

# LOOKING AT THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT THROUGH A MICROSCOPE VS. A TELESCOPE

## INSTRUCTIONAL NOTES

Julian Bond was a co-founder of SNCC and of the Southern Poverty Law Center, a lifelong social justice activist, politician, and was chairman of the NAACP from 1998-2010. He was also a tireless scholar and educator on the civil rights movement, who both studied and taught about the movement for decades at the University of Virginia, American University, and at other institutions. The content of these courses has been compiled in the 2021 book *Julian Bond's Time to Teach: A History of the Southern Civil Rights Movement*, described in the jacket cover as "a master class on civil rights history." Its account of the Montgomery Bus Boycott is an excellent illustration of how he sought to disrupt what he called the "master narrative" of the civil rights movement.

This activity gives students the opportunity to apply one of the ways Bond and other scholars have sought to challenge the master narrative: using a microscope rather than a telescope when looking at the civil rights movement. Students choose a lesser-known but important figure from the Montgomery Bus Boycott -- either one mentioned in the comic book, or one who wasn't -- and carry out research in order to present their findings to their classmates. Guiding questions/prompts are provided for the research task, as are summary/synthesis questions that can be used for follow-up class discussion and/or a written reflection assignment

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Julian Bond, photographed in 2012 on location at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. while filming a documentary.  
(Photo credit: Eduardo Montes-Bradley, Creative Commons Attribution 1.0 Generic license, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Julianbondmovie.jpg>)

Julian Bond was an activist who was deeply involved in the civil rights movement. He was a co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1960 and was a leader there and in other important national civil rights organizations, including the NAACP. He also taught college classes about the history of the civil rights movement for many years. He died in 2015.

In his classes, Professor Bond pointed out that historians had finally started to look at the movement “through a microscope” rather than “through a telescope.” This meant that scholars were paying closer attention to the work of local people and local groups who made and supported the Black freedom struggle. Professor Bond stressed the importance of not only focusing on the activities of major, prominent figures like Dr. King and President Johnson.

## DIRECTIONS

Train your microscope on the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Find out more about the work and contributions of people who are mentioned in the comic book but whom you may never have heard of. Or find out more about key figures in the boycott who are not mentioned in the comic book.

Choose one of the following people to research.

## NAMED IN THE COMIC BOOK

- B.J. Simms [named incorrectly in the comic book as D.J. Simms]

- Rufus Lewis
- E.D. Nixon
- Rev. Ralph Abernathy
- Rev. Robert Graetz

## NOT NAMED IN THE COMIC BOOK

Jo Ann Gibson Robinson

Fred Gray

Rev. Glenn Smiley

Georgia Gilmore and The Club From Nowhere

Clifford and Virginia Durr

Plaintiffs in *Browder v. Gayle*: Aurelia S. Browder, Susie McDonald, Claudette Colvin, Mary Louise Smith, and Jeanatta Reese (You can choose just one to focus on.

Note that Jeanatta Reese withdrew as a plaintiff within a month of the case being filed).

Find out about their work and activism before, during, and/or after the bus boycott, and be prepared to share it with your classmates.

Here are some questions to guide your research and presentation.

- How had they been involved in the struggle for civil rights before the Montgomery Bus Boycott?
- How did they get connected to the bus boycott?
- What was their role in the bus boycott? What special skills, talents, or connections did they bring to the movement?
- What was the most surprising or interesting thing you learned?
- Why do you think you had never heard of this person before? Why do you think it is important to know their name and what they did?

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION/WRITING

1. What do you think of Professor Bond’s idea that it is important to study the civil rights movement through a “microscope” rather than through a “telescope”? What do you think we can learn by looking at things this way? What do you think we might miss?
2. Do you think this idea applies to how we can or should study other movements or moments in history? Why or why not?