Acting out the Montgomery Bus Boycott,  
1955: A Lesson Plan for  
NEH Institute: “Social Movements in Modern America:  
Labor, Civil Rights, and Feminism”  
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Focus/Summary:

The purpose of this lesson is to have students understand the intersection of personal and political challenges in the 1950’s as people were confronted by the quest for African-Americans for equal rights. The civil rights movement galvanized African-Americans for equality in all parts of the United States, particularly in southern states, where the legacy of the Jim Crow was the worst. In some cases unusual alliances developed -- most interestingly cross-race and cross-class -- which illustrate the humanity and possibilities of this movement to unite Americans. In a larger sense this was an attempt for Americans to come to terms with unfinished business since Reconstruction and in another to begin the difficult and messy process of reconciliation and historical understandings of the roots of injustice in the United States.

In this three day lesson students analyze excerpts from the 1990 award-winning film The Long Walk Home. According to Hal Erickson, the film “is a recreation of a troubled era in American history. The time is 1955; the place, Montgomery, Alabama. When Rosa Parks, an African American woman, is arrested for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man, it is the first volley in the great Bus Boycott, organized by Dr. Martin Luther King in order to desegregate the Birmingham transportation system. The boycott is a decided inconvenience for Miriam Thompson (Sissy Spacek), a well-to-do white woman. Now, Miriam must drive to the black section of town to pick up her maid Odessa Cotter (Whoopi Goldberg) and bring her to work. Outside of her own social circle, Miriam realizes for the first time just how privileged, sheltered and self-centered her life has been. What brings this fact home is the realization that Odessa has literally been raising two families: the Thompsons' and her own. Odessa has also sacrificed her own health and wellbeing to serve her employers without question or complaint. Awakened to the true inequities of "Separate But Equal", and impressed by Dr. King's edict of nonviolent resistance, Miriam joins the boycott. This stirs up the racist feelings harbored by Miriam's husband Norman (Dwight Schultz), who at the behest of his goonish brother Tunker (Dylan Baker) joins the Klanlike White Citizen's Council.” (See Hal Erickson, All Movie Guide at http://www.moviefone.com/movie/the-long-walk-home/3972/synopsis Accessed on July 21, 2010). Students then create skits about the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and discuss the role of people in mass movements. For a description of the bus boycott: also see http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohtml/exhibit/aopart9.html#0903 (Accessed on July 28, 2010).

It could be used in a United States history survey course, an AP United States Government course, or an elective on Global Issues/Problems.
Vital Theme and Narrative:
Patterns of Social and Political Interaction

Habits of Mind:

- Recognize the importance of individuals who have made a difference in history, and the significance of personal character for both good and ill; and

- Appreciate the often tentative nature of judgments about the past, and thereby avoid the temptation to seize on particular “lessons” of history as cures for present ills

Objectives:

- Students will understand some of the strategies that civil rights activists used to achieve their goals to create a segregated society through film analysis

- Students will analyze the potential and pitfalls of cross-class and cross-race cooperation and/or conflict through role play

Procedures:

This is intended as a three day lesson; prior to Day One, assign relevant textbook reading on the background of segregation in the 1950’s.

**Day One:**

Opening the Lesson: Song Analysis and Brainstorming Question (15 minutes)

Listen to the song: *Ella’s Song* by Bernice Johnson Reagan: Sweet Honey in the Rock and read the lyrics (which are at the end of this lesson)


1.) What is the message of the song?

2.) From what you know about social movements, what collective strategies appeared to work the best to bring about change? Why?

Developing the Lesson:

Part One: Film Viewing and Analysis (30 minutes)

Show Scene 1, 2, 4, 5, 13, 14, 16, & 17. Skip scenes 4 & 5 if you have only 20 minutes.
Use the following as guided questions to help the discussion afterwards:

For Scene 1:

1.) Why did the black women pay in the front of the bus and then re-enter to sit down through the back door? How did they probably feel about that situation?

2.) What appeared to be Odessa Cotter’s role in the Thompson family? Why was she referred to by Mary Catherine by her first name?

For Scene 2:

1.) Why did Odessa leave the park?

2.) What does Miriam’s reaction to this incident illustrate about her character?

For Scene 4:

Was it surprising that Miriam agreed to drive Odessa? Why or why not?

For Scene 5:

What appeared to be the role of the church in the black community?

For Scene 13:

1.) Why did Miriam stop driving Odessa?

2.) In the subsequent conversation that Miriam and Odessa have what does Miriam appear to learn about herself? What does Miriam mean by “not questioning it”?

3.) What does Odessa mean by her comment that “we are all scared”?

For Scene 14:

1.) Why does Miriam stand up for her right to drive Odessa to work?

2.) Once she picks Odessa up, why does Miriam want her to sit in the front seat?

For Scenes 16 &17:

1.) What does Miriam appear to learn about herself in the confrontation with her brother-in-law?

2.) Why is it important that the buses remain segregated for most of the men in the community?

3.) Why do the women choose a religious song to defend themselves?
4.) What is the underlying message of the film?

**Part Two: Skit Planning (10 minutes)**

Divide the class into groups of 5 students and assign roles: a black maid, a white mistress, the maid’s husband, the mistress’ husband, and a federal government agent. Explain that they are to create a realistic portrayal of the potential or pitfalls of cooperation in this situation by using the film’s excerpts as a beginning as to one potential. Depending on the size of your class and length of the class time, each skit should be about 10 minutes in length. Homework: begin to work on your character and come up with ideas for your skit.

**Day Two:**

Give the students the period to work on their skits and to develop their scripts.

**Day Three:**

**Assessing Student Learning:**

**Part One: (40+ minutes)**

Students will act out their skits.

**Part Two:**

In order to assess their skits and their role in it each student will be assessed in four categories: character development, skit cohesion, voice projection, and overall presentation. Using a 4 Point Rubric, students will first assess themselves in each of these four characters; they will also include a one page description as to how they think they did in each of the four categories. Then the teacher will assess them.

Lyrics and music by Bernice Johnson Reagon
Sung by Sweet Honey in the Rock

We who believe in freedom cannot rest
we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes

Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons
Is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons

That which touches me most is that I had a chance to work with people
Passing on to others that which was passed on to me

To me young people come first, they have the courage where we fail
And if I can but shed some light as they carry us through the gale

The older I get the better I know that the secret of my going on
Is when the reins are in the hands of the young, who dare to run against the storm

Not needing to clutch for power, not needing the light just to shine on me
I need to be one in the number as we stand against tyranny

Struggling myself don't mean a whole lot, I've come to realize
That teaching others to stand up and fight is the only way my struggle survives

I'm a woman who speaks in a voice and I must be heard
At times I can be quite difficult; I'll bow to no man's word

We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes