

# PLENTY WITH LITTLE AND MOST WITHOUT A LOT

Lessons from Georgia Gilmore

BY SAFIYA CHARLES

ON MARCH 8, 1990, DOCTORS admitted Georgia Gilmore to Jackson Hospital in Montgomery, Alabama. A rupture in her intestines had caused fluid to leak and inflame her abdomen. She had no idea she was sick. The seventy-year-old civil rights activist was ready to “cook heavy” for guests, soon to arrive from across the country. She died on March 9.

When those guests gathered in Montgomery to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery march, they joined mourners of Gilmore’s life. Together they ate the food she prepared before she fell ill: her tender chicken and baked macaroni and cheese.

For decades, Gilmore had served a “full dinner” in her dining room where guests, who often entered her home without knocking, crowded around the table twelve or more at a time. Others spilled into the living room, edging in for a seat

on the couch if they could manage to find one, or eating where they stood.

Each day she prepared two slow-cooked meats, baked or fried chicken, and spareribs. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. loved her stuffed pork chops. She cooked turnip greens, potato salad, and turkey dressing, with corn muffins and pound cake or a slice of pie.

One week after her death, St. Jude Catholic Church hosted her funeral service.

“You would have thought she was a world figure,” her son Mark Gilmore Jr. recalled in a 2004 interview with journalist Jamie York of NPR. “The church was packed to capacity. And you know what’s amazing?” he said, thinking about his mother’s long fight against racism and injustice. “She had the police as pallbearers. Can you believe that?”

It must have been a sight to behold. Only twenty or thirty years prior, Montgomery

police officers would have been more likely to resign in protest than carry a “Negro” woman’s casket.

Following the service, mourners filled Gilmore’s home on Dericote Street, where she had served dignitaries, locals, and politicians alike. They gathered around the dining room table and wherever else they could find a seat. Those police officers came, too.

Gilmore demanded respect from Black and white. A widow, she raised six children working within a grinding system of segregation and exploitation, while fighting to overturn that same system. Her cooking and entrepreneurship, encouraged by King and supported by the Black community, allowed her to finance her children’s education. She was most proud of that.

Mark served on the Montgomery City Council for twenty-two years. In Gilmore’s funeral bulletin, her daughter Martha Baker was identified as an

evangelist in Kingston, Jamaica. Another daughter, Oscar Mae, graduated from Alabama State University. What different lives they must have led in comparison to her own. Like many who joined the movement, this was one of her goals.

When I imagine Gilmore, who worked as a cook most of her life, hunched over the stove and likely humming a tune, I think of my grandmother who grew up on the island of Tobago. She cared for fourteen children and reared grand- and great-grandchildren until she died. She, too, passed after an unobserved illness took residence inside her. My grandmother grew up a long way from Alabama. But her story connects.

In her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston writes, “Black women are the mules of the world.” They show up. They do the work. They carry the load—and suffer the consequences of its burden. We are so much more than that. And we have

Montgomery Advertiser

Georgia Gilmore in Montgomery, 1978



made our country the better for it, at times paying dearly for our efforts.

Three decades after Gilmore's death, and more than eighty years after Hurston wrote those words, we see this in the massive burden Black women bear in the current health crisis. Twenty-eight percent of Black women in the United States work in the service industry. They're nursing assistants, cashiers, waitresses, and home health aides. Right now, they are disproportionately filling our hospital beds and dying of COVID-19. For their labor, they earn an average of 63 cents for every dollar earned by a white man. That figure drops to 58 cents in Alabama and 56 cents in Mississippi.

Women like Gilmore and my grandmother were of humble stock. They did plenty with little and most without a lot. They refused to succumb to despair or defeat. They labored from the time their dark hair shone in youthful plaits until their coils faded to gray.

**They show up. They do the work. They carry the load—and suffer the consequences of its burden. We are so much more than that.**

Gilmore once told a reporter that she began cooking at age eight. The Southern Courier may have included that detail to elicit surprise and admiration from white readers. But to learn that skill so early seemed natural to me, and likely to many Black readers.

Gilmore's family was poor. Her mother, Alice, also known as a gifted cook, worked in domestic service for white families. When she taught Gilmore to cook, she armed her daughter with one of the few

marketable skills that could earn Black women a wage at the time.

Has much changed? The vital work of care is really an expansion of domestic work. Childcare, early childhood education, disability care, elder care—that work is still done by Black women. As the Institution for Women's Policy research reports, "thirty percent of the workforce that cares for us are Black American women."

Like her mother before her, Gilmore also "caught babies" for Black women across the city. Barred access to white hospitals, the women either could not afford fees at clinics that served Black patients or preferred to give birth in their own homes. The service earned her between five and ten dollars for each birth, if she got paid.

"If I had the dollars I tried to walk and collect...I'd be a rich man," Mark once said of his efforts to fetch payments. "She delivered just that many children."

Much of what people know about Gilmore as a civil rights figure surrounds her fundraising for the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In 1955, she founded the Club from Nowhere, a clandestine organization of women who cooked and sold food to raise money for the ongoing protest. As weeks became a year, Gilmore turned in more and more money to fund the volunteer taxis and carpools that ferried Black passengers across town.

We know too little about her continued activism, which, in the years after the Montgomery Bus Boycott ended, permanently altered the landscape of the city of Montgomery.

Many of the unsung heroes of the movement were women. Active as they were in the struggle, it was, as they say, a different time. Male leadership was considered both standard and superior. Yet Gilmore and other Black women were the foundation of the movement. Their



The former home of Georgia Gilmore in Montgomery, photographed in November 2015

efforts remain lesser known now, because so few enjoyed visible prominence back then. I ask again, has much changed?

From here in 2020, three things strike me. Two offer perspective: She used food as a weapon and a salve. She gained empowerment through her participation in the bus boycott. The third begs me to take a hard look at the misogynoir and relative disinterest employed by Montgomery's newspapers to tell her story.

PEOPLE WHO KNEW Gilmore called her "Georgie," "Tiny," "Big Mama," or "Madar." She called most of them "Baby."

John T. Edge  
Everyone from visiting presidents to students at the historically Black college Alabama State to politicians from the

state capitol tasted Gilmore's cooking. John F. Kennedy requested her food be brought to his plane as it waited on the tarmac. But her enterprise was born of necessity.

About three months into the Montgomery bus boycott, Gilmore made her allegiance clear. In March 1956, she swore in court that Rev. King had not attempted to incite anyone to stay off the buses, as he was being accused by the state. For this, she was fired from her job as a cook at a downtown restaurant. Gilmore couldn't even get homeowner's insurance to cover her house, Mark told a reporter, because her involvement in the movement was known among whites.

Gilmore's dining room table served several purposes. It was a secure meeting place for talk that had to be kept quiet.



LEFT: Georgia Gilmore, 1978;  
OPPOSITE: A clip from the December 31,  
1958 edition of the Montgomery Advertiser  
announcing the closure of city parks

among white folks about the goings on of colored folks—hers was the place.

THE CURRENT MASS movement of protests and disruptions following the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor also incorporates food as a means of sustenance and empowerment.

When I visited Richmond, Virginia, in July, protesters had taken up residence in Monument Park, alongside the colorfully reimagined memorial to Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Spray-painted graffiti covered almost every inch of exposed stone: UPLIFT BLACK VOICES, THIS TIME IT'S DIFFERENT, and WE'RE NOT LEAVING. Activists had installed a compost station and a small community garden patch. They had planted seeds of intention.

Across the street from the monument, I found a group of men sitting in fold-out chairs grilling meat and vegetables under a canopy covered with BLACK LIVES MATTER signs. These men gathered, just as people once did at Gilmore's home, to nourish minds, bodies, and spirits and facilitate community.

Sikhs in Queens, New York, mobilized to feed protesters in June. The religion encourages langar, a practice of preparing and serving free meals to the community, as a form of seva, or selfless service. In Sunnyside, about a dozen volunteers distributed 500 meals of matar paneer, rice, and rajma, a red bean and tomato stew. A faithful Catholic, I imagine Gilmore was motivated by similar principles when she began to prepare that final meal for those marchers in 1990.

Calls now ring out for Black reclamation

King and the Montgomery Improvement Association leaders could move and speak freely; hold private meetings with public officials even, as was the case when King once brought President Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert F. Kennedy to Gilmore's home.

The unsanctioned restaurant fed and nourished. In the physical sense and in the cultural and political sense. If you wished to make a pleasant escape from a dismal circumstance, you could take a seat at her table and Georgia Gilmore would fill you up until you were a balloon ready to burst.

If you wanted the latest news about the progress and challenges of various boycotts and protests, what was happening in the courts locally or nationally, and what was being discussed

of Southern lands stolen from African American citizens. Crowdfunding campaigns raise money for urban gardens, grocery cooperatives, and farming collectives.

"Food has always been a powerful tool in the hands of oppressors. Food was a major component in colonization and enslavement. To control people, you

control what they eat," Lindsey Lunsford, a specialist in sustainable food systems at Tuskegee University, told me when I went looking for ways to connect this moment with Jim Crow-era Montgomery. "Racial equity in the food system and community sovereignty is really people having control over and a say over what they eat ... and making sure that food reflects them and their vision for their future and their families."

Food production and consumption as fuel, as politic, as a means of power, is a long-standing concept. As the bus boycott showed, the work of Black women could propel a movement. But the production of food is often stigmatized. The ongoing devaluation of Black women's work points to why many people like Gilmore, who powered the boycott and greater civil disruptions, remain relatively unknown.

"HUGE NEGRO WOMAN draws Cursing Fine," read the headline in the Alabama Journal on November 3, 1961. The reporter likely recognized the name of the woman in question, for Georgia Gilmore had appeared in the paper before. But the reporter identified the business owner and activist only by her size, race, and sex.

The adjective "huge" does the most work in this headline. It speaks to a perceived unruliness, and to the stereotype of a large, disorderly Black female figure in need of censure. Or maybe it's just there for comic relief.

When Gene Kovarick of my paper, the Montgomery Advertiser, wrote in November of 1961: "A hefty Negro woman who weighed in excess of 230 pounds was fined \$25 today in city court on charges of cursing a diminutive white garbage truck driver," he worked a twist on the sassy Black mammy archetype. And he rendered the white male truck driver her victim.

**COMMISSION TEXT  
CLOSING CITY PARKS**

Following is the complete text of the City Commission resolution closing city parks:

WHEREAS, eight Negroes, namely Georgia Theresa Gilmore, Gussie Carlton, Sylvia Johnson, J. C. Smith, Mattie Cargill, Fred Harris, George Stephens, and Elizabeth Brown, have attempted to compel the integration of Oak Park and other public parks in the City of Montgomery hereinafter designated, by suit filed in the Federal District Court; and WHEREAS, this attempt poses grave problems involving the welfare and public safety of all of the citizens of the City of Montgomery; and

WHEREAS, the members of the Commission are of the opinion that it is to the best interests of the citizens of Montgomery that said parks be closed:

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the Board that the following public parks in the City of Montgomery, of Commissioners of the City of Montgomery, Alabama, to-wit,

PARK	LOCATION
Bear Park	East of Coliseum Boulevard
Bruce Field	North of Highland Avenue at end of Anderson Street
Civic Park	Bounded by Yancey Avenue on the South, Madison Terrace on the West, Upper Wetumpka Road on North; California Street on East.
Day Street	North of Day Street, directly in front of Day St. Baptist Church
Diffley Park West	Bounded by Crenshaw on West, Aaron Street on North
Hamner Hall	Bounded by Milgred, Clayton and Holt Streets
Kings Hill	Claremont Street, 1 block north of Lower Wetumpka Road
Kiwans	Small Downtown Park, north of Columbus Street
Mobile Heights	Mobile Heights
Oak Park	Bounded by Lake Street on North, Hall Street on West, Stevenson Street on South, Forest Avenue on East
Perry Street	Bounded by Jeff Davis Avenue on South, Lawrence Street, on East, Perry Street on West.
Ridgecrest	April and Ridgecrest Streets
Trenholm Court	North of Columbus Street in project area
Washington Park	At west end of Dorothy Street, West of Jordan Street, South Mobile Road

be closed beginning January 1, 1959, to all persons, regardless of color, until further action of the Parks and Recreation Board and the Mayor and Commissioners of the City of Montgomery.  
(Signed by the Commission Members and dated Dec. 30, 1958.)

Left and Right: Montgomery Advertiser

The Advertiser dropped the word “huge” in a follow-up headline the next day: “Big Negro Woman Fined \$25 for Cursing Garbage Man.” But the first line of the story employs it: “A huge Negro woman was convicted in Recorder’s Court Friday for cursing the white driver of a City Sanitation Department truck.”

By that point, Gilmore had been quoted or mentioned by name in the Advertiser at least four times. The discourtesies of 1961 follow a period in which Gilmore had made the paper as an activist for civil and voting rights and agitator for equitable city services. In 1956, the newspaper quoted her testimony from King’s trial. In December 1958, she challenged a city racial ordinance. On New Year’s Eve, 1958, she was named as plaintiff in a federal suit, *Georgia Theresa Gilmore v. City of Montgomery*. Last, in September of 1959, she was mentioned in a story about the invalidation of a racial ordinance.

At the height of a race-mixing panic in a city boastful of its reputation as the “Cradle of the Confederacy,” it would have been unrealistic to expect fairness from a white Southern newspaper. I understand that. But I believe that coverage is worthy of attention now, as many newsrooms across the country begin the very late-term work of assessing and dismantling the historical biases and erasures that have alienated and marginalized Black communities.

My own presence at the Advertiser, as the race and ethnicity reporter, is meant to demonstrate a commitment to this effort. The reality is our newspaper now faces down decades of rightfully earned mistrust from African Americans. Only time, persistence, and engagement with the communities harmed can yield good faith.

For what it’s worth, the Advertiser’s posture on Gilmore seems to have relaxed by 1964. In a story on the wedding of her

daughter Oscar Mae, the reporter is generous, describing the bride with elegant language and telling readers that “the bride’s mother wore a baby blue satin brocaded dress with black accessories.”

Positive acknowledgment of Georgia Gilmore’s activism, however, does not come until November 1980.

## Gilmore and so many Black women before and after her have demonstrated the courage, will, and sense necessary to effect great change.

THINKING OF 1955 and 1956 and Gilmore’s involvement in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, I’m fascinated by how her acts of civil disobedience shaped her life, as she embraced the power and responsibility she earned.

Before 1955, Gilmore, like most working-class Black women, had sometimes endured the mistreatment of drivers on the city’s buses, because when you’re Black, and poor, and a woman, you do what you must to survive. For Gilmore to resist and to triumph must have felt thrilling.

“It was just the idea that you could make the white man suffer. And let the white man realize that you could get along in the world without him,” Gilmore said in a 1979 interview about her participation in the boycott.

Black women have long maintained the highest rate of labor participation among all women in the United States. But when the bus boycott began, Montgomery’s working Black women were unaware of the power they possessed en

masse. They were treated as members of the permanent underclass. They washed for whites, cooked, cleaned their houses, and cared for their children. They kept the municipality and its economy churning. Today, we would call these Black women essential workers.

“They was the one that really and truly kept the bus running. And after the maids and the cooks stopped riding the bus, well the bus didn’t have any need to run,” Gilmore said.

In a 1986 interview for *Eyes on the Prize*, a documentary series that chronicled the civil rights movement, Gilmore said that before the boycott she had grown dependent on the system. By walking or carpooling, she realized that she could do just fine without the bus. Working for herself, she proved she could do without a white employer, too. White Montgomery, on the other hand, couldn’t survive without her.

“Before the bus boycott, I couldn’t drive. But after the bus boycott began, I was able to drive. And then I was able to save enough money to get a car. And then I was really a big shot. Because I felt like that I had come up in the world being able to drive and say, ‘Well, I own the car,’” Gilmore said.

The movement had granted her agency. The movement had empowered her.

In 1958, two years after the boycott ended, Gilmore was back in court. After her son Mark was beaten and arrested by two white police officers for crossing a segregated park, she challenged the law that gave them license. In 1959, Montgomery’s ordinance barring Black residents from public recreational facilities was ruled unconstitutional.

IT’S HARD TO think of a contemporary who matches Gilmore’s force and character, but many Black women continue to

fight for and champion their communities. Women like Lunsford, the Tuskegee-based scholar who advocates for racial equity in food systems; farmer and food sovereignty activist Leah Penniman, chef and writer Adrian Lipscombe, land justice advocate and organizer Dara Cooper, and food historian Zella Palmer, to name just a few.

We must commit to listening to, amplifying, and supporting Black female leadership. Gilmore and so many Black women before and after her have demonstrated the courage, will, and sense necessary to effect great change.

Georgia Gilmore was an activist and a domestic worker. A mother, protector, a midwife, and widow. She was a cook, a witness, a restaurateur, a hustler, a joker, a fed-up citizen. A singer, an appellant, a wisecracker, a democratic purist, a civil rights hero, and a regular person.

She was a hardworking Black woman worthy of respect.

She was not a mule.

Know her. Celebrate her. Embody her legacy. 🐾

Safiya Charles is a race and ethnicity reporter in Montgomery, Alabama. This piece is published in collaboration with the Montgomery Advertiser.

