Riché Richardson was born and raised in Montgomery, Alabama, the birthplace of the civil rights movement. She was an active student leader, developing a community initiative as a teen for children at the city’s Cleveland Avenue YMCA, reflecting her aim to “make a difference,” a goal that to this day shapes her public outreach and public voice as a scholar in the humanities. She attended Spelman College and majored in English, minoring in philosophy and women's studies. She received her PhD at Duke University in American literature with a certificate in African and African American studies. She is a 2001 Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow. She spent the first decade of her academic career in the University of California at UC Davis; she is currently an associate professor in the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University and works primarily in the fields of African American literature, southern studies, cultural studies, and gender studies.

Her recent courses include bell hooks Books, The Oprah Book Club and African American Literature, Introduction to Africana Studies, Toni Morrison’s Novels, Black Panther Party Autobiography: Writing the Activist Self, 1966–2016, The Willard Straight Takeover and the Legacy of Black Student Movement, and Beyoncé Nation. She has published essays in numerous journals and the book Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta (2007). Since 2005, she has coedited the New Southern Studies book series at the University of Georgia Press, and began serving as its editor in 2018. She is also an artist whose mixed-media appliqué art quilts have been featured in several...
solo and group exhibitions and in the films A Portrait of the Artist (2008) and The Skin Quilt Project (2010). Her chapter here details intersections between three interests—her quilt art, her deep roots in Montgomery, and the living legacy of civil rights—stitching together a compelling image of one particular public humanist and artist.

As a black woman teacher, researcher, and artist, I frequently grapple with how systematically blacks were abused in the system of antebellum slavery, including slavery’s assault on the black maternal body. In dealing with what the human means to someone who works in an interdisciplinary department of Africana studies in the humanities in fields such as African American literature, gender studies, southern studies, and black feminism, I think and talk a lot about the long history of black dehumanization within the system of Western slavery. Africana studies, a field founded on an embrace of activism and community service and outreach, is an ideal site from which to cultivate projects linked to public and community engagement, especially as the latter have gained more emphasis in academic institutions. Concomitantly, I frequently discuss the long history of freedom struggles in the black liberation movement that have been developed to confront subjection within slavery and Jim Crow, along with the lingering manifestations of these systems that have persisted. Because I was born and raised in Montgomery, Alabama, the civil rights movement, including the activism of Rosa Parks, is an aspect of this long history of black liberation struggle that has most viscerally impacted my life and work.

In retrospect, I can say that Rosa Parks’s legacy began to influence my life profoundly during my teen years. At ages sixteen and seventeen as student council vice president and then president at the historic St. Jude Educational Institute, I developed a leadership program at the Cleveland Avenue YMCA under the supervision of its director Robert James with the goal of making a difference in the community. For two years, I volunteered every Friday afternoon coordinating this program for children and preteens in the surrounding community, the same community in which Parks had once lived. It was in Montgomery that Parks refused to give up her seat when bus driver James Blake ordered her to do so on that fateful evening of December 1, 1955. My work with children in the vicinity reflected Parks’s longstanding commitment to supporting them through work such as her leadership in Montgomery’s NAACP Youth Council, where she had mentored girls such as Mary Frances Whitt, a friend and federated club sister of my mother, Joanne Richardson. Parks’s early work with this group was extended in her continuing engagement with children in her writings and in her outreach to
them through her work in the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development in Detroit. At age seventeen, I won a first-place prize in a poetry contest in Montgomery for a dramatic poem that I wrote honoring Parks, “Together We Will Win.”

At this point in my life, nearly thirty years later, and in the work I do as a professor at Cornell University and as an artist, I continue to find deep inspiration in the legacy of Rosa Parks. When my book Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta was published in 2007, Troy University’s Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery hosted a book-signing and public reception. As an art quilter, my first two solo exhibitions of my mixed-media appliqué art quilts in 2008 and 2015 were also both held at the Rosa Parks Museum, curated when Georgette Norman was its director. In 2008 and as part of the community-based programming for the first show, talking in a workshop with fourth and fifth graders from E. D. Nixon Elementary, a school located a few blocks away from the Y, brought me full circle and back to the community in which I had volunteered during my teen years.

Georgette and I first met after I graduated from Spelman College in 1993, when we were assigned to the same unit as volunteers for a week at a Girl Scout day camp for economically disadvantaged girls, Camp Sunshine. At the time, she was serving as director of the Alabama African American Arts Alliance, which she had founded to help support and promote African American and African diasporic art in the state. This was in keeping with her outstanding leadership legacy of building arts institutions in Alabama to make a positive and transformative community impact. Such cultural contributions have situated her among the South’s foremost black women institutional leaders and arts curators. Like the girls, I called her “Miss Georgette” back then, and she and I kept in touch after sharing such an inspiring week together mentoring the girls. I had made my first quilt as a senior at Spelman, and she encouraged me to exhibit my artwork at some point. Our dialogues mirrored Rosa Parks’s continuing investments in youth and demonstrated the difference that sustained commitment to mentoring and volunteering in the community can make, including building mentoring relationships among black women and girls.

On my visits home from graduate school at Duke University, I would visit Georgette and attend arts salons and parties at her home, also located in Rosa Parks’s former community near the Y where I had once volunteered. Actors from the Alabama Shakespeare Festival and musicians from the Montgomery City Orchestra could often be spotted in this intellectually dynamic and lively arts community. Over the years, during these evenings
I enjoyed activities from participating in African drumming to hearing a blues band, and I even shared my quilt work informally in this setting several times.

On January 31, 2013, the historian Jeanne Theoharis was invited to the museum to speak about her newly released political biography, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*. The talk was organized and introduced by Georgette and aired on C-Span2 to launch Parks’s centennial birthday celebration in Montgomery. On February 4, I was honored to serve as the invited speaker for Rosa Parks’s gala hundredth birthday celebration at the museum, which was an opportunity to present an excerpt from my academic work on Parks. The program also included a letter from First Lady Michelle Obama read by Georgette, a poetry reading by National Book Award recipient Nikky Finney, and remarks by Montgomery’s mayor Todd Strange and other city officials, along with administrators from Troy University.

At the centennial event, I was presented with a framed set of soon-to-be-released Rosa Parks commemorative postage stamps and invited to be a part of the stamp unveiling with Montgomery postmaster Donald Snipes and Georgette Norman, along with Rosa Parks’s family members who had traveled from Atlanta (fig. 6.1). Georgette had developed a “100 Birthday Wishes” community project in Montgomery in which children shared their thoughts about their city, their country, and the world and suggestions for

**Figure 6.1** Montgomery postmaster Donald Snipes, Riché Richardson, and Georgette Norman, from *Montgomery Advertiser*, February 5, 2013. Photograph by Mickey Welsh.
changes to make them better places. These were shared in the daily *Montgomery Advertiser*, and on the night of the celebration, printed on paper made by children in a mobile studio traveling throughout the region, the hundred wishes were presented to city officials. Others and I were given a framed “Wishes do come true” commemorative print on the handmade paper.

I took the stage again as I unveiled my art quilt honoring the heroine and donated it to the museum. All of my life’s work came together that day, and it has been one of the happiest days of my life. I felt as if I had been born for that day and saw my life’s purpose far more clearly, to the point that I am humbled enough to say that I enjoyed celebrating Rosa Parks’s centennial birthday far more than I have ever enjoyed celebrating a birthday of my own. My Rosa Parks art quilt is now on display in the permanent collection at Troy’s Rosa Parks Museum, part of an art montage that greets guests as they enter (see fig. 6.2). With a three-dimensional appliqué portrait of her against fabric featuring images of globes, my art quilt frames Parks in relation to the long history of the black freedom struggle while simultaneously linking her to diverse global populations. As someone who was born, raised, and educated in Montgomery through high school but who primarily lives and works in Ithaca, New York, far from my hometown, I value everything that keeps my work as both a scholar and artist connected to the Montgomery community.

Rosa Parks’s gala birthday gave me a sense of what can happen when academics, especially humanists, are given a public platform on which to share ideas. It underscored my work’s potential to begin up dialogues between people positioned at opposite political poles and people who typically do not have opportunities to meet or talk. In 2013 and 2014, the centennial event program aired regularly on the regional cable television network, Capital City Connection, typically three times a day when on the programming schedule. In the program, I talked about my research project related to Parks’s legacy, which allowed me to share the project with a large and diverse television audience in Alabama, which means a lot to me as a scholar who was born and raised in the state. This is just one of the ways in which my project demonstrates the relevance and value of humanist-oriented academic research in the public sphere and its potential to make an impact on communities.

From January 10 to March 27, 2015, an exhibition of sixty of my art quilts, *Portraits II: From Montgomery to Paris*, appeared at Troy’s Rosa Parks Museum, dedicated to the memory of my grandparents, Joe Richardson and Emma Lou Jenkins Richardson. It was designed to help launch both the fiftieth
anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery March and the sixtieth anniversary of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Rosa Parks was the centerpiece of the series that I developed for the exhibition in tribute to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which also featured pieces honoring Martin Luther King Jr. and E. D. Nixon. A public reception held on Dr. King’s birthday, January 15, drew a large audience, and on that occasion I also released a print card picturing my King quilt. Daily busloads of schoolchildren and many others visited the exhibition, and it was featured in stories in the *Montgomery Advertiser* and on local television. On the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery March, the museum held a gala reception in the gallery featuring my quilt exhibition, and local leaders attended along with such national figures as House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, Martin Luther King III, Jesse Jackson, and Bernice King.

The signature style of portrait art quilting that I have developed draws on intricate design techniques and incorporates painting, mixed-media, and hand-stitching to produce detailed, three-dimensional quilts. My 2015 show featured several large installation-style “torso quilts.” The centerpiece among them was a large triple-panel quilt installation in the debutante series, a work that features my grandparents on either side of my aunt Pamela at age sixteen during her cotillion in Montgomery in April 1976 at Garrett Coliseum. The installation incorporates digital media for spotlighting and soundtrack, and I drew on principles of geometry, engineering, and architecture in developing it. In my art, I aim to depict the beauty of the human spectrum, including the body, sometimes acknowledging the beauty and dignity of black life and family in the Jim Crow South. My family quilts recall May Day celebrations in Montgomery dating back to the 1960s, as well as Easter parades, school programs, and birthday celebrations. They re-create family debutante portraits from the 1970s to the 2000s. Altogether they capture a side of black life, particularly in the U.S. South, that is not frequently discussed.

My work as a scholar and visual artist helped me to make a strong public impact during these events at the Rosa Parks Museum, which is fitting considering that her legacy has been a subject of investigation for me as both a scholar and artist. While my academic work has begun to draw public and media interest on its own terms, I have found my artwork to be tremendously useful in expanding my opportunities for public and community engagement. I often find myself working in my art on questions similar to those I am researching. The work is for very different audiences, but I value both opportunities. Those who may never read my writing can nevertheless reflect on philosophical questions my exhibitions raise when they
encounter my visual work and attend receptions in public gallery spaces. Art audiences are often more dynamic and energizing than scholarly audiences and help to expand my platforms for teaching. As an academic, I find that also being an artist expands my access to public and media platforms and allows me to participate more extensively in public and community art projects. While I typically develop my work as an academic and artist for different audiences, public spaces often bridge the work that I do in each by simultaneously drawing on my voices as a scholar and artist. My art also helps to broaden my understanding and practice of research, in the sense that I routinely do research in developing my art projects. My sometimes overlapping research trajectories as an artist and academic unsettle and challenge the separate spheres into which I am inclined to categorize my work.

Rosa Parks, in honor of whom Congress commissioned a monument for the National Statuary Hall that was unveiled in the US Capitol on February 27, 2013, has often been reduced to a myth of “quiet strength” and described as having remained seated on the bus that day because she was “tired.” Invoking Parks’s long days of work as a seamstress at the Montgomery Fair Department Store in downtown Montgomery and thus physical tiredness obscures reality. It was mental exhaustion that Rosa Parks herself described: “People always said that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn’t true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.” In such instances, invoking the weariness of her body as a laborer supersedes the emphasis on her mind and fails to frame the story of Rosa Parks at a metaphysical level, which would complicate the narrative that so insistently reads the bus encounter through her physical human body and exhaustion of the flesh.

From another viewpoint, the bus driver’s response to Parks that night came from a reading of her as inferior and subhuman because of her status as a black woman. In my own research, I foreground critical epistemologies from black feminism to interpret such views and to analyze the impact of gender alongside race and sexuality in fashioning Parks’s body on the bus that night. Furthermore, I consider Parks’s recurrent iconic imaging as the “Mother of the Civil Rights Movement,” emphasizing its rootedness too in politics of race, gender, and sexuality, underscoring ways in which the title unsettles conventional pathologies of the black maternal body such as the mammy figure (I mean this in the sense of not being as stereotypical and pathological as the mammy, as my forthcoming book elaborates), while
foregrounding themes related to children and futurity. I examine this title’s manifestations in her own writings and its mirroring in some of her representations in culture. In the process, I have aimed for a more nuanced portrait of Parks as a human subject by focusing on her own words.

In this essay, in light of my training in fields such as literary and cultural studies, and building upon my work on Rosa Parks and her scripts as a national mother who has challenged conventional white-centered images of femininity, I discuss the Children’s Wing added to the Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery in 2006. Its dynamic and futuristic engagement with Parks’s legacy was designed to facilitate public encounters with her legacy at the site of her 1955 arrest, the intersection of Montgomery and Lee Streets. The installation invokes Parks as a mother, echoes major themes that inflect her writings related to freedom, and challenges children to help eliminate injustice and create a better world in the future. Its primary exhibit is a futuristic bus that simultaneously situates Parks’s action on the bus in relation to a longer history and draws on themes related to future time and space, including a virtual tour given by a robotic bus driver. I link these motifs to Afro-futurism. This installation frames Parks’s message as a universal one and is developed primarily to speak to youth growing up in the twenty-first century in a digital age.

Though this museum draws visitors from all over the world and busloads of schoolchildren, its powerful message is not as widely known by those who have not had the opportunity to visit it. It is also useful to analyze and write about in my research from a scholarly standpoint because much of its design innovation and ingenuity flies under the radar. Too often, the legacies of black women leaders have been marginalized and their voices silenced in civil rights narratives, in spite of their pivotal contributions to the movement. This institution related to Rosa Parks is worthy of far more critical reflection than it has received. Moreover, it is all the more important to reflect on because it is now juxtaposed with the new groundbreaking Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice, a project of Bryan Stevenson’s Equal Justice Initiative, which is nearby and has promoted, in national media, critical reflection on histories of slavery, Jim Crow, and civil rights in Montgomery.

As I think more about my own art quilt featuring Rosa Parks that helps welcome audiences into the Rosa Parks Museum, I also realize the ways the quilt mirrors and echoes the Children’s Museum’s framing of her as a figure who transcends time and space and as a universal symbol of freedom. I am thankful that this institution is a space that, over the years, has provided public platforms for me to engage the community in Montgomery as both
a scholar and artist. My analysis also provides a more direct critical dialogue on the museum, which illustrates the role that it has played in shaping my research in recent years. My conclusion of this essay acknowledges how Rosa Parks’s legacy has continued to shape my commitments to public and
community art. Some of the opportunities that I have had for community engagement have also helped me to appreciate the value of organic intellectual voices and perspectives that operate at the grassroots level, beyond the context of academia.

The Rosa Parks Children’s Museum and the Cleveland Avenue Time Machine

As someone who has come to view the Rosa Parks Museum as a kind of artistic home, in the sense that it has helped me to build upon my early work in life related to Rosa Parks and to remain organically connect to the Montgomery community, I cherish this institution. It is one of the premier sites in the nation for teaching and learning about her legacy, along with the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development that she established with her friend and eventual caretaker Elaine Steele. Already intellectually invested in studying Rosa Parks, I increasingly began to draw on critical frameworks at my disposal to think about the ingenuity in the museum’s design and particularly about how the Children’s Wing builds on the conventional mythology of Parks as Mother of the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, I recognized the levels on which the Children’s Wing operates subversively by presenting a counter-narrative to conventional stereotypes of black mothering, extending the platform that she outlines in her books and carried out in her activism related to reaching out to children around the world.

The Children’s Wing draws a national and global audience of thousands of tourists annually. Its popularity points to the extent to which Parks has been embraced by an intergenerational audience and to the timelessness of her message, including its themes related to freedom. They are themes that run counter to narratives in popular culture and hip-hop that reductively frame Parks in relation to the past or dismiss her altogether, such as those of the rap group OutKast and Cedric the Entertainer, but relate her legacy to the future. In this sense, the young audience that the Children’s Wing primarily draws and its futuristic themes demonstrate the limits and misperceptions in such popular readings of Parks.

In 2000, Troy University’s Rosa Parks Library and Museum in Montgomery emerged as the nation’s second major institution in the United States designed to honor the life, work and legacy of Rosa Parks and the history of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Georgette Norman was hired as the museum’s director, and it opened to the public on December 1, 2000, in a ceremony that featured Parks as the guest of honor. The landmark 55,000-square-foot building on the site of the former Empire Theater, where
Parks's famous arrest occurred, houses not only outstanding installations but also extensive databases on Rosa Parks, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and civil rights movement legal cases.

The Cleveland Avenue Time Machine, built to resemble a bus, is the centerpiece of the museum’s Children’s Wing, which opened in 2006, a year after Parks’s death. Georgette spearheaded this addition to the museum. In March 2009, it won a TEA Award for Outstanding Achievement in the category “Exhibition on a Limited Budget” (from what was once the Themed Entertainment Association) at the fourteenth annual Thea Awards ceremony held at the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim, California. The installation was a collective design effort by Eisterhold Associates of Kansas City, Missouri, Jan Bochenek of Virginia, Ben Lawless of Maryland, Peter Vogt of Washington, DC, and Hadley Exhibits of New York, whose primary features include special lighting, a seven-projector video, audio, and fog. The large bus installation most viscerally climaxes the museum’s emphasis on temporal themes. The bus is painted green, gold, and beige to resemble the one on which Parks was arrested in 1955. However, a number of features accord it a futuristic aura: the size (larger than the historic bus and larger than average seats), the wide center aisle, and the robot driver, “Mr. Rivets,” poised over a dashboard resembling the instrument panels on space ships in science fiction films.

As a space, the bus evokes the past through its color scheme while conveying the future through its design and features. The bus is framed through its name (Cleveland Avenue Time Machine) and its appearance. The installation of the giant bus is a space designed to look larger than life from the perspective of a child and to provide an imaginative tour to engage the history of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The bus is parked in a large, open warehouse-like display space, framed by black metal posts, connected to a host of wires and steam pumps that one might see in an industrial factory, and it must be boarded by walking down a long, L-shaped ramp lined with metal rails that lead up to its entrance. Once a passenger is seated, Mr. Rivets starts the engine, and the bus uses a host of special effects, such as vibrations, flashing lights, steam and sound to create the sensation of motion, features that engage the senses and create the illusion that the bus is a machine. An overhead video screen on the bus becomes the focal point as a video narrated by the actress Tonea Stewart emerges, a parallel to the feature that begins the tour in the main museum.8 The main exhibition casts its tourists as pedestrians and ushers them on a walk that alludes to the day-to-day material conditions and practices that led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, but the Children’s Museum alternatively stages and simulates an imaginative ride through history.
Time travel in the sense popularized through science fiction is the central motif in the video as the tourist goes back in time not just to the 1950s and 1960s but 150 years, an imaginative journey into the past signaled by the physical vibrations of the bus. It is notable that the naming of this bus installation invokes the H. G. Wells novel *The Time Machine*, which popularized the concept of time travel and expanded the possibilities for imagining the phenomenon. The novel was published in 1895, a year before the Supreme Court’s *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision sanctioned the “Separate but Equal” doctrine segregating public facilities, including forms of public transportation. The Cleveland Avenue Time Machine conserves the original bus coloration but otherwise fully reimagines and redesigns the No. 2857 GM on which Parks was arrested. But navigating a trip forward in time emerges as the main purpose of Mr. Rivets.

The robotic Mr. Rivets manifests qualities associated with a cyborg and anticipates a post-human subject, even as his status as a male bus driver (“Mr.”) might seem to conserve the conventional logic of gender. He is also marked as post-racial through his seeming race neutrality but situated in a context that acknowledges racism, contrary to post-racialism’s evasion of the social impact of racism. In effect, Mr. Rivets replaces 1955 bus driver James Blake in his role as the navigator for a diverse generation of passengers. He facilitates their encounter with the past as he sits poised to transport them to a world of new possibilities in the twenty-first century and beyond. The video that unfolds on screens positioned outside of the bus windows create the sense that one is surrounded by and traveling through history as Parks’s story is narrated.

To show the origins of the term “Jim Crow” that eventually emerged as a euphemism for segregation, Mr. Rivets goes back in time 1828, to Cincinnati, where stage entertainer Thomas “Daddy” Rice donned the burnt cork mask of minstrelsy and did a song and dance routine called “Jump Jim Crow.” Narrator Tonea Stewart explains that minstrelsy propagated an image of blacks as foolish. The video displays a host of caricatures of blackness that were circulated in U.S. material culture and that were linked to notions of black inferiority. The year 1857 is the next time period to which the bus travels. The video’s most compelling feature at this juncture features local actors portraying the family of Dred Scott to facilitate discussion of his famous legal case. An enslaved black man, Dred Scott sued for his freedom, but the U.S. Supreme Court held in its 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision that citizenship rights did not apply to blacks. Thus, the video shows discrimination against blacks in the North and “how Scott became the most famous black person in America” at that time.
The video’s next phase of time travel stages an imaginary conversation between Harriet Tubman and Henry “Box” Brown. After she escaped slavery to freedom via the northbound Underground Railroad, Tubman made numerous trips to the South to free black slaves, and the video tells the story of how Brown famously arranged to have himself boxed and shipped to freedom. The year 1892, in New Orleans, emerges as another signal juncture on the journey that pinpoints an early challenge of Jim Crow on public transportation by covering the case of Homer Plessy, the Supreme Court case upholding segregation as “separate but equal.” The time machine’s next major stop occurs in 1955, when the narrator raises the question, “How much has changed?” and says, “Not enough, I’m afraid, by this time.” At this point, actors dressed in period clothes evoke the Montgomery Bus Boycott and Parks’s heroic choice to remain seated. Stewart, narrating, says, “Something happened that changed America on that bus that evening,” registering Parks’s indelible impact on the nation.9

Besides examining the past, the video in the Children’s Wing bus also takes its young audience on an imaginative journey into the future and draws on images associated with the space age. The Rosa Parks Museum, by tacitly casting Parks as a symbolic mother, reinforced references to her as the “mother of the civil rights movement” that had been increasingly mainstreamed and embraced in this nation by the 1990s. However, the museum effectively recasts romanticized motherhood within civil rights history by associating it with notions of futurity as much as the past. The name “Children’s Wing” is also significant for alluding to the famous Children’s March in Birmingham, Alabama, that occurred in 1963.

The young audiences the museum addresses in this bus tour can be thought of as an extension of the youth mentored by Parks during her lifetime. In the video they watch, the forced migrations of modernity that were linked to slavery are eventually displaced by images of a world in which travel is entirely voluntary. More than that: all limitations on time and space are removed. The containment and marginalization of black subjects is completely ruptured. In this future all humans are free from mental and physical constraints and have the entire universe at their disposal, including access to alternative and inclusive historical narratives. In this space, the hope and potential looking toward the year 2055 are indispensable in complementing a look back to the historic events of 1955.

The dynamic Cleveland Avenue Time Machine challenges passé narratives of the civil rights era by making Rosa Parks not only an emblem of past struggles against segregation but also as a harbinger of African American
The installation registers an axis of temporal nodes that dislodges Parks from romantic and nostalgic narratives. It frames her as a premier revolutionary and a woman who not only made a national impact on ending segregation but also whose significance is global and universal. While the slavers’ ship has recurrently functioned as a symbol of slavery in the Western world, it is the bus that emerges in this installation as the primary symbol of both civil rights struggles and the journey to new horizons.¹⁰

The Cleveland Avenue Time Machine creates an interactive and inter-subjective engagement with the past using video and animated sound and light effects to simulate movement backward in time. Yet the main movement suggested is travel forward. Even the historic bus boycott is seen as part of a transcendent narrative that signals the future. It exceeds earthly dimensions and temporalities by drawing heavily on science fiction, a genre in which black and female subjects have remained largely invisible or marginal, with the exception of works by writers such as Octavia Butler. Moreover, the video’s narrative emphasizes Rosa Parks along with a range of black female precursors, unsettling conventional male-focused chronicles of African American history. Here Parks is situated within a futuristic aesthetic and simultaneously synonymous with the past, present, and future.

The installation’s chronological narrative of the civil rights struggles goes well beyond the 1950s and 1960s, spanning the antebellum era to the twenty-first century. This in effect dislodges civil rights history, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott, from the stasis to which it has been linked in the national imaginary. This approach is particularly significant when considering the exhibition’s diverse audience of children and adolescents. Today’s youth don’t know much about civil rights history and internalize the myth of its obsolescence, but the Time Machine’s technology and multimedia can reach them and position them to share this history with future generations. The representations of Rosa Parks that have emerged in the new millennium, as in this exhibit, also profoundly resonate with Afrofuturism.

In historicizing and remembering the Montgomery Bus Boycott and monumentalizing Rosa Parks as a civil rights leader via video, while drawing on technology and features derived from science fiction, the Cleveland Avenue Time Machine poignantly actualizes a visual and aural aesthetic in keeping with Afrofuturism. A critical and cultural discourse in areas such as literature and art, Afrofuturism draws on fantasy, magical realism, and science fiction to engage the past and present in relation to the lives of minorities, including people of African descent, while decentering Western-centered frames of reference. Mark Dery, author of the seminal essay “Black to the Future,”
introduced the term itself in 1993. It has been further advanced and developed critically by scholars such as Alondra Nelson, who founded an internet site called Afrofuturism in 1998.

Nelson acknowledges that the site emerged in part because dialogues about blacks and technology proved limiting in their vacillation between focus on the utopian fantasy of technology in eliminating race and emphasis on the rhetoric of a digital divide. As she argues, “The racialized digital divide narrative that circulates in the public sphere and the bodiless, color-blind mythotopias of cybertheory and commercial advertising have become the unacknowledged frames of reference for understanding race in the digital age. In these frameworks, the technologically enabled future is by its very nature unmoored from the past and from people of color.” Enlightenment philosophy, most notably the perspectives of G. W. F. Hegel, famously excluded Africans in the schema of world history and posited them as being out of time, a framing that denied their humanity, marked them as inferior, and helped to rationalize their enslavement and subjection. Afrofuturism, along with queer and gay and lesbian studies, has played a primary role in shaping discourses on temporality in African and African diasporic thought as it provides a counter-narrative to conventional narratives that have marginalized and excluded blacks.

Birmingham, Alabama, musician Sun Ra, who migrated to Chicago and founded his “Arkestra” in the 1950s, stood at the forefront in developing an Afrofuturist discourse in music, synthesizing sound with images of Africa, space, and science fiction in costuming and other visual displays. While his groundbreaking innovations in jazz and experiences in cities such as Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia typically link his Afrofuturist musical production to urban contexts, they were shaped by his foundational musical training and performances in clubs in Birmingham during the bitter years of the Jim Crow era. Sun Ra and his Arkestra challenged stereotypes of the South as backward and trapped in time. Their performances and recordings organically link the origins of Afrofuturism to Alabama, worth thinking about in connection with the Cleveland Avenue Time Machine.

The installation frames Parks’s choice to remain seated on the bus as the outgrowth of a longer history of movement for freedom that continues to unfold, a movement that her transcendent legacy continues to impact. At the same time, this framing challenges the conventional perception of her choice to remain seated as being simply an individual act of heroism. It emphasizes that the boycott that Parks’s arrest catalyzed was a collective and interdependent community initiative. The installation also enacts and stages the messages running through Parks’s books for young readers, affirming their
potential to help catalyze change in the world, just as she did, framing them as the hope of the future.

A paean to Parks as a symbolic mother in the nation, the Rosa Parks Museum’s Children’s Wing was designed to help spread the message that mattered to her most, and the Afrofuturistic digital Time Machine emphasizes its timelessness and universality. Like her books, it addresses a young audience and challenges narratives of the civil rights movement by linking the past to the future. In the Cleveland Avenue Time Machine, a black woman—Parks—is unfettered and embodies the triumph of a national ideal: freedom and democracy. As I conclude, I want to describe two ways in which my own art related to Rosa Parks has been used at the local level to help bridge her legacy to newer grassroots movements.

From Black Lives and Black Community Art

As I have acknowledged, the rap group OutKast and the actor Cedric the Entertainer have both been famously dismissive of Rosa Parks’s legacy. The high-profile controversies reflect other contestations of Rosa Parks’s legacy that have emerged in African American popular culture in music and film. In 1999, OutKast, along with its production company LaFace Records, was sued by Rosa Parks for the song “Rosa Parks” included on the 1998 album Aquemini. Parks’s attorney Gregory J. Reed argued that OutKast illegally appropriated her name for a song that included vulgar lyrics. Similarly, the 2002 comedy film Barbershop, directed by Tim Story, garnered controversy because of a heated debate that it stages about Parks between two of its characters, Calvin Palmer Jr. (Ice Cube) and Eddie (Cedric the Entertainer), with Eddie crudely asking, “Who the hell is Rosa Parks?” and asserting that “Rosa Parks ain’t do nothing but sit her black ass down.” Such representations belie the dynamism that connects Rosa Parks’s message to younger generations in her own work. In the years since her death, the aforementioned museum installation and national tributes to her, including the statue in the US Capitol, have compellingly underscored the continuing impact of her legacy.

A tragedy involving hip-hop closer to home in Montgomery was a catalyst for linking Rosa Parks to antiviolence activism in the area. During the final days of December of 2013, the popular Montgomery rapper named Doe B (Glenn Thomas) and two other people lost their lives in a shooting at a local night club. The city had witnessed multiple homicides that year. Doe B., who wore an eye patch after a 2009 shooting, was known for both his talent and generosity in the community. In July 2014, Michelle Browder, a grassroots community artist and activist in Montgomery, took an image of
my Rosa Parks art quilt and replaced its broken arrest number with the words “#No More: Stand Up Against Violence” as a call to end the city’s violence perpetrated by black youth. She posted her redesigned image of my quilt on social media and challenged others in her circle to join her in taking a stand against violence, and her message then appeared on posters and other paraphernalia. Encouraged and supported by Georgette Norman, Browder has worked on numerous public art projects and initiatives related to civil rights history and is well known for her colorful paintings and murals and visionary designs using Converse sneakers as canvases.

Browder’s statement affirmed the continuing significance of Parks’s civil rights legacy in Montgomery and its relevance to grassroots community organizing efforts to promote peace. At the same time, some local artists and activists began to question and rethink the use of the phrase “Stop the Violence.” Instead of invoking the word “violence” at all, they began to express a preference for the use of the phrase “Start the Peace” or “Keep the Peace.” Browder, who established a youth nonprofit and her own tour business, was also one of the activists in Montgomery’s Black Lives Matter movement who helped to lead demonstrations after the death of Gregory Gunn in February 2016 at the hands of a Montgomery police officer. A relative of Aurelia Browder, one of the plaintiffs in the 1956 legal case Browder v. Gayle challenging segregation of public buses in Montgomery, she has engaged in critical reflection on Parks in her art and does workshops at the museum. It is among the institutions Browder visits when leading her popular “I Am More Than” public tours of civil rights movement sites.14

In fall of 2016, I was invited to speak and exhibit my civil rights quilts at the annual Westheimer Peace Symposium at Wilmington College in Wilmington, Ohio. I was also invited to contribute a block to a community quilt that was made in tandem with this event to promote messages related to peace, which I rendered in my typical appliqué style. Michelle Browder’s provocative retooling of my Rosa Parks quilt and use of it as part of her campaign to raise awareness of her antiviolence campaign helped inspire my quilt block design. In it I used an image recalling an earlier work depicting Parks (see fig. 6.2) but replaced the arrest number of the earlier work with the name “JOHN,” to honor John Crawford, a young African American man killed by a police officer in a Walmart in Beavercreek, Ohio, in August 2014. I was honored to have my art quilts installed in the gallery room alongside Gail Cyan’s powerful quilt featuring Crawford, which depicted his image in juxtaposition with Black Panther Party women giving the Black Power salute. I appreciated the dialogism that Browder established with me as an artist, and it has also inspired me to continue designing Rosa
Parks quilt blocks that foreground the first names of victims to help ensure that they will not be forgotten.

For me, this peace quilt, like Browder’s art and my representation of Parks in relation to John Crawford, links the global freedom movement that Parks catalyzed and the earlier black liberation movement to newer political movements, from Black Lives Matter to #SayHerName, that critique and protest police violence. Like the installation in the Rosa Parks Museum Children’s Wing, such work links Parks’s legacy to the future as well as to the present. At the same time, the initiative out of which this gesture emerged in Montgomery underscores the importance of working to combat crime in black communities.

My great-aunt Johnnie Rebecca Carr was a longtime leader of the Montgomery Improvement Association and the best friend of Rosa Parks. However, that background has nothing to do with why I embrace the latter in my own work and art. My own dynamic and visceral encounters with the legacy of Rosa Parks, whom I never met in person, were the outgrowth of my work and investments as a community volunteer, which began during my teen years. My work on her is an intricate part of my identities as both a scholar and artist and has inflected some of my most visible and meaningful public work. I remain invested in learning from and researching her life’s work focused on freedom, which is all the more urgent to study, reflect upon, and draw on in a political climate shadowed by so much division and unrest. The peace and freedom that Parks symbolized are indispensable for building a better future for this nation and the world, including all of its children, whom she embraced continually in her public work and who were ever dear to her heart.

Notes

2. On this occasion I also released an art print card featuring this quilt in Rosa Parks’s honor.
5. See Rosa Parks with Gregory J. Reed, Quiet Strength: The Faith, the Hope and the Heart of a Woman Who Changed a Nation (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994); and Rosa Parks with Gregory J. Reed, Dear Mrs. Parks: A Dialogue with Today’s Youth (New York: Lee and Low Books, 1997).

7. Cofounded in 1987 by Rosa Parks and her longtime assistant Elaine Steele to promote community initiatives among youth in the city and around the nation, the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute in Detroit is the most longstanding U.S. institution designed primarily to honor the legacy of Rosa Parks. It builds upon her work to promote civil and human rights.

8. Stewart is best known for portraying the mother of the nine-year-old girl raped by two white men in the 1996 film *A Time to Kill*, which is set in Mississippi in the post–civil rights movement era. Stewart also portrayed Johnnie Carr in the 2002 film *The Rosa Parks Story*.

9. It is noteworthy that the Cleveland Avenue Time Machine in the Children’s Wing is complemented by a physical time line stenciled on museum walls. This time line features figures associated with the Montgomery Bus Boycott beyond its major players such as Parks and Dr. King. Furthermore, an interactive computer extends the time line and shows, for example, the records of citizens arrested for their boycott activities.


