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## On the representation of body and space in the eulogies for Rosa Parks

**ABSTRACT:** Debunking the stereotype of Rosa Parks as a simple seamstress who unwittingly unleashed the start to the Civil Rights movement, this paper explores some eulogies delivered at her funeral to see how the almost mythological narrative about her merges with the narrative of her as a real person embodying the oxymoron of physical smallness and iconic greatness. The negotiation for social recognition that Parks' example sparked in 1955 is presented in terms of the representation of space in the eulogies.

**Keywords:** Rosa Parks, African American, Eulogy, Space, Body.

### 1. Bodies and negotiation of space

Rosa Parks' story is all about body and space. It is the story of the tiny body of an African American woman who refused to give up a physical space rightly occupied in a shared but segregated space. That bus in Montgomery, Alabama, which was taking her home on that fateful December 1, 1955, was an emblem of the US in which space embodied the paradox of union and division. In particular, people in Montgomery were admitted on board regardless of the color of their skin, in an apparently inclusive way, but the space they were supposed to share was instead valued, graded and distributed according to an implied taxonomy which guaranteed the best seats to the whites. Moreover, this procedure implied a continuous remodeling of space, as the divide between the most comfortable part of the bus set aside for the whites and the rest of the bus for the blacks was fluid and tended to expand in favor of the whites. In fact, according to a local "separate but equal" regulation, the first ten rows were reserved for the white passengers, with the bus drivers, who were white, legally empowered to allocate the seats, reflecting the momentary need to accommodate white passengers at the expense of black ones. While white passengers took this regulation for granted and felt entitled to their privilege, Rosa Parks felt it was her right and duty to challenge this local social process. That day in 1955, out of habit she followed the regulations, but at the bus driver's request to give up her seat for a white man, she found herself sitting in a no-man's land (Aitken, 2003, p. 48): it was probably this racial divide so liquidly expanding, oppressing, and offending her as a human being that caused her reaction. This was not the first time that a black person refused to give up their seat on a bus. On March 2, 1955, i.e. nine months before the more famous Parks' refusal, a fifteen-year-old student and member of the youth section of the local NAACP (National

Association for the Advancement of Colored People), Claudette Colvin, was arrested for not complying to the driver's request to leave her seat to a white woman (Hoose, 2009). Even though the NAACP was in need of an exemplary case to trigger a strong reaction to the segregation laws, they decided against using Colvin's story to promote resistance, considering her young age as a deterrent. In addition, Colvin soon became pregnant out of the wedlock, which further deprived her of the moral integrity an exemplary case needed to have to be successful in a conservative society such as the one in Alabama in the 1950s. However, she strongly contributed to the desegregation process being one of the four plaintiffs in the *Browder v. Gayle* case, the 1956 legal case that ruled that the Montgomery segregated bus system was unconstitutional<sup>1</sup>.

Colvin's refusal to leave her seat was eclipsed by Parks' similar act. Parks embodied all the characteristics the NAACP was looking for. She was an adult married woman, a hard worker, and no one could question her moral standards. Consequently, her story was conveyed in a way that created the mystifying narrative of a simple seamstress who reacted to an unjust imposition unaware of what her act could produce. This narrative was functional to the NAACP's cause and was so productive that it continued to be stereotypically repeated over the decades, strengthening the narrative *topos* of David against Goliath, of ingenuity that challenges and defies a gigantic system of inequality. On the contrary, Parks had long been committed to the desegregation cause and was a militant activist who had been hard working to make the local section of the NAACP, of which she was secretary, a more militant branch against injustice. While Colvin was released on bond because her family paid her bail, Parks was released because a committee of activists went to rescue her, including men and women, blacks and whites, lawyers and a former president of the NAACP (Parks, Haskins, 1992, pp. 122-123). No simple seamstress in trouble could have raised such mobilization. Her direct involvement in the dynamic activism in Montgomery was key to making this episode a national case, as the net of mutual support and (till that moment) silent resistance made it resonate along the lines of the national NAACP. Consequently, the bus boycott it sparked summoned a still unknown young minister, Martin Luther King Jr., to Montgomery, where he soon became president of the MIA (Montgomery Improvement Association) and gradually gained the leadership of the Civil Rights movement. Parks' role remained "behind the scenes", partly because she was facing a trial and considered it safer not to expose herself, partly because of possible retaliations (both her and her husband lost their jobs) and partly because it was unusual for a woman to exercise such leadership. The risks connected to any kind of civil disobedience multiplied when a woman was involved. In fact, Parks' interest in the activities of the NAACP dated back to her marriage but had long been

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<sup>1</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20160122124900/http://new.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/Browder%20v%20Gayle%20Court%20Summary.pdf>

contained by her husband who was afraid this would be too dangerous for a woman. Indeed, till that moment the NAACP did not include any woman. But things would change soon, and when the news spread that some women were attending the NAACP meetings, Parks asked to be admitted too. On her first day with the NAACP in 1943, she was elected secretary of the local section. Thus, Parks' conquest of her own space started inside the black community and then continued winning her vital space also outside.

Far from being simply a physical concept, space is instead an abstraction of what human beings are and how they are valued in the world. In the past, many revolts started with the physical occupation of a space, whether a castle in the Middle Ages, or much more recently in 2021 in the US Capitol when the rioters' parading down the corridors and the pictures they took of themselves sitting at the desks of the most important politicians marked the success of the expedition. The strategical and metaphorical importance of space is reflected for instance in the *Occupy Wall Street* protest movement targeted against economic inequality in the US in 2011 (van Gelder, 2011). Physically occupying a symbolic place such as the financial district in New York means conquering it and clearing out a space dominated by injustice and metaphorically gaining the recognition and consideration that the majority of people had been denied by a minority of tycoons. The idea of occupying a space as a way of overcoming invisibility by imposing a physical presence is ingrained in movements for recognition of rights, as testified to by sit-ins, marches and freedom rides that started in the 1950s and 1960s. This idea has since spread throughout Western culture generating other similar movements in different geographical contexts and historical periods.

Space has always been crucial for the advancement and self-representation of human beings. Expansion and improvement derive from negotiating space and reorganizing it constructively. The one-sided remodeling of space, exemplified by the bus in Montgomery, simply mirrors the dynamics of the dominant approach that has deprived part of the US population of their right to exist and be recognized. In fact, the appropriation of space has a long history and has reflected the dominance and superiority of the whites at the expense of other ethnicities, starting with Native Americans. White Americans rarely questioned their right to occupy spaces in the land they wanted to conquer. This geographical, social and cultural process guaranteed the historical expansion westward and the creation of the US as it is today; when, in the decades following the Civil War the South of the US struggled to manage the coexistence of whites and blacks, the same pattern resurfaced in a new, recontextualized way.

The physical space Rosa Parks refused to give up on the bus parallels the immaterial space she has since occupied as an emblem in the history of civil rights.

Merging the representation of space with the space of representation, this paper will attempt to explore how the narrative of Rosa Parks as an icon of the civil rights movement (McGuire, 2010) blurs with the

representation of her as a real person. More specifically, the paper intends to deconstruct the stereotypical narrative of a tiny woman unaware of her potential and to build instead the narrative of a strong woman who, by imposing her body, consciously fought for the empowerment of both men and women, whether black and white, and ultimately for the improvement of American society at large. The analysis also considers the representation of space as an instrument that connects, divides, creates security and ultimately promotes social recognition. The analysis focuses on some of the eulogies delivered at Rosa Parks' funeral services, to see how these eulogies, with their mandatory function of commemorating, honoring, and dedicating (Ochs, 1993) and the eulogizer, with a duty to heighten audience members' feelings of regard, love, and appreciation for the deceased (Peterson, 1983), manage to balance the almost mythological, but stereotypical, narrative of Rosa Parks with a more realistic account of her.

## 2. Eulogistic discourse

This section introduces some of the generic features of eulogies and thus provides background for the analysis carried out in this paper. Eulogistic discourse focuses on speeches delivered to honor somebody and falls into the category of epideictic oratory. Classical rhetoric identifies three branches of oratory, i.e., deliberative, forensic, and epideictic. Deliberative oratory is oriented towards policy and decision making and is typically contextualized in the Parliament or governmental meetings, so the expected response is a vote, its social purpose is to influence, and the time orientation is directed towards the future. Forensic oratory is typical of law courts where a speaker accuses or defends a suspect; the expected response is a judgement, the social purpose is to ensure justice, and time orientation is directed towards the past. Epideictic oratory is contextualized in ceremonial events and public commemorations and has the social purpose of honoring and celebrating someone's life; the type of response it expects is an applause, and time orientation is directed towards the present (Charteris-Black, 2014, pp. 6-7).

Even though classical rhetoric provides clear-cut divisions between the three types of oratory, some of their characteristic features seem to blend and overlap, creating rhetoric hybrids (Jamieson, Campbell, 1982), which is what often happens in the subgenre of public eulogies targeting important people who provide opportunities to advance agendas. Also time orientation is much more flexible than classic rhetoric prescribed; the focus on the present is dominant, but references to the past are abundant, e.g. recalling the deeds and qualities of a person, as are references to the future, e.g. imagining how the *exemplum* of that person might influence other people's lives.

Eulogies as a genre are easily recognizable as they have specific characteristics that identify them, notably their context of situation and their social functions. The context of situation in very simple terms refers

to the occasion when a text is produced, or rather the environment of a text (Malinowski, 1923) and often recurs in similar “situation types” which, over time, become conventionalized and influence the semantic configuration that speakers will typically construct (Halliday, Hasan, 1976, p. 110). J.R. Martin (1997, p. 43) defines genres as “staged, goal-oriented social processes” achieved by members of a culture interacting to achieve a goal which requires several interactive steps. In this way, genre connects culture to situation, and register connects situation to language. Thus, Martin emphasizes the connection between social purposes and text structures, and how these are realized as situated social and linguistic actions within register (Bawarshi, Reiff, 2010, p. 33).

Register in eulogies is a fundamental component, as it is through register that social identities are created and negotiated. A successful eulogy needs to pay particular attention to the connection the eulogizer creates with the audience, i.e. the tenor, which is the starting point to effectively develop the speech. The field can be divided into: a) experiential domain, what the text is about, in the case of eulogies generally a matter of talking about a person’s qualities; b) goal orientation, which in the short run means celebrating a person and in the long run setting moral standards or celebrating the afterlife; and c) social activity, that is what the text is doing socially – in the case of eulogies creating a common ground strengthening the connection within the community by discussing inspiring issues that keep the public tied to a common feeling, creating collective consolation and identification with a cause. The mode is focused on the use of language but in eulogies also silence and pauses are important, as the prosody and feelings it conveys are essential if the public is to be involved.

Eulogies have the primary social function of celebrating during a ceremony, whether a wedding, a birthday, a retirement party and so on. Thus, eulogies delivered to mourn the death of a person can be considered a subgenre characterized by some specific features due to the doleful circumstances in which they unfold. They perform a ritualistic function (Frijda, 1997) and cooperate to make the transition solemn and enduring, which helps cope with grief and provides consolation (Kunkel, Dennis, 2003).

Eulogies’ peculiar time orientation triggers a projection of their meanings to a level that lies beyond the *hic and nunc* context and is affected by the eulogies’ (lack of) religious tone; overcoming the limitation of space and time, eulogies explore the future both in personal and public terms, exploring the religious belief in an afterlife or the secular lasting legacy of the dead person’s *exemplum*.

In the US, the Gettysburg Address is still considered a model for eulogies as it perfectly embodies the genre’s function of creating unity in crucial celebrative moments. The speech was delivered by President Abraham Lincoln on November 19, 1863, at the dedication of Gettysburg Civil War Cemetery located

on what was the battlefield of one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War<sup>2</sup>. The collective people honored during the ceremony and the lack of direct knowledge with the eulogizer lead the speech towards a non-personal purpose, in which rather than celebrating the soldiers' individual courage, it is the cause for which they gave their lives that is celebrated, namely letting their great country born in liberty endure and overcome the obstacles of inequality that threaten her. A similar appeal to engagement for the enforcement of equality which resulted in better opportunities for future generations is a constant in the eulogies delivered for Rosa Parks. It is possible to trace a similar move from the particular to the general in both the Gettysburg dedication and Rosa Parks' funeral, insofar as the act of a single person resonates at the national level and celebrating Parks' act of civil disobedience is equivalent to celebrating the new trajectories black people's lives can follow after the changes in American society that she induced, as mentioned by several black eulogizers; for example, Condoleezza Rice said that, if it had not been for Parks, she would probably have never become the Secretary of State.

Neither in the Gettysburg or in Parks' eulogies is the projection towards the future related to the afterlife, in contrast to religious funerals, but relates instead to the potential a nation can realize once it breaks free from the limitations of injustice and inequality. Indeed, the Gettysburg Address' main purpose is setting an example of courage and dedication and the famous final remarks: "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth" has the clear function of reknitting the community, one of the main functions of eulogies as a genre (Jamieson, 1978).

The evolution of political speech in the US has favored a more personal and, in some respects, more jovial approach, that even in eulogy is rather evident. However, Lincoln's clear style characterized by brevity, clarity and powerful expressions of dedication and no gimmicks set an example that still inspires political speakers that prefer to be short and direct; for instance, Barack Obama's eulogy has a clear intertextual reference to the Gettysburg address when he says: "It is this small quiet woman whose name will be remembered long after the names of senators and presidents had been forgotten"<sup>3</sup> that reminds us of Lincoln's words: "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here". Moreover, simply mentioning Lincoln's name in any public speech creates an atmosphere of collective admiration that predisposes the audience towards a positive reception of what they are hearing. President Clinton's eulogy, after breaking the ice with a jovial exchange with one of the guests, quotes an episode about Lincoln, recollecting his direct style, inspiring the audience by mentioning

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.abrahamlincoln.net/the-gettysburg-address.jsp>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4916471/user-clip-barack-obama-eulogy-rosa-parks>

the president that put an end to slavery, and perhaps, in a subliminal way, introducing a comparison between himself and Lincoln.

### 3. The (not so) simple narrative of Rosa Parks' body

The Library of Congress has recently offered free access to Rosa Parks' digitalized papers<sup>4</sup>, most of which are notes and letters that give a private picture of her, providing relevant additions to the many narrations of her inspiring and tumultuous life written so far, including the only encompassing biography (Brinkley, 2005) and the self-narration she offered in her autobiography (Parks, Haskins, 1992), not to mention the countless adaptations in books for children. The many photographs included in the Library of Congress papers cover several decades and show the physical aging and weakening of her body, inversely related to the strengthening of her stance as a living legend.

The living legend narrative tells that a black seamstress refused to give up her seat to a white man on a segregated bus apparently because she was tired. As mentioned in Section 1, this straightforward narrative, perfect as regards nurturing the legend of simple acts that against all odds change the course of history, is somewhat inaccurate. As a matter of fact, Rosa Parks was much more than a humble seamstress; she was a longstanding activist, one of the first women to have an active role in the local NAACP, and her historical arrest was entrenched in a long pattern of resistance that dated back to the previous decade. When interviewed by Aldon Morris, she said: "My resistance to being mistreated on the buses and anywhere else was just a regular thing with me and not just that day" (2012, p. 25), in fact, records show that twelve years before she had already had an unfortunate encounter with the same bus driver who then had her arrested in 1955 (Aitken, 2003, p. 47). Discussing his impressions at the interview, Morris adds that the narrative of the spontaneity of the event and of her bewilderment at the consequences her act had in the desegregation movement that followed, does not do her justice and eclipses her intelligence, her strategical thinking and her civil engagement. She was certainly aware of the social processes and strategic agencies in her actions, so labelling the episode as a casual event that provoked unexpected consequences would diminish her awareness. Parks herself debunks the common narrative that she refused to leave the seat because she was tired. In her autobiography (Parks, Haskins, 1992) she remarks that at the time she was 42, in the fullness of her strength, and that she was not more tired than usual after a working day; or, rather, she was, but not physically, she was only tired of giving in.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/collections/rosa-parks-papers/>

Her death in her Detroit house on October 24, 2005, was honored through a one-week memorial prior to her funeral service on November 2 in the Greater Grace Temple, Detroit. Her body was moved to Washington DC, to be laid in honor in the US Capitol Rotunda on October 30-31 where more than 30,000 passed by the casket and many members of the Congress, as well as President George W. Bush and first lady Laura Bush, attended her memorial service. The US Capitol Rotunda is considered the most suitable place for the nation to pay tribute to eminent citizens, including past presidents, lawmakers, Supreme Court judges and a few others<sup>5</sup>. Parks was the first woman and the second African American to lie in honor there, the first one being Jacob Joseph Chestnut, a police officer who was killed with a colleague in 1998, during a mass shooting at the Capitol, while working to ensure others' security.

Back in Detroit, four thousand people attended the funeral service at the Greater Grace Temple Church<sup>6</sup>. More than 30 eulogizers took the floor to say a final goodbye to “sister Rosa” or “mother Rosa”, as she was often called, including politicians such as Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Nancy Pelosi, John Conyers Jr., entertainers such as Aretha Franklin, Santita Jackson, Brenda Jackson, but also Bernice A. King, the daughter of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bruce S. Gordon, president and CEO of the NAACP. The eulogies delivered during her funeral service were rather different, some of them blended eulogy and propaganda, for instance the one delivered by activist Rev. Al Sharpton was deeply entrenched in the current political and social situation, attacked the local government, lamenting the lack of interest for Louisiana recently beaten by Hurricane Katrina, exploiting the populist idea of being neglected by the federal government.

The two eulogies selected for the analysis in this section were delivered by Oprah Winfrey<sup>7</sup>, and former President Clinton<sup>8</sup>. The two eulogies belong to the two main categories of eulogizers: entertainers and politicians, that reflect the multifaceted nature of the celebration, where political activism blended with spiritual music and entertainment. As a black successful woman, Oprah Winfrey embodies the difference made by the Civil Rights movement and her eulogy was appreciated for its conciseness and emotive appeal; Bill Clinton represents the minority of white eulogizers, about one third of the total, all of them politicians or CEOs of important companies.

Both Winfrey and Clinton mention the minuteness of Parks' body presenting it under a light that evokes bewilderment and marvel but at the same time inspiration and power. Winfrey recalls what she candidly thought of Parks when she was a child: “She must be really big.’ I thought she must be at least a hundred feet tall”. The hyperbole she uses conveys the straightforward correspondence between the greatness of

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.aoc.gov/what-we-do/programs-ceremonies/lying-in-state-honor>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna9893832>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/oprahwinfreyonrosaparks.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/05/weekinreview/president-clinton-delivers-remarks-at-funeral-of-rosa-parks.html>



a person and their size in a child's innocent mind. "I imagined her being stalwart and strong and carrying a shield to hold back the white folks". She even imagined Parks as a loyal warrior ready to protect her community from the white people, evidently considered the enemy. The alliteration that links the binomial "stalwart and strong" reinforces her mythological stature. The description of Parks seen through child Winfrey's eyes is followed by the impression of her when she became an adult. "And then I grew up and had the esteemed honor of meeting her. And wasn't that a surprise. Here was this petite, almost delicate lady who was the personification of grace and goodness". This passage is hinged on feelings and builds the *pathos* of the eulogy. Winfrey intensifies her feelings at meeting Parks using the expression "esteemed honor" and the exclamation with inversion "Wasn't that a surprise" that extends the marvel to the public. Parks' real appearance is described as "petite" and "delicate", two adjectives that convey elegance and frailty and overturn the imaginative fantasy of a child. Nothing of the armed warrior can be perceived in Parks; Winfrey calls her a "lady", a title of respect that stresses how American society has changed in the last fifty years, as no one would have ventured to call an African American woman "lady" before the Civil Rights movement. Winfrey emphasizes this important passage using another figure of sound, alliterating "grace and goodness", the qualities Parks embodied, according to the open personification she uses.

While Winfrey engages the public through the tenderness of a child's imagination, Clinton beats her with an even more appealing reference: "When I first met Rosa Parks, I was reminded of what Abraham Lincoln said when he was introduced to Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He said, 'So this is the little lady who started the Great War'". The parallel is striking. White author Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel on the cruelty of slavery published in 1852 deeply impacted American society and indirectly supported the abolitionist cause. Reportedly, Stowe, who was a pious and shy tiny woman, had never even imagined having such a resonance and according to a well-known anecdote when President Lincoln met her, he nicely remarked the oxymoron of the great effect generated by such a tiny person (Reynolds, 2020, p. 326). Lincoln was obviously exaggerating when he hyperbolically attributed to Stowe the outbreak of the Civil War, but she did contribute to the creation of a strong movement against slavery especially in the North of the US. Thus, Clinton presents Rosa Parks as the modern equivalent of Harriet Beecher Stowe, as the two tiny ladies in two different crucial moments of American history unexpectedly triggered unprecedented upheavals, both connected with slavery, which radically changed American society. Two tiny ladies transformed America for the better through small things, the first with a novel, the second with a refusal.

Clinton then adds: "Rosa Parks [...] was small in stature with delicate features. But the passing years did nothing to dim the light that danced in her eyes, the kindness and strength you saw in her smile, or the

dignity of her voice”. Clinton uses the same adjective “delicate” that Winfrey uses, to highlight the gentleness of Parks’ actions. The word “delicate” is so important in this passage that it is the first of a series of alliterations connecting the words “did”, “dim”, “danced”, till the last fundamental one “dignity”. Stressing out the delicacy of Rosa Parks’ appearance, Clinton indirectly suggests that she ignited what he calls “the most significant social movement in modern American history” convincing with the dignity and righteousness of good ideas rather than through violence.

Thus, the fundamental importance of Parks for America is not reflected in the size of her body, but in her inner strength, perseverance, courage, and dignity. No eulogizer omitted to mention that her body was tiny, but the powerful light it released was even intensified by the oxymoron.

#### **4. Negotiation of space in the eulogies for Rosa Parks**

This section explores how the idea of space is conveyed, analyzing how it integrates and merges with the identification of a vital space in which everyone can feel safe and self-confident. The analysis also wants to see how the representation of space suggests deprivation and ultimately negotiation for social recognition.

The physical space in the funeral location was organized so as to have the public, made up almost entirely of African Americans, sitting in the parterre and balcony seats and the guests, both blacks and whites, sitting in a semicircle on the stage; beyond them sat the choir, facing the public. The casket occupied the visual center of the place, resting in the space between the parterre and the steps leading to the stage, thus marking the divide between public and guests. Whether the casket was connecting or separating the two parts of the auditorium is disputable; what is certain is that the casket was below the steps, which makes it more easily associated with the public rather than with the guests who talked about Rosa Parks looking at her body from above. This space management was probably due to the large number of people invited to speak and the public nature of the event. However, this spatial organization seems to be a visual metaphor of Parks’ being in between the parterre and the stage, in between the ordinary and the extraordinary. It perfectly reflects the intermediary function Parks had in her life: she was the junction point between ordinary people and the establishment, a woman who became influential but never lost her humble attitude, a fact that was widely recognized in the eulogies.

Trying to overcome the gap between eulogizer and public, Oprah Winfrey begins her eulogy demonstrating the *ethos*. As the classical oratory requirements suggest (Charteris-Black, 2014, pp. 8-9), she needs to create the ethical credibility that is necessary to establish trust, and this inevitably implies the negotiation of visibility space. At that time, Winfrey was a well-known and influential anchorwoman.

Like all the other celebrities that were invited to speak, she represented the jet set, a world of wealth totally different from the life of an old woman like Parks, whose rent was paid for by a benefactor despite the enormous impact she had had on the history of the US. The huge divide between Winfrey and the public, not to mention Parks, required that she stepped out of her celebrity allure to appear as a down-to-earth person. Thus, beginning her eulogy by saying “I grew up in the South” was a necessary move to fill the physical and metaphorical space between her and the public, emphasizing the same origins and values. Without this preliminary introduction, she would have stayed in her visibility space, as the privileged person under the spotlight and the public would have remained in the space of invisibility, where individuals negotiate the loss of individuality trading it with the sense of protection and safety deriving from collective identity. Without this introduction that bridged the space between visibility and invisibility, she would have failed to establish the *ethos* that pertains to the moment and does not rely on previous ideas the audience may have about the speaker. She continued saying: “and Rosa Parks was a hero to me long before I recognized and understood the power and impact that her life embodied”, including herself and Parks in the same sentence, compressing also the linguistic space so as to unify and connect them through a unidirectional status recognition. It was Winfrey who saw a hero in Parks, so that the existing wealth gap between the celebrity and the old woman was reversed in favor of Parks.

Winfrey continues recalling her father telling her Rosa Parks’ story, which builds on the idea of belonging to an ordinary black family, with parents instructing children with dignified stories that build African American pride and cultural heritage, something many from the audience can relate to. Thanks to this family moment that stresses the traditional values of the South, the idea of Parks as a “hero” was impressed in her mind.

Clinton’s eulogy approaches visibility space from a different perspective. His status as president was universally recognized but still meant he had to establish his *ethos*. Being the president did not entitle him to a pass into a community that still lamented discrimination which is why he could not fail to say: “It was my honor to present her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom and to join the leaders of Congress in presenting her with a Congressional Gold Medal”. Those are the highest honors given by the US executive and legislative branches to individuals who have meritoriously contributed to the security or national interests of the United States or to world peace with their significant public or private endeavors. Clinton recalls how he awarded Parks, but with an elegant move does so indirectly, placing the emphasis on the honor he felt and on the Congress leaders he joined in doing so. Then the eulogy becomes more personal when he adds: “I remember well when she sat with Hillary in the box of the first family at the State of the Union Address in 1999”, this time using “I” as the actor associated to memory, that is a constant theme in African American discourse; he also mentions his wife by first name in a very

confidential way, assuming that everyone knows who Hillary is, without using the title “First Lady” that would widen the gap with the public; he wanted instead to share with the public that kind of intimacy that included Parks, who sat in the privileged first family Congress box. Then Clinton continues: “the entire Congress, Democrats and Republicans alike, rose as one to recognize that she had made us all better people in a better country”. The representation of space is very compelling in this passage. The African American woman who was once segregated in the most uncomfortable part of the bus, was now invited to the most privileged space, and the public, made up of important Congress persons, black and white, all stood up, performing an action that was intended not only as a tribute to her but also as a repayment and a reversal for her historical refusal to get up. Clinton’s words are also very inclusive as he says that Parks’ action made “all of us” better, in which the inclusive pronoun “us” refers to the American people regardless of ethnicity and skin color and made the US a better country as a whole. The vague comparative “better” implies an improvement but remains indefinite, as it is not clearly said in what sense the country improved, if it became freer, more just, more integrated, more aware of differences. The limitation of a precise word is avoided and instead it is up to the audience to fill the vagueness with their expectations.

Drawing on the basic act that created Parks’ iconicity, Clinton’s eulogy lingers on the opposition between sitting and standing. He says: “to the end, she radiated that kind of grace and serenity that God specially gives to those who stand in the line of fire for freedom and touch even the hardest hearts,” playing with the pun of her “standing” for her rights through sitting, thus remarking the absurdity of the whole system that she was defying. The importance of the sentence is further signaled by the various figures of sound, starting with the repetition of the “s” sound fusing together the ending and the beginning of the two most important nouns that connote Parks, “grace and serenity”, repeated again in the verb “stand”, and two final alliterations “fire for freedom” and “hardest hearts”.

He lingers on the idea of division prompted by the unequal use of space, recalling his personal experience as a Southerner, a white boy commuting on a segregated bus. He uses a parallelism to create the sharp effect of injustice through the repetition of the same simple sentence structure: actor, process, adjunct. “I sat in the front. Black folk sat in the back.” The process is the same, but the adjuncts change according to the actor. The conciseness of the variants of the same sentence highlights how artificially clear and simplistic the division was, something that obviously cannot reflect the complexity of reality. The personal story continues with Clinton maintaining that, inspired by Parks’ example, he and some of his white friends started sitting at the back of the bus, suggesting that Parks made all people reject their absurd limitations and ultimately feel free. It is not important whether this story is true or not; what

matters instead is the function the anecdote has in creating the *pathos* that is the emotional bond with the audience.

In the end, the very episode that made Parks famous and which constitutes the *logos* of all the eulogies is metaphorically entrenched in the idea of space. The bus is a means that makes people move, but this segregated bus made people move at two speeds. The very metaphor of life as a journey implies space based on orientational metaphors, that is spatial relations such as up and down, or front and back, that tend to have definite evaluations, e.g. upward and downward orientations are respectively positively and negatively evaluated (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980). Thus, in metaphorical terms, black people's journey/life was biased from the outset, as it relied on a segregated bus with its internal section orientationally evaluated, offering two-track enjoyment of the same reality, of the same land to explore.

Clinton devotes a long section of his eulogy to retracing the salient moments of Parks' life and does so in terms of space, mentioning all the times she had to move in search of better opportunities. When he mentions the famous bus episode, he says: "she was just taking the next step on her own long road to freedom", dwelling on the metaphor of life as a journey with a final destination that for her is freedom. Winfrey also revisits this idea and says: "That day that you refused to give up your seat on the bus, you, Sister Rosa, changed the trajectory of my life and the lives of so many other people in the world". Talking of "trajectory of my life" she expands the metaphor of life as a journey assuming that debunking the norm based on the front-positive vs. back-negative orientational metaphor, Parks changed the track of that metaphorical bus allotting black people the worst space and gave them the chance to enjoy the journey and take advantage of the best space available in American society.

## 5. Conclusions

On December 1, 1955, it was through an act of physical occupation and not letting go of a space that Rosa Parks defied the segregated society in Montgomery, Alabama, sparking that bus boycott that changed the course of American history (Phibbs, 2009). She never held public office but her low-profile commitment for the people in need of help continued throughout her life. At her death, she was universally recognized as a symbol of freedom as well as of quiet, courageous, and dignified determination. Her vital role in the struggle for equality benefited all Americans, whatever the color of their skin, as her act of civil disobedience promoted a vision of divides as limitations for blacks and for whites at the same time. While white people thought they were free, in fact they fell under the same boundaries imposed on black people.

As a white person who grew up in the segregated South, Clinton felt entitled to highlight this idea in his eulogy. He told an anecdote about his boyhood, when he and his friends after Parks' arrest, decided to sit in the last rows of the bus. This simple story, true or false as it may be, underscores the idea that divides are for everyone and when space is delimited, no one is free. The boys realized that the limitations imposed on black people impoverished white people too, and for them too sitting wherever they wanted was a revolutionary act of freedom and conquest of a space they too had been denied. Parks and her eulogizer convey the idea that space is freedom when it is shared and that the coexistence of bodies in the same space is an expression of mutual social recognition.

References to Parks' body were consistent in the eulogies at her funeral. Since the very beginning her body was protagonist, calmly and confidently confronting itself with the massive task of dismantling the legal bigotry demeaning the African Americans living in the segregated South. The oxymoron of physical smallness and greatness she embodied was a constant, repeating again the stereotypical narrative of the tiny woman who surprises everybody with her unpremeditated act. Winfrey called her "sister", and other eulogizers called her "mother", referring to model roles in familiar or sorority environments, which, despite being dignified roles, are definitively diminishing of her social role. The eulogies did not overcome this consolidated narrative of a legendary woman who, suddenly emerging from the anonymity of the black working class, against all odds does something great. She seems to be entrapped in the narrative of her own legend and only when she can tell her own story in first person, as she does in her autobiography and in her interviews, does the narrative of her as a militant activist and not as a sporadic agitator emerge in its full force and dignity, finally abandoning the stereotype of smallness and greatness at the same time. Indeed, physical smallness means nothing in terms of conquering metaphorical social space.

Today, the intellectual movement for the empowerment of African American people promoted by artists, writers, celebrities and, in a more confrontational way, by the *Black Lives Matter* movement, relies on the idea of finding a voice, a metaphor for feeling free to express ideas, talking, discussing, and being heard and understood by others. A voice is an abstract concept compared to the concrete concept of a body, but the two are related. A body is the origin of a voice; a voice is a derivation of a body, plus something more that pertains to the cultural heritage of a community. In other words, today's movement to find a voice is a derivation of the imposition of a body in a space, a process that started that day in 1955 when Rosa Parks simply refused to stand up.

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