mask of

[104] Nadasen, 24.
[105] Robinson, 107.
[106] "People who haul maids harassed," *Montgomery Advertiser* (Montgomery, AL), 17 October 1956.
[107] Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Majors and Minors: Poems*. Toledo, Ohio: Hadley and Hadley, 1895), 21.

servility adopted by African Americans to avoid the punishments associated with perceived threats against white power.

Domestic workers, as a group often in white spaces, regularly cloaked themselves in the image of the mammy. Dramaturgical interpretations of this process in film and literature highlight the reduction of black expression in front of white society. *A Long Walk Home,* a movie based on the bus boycott in Montgomery, displays the act of masking perfectly. In one scene, the Thompson family sits down to a Christmas dinner, a meal prepared and served by black household workers. The mother of Mr. Thompson makes a racially charged comment about the protestors right as Odessa—a main character and domestic worker for the Thompson's— comes into the dining room to offer the guests dinner rolls. Odessa dutifully ignores the comment and keeps her face neutral, and gaze downward as she goes about distributing the bread. However, once Odessa and her colleague departed from the house, they voiced their outrage. Like the fictional characters, the mask of the joyful mammy slipped from the faces of black domestic workers as they walked to and from work.[108]

The function and name of Gilmore's group, the Club from Nowhere, carried a discreetness aimed at alleviating some of the dangers faced by women in a social class most vulnerable to economic reprisals. As Patricia Hill Collins argued in her work, images of black women created by the ruling class kindled resistance as much as it subjugated them. African American women recognized the injustices of the system and found means of self-definition. Domestic workers and other working-class women resisted their objectification through their

[108] Kelley, 7; The caricature of the mammy is grounded in the mythology of the idyllic Antebellum South. The mammy is an African American woman who is a domestic servant, faithful and obedient to the white family she serves. The image was used to explain the economic exploitation of black women and their restriction to domestic jobs during Jim Crow. See Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York,: Norton & Company, 1999).

refusal to accept these stereotypical images of themselves as core pieces of their identity. Instead, they obscured their true selves behind masks of servility**.** Many household workers and other working-class women could not afford to depart from these constructed impressions of themselves and become associated with the MIA. The name of the club functioned as a clever means of concealing the identities of its members. Additionally, a formal list of members does not exist, and few remember the names of women who aided the group.

In a 2005 interview with Alabama State University, Mark, Gilmore's oldest son, remembered four women who took part in the club. He recalled the names of Mrs. Brown, Mrs.Dillahay, Hiwatha Thomas, and W.S. Kitts.[109] However, Gilmore worked as the face of the club and acted as its sole official officer. As the organizer of the operation, she handled the money that members collected and made sure all funds were deposited into the MIA's collection plate. When Hazel Gregory made the MIA's financial reports, the receipts listed the donor as the Club from Nowhere. Essentially, the money came from nowhere and no one. Club members carried out their acts of resistance without police trailing them or giving them traffic tickets.[110] The covert nature of the club and its decision to target those who did not or could not attend the mass meetings permitted progressive white residents to support the MIA while avoiding conflict with more conservative acquaintances through the purchase of cakes and pies from the club.[111]

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[109] Mark Gilmore interview; Mark Gilmore's interview provides insight into the size of the Club from Nowhere and who would have helped Georgia Gilmore with the process of fundraising. However, the information given does not give a clear indication of who these women were. Research using census records and directories shows multiple women who share the surnames given by Mark. The absence of background knowledge on the women made it difficult to positively identify Club from Nowhere members.

[110] 1986 Georgia Gilmore; 1957 Receipt book Montgomery Improvement Association Papers, Alabama State University Archives and Special Collection; In late January 1956, Montgomery police started to enforce Mayor W.A. Gayle's "get tough" policy for the boycott. This included giving parking tickets for speeding and other traffic violations, stopping and questioning drivers and those waiting for the carpool; Robinson, 123.

[111] Edge, 17; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 79.

The Club from Nowhere participated in a long legacy of women utilizing food for the material gain of their families. The group was not unique to Georgia Gilmore or the women of Montgomery. Women of all races and ethnicities raised money for benevolent societies, church functions, and other causes through the sale of baked goods and plates of food. This took the form of actual foodstuffs and food literature in the form of community cookbooks written by women in a club or church. Both allowed women to consolidate their collective knowledge and skills into sellable objects to raise money for their cause. In Montgomery, the Club from Nowhere inspired the creation of a similar club on the west side of Montgomery called the Friendly Club, founded by Inez Ricks.

At each mass meeting, a friendly competition ensued as each club leader presented their cash donations. Robinson explained how the event presented an important piece of the Monday night gatherings as it gave "people another way to rid themselves of their frustrations and pent-up emotions."[112] Attendees looked forward to the announcements and contributed to both groups in the hopes of creating a tie. Both groups poured their time, strength, and money into making the largest impact that they could. In that way, the clubs represented more than a money-raising society because of the pride in their work and the personal investments they made beyond finances. The actions of the women in the MIA and in these separate organizations reflect a longstanding history of organizing, philanthropy, and activism among black women.

Black women stood at the forefront of every struggle for civil and human rights in the United States. They have long engaged with the social and political issues that plagued members of their racial group. Before Emancipation, African American women formed female anti-slavery organizations, published anti-slavery literature, and took part in the efforts to aid fugitive

[112] Robinson, 72.

slaves.[113] In the racially charged atmosphere of America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, clubs and civic organizations organized by black women initiated efforts aimed toward the social betterment of communities.[114] For black women during the Civil Rights Movement, the act of fundraising and engagement in philanthropy reflected a sense of social solidarity in the face of white supremacy. Many individual decisions made by African American philanthropists gained their foundation in community considerations and a sense of collective care. The concept of community and communal obligations meld into the fundraising actions of the Club from Nowhere and other black women's organizations in the era of racial segregation.[115] The philanthropic efforts of the Club from Nowhere and Friendly Club members came from their desire to bridge the gaps left by the political disenfranchisement and the social exclusion of African Americans.

The work of both organizations reflects the pivotal roles women filled during the fight for civil rights in the 1950s. During the boycott, Erna Dungee described women as the "power behind the throne" as early organizers of the alternative transportation system and as drivers.[116] Despite the prominence of women in the black community as these community leaders and reformers, few women held official positions in formal institutions outside of the traditional role of secretary. The MIA's earliest officers included Erna Dungee as the financial secretary and Hazel Gregory as the office secretary. Both Dungee and Gregory, along with other women, served as board members of the MIA and joined its committees. Yet, the top levels of leadership

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[113] See Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992) and Manish Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition (*New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).
[114] See Floris B. Cash, *African American Women and Social Action: The Clubwomen and Volunteerism from Jim Crow to the New Deal, 1896-1936* (Connecticut: Praeger, 2001).
[115] Shaw, 41.
[116] Erna Dungee Allen interview in *The Walking City: The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1956*. 6 August 1977.

remained male dominated positions.[117] Until recently, the activism of women in these organizations, including their distinct motivations and strategies, remained largely ignored. Women often lacked the titles or accolades associated with male members in the movement. Nevertheless, they provided significant assistance as ground operatives that recruited, disseminated knowledge, and promoted others to act in the name of civil rights. This type of leadership remained an important feature of mobilization at the ground level.[118]

The civil rights activism in Alabama, and in the South at large, relied on the everyday actions and courage of residents. These constituents, often working-class, maintained pressure on leadership and pushed the movement forward. The motivational language used by King and other MIA leaders did not align with the circumstances of the boycotters and did not gain the same tangibility as events that occurred in their lives. The religious undertones and the rhetoric of unification effaced the gender and class implication of the boycott. [119] Black working-class people faced a particular brand of racial discrimination and sought to improve not only the treatment of themselves racially but also contended with their economic circumstances. Their fight against white supremacy also struck at the exploitative system of the southern economy. The recognition of what could be lost created a language of local struggle protestors tapped into when participating in the carpools, attending mass meetings, and walking to work. The grassroots activism of black working-class women gave texture to the boycott by highlighting and interrogating these contradictions in treatment.[120]

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[117] Johnnie Carr, a civil rights activist who served on several committees during the boycott, succeeded Martin Luther King Jr. as the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association after his departure to Atlanta. She served in that capacity from 1967 until her death in 2008.

[118]Belinda Robnett, "African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization". *American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 6 (1996), p. 1665; Dittmer, 31.

[119] Morrison, 247.

[120] Wilson, 308.

Both the Club from Nowhere and the Friendly Club demonstrated the power of domestic workers and the process of organizing among black working-class women. Throughout the history of the United States, black domestic workers protested their treatment through a distinctive form of grassroots activism. These women struck against the silence demanded of them as women and as African Americans in an apartheid state, and generated space for their voices and constructed their stories into a common language that connected with and compelled others. Black domestic workers did not passively accept the treatment they received in white households. African American household workers took leftover food — sometimes without the knowledge of their employer—through the practice of pan-toting. They refused to live in the homes of their employers to assert a level of separation and independence, quit when work conditions proved unsatisfactory, told of their treatment within certain households as a warning to others.[121]

At the mass meetings, black women continued to testify to the abuses they received on the buses and in white homes.[122] The black women of Montgomery articulated a fight against more than just bus policies. Premilla Nadasen positioned this practice of storytelling, the refusal to be silent in the face of discrimination or trauma, as an apex of the black household worker's strategy. These domestic workers weaponized the practice of storytelling, their social networks, and their proximity to white families for political mobilization.[123] That intimate knowledge of what the bus boycott meant breathed life into the movement and aided the women as they used their environment and skills to construct a means of activism from their social perspective. "We

[121] Hunter, 59; Wallach, 74.
[122] Edge, 18.
[123] Nadasen, 80-81.

had a lot of our club members who were hard-pressed, and couldn't give more than a quarter or half-dollar," Gilmore admitted, "but all knew how to raise money."[124]

The local grassroots activism displayed by the Club from Nowhere represented the thousands of African Americans working outside of the public eye. Their contributions remained largely forgotten in the boycott's aftermath and early civil rights scholarship. Though the boycott received international attention, local support mattered the most because it sustained the movement emotionally, ideologically, and socially. Members of the Club from Nowhere and the Friendly Club used their social networks cultivated from their work and neighborhoods, to position themselves as mediators between the formal organization and those in the community that did not have the time nor the employment security to participate in the organization.[125]

Gilmore's group joined the pantheon of other black working-class women's organizations in Montgomery such as the Ladies Auxiliary of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP). Composed of local female relatives of the BSCP, the women's auxiliary club offered a means to fight for their right to fair treatment as women, as African Americans, and as workers. The group organized fish fries to raise money for the BSCP and became an important part of keeping union hopes alive through the moral support and financial support they provided during strikes.[126] Selling plates of food functioned as another extension of women's political participation and micro-mobilization. Food preparation and selling plates do not contain an inherently political or subversive element. However, the social reality of an individual influences the way she acts, views, and expresses themselves.[127] When African American women organized themselves, they did so with the understanding of the social, political, and economic gaps left by racial

[124] Jarrett.
[125] 1986 Gilmore interview.
[126] Brooks, 130.
[127] Kelley, 44.

discrimination that their work needed to tackle. Thus, the actions of the Club from Nowhere transcended a purely transactional exchange of money.

When the time came, Gilmore and several working-class women lent their voices and their stories to the cause. On February 21, 1956, Montgomery County indicted King and eighty-nine others for their role in the boycott of Montgomery City Lines, Inc. The court charged the protestors with violating a 1921 ordinance that outlawed boycotts against businesses. During the four-day trial, thirty-one witnesses, including Georgia Gilmore and Inez Ricks, testified to the abuses they faced on city buses.[128] Gilmore shared her story about the bus driver that left her at the bus stop after telling her to get off the bus to enter from the rear. She also revealed the experience of her elderly mother.

Janie, older and physically limited, had difficulty getting on and off the bus from the rear. While attempting to enter from the front, the bus operator demanded that she enter from the rear despite her being unable to use the steps. Gilmore then made one of the most significant points from the trial stating, "When they count the fares, they don't know if it is colored money or white money."[129] The testimony of Georgia Gilmore, Inez Ricks, and several working-class women gave voice to the daily humiliations suffered by African Americans in Montgomery during *State of Alabama v. M. L. King, Jr*. in 1956. Their decision to speak about their experiences challenged a system designed to silence African Americans and render them invisible. To speak about one's dissatisfaction with their treatment and demand visibility did not come without a price. Whether

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[128] "State of Alabama v. M. L. King, Jr., Nos. 7399 and 9593," Kinginstitute.stanford.edu, *Stanford University the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*. https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/state-alabama-v-m-l-king-jr-nos-7399-and-9593.

[129] "Negroes Tell," *Alabama Tribune* (Montgomery, AL) 23 March 1956; Georgia Gilmore, Montgomery Bus Boycott Trial Transcript, 19 March 1956, Alabama Department of Archives and History, 353.

her employers fired her, or she quit before they could, Georgia Gilmore lost her job at the National Lunch Company.

CHAPTER 3: GILMORE'S HOME RESTAURANT AND BLACK BUSINESSES IN MONTGOMERY

As one of the head cooks at the National Lunch Company, Gilmore made the restaurant's specialty: perfectly crispy, fried chicken. She may have served the main dish with a side of collard greens and a steaming pan of macaroni and cheese. Gilmore seasoned and prepared her dishes with the skill of a woman possessing close to thirty years of culinary experience. Her dishes stood as a testament to the legacy of her mother's teachings, lessons learned in the kitchens of white citizens, trial-and-error, and culinary creativity. Located on North Court Street, the National Lunch Company was a downtown cafeteria that catered to blue-collar workers. Yet, neither Gilmore nor any other African Americans could enjoy the fruits of her labor comfortably. Like other establishments in the South, black and white patrons at the restaurant had different entrances at the restaurant. The entrances were situated on the same side of the building, only a few feet away from each other.[130] The strategically placed distance showcased one of the greatest ironies of the Jim Crow South. The African American cooks that prepared the food eaten by white customers could not sit down and enjoy a meal in the same space. This section examines black businesses, particularly restaurants, and their contributions to the Civil Rights Movement as spaces of leisure and activism. A study into Georgia Gilmore's restaurant and the Club from Nowhere illuminates acts African Americans took in their mundane lives to resist white supremacy. Her home restaurant offered a space of communion for black and white customers, as well as members of the MIA, that defied legal and social boundaries of race. It exemplified how black-owned restaurants served as spaces for gathering away from white surveillance.

[130] Karren Pell and Carole King. *Classic Restaurants of Montgomery* (Charleston, SC: American Palate, 2020), 51.

Cooking at the National Lunch Company imbued Gilmore with insight into the restaurant industry and helped hone her cooking skills. When she lost her job in 1956, King recommended she start a restaurant of her own. Since their introduction at the first mass meeting, the two became close friends and admirers of each other's work. Dr. King's early support helped kickstart her food enterprise. The funds given by the reverend helped Gilmore expand her kitchen, buy more utensils, and allow her to save money to send her children to school.[131] The tenacity and spirit of Gilmore moved those around her, including King, who walked the three blocks to her home to enjoy a delicious plate of food.[132] Though not a licensed public restaurant, Gilmore's home expanded on the limited dining options for African Americans in Montgomery and her place fit in well with the other small businesses in the neighborhood. African American men and woman around the city sold food, candies, candy apples, or popcorn to make extra money.[133] People along the west and east sides of Montgomery spoke of these small businesses and offered recommendations on places to eat and people to see to those around them. When someone wanted a good meal, they knew to visit Mrs. Georgia's house. When a customer visited her home restaurant, they walked right through the unlocked front door.[134] As Mark Gilmore, the oldest son, recalled "The chicken was jumping in the pot, the rolls were hot, and that tea you couldn't beat it."[135] In the kitchen of a white house on the corner of Bolivar and Dericote Street, a large pot of collard greens simmered on a four-burner stove as Gilmore made candied yams in one of her cast-iron skillets.[136]

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[131] "King Helped Put Local Woman in Lunch Business", *Alabama Journal* (Montgomery, Alabama), 4 April 1978.
[132] Edge, 21.
[133] Valda Montgomery. Interview by author. 21 February 2021.
[134]Vernon Jarrett, "Their Jobs Were on the Line: 'Nobodies' Paid Boycott's Way."
[135] Mark Gilmore interview.
[136] Bailey interview; The section of the street that intersected with Dericote Street is now called Rufus Lewis Lane. A historical marker commemorates the contributions to Gilmore in front of her second home, a red brick ranch-style house, that she moved to in the 1970s.

Customers at her place enjoyed traditional Southern food of fried and baked chicken, fried fish, stew meat, liver, beans, stew beef, pig feet, turnip greens, collard greens, cream potatoes, potato salad, candied yams, and corn muffins.[137] Attorneys, activists, barbers, doctors, preachers, politicians, and laborers alike ate at her establishment. Black and white patrons sat at a large dining room table surrounded by a dozen chairs, and when those chairs filled up, she had stools on standby. When no vacant spot in the dining room remained, customers sat on any available space in the kitchen. Hungry Montgomery residents spilled into her green-tiled kitchen, reading from a handwritten menu, watching as piled plates with chicken wings, macaroni, and cheese, and chitlin stew as she took them off the stove all for a fixed price.[138] The backdoor restaurant took part in an underground black economy that asserted a level of agency to serve community needs for spaces of leisure that offered comfortable and equitable experiences.

Gilmore demonstrated this agency through the entertainment of an interracial clientele that struck at the core of racial segregation and white authority. Section 369 from the city ordinances of Birmingham, Alabama mandated the segregation of blacks and whites in places that served food. "It shall be unlawful to conduct a restaurant… at all which white and colored people are served in the same room, unless … separated by a solid partition extending from the floor upward to a distance of seven feet or higher, and unless a separate entrance from the street is provided for each compartment."[139] The code reflected similar laws throughout Alabama and the South that limited social interactions between blacks and whites that did not enforce the dominant power structure. Yet, blacks and whites frequently encountered each other in their day-

[137] I am using the umbrella tern, Southern food, to encapsulate foods and ingredients associated with the regional food eaten by all southerners and those connected with African American heritage cooking.
[138] Blejwas, 214; Frederick Brown, " Mrs. Gilmore: 'A Woman Who Put Her Foot In It' for Freedom," Alabama State University Archives and Special Collections.
[139] City of Birmingham, Alabama, "Birmingham, Alabama Issues Racial Segregation Ordinances," *SHEC: Resources for Teachers*, https://shec.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/866.

to-day lives. In the kitchen at the National Lunch Company, Gilmore fried up the restaurant's specialty fried chicken. Her hands cleaned the poultry, seasoned it, and floured it, and placed each piece into the hot grease. African American workers made up the background of cooks, dishwashers, and cleaning staff that produced the dining experience of the white, blue-collar diners in the cafe.

If a black person went downtown in Montgomery and wanted to eat a hamburger, they needed to find a black-owned hamburger shop if they did not want to have to face the subpar treatment at white establishments. Whites could enjoy an imagined familial connection to black domestic workers and cooks, yet to eat with these supposed "friends of the family" transgressed the status quo. Mildred, a thirty-two-year-old domestic worker, recalled when her employer expressed a familial love for her to a visiting friend, suggesting that Mildred was a part of the family. She pulled her employer aside to clarify that she was not "one of the family" citing, "the family eats in the dining room and I eat in the kitchen."[140] The exclusion of African Americans in eating spaces mirrored the second-class citizenship and systemic racial discrimination they faced in their daily lives. The denial of equal access to dining options and the creation of segregated eating experiences reproduced and maintained white hegemonic control in the Jim Crow South. In this context, food acted as a symbol of social status and the attainment of a seat at the table became the goal of civil rights protests.[141]

The introduction to quick-service cafes, lunch counters, and lunchrooms in the twentieth century South made eating outside the home more accessible to those outside of the elite classes. Thus, African American middle and lower classes held the potential to exist and dine in the same spaces as whites, which undermined the racial and class assumptions that provided the basis for

[140] Nadasen, 8.
[141] Zafar, 49.

white supremacy.[142] The "whites-only" signs that adorned restaurants reinforced power relations in the face of a growing African American consumer base.[143] Notions of racial purity bled into ideas of food purity and sanitation in the burgeoning industrial food system. Just as power conflicts become encoded into food, white supremacy also entwined itself into spaces of eating. In public food spaces —restaurants and lunch counters— fears of miscegenation and the battle to uphold the white structure influenced eating practices. The signage possessed an ideological underpinning that assumed an inherent dirtiness among African Americans and justified the social segregation of races. In Gilmore's home, these codes of separation melted away. Her home offered a safe and comfortable environment to engage with familiar company and enjoy a delicious meal together.

Martha Hawkins captured the essence of Gilmore's home restaurant and the impact of her legacy in her memoir, *Finding Martha's Place.* "The feeling of her home became downright sacramental," she wrote "a camp meeting of sorts with a continual loud and loving conversation about the things that mattered."[144] When locals could not make it to her home, Gilmore and her family delivered the food. Professors and students from Alabama State College, workers from the laundry on High Street, and other businesses around town called the house to place orders.[145] However, Gilmore's cooking did more than just fill the bellies of her customers. Her place offered the opportunity for communion among for black and white residents without racial or

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[142] Cooley, 9; Ferris, 247.

[143] Cooley, 5.

[144] Martha Hawkins and Marcus Brotherton, *Finding Martha's Place: My Journey Through Sin, Salvation, and Lots of Soul Food* (New York: Touchstone, 2010), 273.

[145] Hazel Gregory, secretary of MIA, gave Gilmore the suggestion to call the laundry in the morning and tell them what she planned to cook that day. A sample menu of foods she made included: fried chicken, pig feet, and stew beef, mashed potatoes, black eyed peas, and collards greens. Gilmore would then give each customer a number #1-15. She would then assign letters to correspond with the main dishes and sides; "Mrs. Gilmore: 'A Woman Who Put Her Foot In It' for Freedom". VC-NC-2018-Gilmore, Georgia. ASU Archives Media Collection. Alabama State University, 28 February 2018.

class distinctions. The restaurant mirrored the spirit of the boycott as something more than a protest against the inhumane treatment of black residents in the city. It encompassed a sense of fellowship that the boycott heightened within the African American community. Her home produced a place where Martin Luther King Jr. ate a meal and enjoyed the company of his neighbors during the turmoil of the boycott. Walking a few minutes to the front door of Gilmore's home, he would have teasingly called out to "Tiny" — the nickname King bestowed onto Gilmore — in greeting. He sat down at her dining room table as she served up plates of his favorites, her famous stuffed pork chops, and stuffed bell peppers.[146]

Feasting on soul food classics, King sat with community members inside and outside of his circle. The dining table represented a time of gathering and in Gilmore's home, and the gathering fostered a safe environment for African American leisure. Black communities used segregation to cultivate a form of congregation and community that gave space for them to exist on their terms outside the regulations on their behavior placed upon them by Jim Crow. The conversation within the home restaurant became a rebellious act of free will and a testament to the role of food as a piece of kinship building.[147] Gilmore's kitchen exemplified how vital black businesses were to the success of the Montgomery bus boycott as a challenge to white supremacist society and spaces that fostered civil rights action. Her restaurant operated as a meeting place for Reverend King, Reverend Abernathy, Reverend Powell, and other leaders of the MIA.

The home restaurant shares with Paschal's in Atlanta, Georgia, or Dooky Chase Restaurant in New Orleans the creation of spaces that shielded black resistance. Within the walls of Dooky Chase Restaurant, King and other leaders during the Civil Rights Movement crafted

[146] Pell and King, 78; Mark Gilmore interview.
[147] Kelley, 45.

plans and engaged in debates. Chef Leah Chase placed steaming plates of gumbo and other creole cuisines in front of hundreds of NAACP, SNCC, CORE, and other civil rights activists that came through her doors.[148] Robert and James Paschal of Atlanta served up southern cooking to local civil rights activists and even extended their business hours to accommodate the group. The brothers provided complimentary meals to protestors and the parents of college-aged activists anxiously waiting on their children. Though their license only allowed them to serve African Americans, the brothers often hosted SNCC workers and sat them away from the windows in case of a patrolling policemen. B.B. Beamon's on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta hosted interracial groups for SNCC meetings in their back room and offered workers free meals.

In Montgomery, the famous Ben Moore Hotel offered their services to the MIA. A towering four-story brick structure resting on the corner of High and Jackson Street, the Ben Moore opened in 1951 as the first hotel to serve African Americans in the city and the first high rise outside of the downtown area. Businesses lined the ground floor of the hotel including Malden Brothers' barbershop where Nelson Malden, longtime friend of Gilmore, cut Rev. King's hair and conversed with each other.[149] The fourth floor of the hotel hosted the Rooftop Garden Restaurant, also known as the Afro Club. Civil rights activists gathered to dance, eat, socialize, and strategize at the restaurants' tables. Its location at the top of the Ben Moore Hotel gave diners unrestricted views of Montgomery's scenery and alerted them of possible dangers. From their vantage point, civil rights leaders could see authorities or white vigilantes approach the hotel. If someone deemed the situation hazardous, diners could slip through the secret

[148] Ibid., 511. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).
[149] World Monuments Fund, "Voices of Alabama: Ben Moore Hotel," YouTube video, 03:51, 25 Sept. 2019, https://www.youtube.com/?gl=DE.

underground room accessed through a pantry in the building.[150] These restaurants defied segregation laws by serving white and black patrons in their establishments and systematically broke barriers between the two groups. SNCC workers, members of the SCLC, and other activists deconstructed the boundaries and meanings of race in these spaces. An invitation to a common table fostered dialogue and nourished a growing movement that altered American society. These conversations took place in more informal eateries and in the homes of black residents. Local people donated foodstuffs like rice, cornmeal, and other goods and opened their home to feed and shelter protestors. The locals offered their best food to the activists and at in some cases would serve the activists before family members. The intentional disregard for segregation laws placed the people that hosted these interracial groups in danger from local and federal law enforcement and white segregationist vigilante groups. Black women were often at the forefront of these efforts as hostesses to civil rights workers. They offered meals as well as a safe place to rest and converse without worry of white violence.[151]

Just as Mrs. Gilmore opened the doors of her home to protestors and activists of every color, so too did women across Montgomery. Women like Vera Harris, wife of Richard Harris and co-operator of Dean Drug Store, turned their fingers purple by mimeographing hundreds of flyers announcing the protest in December 1955. Mrs. Harris distributed hygiene products and medications to Freedom Riders and made sure they received their fill of the food she cooked. Juanita Abernathy, an activist in her own right and the wife of Rev. Ralph Abernathy, feed protestors and Rev. King throughout the boycott period. By feeding and eating with these people, the women expressed an act of friendship that recognized each person as an equal worthy of

[150] Pell and King, 90; Valda Montgomery. Interview by author. 21 February 2021.
[151] Browning, Joan C.., Burlage, Dorothy Dawson., Baker, Elaine Delott., Curry, Constance., Patch, Penny, *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 38.

safety and fair treatment. Through food and other acts of care, Gilmore and the women of Montgomery sustained the 1955 boycott and the larger civil rights struggles.[152]

[152] Ferris, 269; Joan Browning, Interview by author, 1 February 2022; Montgomery, 25; Valda Montgomery. Interview by author. 21 February 2021; Rosalind Bentley, "Hostesses of the Movement, *"Southern Foodways Alliance Gravy*, 10 Aug 2017, https://www.southernfoodways.org/gravy/hostesses-of-the-movement/.

CONCLUSION: FOOD AS A LEGACY: THE IMPACT OF THE BUS BOYCOTT

Gilmore moved about her kitchen, cooking, and listening to gospel music. Suddenly, an announcement came over the local station.[153] After thirteen months, the boycott had ended. The *Aurelia S. Browder et al. v. W. A. Gayle et al.* court case filed by Fred Gray and Charles D. Langford in February 1956 challenged the Alabama state statutes and the city ordinances that required segregation on buses. On June 5, 1956, a U.S. District Court ruled that the segregation codes on intrastate buses were unconstitutional, and the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the verdict by December 1956.[154] The battle for civil rights continued in Montgomery and around the United States as African Americans contested their second-class status. The Montgomery Improvement Association remained a fixture in the community after 1956, and the women from the Club from Nowhere persisted in their support of the organization and other civil rights causes.[155]

On the morning of May 20, 1961, the phone rang as Betty Gilmore helped her sister wash collard greens and shell peas in preparation for the anticipated lunch rush that afternoon. When Betty answered the phone, the caller told her to turn on the television. When the Freedom Riders arrived in Montgomery at 10:23 am on May 20, 1961, a mob of angry white men, women, and children awaited them. With crates and metal pipes, the mob attacked the twenty unarmed college students.[156] Later that morning, a white man knocked on Gilmore's door, holding a profusely bleeding man. Before long, four students sought refuge inside the house directed there by attorney Solomon Seay. The group stayed until nine o'clock in the evening when they deemed

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[153] 1986 Gilmore interview.

[154] "Browder v. Gayle, 352 U.S. 903," Kinginstitute.stanford.edu, *Stanford University the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*. https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/browder-v-gayle-352-us-903.

[155] 1958 Receipt book Montgomery Improvement Association Papers, Alabama State University Archives and Special Collection; 1959 Receipt book Montgomery Improvement Association Papers, Alabama State University Archives and Special Collection.

[156] "History of the Freedom Rides Museum," *Alabama Historical Commission*, https://ahc.alabama.gov/FreedomRidesHistoryFacts.aspx.

it safe to leave the home.[157] The 1961 event epitomized the tenacity of Georgia Gilmore and the black community's trust in her home as a sanctuary.

Georgia Gilmore did not cultivate a relationship with her community or create a restaurant where anybody could make themselves at home, for money; nor did she seek stardom from her efforts during the boycott. She cared about the people she fought for and actively worked to increase the rights of black residents after the boycott officially ended. She served as the lead plaintiff in *Gilmore et al. v. City of Montgomery (1959)*. Gilmore sued the city of Montgomery after local police assaulted and arrested her son, Mark, as he took a shortcut through the whites-only Oak Park on his way to work in September 1957. The lawsuit sought to end segregation in public recreational facilities. In 1959, black residents won another civil rights battle after federal judge Frank M. Johnson Jr. ruled that the city must integrate its recreational facilities. She later co-wrote an article with Nelson Malden, "Chairs and the Cosmonauts," emphasized the ridiculous actions —removing the chairs and tables— the city undertook to avoid integrating the public library.[158]

When organizers of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Selma March considered food options, Georgia Gilmore's place came to mind. Around her twelve-seater oak trestle table, King had talked with Lyndon B. Johnson while dining on deviled eggs. Robert and John F. Kennedy likely consumed some of Gilmore's home cooking.[159] Her home represented a key place in the history of civil rights in the city and continued to be a hotspot for locals. Though retired, Gilmore did not miss a chance to feed her community. Two days before the anniversary, she prepared

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[157] Betty Gilmore interview 2, interview by Dr. Howard Robinson, Dr. Shirley Jordan, and Stephanie Jordan, ASU Archives Oral History Collection, Alabama State University, 18 April 2006; Mark Gilmore, interview.
[158] "Chairs and the Cosmonauts," *The Montgomery Advertiser* (Montgomery, AL), 16 August 1962, 4; "Mrs. Gilmore: 'A Woman Who Put Her Foot In It' for Freedom"; Mark Gilmore interview.
[159] Edge, 24.

macaroni salad, taking the time to put red, green, and yellow peppers around it. She placed a pot of peas on the stove to boil and checked on her marinated chicken. By that afternoon, she was hospitalized with peritonitis. She died later that week on the day of the Selma March anniversary, at seven o'clock. Gilmore fed friends and family for the last time after her funeral, where mourners ate the food she prepared for them a few days earlier.[160]

The actions of Georgia Gilmore and the other women in her club joined a legacy of black women who leveraged their knowledge of food for the betterment of their community. The legacy of food activism by Gilmore and the women from the Club from Nowhere revealed how food extended beyond the act of nourishing the body. These women and the acts of care they performed deserve to be more than a footnotes in the history of the Civil Rights Movement.[161] The women of the movement proved just as active if not more during the period than the men, and they provided for the basic needs of activists. Black women, especially domestic workers and those working in other low-paying jobs, doubled their workload at the end of their workday. They left their places of employment to cook food for marchers or tidy a spare room in their house to shelter an activist. The actions of the black working-class women in the Club from Nowhere sustained their community socially and politically. Like the enslaved and free women in the antebellum South, the women of the Club from Nowhere recognized food as an agent of freedom. Not all pound cakes or fried chicken sandwiches contain a political element. But in a system "designed to keep black people dependent and hungry" to feed one's community on their terms, it becomes a radical act of self-assertion and agency against white supremacist authority.[162]

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[160] Betty Gilmore interview 2.
[161] This thesis has a corresponding heritage tour entitled, "Georgia Gilmore and the Montgomery Bus Boycott," which explores the Montgomery 1955 bus boycott and aims to highlight the contributions of Georgia Gilmore.
[162] Wallach, 75.

APPENDIX: GEORGIA GILMORE

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[163] Georgia Gilmore seated at the kitchen table at her home in Montgomery, Alabama. Alabama Department of Archives and History. Donated by Alabama Media Group. Photo by Frank Sikora, *Birmingham News*.

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