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Theoris, Jeanne. The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks.

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Theoris, Jeanne. *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*.

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Reviewed by Carol Reagan Shelton, Ph.D., Rhode Island College

Most contemporary people, including school children, have some knowledge of the role Rosa Parks played in the Civil Rights Movement. The image of Rosa Parks that has dominated the imagination of the American people is that of a tired, black woman refusing to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Hearing the story of Rosa's act of disobedience of the bus driver's order to move to the back of the bus, and her subsequent arrest for this act of civil disobedience, strikes most of us as unjust.

The arrest of Rosa Parks led to one of the most iconic actions of the early civil rights movement. It led to a boycott of the Montgomery city buses by people of the African American community for more than a year.

Theoris' book attempts to erase the caricature of Rosa Parks as a tired seamstress who simply "could not take it anymore" and to more fully describe her political background and perspectives. Mrs. Parks has had her image white-washed as it were; she has been described as a simple working woman with little or no political interest. The stories that have been told about the role she played in the movement to end discrimination among African Americans often begin and end with the action taken by her on December 1, 1958. The author provides the reader with a comprehensive understanding of Rosa Parks' intellectual and political activities before, during and for the many decades that followed her political action in 1958, until she died in 2005.

Rosa (McCauley) was born in Alabama in 1913 of two parents described by Theoris as "accomplished and driven." Her mother taught school prior to becoming pregnant with Rosa, and her father was a stonemason. She had a younger brother, Sylvester. Because her father traveled in search of jobs and eventually left his family behind, Rosa, Sylvester and her mother moved in with her mother's parents, with Rosa growing up with loving grandparents and a great-grandfather. Her grandfather, born into slavery, had light skin, as his father was the slave owner's son. Though her grandfather looked more white than black, growing up in slavery, he

developed a belligerent attitude toward people of the white race. He was often witness to the bigotry of white people toward people of his own race.

Rosa's grandfather, a follower of Marcus Garvey, was a believer in economic self-sufficiency, black-nationalist pride and self-determination. Raised in a household that discussed and espoused such causes and ideas in 1919, left an indelible mark on Rosa Parks. Her sense of respect for herself and her people came from a belief instilled in her from childhood. She treated all people with respect and expected, in turn, that she and all people, white and black, deserved the same regard toward each other. Throughout her life, Rosa witnessed countless occasions of disrespect, hatred and bigotry, directed primarily at black people.

Knowing something of her early life and the ideas she was exposed to, one cannot be surprised to learn that the man she eventually married, Raymond Parks, was a political activist and, among other affiliations, a member of the NAACP.

Theoris does an excellent job laying the groundwork for the reader's understanding of how the work of people like Parks and others whose names may not be as well known, laid the groundwork in the 1930's and 1940's South, for what became the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. The work of these early activists, like the work of those who sow seed but don't harvest the crops, came to fruition in the movement that flowered in the late 1950's with the Supreme Court's *Brown vs Board of Education* decision, and the momentum that followed.

Parks herself became involved in the NAACP, though the Montgomery unit was made of up very cautious professional people, mostly men. Often there were conflicts among the groups' members because of concerns that some of the issues were too controversial or radical.

The period of time that began with Park's civil disobedience and in the years that followed that action, were very difficult for Parks and her family. Both she and Raymond lost their jobs. Rosa traveled on behalf of both the NAACP as well as Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, but though her expenses were paid, she was never in the employ of

either organization. As a result, the economic insecurity the family experienced in Montgomery, influenced their decision to move to Detroit where her brother Sylvester lived.

In Detroit, Parks continued her advocacy on behalf of Civil Rights. She gave lectures, attended rallies and lectures, and marched in protests for both workers' rights and civil rights. She supported the emerging Black Power movement popular among young African Americans in Detroit. Yet history has almost ignored the long, committed life of Rosa Parks and has rather continued to paint a rather superficial portrait of her, as if the only day that had importance to her was December 1, 1958.

The author of this important book portrays Mrs. Parks as a person whose entire life was immersed in the struggle for racial and social justice. Her moral certitude about the evils of racial injustice had its origins in the personal experiences of racism in her own family. Her beliefs were further sharpened by her exposure to the writings and lectures of both black and white leaders and all advocates for racial equality. Theoris has painted a wonderfully comprehensive portrait of Rosa Parks. All those of us who have only had the limited version of her story, will turn the last page of the book with a sense of awe at the richness and power of her contribution to social justice in America.