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"The Whole Nation Will Move": Grassroots Organizing in Harlem and the Advent of the Long, Hot Summers

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**“THE WHOLE NATION WILL MOVE”: GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING IN HARLEM
AND THE ADVENT OF THE LONG, HOT SUMMERS**

A Dissertation Presented

by

PETER D. BLACKMER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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W.E.B. DU BOIS DEPARTMENT OF AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES

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DEDICATION

To Roxa Blackmer, Paul Brennan, Mary Bresadola, and Richard Gassan

*And to all those—past, present, and future—who dedicate their lives to the pursuit of
universal love, justice, and human rights*

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ABSTRACT

“THE WHOLE NATION WILL MOVE”: GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING IN HARLEM AND THE ADVENT OF THE LONG, HOT SUMMERS

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“The Whole Nation Will Move” provides a narrative history of grassroots struggles for African American equality and empowerment in Harlem in the decade immediately preceding the era of widespread urban rebellions in the United States. Through a street-level examination of the political education and activism of grassroots organizers, the dissertation analyzes how local people developed a collective radical consciousness and organized to confront and dismantle institutional racism in New York City from 1954-1964. This work also explores how the interests and activities of poor and working-class Black and Puerto Rican residents of Harlem fueled the escalation of protest activity and demands for human rights and self-determination that pushed local and national civil rights organizations in new, more radical directions with the advent of the 1964 Harlem Rebellion.

Though the body of scholarly work focused on the Civil Rights and Black Power movements beyond the South has grown exponentially in the past decade,

struggles for rights and power in Harlem have been underappreciated for their far-reaching influence upon this era. As an international hub of Black political thought and cultural production, Harlem was home to organizers, artists, intellectuals, and local people whose contributions to Black Freedom Struggles throughout the African diaspora complicate popular narratives of the Civil Rights Movement, and challenge the geographies and periodization of the Black Power Movement.

By closely analyzing local, national, and global trends in grassroots struggles for human rights and self-determination in the ten-year period preceding the Harlem Rebellion, this dissertation frames the outbreak of the rebellion as the result of a collective disillusionment with the repressive limitations of liberal governance in an era of global revolution. This analysis issues a fundamental challenge to the popularly accepted narrative that explains urban rebellions as consequences of an oppressive “powder keg,” thereby denying conscious political agency to Black communities who sought to resist oppression and reform government in the years, months, and days leading up to these uprisings.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On a cold January night in 1964, hundreds of Harlem residents crowded into a small gymnasium on West 118th Street, where James Baldwin sat alongside Jesse Gray, John O. Killens, and John Lewis at a long table at the end of the room. The makeshift speakers' platform was surrounded on all sides by local people and community leaders who had come to show their support for a massive rent strike that was underway in Harlem. Rising from his seat, Baldwin explained to the audience that he had come as a witness, to testify against those responsible for establishing and maintaining the cruel housing conditions in Harlem that had fueled such community resistance. The housing crisis in Harlem was not a local, isolated issue, Baldwin contended, but rather symptomatic of broader systems of racial oppression in the urban north. "It is a more complex situation in the North," explained the internationally renowned author, essayist, and playwright. Compared to the Southern states, where the perpetrators of racism were easy to identify, those responsible for exploitative housing, segregated schools, and economic inequality in the urban North were harder to distinguish. "It's hard to find the landlord," Baldwin continued, "it's hard to know where the enemy is."

Much more than a lament of racial inequality in Harlem, Baldwin's comments at the rent strike rally offer critical insights into the institutional nature of racial oppression in the urban North. "There is a contradiction between the lives white people live and the lives we live," Baldwin observed, "The landlords, the city and the state *are* responsible." Through this statement, Baldwin issued a fundamental

challenge to one of the most popular perceptions of American Jim Crow society in the 20th Century. For decades, this popular analysis has held that two distinct forms of racial subjugation existed in the United States: one *de jure*, the other *de facto*. This enduring understanding of *de jure* subjugation explains the system of southern racial oppression as one defined and codified by laws and regulations that gave legal credence to the personal and cultural racism inherent in white southern society. Conversely, this popular analysis suggests that a *de facto* system of racial subjugation existed in the North, in which racism existed and was practiced on a personal and cultural level within white society, but not officially sanctioned by governing structures. By naming the city and the state as responsible parties in establishing and enforcing racial oppression in Harlem, Baldwin not only threw down a fundamental challenge to these flawed perceptions, but gave voice to what many Harlem residents had believed all along.

While offering a useful explanation of Jim Crow society in the urban North, this 1964 address also illuminates the nature of the fight waged by Black communities to resist and transform these complex systems of oppression. “This is a revolution,” Baldwin declared, adding that such a struggle would become “harder and harder because the revolution has to revise the entire system.”¹ Such an appraisal of the freedom struggles waged by Black and Puerto Rican communities in Harlem was hardly romantic or hyperbole. By the time Baldwin delivered this analysis, thousands of Harlem residents had come to similar conclusions after

¹ Fred Halstead, et al., *Harlem Stirs* (New York: Marzani & Munsell Publishers, Inc., 1966), 62.

nearly a decade of confrontations with various levels of the city's power structure. Through these experiences in organized grassroots struggles for Black rights and power in Harlem, local people not only developed a systemic critique of racial oppression in the urban North. This radical analysis developed in the streets of Harlem informed a militant grassroots political movement that threw down a challenge to the largest city in the United States and inspired communities in other American cities to do the same.

In the decades since Baldwin's address in Lower Harlem, histories of the Black Freedom Struggles of the 1950s-1960s have focused largely on campaigns against segregation, racial violence, and disenfranchisement in the rural South, contributing to a popular narrative that has painted racial oppression and the Civil Rights Movement as uniquely southern phenomena. Histories of concurrent struggles for rights and power in the urban North have much to contribute to present popular discourse around systemic racism and institutional inequality, organized resistance and urban rebellions—topics which remain murky at best in popular knowledge—yet these histories have only recently begun to receive a similar level of scholarly interest as those in the South. Though the body of scholarly work focused on the Civil Rights and Black Power movements beyond the South has grown exponentially in the past decade, there remains a dichotomy in popular perceptions of the Civil Rights Movement in the South and the North. Whereas popular narratives of the Southern movement are routinely characterized by discourse about nonviolent resistance, Black Freedom Struggles in the urban North have long been painted as byproducts of the southern movement and characterized

by urban “riots” that erupted by the mid-1960s. Consequently, decades-long grassroots struggles for rights and power in Harlem, long considered a Black Mecca, have been underappreciated for their far-reaching influence upon this era.

In recent years, scholars of African American history have produced several notable works that prominently locate the contributions of Black communities in New York City within more expansive histories of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.² New scholarship has also focused on the forces of systemic racial oppression that spawned the oft-overlooked 1964 Harlem Rebellion, and the ways in which this uprising influenced national policies on crime and policing.³ Despite these recent publications, however, little work has been done to comprehensively analyze the significant struggles waged by Harlem communities for civil rights, human rights, and self-determination during the ten-year period of the Black Freedom Struggle preceding the 1964 Harlem Rebellion.

As a result, present scholarship largely maintains the problematic, yet popularly accepted narrative that explains urban rebellions as consequences of an

² Adina Back, “Up South in New York: The 1950s School Desegregation Struggles,” (PhD diss., New York University, 1997); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2006); Brian Purnell, *Fighting Jim Crow in the County of Kings: The Congress of Racial Equality in Brooklyn* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2013); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008); Clarence Taylor, ed., *Civil Rights in New York City: From World War II to the Giuliani Era* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

³ Michael Flamm, *In the Heat of the Summer: The New York Riots of 1964 and the War on Crime* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

oppressive societal “powder keg,” thereby denying conscious political agency to Black communities which sought to resist oppression and reform government in the years, months, and days leading up to these uprisings. This absence of a street-level analysis of the ten-year period of community activism preceding the Harlem Rebellion marginalizes the significant roles played by local people and grassroots leaders, including Ella Baker, Jesse Gray, Mae Mallory, and Malcolm X, in organizing Harlem residents to fight against racial oppression and demand a more equitable society. These narratives are essential for explaining the outbreak of urban uprisings in the 1960s not as “race riots,” but as rebellions against American Apartheid in the nation’s cities.

“The Whole Nation Will Move: Grassroots Organizing in Harlem and the Advent of the Long, Hot Summers,” addresses this gap by closely analyzing local, national, and global trends in grassroots campaigns for African American human rights and self-determination in Harlem in the decade immediately preceding the era of widespread urban rebellions in the United States. This project traces the development of a collective radical political consciousness in Harlem and analyzes how poor and working-class Black and Puerto Rican residents fueled an escalation of protest activity that pushed local and national civil rights organizations in more assertive, imaginative, and radical directions in the early 1960s. Forged through school boycotts, rent strikes, economic picket lines, and protests over police brutality, this popular consciousness and political action reflected frustrations over the limitations of racial liberalism in New York City and was mobilized to fight for self-determination and a more progressive form of urban governance. Through

participation in local organizing efforts to improve living conditions and combat institutional racism, some of the most marginalized communities in New York City developed a radical critique of urban power structures that challenged the legitimacy of an inherently oppressive society.

These trends also reveal a continuous resistance on the part of the city government to concede any demands of civil rights organizations for an equitable share in the city's economic, political, and social power structures beyond superficial, reformist political maneuverings. In turn, this dogged resistance—which included violent police repression of organizers, activists, and local people—spurred grassroots organizers to adopt more militant rhetoric and tactics as they fought to secure human rights and self-determination for African American communities in Harlem and throughout the city. This increasingly militant and radical organizing had profound influences on the political consciousness of local people in Harlem and shaped the political climate of the area in the early 1960s. The project thus frames the outbreak of the 1964 Harlem Rebellion as the result of a collective disillusionment with the repressive limitations of liberal governance to meaningfully address systemic racial oppression. Though a spontaneous act of police brutality provided the impetus for the 1964 Harlem Rebellion, the fatal shooting of 15-year-old James Powell that July occurred within a volatile political climate charged by increasingly repressive state violence that was employed to maintain the racial status quo as radical and revolutionary analyses were inspiring mass mobilization in Harlem and throughout the city.

Building upon the current historiographical trend of utilizing “local studies” of the Civil Rights Movement to examine a range of nationally significant themes and concepts, this project centers the experiences of local people in Harlem as a means of analyzing histories of racial oppression, community organization, and political movements in the urban north. My interdisciplinary research draws from extensive archival collections, along with existing and original oral history interviews, to illustrate how Black communities in the urban north shaped national debates around integration, direct action, human rights, community organization, self-determination, nonviolence, nationalism, and political power during the modern Civil Rights era. Through a close examination of the political education and activism of grassroots organizers, such as Ella Baker, Jesse Gray, Jack O’Dell, Mae Mallory, Malcolm X, and many others, the dissertation analyzes how Harlem leaders influenced these fundamental national debates through local campaigns for tenant rights, educational equality, economic empowerment, and police reform.

Though a local study of the Movement in Harlem, “The Whole Nation Will Move” also situates these struggles for rights and power within the national and global political contexts that they were fundamentally connected with. As an international hub of Black political thought and cultural production, Harlem was home to organizers, artists, intellectuals, and local people whose contributions to Black Freedom Struggles throughout the diaspora complicate popular narratives of the Civil Rights Movement, and challenge the geographies and periodization of the Black Power Movement. Pan-African political thought was a significant aspect of popular political consciousness and organizing in Harlem, and by the early 1960s,

African nationalism and independence movements had inspired a revolutionary consciousness throughout the diaspora and helped to fuel a surging radicalism in Harlem. By locating grassroots struggles for rights and power in Harlem within this broader context, this project analyzes the ways in which national and global liberation struggles informed local political action. Thus, “The Whole Nation Will Move” again, frames the outbreak of the rebellion in Harlem not as a “race riot,” but as a radical political expression in an era of global revolution.

Chapter Two, “A ‘Rising Tide’ Coming In,” analyzes the social forces in Harlem and beyond that contributed to the evolution of an insurgent Black political consciousness in the mid-1950s, and how that consciousness translated into political action. Through an examination of the various strands of national political thought and action that coalesced in Harlem in the early 20th Century, this chapter analyzes the era that laid the groundwork for movements for Black rights and power during the Civil Rights Era of the 1950s-60s.

Chapter Three, “In Harlem With A Revolutionary Dream,” analyzes how Jesse Gray, Mae Mallory, and Malcolm X built upon the radical traditions of the post-World War II era to shape a popular organizational shift away from middle-class, moderate approaches to civil rights and integration, and toward radical grassroots organizing for human rights and self-determination. The work of these three leaders from 1958-1959 intersected with a wide array of influential local, national, and international figures and demonstrated the ways in which local people in Harlem were mobilized in consciousness and empowered through action to engage in sustained struggles for rights and power in Harlem and beyond in the 1960s.

Chapter Four, “An Extremely Dangerous Luxury,” analyzes the outcomes and impacts of a confrontation between Harlem residents and the NYPD outside the 28th Precinct in the summer of 1959. This brief, yet dramatic demonstration marked the apex of months of local and national debates around nonviolence, self-defense, integration, and Black nationalism that had converged in Harlem that summer. Described as a “near riot,” this confrontation and its fallout represented a growing popular disillusionment with liberal approaches to addressing issues of institutional racism in New York City and helped to launch radical grassroots organizers into more prominent leadership roles in the city.

Chapter Five, “Majestic Lions of the Valleys and Plains,” examines the convergence of local, national, and global freedom struggles in Harlem from 1959-1963 and the emergence of what Dr. John Henrik Clarke described as the “New Afro-American Nationalism.” Through an exploration of the evolving actions and ideologies of Mae Mallory and Malcolm X during this period, along with their expansive networks, this chapter analyzes the formative roles played by local people in challenging racial oppression in the urban north and pushing the national Civil Rights Movement in more radical directions in the early 1960s.

Chapter Six, “Talking and Acting in Our Interest,” traces the development of both the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Northern Student Movement (NSM) in Harlem from 1960-1963 to analyze the ways in which local people shaped the emergence and evolution of national civil rights organizations. Beginning as interracial organizations dedicated to supporting the southern Civil Rights Movement, by 1963 these organizations shifted their focus to community-based

organizing for Black equality and empowerment in the urban north. Through the active involvement and influence of grassroots organizations and indigenous leaders, these organizations would transform their positions on integration, community-based organizing, self-determination, nationalism, and nonviolence, and in the process, emerge as leading forces in northern Black freedom struggles.

Chapter Seven, "Something's Gotta Be Wrong," examines the emergence, evolution, and impacts of the Harlem rent strikes of 1963-64 within the context of escalating demands for immediate rights and power in New York's Black and Puerto Rican communities. Through their involvement in the rent strikes, thousands of Harlem residents came face to face with the many sides of institutional racism in the city and consequently developed a more radical critique of the city's power structure. This chapter thus frames the outbreak of the 1964 Harlem Rebellion as the result of a collective disillusionment with the repressive limitations of liberal governance to meaningfully address systemic racial oppression.

CHAPTER 2

A 'RISING TIDE' COMING IN: THE BLACK MECCA AS URBAN MOVEMENT

CENTER, 1954-1957

In final analysis, Harlem is neither slum, ghetto, resort or colony, though it is in part all of them. It is—or promises to be—a race capital. –Alain Locke (1925)⁴

Just below a drawing of Roland Hayes on the front cover of the March 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic* magazine, the words “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro” were printed in large, bold font. The *Survey Graphic*, which mostly appealed to a readership interested in topics of social work and philanthropy, was inspired to publish the issue after the magazine’s editor met Alain Locke at a debutante dinner organized by Charles S. Johnson to honor the young artists, writers, and intellectuals of the “New Negro Movement.”⁵ This Movement represented the expressions of the social, artistic, and political consciousness of a new generation of African Americans, born after slavery, that converged in urban centers like Harlem and later Chicago during the Great Migrations. In his preface to the issue, titled “Harlem,” editor Alain Locke introduced readers to the social intricacies and dynamics of the neighborhood that provided the fertile ground for the development of this new generation of race women and men. “The reformers, the fighting advocates, the inner spokesmen, the poets, artists and social prophets are here,” Locke wrote, “and pouring in toward them are the fluid ambitious youth and pressing in upon them the migrant masses.” Though surrounding communities may have been aware of the social impacts of the

⁴ Alain Locke, “Harlem,” *Survey Graphic* 53 (1925): 629.

⁵ Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), x-xi.

Great Migration into Harlem and other urban centers around the First World War, Locke contended, they remained “largely unaware of the psychology of it, of the galvanizing shocks and reactions, which mark the social awakening and internal reorganization which are making a race out of its own disunited elements.”⁶ To Locke and many other conscious observers, this “social awakening” and unifying social reorganization that was taking place in Harlem signified the potential of the neighborhood as a “race capital,” a Black Mecca.

This vision of Harlem as a Black Mecca put forth by Locke and others of the Harlem Renaissance and broader New Negro Movement was not merely an observation of contemporary social phenomena—it was a proclamation of Black survival, achievement, and empowerment made possible through the active struggles of resilient communities. In other words, through the struggles of Black people to survive (and sometimes thrive) in a hostile city and remake a section of New York in their image, the groundwork was laid for a new generation of race leaders to emerge and struggle to remake the city, nation, and world *in their image*. Though there were certainly political, economic, and social forces unique to New York City in the early 20th Century that influenced the growth and development of Harlem’s Black communities, this same growth was often achieved *in spite of* various forces that restricted equal access to prosperity as white New Yorkers. It was, in fact, these conflicting forces of opportunity and repression that made Harlem unique and provided the backdrop for its canonization as a “race capital” of the world. Giving voice to this unique potential that Harlem represented for the Black

⁶ Locke, “Harlem,” 630.

world, writer James Weldon Johnson predicted in the same 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic* that “Harlem will become the intellectual, the cultural and the financial center for Negroes of the United States, and will exert a vital influence upon all Negro peoples.”⁷

Johnson’s words proved prophetic as Harlem’s community swelled in size, reputation, and influence in the following decades. New generations of artists, community leaders, scholars, and politicians entered into the fray, each influenced by the cultural and political milieu of the Black Mecca, and standing on the shoulders of those who had come before. By the 1960s, Harlem had fostered the development of a wide array of homegrown and migrant race leaders, such as Marcus Garvey, Audley Moore, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Ella Baker, Malcolm X, Mae Mallory, and Jesse Gray whose experiences in the neighborhood would shape political movements from the grassroots to international arenas for generations to follow.

This chapter will draw upon the traditions of Black political, social, and economic consciousness and struggle in the Black Mecca that laid the groundwork for the emergence of new directions in struggles for civil and human rights and Black empowerment during the Civil Rights Era of the 1950s-1960s in New York City. Much like Locke in “Harlem,” this chapter narrates and analyzes the social forces in Harlem and beyond that contributed to the evolution of an insurgent Black political consciousness in the mid-1950s, and how that consciousness translated into political action. The years from 1954 to 1957, particularly, represented a

⁷ James Weldon Johnson, “The Making of Harlem,” *Survey Graphic* 53 (1925): 639.

formative period in Harlem's development as a "movement center" in the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement.

As defined by sociologist Aldon Morris, a "movement center is a social organization within the community of a subordinate group, which mobilizes, organizes, and coordinates collective action aimed at attaining the common ends of that subordinate group." Although Morris's framework was constructed to analyze and explain the social forces that contributed to the development of "coordinated collective action" in a particular location, such as Montgomery, Alabama, and thus does not strictly apply to the case of Harlem with the neighborhood's amalgamation of generally uncoordinated ideologies, organizations, and interests, the framework provides a useful starting point for understanding how organizations and movements developed in Harlem and the neighborhood's place within the Civil Rights Movement. By 1964, Harlem's grassroots political scene would more closely resemble the "movement center" framework laid out by Morris, but it was during the gestation period between 1954-1957 that local activists drew upon the Black Mecca's traditions of resistance and liberation struggles to confront local and national issues and lay the groundwork for the transformative social movements of the early 1960s.



Nearly eleven years had passed since Harlem's last rebellion when Malcolm X returned to the neighborhood in June of 1954 to lead the Nation of Islam's Temple No. 7. In the wake of the Second World War, white hostility to Black claims of equality and mobility led to days of rebellion in 1943 following the shooting of a

Black veteran by a white police officer in Harlem. Malcolm Little had born witness to the rebellion as a young waiter and hustler, but after a stint in prison, returned to the neighborhood over a decade later as Malcolm X, convert to the Lost-Found Nation of Islam.

An Islamic sect born of the Black nationalism of the early 20th Century, the Nation of Islam was founded in Detroit by the enigmatic W.D. Fard in 1930. Just four years later, however, the Nation came under the direction of Elijah Muhammad after Fard mysteriously disappeared. Born Elijah Poole in 1897, Muhammad migrated north from rural Georgia and was later re-named by Fard, who proclaimed himself the incarnation of Allah, to reflect the former's status as the "messenger" of Allah. Poole had been born into the time period that historian Rayford Logan coined as the "nadir of American race relations." This "nadir," spanning from roughly 1875-1920, marked the most harrowing period in the African American experience since the conclusion of the Civil War.⁸ The period was an outcome of the reactionary overthrow of Reconstruction in the South that violently curbed African American economic, political, and social advancement and paved the way for the establishment of Jim Crow society.⁹ This reactionary war was waged most visibly through public lynchings, or extra-judicial killings, meant to make examples of Black

⁸ Historian Rhonda Y. Williams uses the date range of 1875-1920 to classify the nadir. See Rhonda Y. Williams, *Concrete Demands: The Search for Black Power in the 20th Century* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁹ In 1900, three years after Elijah Muhammad's birth, George Henry White gave an address to Congress in support of his anti-lynching bill in which he claimed that "since the end of the Civil War, fully fifty thousand of my race have been ignominiously murdered by mobs." White was the last surviving Black congressman elected during the Reconstruction era. See Benjamin R. Justesen, *George Henry White: An Even Chance in the Race of Life* (New Orleans: LSU Press, 2001), 286.

men, women, and children who dared to defy white-imposed societal norms aimed at repressing attempts at uplift. According to statistics from the Tuskegee Institute, between the time of Elijah Poole's birth and the time he first met Fard in Detroit in 1931, nearly two thousand African Americans nationwide had been victims of lynching.¹⁰

This period of rampant racial terrorism and violence had profound impacts upon a young Poole, who had come face to face with the brutal realities of southern racism as a child. When Elijah Poole was around 10-years-old, he witnessed the lynching of an 18-year-old African American man in Cordele, Georgia. According to biographer Claude Andrew Clegg III, this "traumatic experience stayed with Elijah for the rest of his life and certainly made him more susceptible to black separatist doctrines."¹¹ Furthermore, the young Elijah was particularly disturbed that this murder had taken place within a predominantly Black section of Cordele. Citing Muhammad's own remembrances of the event, Clegg claims that "Elijah could not understand how this could have happened to a young man 'in the midst of his own people,' while 'all our grown men right there in the section' watched and dared not intervene."¹² After witnessing a second lynching around 1920 when a Black man had been tied to a pickup truck and dragged through the streets of Macon, Poole

¹⁰ The exact number of recorded lynchings that occurred between 1897-1931, according to the Tuskegee Institute, is 1,928. "Lynchings: By Year and Race," University of Missouri-Kansas City, accessed October 1, 2016, <http://law2.umkc.edu/Faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchingyear.html/>.

¹¹ Claude Andrew Clegg, *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 10.

¹² Ibid.

eventually fled the South with his family in 1923, lamenting that he had experienced 'enough of the white man's brutality in Georgia to last me for 26,000 years.'¹³ Like many of the thousands of Black Southerners who sought reprieve in the North during the Great Migrations, what Poole and his family found upon their arrival in Detroit was merely another brand of the oppression they had suffered through in Georgia.

Another victim of such violence that drove Poole from the South was Earl Little, whose murder in East Lansing, Michigan in 1931 demonstrated that there was no sanctuary from racial terrorism to be found in the North. Little, a preacher and avid follower of Marcus Garvey and the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), was no stranger to the types of physical and psychological racial violence that brought Elijah Muhammad north and to the NOI in 1931. After having seen three of his brothers killed by white men (one by lynching), Little risked the same violence to promote Marcus Garvey's platform of liberation, nationalism, and racial pride for people of African descent. For this advocacy, Little met the same fate as his brothers in 1931, which was believed to have been at the hands of The Black Legion, a local white supremacist and terrorist organization. Though he paid the ultimate price for his militant advocacy of racial pride and independence in a country that was patently hostile to these notions, Little left an indelible legacy of protest and resistance for his progeny to embrace and build upon. Little's son, Malcolm, later said of his late father's racial advocacy, "the image of him that made me proudest

¹³ Ibid, 13.

was his crusading and militant campaigning with the words of Marcus Garvey,” a crusade that made him a “tough man” in young Malcolm’s mind.¹⁴

In spite of the immense hardships and sufferings of millions of African Americans throughout the nation during the nadir that Poole and Little lived through, this period witnessed a flowering of Black political consciousness and militancy that would influence generations of race leaders to follow. In New York, where the multifaceted realities of Jim Crow society assumed the form of urban racial ghettos, Black communities proved particularly receptive to political ideologies that offered views of alternative possibilities to the oppressive conditions under which they lived. One of the most influential figures in promoting race consciousness and militancy in the early 20th Century was Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican migrant who settled in Harlem in 1916. In Harlem, Garvey found a heterogeneous Black community from throughout the United States and African diaspora who brought with them a range of experiences with racial oppression and ideas for how they could get free.¹⁵ Settling within the invisible walls of a racial ghetto in northern Manhattan, this was the base to which Garvey’s Black nationalist approach to racial uplift was tailored and drew the most support from.

In 1917, with the help of Amy Ashwood and Amy Jacques, Garvey formed the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which “built its following by regaling black working-class people with nationalistic language, symbolism, [and]

¹⁴ Alex Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as Told to Alex Haley* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 6.

¹⁵ Rhonda Y. Williams, *Concrete Demands: The Search for Black Power in the 20th Century* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 22.

pageantry of racial pride,” according to Rhonda Y. Williams. “When Garvey spoke of the greatness of the race,” biographer E. David Cronon wrote, “Negroes everywhere could forget for a moment the shame of discrimination and the horrors of lynching.”¹⁶ Garvey’s emphasis on psychological empowerment for Black people was an imperative precursor to economic and political empowerment. In the context of the violence of Jim Crow society and the racial pogroms that were taking place throughout the nation in the early 20th Century (most notably in East St. Louis in 1917), Garvey’s preaching of racial consciousness that called Black communities to transformative action must be understood as an inherently radical intervention.

Although Garvey’s movement crumbled under the weight of organizational shortcomings, contentious relationships with other Black liberation groups, and government repression, his meteoric rise had formative impacts on the political development of generations of Black communities in Harlem and beyond. As Cronon notes, Garvey “achieved little in the way of permanent improvement for his people, but he did help to point out the fires that smolder in the Negro world.”¹⁷ Although he was certainly not alone in his efforts to fan these “smoldering” flames, his rhetoric and praxis of Black empowerment inspired a generation of leaders that emerged in his wake, including Audley Moore and Malcolm X, and is indicative of the relationships between political rhetoric, empowerment, and organizing in Harlem.¹⁸

¹⁶ E. David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1955), 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 4.

Furthermore, Garvey and the UNIA's advocacy of "black political autonomy and building an independent black community" foreshadowed struggles for Black self-determination in cities in the 1960s, undergirded by the notion that "the city is the Black man's land," as James Boggs put it in 1966.¹⁹

Although Garvey's influence waned in the post-war years, his legacy was rekindled in the 1950s as African nations fought for independence from colonial powers and Black nationalist ideologies resurged in Harlem and the United States. Through his conversion to the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X seized the torch for a new generation of African Americans who were ready to be "inflamed."²⁰ Though Malcolm had great successes in establishing and organizing temples in Boston and Philadelphia just months before arriving in Harlem in 1954, the opportunity to lead the storefront Temple on the corner of West 116th Street and Lenox Avenue in Central Harlem felt different to him. This appointment provided the young minister with a chance to return to Harlem, where he had come of age as a young hustler and learned the social intricacies of the neighborhood and its peoples. More importantly,

¹⁸ For extended narratives and analyses of struggles for Black empowerment, equality, and liberation in New York City during the Civil Rights era, see Williams, *Concrete Demands*; Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2006); Martha Biondi, *To Stand And Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹⁹ Williams, *Concrete Demands*, 20; James Boggs, *Racism and the Class Struggle: Further Pages from a Black Worker's Notebook* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970).

²⁰ At a May 1963 rally in Harlem to support "Project C" in Birmingham, a "moderate black minister" told the crowd of 2,000 chanting for Malcolm X, 'I did not come here to inflame you,' to which a voice from the crowd responded, 'We want to be inflamed!' Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty* (New York: Random House, 2008), 291.

however, this specific appointment represented to Malcolm a unique opportunity to grow the Nation of Islam and spread its teachings of Black liberation and empowerment in ways that were not possible in any other single temple. Temple No. 7 was located in an international city with a Black population that would grow from 750,000 to over one million in its five boroughs in the decade from 1950-1960.²¹ Moreover, the Temple's physical place within the Black Mecca situated the NOI and Malcolm within the transformative ideological spaces that Harlem had historically nurtured and sustained. Upon his arrival in Harlem, therefore, Malcolm was stepping into a grand political arena that would profoundly influence his ideological and political development.

One of the most well-known landmarks in Harlem's political landscape that Malcolm would become intimately acquainted with was "Speakers' Corner." Just ten blocks northwest of Temple No. 7, the corner of 125th Street and Seventh Avenue served as an informal, open-air classroom, theatre, and church, depending on the orator and audience. From spring to fall, speakers called out to small, transient crowds from stepladders and makeshift platforms, "raining abuse" on Jim Crow society, deconstructing systemic racial oppression, and exhorting potential converts to nationalist organizations. The common sight at Speakers' Corner, reporter Peter Goldman wrote, was "a lone man on a wobbly pine platform or a ladder...squalling at little crowds of black people who tend to get bored and drift on unless you raise

²¹ Ira Rosenwaik, *Population History of New York City* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1972), 190.

some hell.”²² Although Goldman painted Speakers’ Corner as a carnivalesque scene, these orators brought Black radical thought and analysis to the street-level and played a significant role in popularizing critical political consciousness across generations. “Speakers’ Corner made it easy to raise critical questions, to be concerned about what’s happening locally and internationally,” Harlem native and author Toni Cade Bambara later wrote. “It shaped the political perceptions of at least three generations. It certainly shaped mine.”²³

Speakers’ Corner, and the expressive political culture that it characterized, was significant not only for helping to shape the racial consciousness of Harlem residents, but also for promoting connections between different generations of struggles for Black liberation. Longtime residents of the neighborhood who had experienced different phases of struggles for equality in the early decades of the 20th Century served as bridges to connect pre- and post-war eras of organizing with the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement in the mid- to late- 1950s. At Speakers Corner, these generations could not only debate, but also meet and connect to chart new directions in the old struggle for liberation. Through his connection with a former Garveyite, Lewis Michaux, Malcolm X gained entrée to Speakers’ Corner and was aided in his rise in Harlem’s competitive street-speaking scene.

Michaux, whose National Memorial bookstore was a landmark in Harlem and key site for the dissemination of Black radical thought, served as a “gateway” to

²² Peter Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 53.

²³ Carter A. Mathes, "Scratching the Threshold: Textual Sound and Political Form in Toni Cade Bambara's 'The Salt Eaters'" *Contemporary Literature* 50, no. 2 (2009): 363-96.

Harlem's past, where Malcolm and other young nationalists expanded their knowledge of leaders and movements in the neighborhood and cultivated new analyses in the late 1950s.²⁴ According to scholar William Sales, though Malcolm "received formal exposure to Black nationalism" through the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, it "was tempered and altered in the political culture of Harlem with its street corner debaters, orators, and radical intellectuals."²⁵ As Malcolm immersed himself in Harlem's radical political scenes while organizing Temple Seven, he built upon his personal connections to Black radical traditions to develop his reputation as an exceptional orator, intellectual, and leader. In the following years, local, national, and global events and trends would coalesce to propel Malcolm and his brand of Black political empowerment to the forefront of struggles for Black liberation in the Black Mecca and beyond.

The *Brown* Decision and the Fight for Educational Equality in Harlem

In May 1954, just weeks before Malcolm had made his return and began his rise in Harlem, the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* altered the course of struggles for Black liberation in the city, nation, and world. Influenced by the testimony of psychologist and Harlem resident Dr. Kenneth Clark, Chief Justice Earl Warren and the United States Supreme Court ruled that the doctrine of "separate but equal" that had legally sanctioned racial segregation for over 50 years was "inherently unequal." The Court's ruling went beyond the initial intent of the lawsuit to ensure equal educational opportunity for African American children to

²⁴ Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, 53.

²⁵ William W. Sales, Jr., *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 59.

challenge the legitimacy of the institution of racial segregation that underwrote the segregation of schools. For this reason, an editorial in the *New York Amsterdam News* referred to the *Brown* decision as a “second emancipation for the Negro in America.”²⁶

Though formal school segregation had been declared unconstitutional in New York State in 1938, schools in the city remained heavily racially segregated and unequal well through the 1950s and beyond. Several factors contributed to this maintenance of school segregation, many of which were the result of public policies sponsored by city government. Certainly, residential segregation was a determining factor in educational segregation and was driven by both “de facto” and “de jure” practices and policies. Additionally, public policies determining the drawing of school district lines and location of new school construction served to effectively maintain and enforce segregated schools. Furthermore, teacher quality and assignment, student population and overcrowding, and the physical condition of school buildings all impacted the quality of education that Black students received and were heavily influenced by public policy.

Recognizing governmental culpability in the quality of education their children were receiving, Black parents and civil rights activists targeted school segregation and its root causes, like residential segregation, in the 1950s. As historian Martha Biondi explains, “civil rights leaders exposed this governmental complicity in maintaining racially defined schools, calling into question the accuracy

²⁶ "The Second Emancipation," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 22, 1954.

of the phrase *de facto* to describe racial segregation in New York City public schools."²⁷

It was not until the *Brown* case, however, that public officials recognized a sense of urgency in entertaining the complaints of parents and civil rights leaders regarding the city's schools. Contrary to popular understandings of struggles for educational equality, as Biondi notes, New York City was one of the first places in which the *Brown* decision "sparked a push for integration."²⁸ It was the expert testimony of Dr. Clark during the Supreme Court hearings that finally persuaded city officials, including Mayor Robert Wagner, to take interest in matters of educational equality, however ineffectual this interest would prove to be.

Two weeks before the Supreme Court reached their decision on May 17, the Intergroup Committee on New York's Public Schools held a conference titled "Children Apart," which called attention to the adverse affects of educational segregation and inequality in the city.²⁹ Leaders of the group, which represented a coalition of 28 community organizations, included influential figures including Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark, Judge Hubert Delany, and Ella Baker, an NAACP leader and fierce advocate of grassroots leadership who would go on to mentor the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) six years later.³⁰ The momentum generated by the conference, which was attended by over

²⁷ Martha Biondi, *To Stand And Fight*, 241.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 246.

²⁹ C. G. Fraser, "Harlem Students Learn Inferiority," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 1, 1954.

175 parents, teachers, and civic leaders, coupled with the *Brown* decision, spurred the Board of Education to heed Dr. Clark's calls for a study to investigate segregation in the city's schools. Ultimately however, like many government-sponsored studies or investigations, the study and city's subsequent formation of the Commission on Integration represented little more than a token concession to the pressure brought upon City Hall by the *Brown* decision and Black community leaders.³¹

This mobilization did, however, provide a foundation for heightened community action in Harlem. According to historian Barbara Ransby, the conference "primed" the activists, educators, social workers, and parents in attendance for action in the wake of the *Brown* decision and "kicked off" several years of protests for school desegregation and reform.³² Among those who were "primed for action," was a group of Black mothers, including Mae Mallory and later known as the "Harlem Nine," who would mount their attack on educational inequality and institutional racism in the years to follow.³³

Drawing upon the rhetoric of activists and organizers in the post-war era, these parents, teachers, and civic leaders in Harlem drew explicit connections

³⁰ Adina Back, "Exposing the 'Whole Segregation Myth': The Harlem Nine and New York City's School Desegregation Battles," in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, ed. Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 69; Biondi, *To Stand And Fight*, 246.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Barbara Ransby, "Cops, Schools, and Communism: Local Politics and Global Ideologies—New York City in the 1950s," in *Civil Rights in New York City: From World War II to the Giuliani Era*, ed. Clarence Taylor (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 36.

³³ Back, "Exposing the 'Whole Segregation Myth,'" 70.

between northern and southern forms of racial oppression to locate their struggles for equal educational opportunities within a larger, national context of oppression and liberation struggles. Mae Mallory, for instance, argued that educational inequality in the city exposed the fallacies of the “whole segregation myth” believed by white audiences that understood racial segregation to be the exclusive trademark of southern states.³⁴ By invoking southern racism within this context, northern organizers like Mallory effectively dramatized the forms of institutional racism that they faced to debunk popular myths that painted northern cities as beyond the purview of Jim Crow society.

Surely, most Black residents of Harlem needed little convincing that they lived under a northern style of Jim Crow society; the contradictions in rhetoric of equality and progress in the North were stark to anyone who headed down Fifth Avenue south of 110th Street and compared the quality of education, housing, employment, and law enforcement found there to conditions in Harlem. However, by drawing connections to racial oppression in the South, northern organizers brought these contradictions into popular focus and caught the attention of media outlets and public officials who balked at comparisons to the Jim Crow South. In the post-war era and beyond, these comparisons that Mallory and other educational activists invoked, were also frequently, and effectively, drawn to address the functions and practices of the police in Harlem.

³⁴ Ibid, 81.

Struggles for Police Reform in the Jim Crow North

As historians of the struggles for civil rights in post-war New York City have pointed out, northern organizers increasingly came to identify police brutality within a national context of racial violence against African American communities. Additionally, as the nation held up the banner of “democracy” in the face of a war against fascism in Europe and Japan, African Americans and their allies on the home front called out the contradictions evident in the freedoms they were denied.³⁵ In Harlem, white officers of the NYPD were often the most visible representations of this denial of freedom, as they were seen as the enforcement arm of white supremacy in the face of swelling demands for Black liberation in the post-war era and beyond.

The underlying factor of this increased Black militancy, as Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. elaborated upon in *Marching Blacks* in 1944, was “that racial prejudice had finally come under the attack of the new Negro and the new white man.” In his lyrical style forged from years at the pulpit of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, Powell referred to this growing consciousness and activism as a “rising tide” that “bigots in high places tried to hold back.” While he stopped short of calling the police by name, Powell proclaimed that “it is they and men of their kind, interested in preserving the status quo of dual democracy, who, in my opinion, stimulated...every race riot in America in 1943.”³⁶

³⁵ Biondi, *To Stand And Fight*, 72-73. For extended analyses of post-war police abuses and struggles for reform in New York City, also see Marilyn S. Johnson, *Street Justice: A History of Police Violence in New York City* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

While Powell's analysis emphasized the institutional nature of racist repression in the city and nation, his successor as Harlem's representative on the City Council, Benjamin Davis, Jr., brought that analysis to a concrete, street-level view in his 1947 pamphlet, *Lynching Northern Style: Police Brutality*. Davis, a lawyer and Communist Party member, had been elected to fill Powell's seat when the latter embarked upon his first congressional campaign in 1943. As a response to the inaction of NYPD commissioner Arthur Wallander in 26 cases of alleged brutality brought to his attention, the pamphlet decried this rampant police abuse and tactfully put forth an analysis that identified the functions of lynching and police violence within the context of institutional enforcement of white supremacy. In the wake of increased Black demands for equality in the post-war era, the pamphlet echoed the sentiments held by many Black residents of Harlem in the post-war era and beyond, that police violence was employed to "create the impression that Negroes are unworthy of the full citizenship which they rightfully demand." Put more simply, the pamphlet argued that the recent escalation of police violence was designed to "keep the Negroes 'in their place.'"³⁷

Judge Hubert Delany, member of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and of the Intergroup Committee on New York's Public Schools, was no stranger to the realities of northern policing that many residents of Harlem lived with. In 1951, three years before the Committee's "Children Apart" conference and the *Brown* decision, white NYPD officers savagely beat Delany's nephew outside of his home on Bradhurst

³⁶ Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., *Marching Blacks* (New York: Dial Press, 1973), 158-159.

³⁷ Biondi, *To Stand And Fight*, 72-73.

Avenue in Harlem. William Delany, a 29-year-old Black man who had been left crippled by the polio virus as a child, was beaten unconscious and kicked in the face after the white officers ordered him off his own front stoop.³⁸ The beating of William Delany came during a five-year period from 1947-1952 in which 46 unarmed African Americans were killed by police in the state of New York, according to investigations of the NAACP.³⁹

In response to the brutal beating of his nephew, Judge Delany penned a biting statement about police brutality that ran on the front page of the weekly Harlem newspaper the *Amsterdam News*.⁴⁰ In his response, Delany charged “police in Harlem consider that they have the God-given right in a poor community...to keep the peace with the nightstick and blackjack whenever a Negro attempts to question their right to restrict the individual’s freedom of movement.” To further emphasize the weight and urgency of his criticism of the heavy-handed practices of police officers, Delany accurately pointed out “such actions on their part lead to riots.” Far from hyperbole, Delany’s analysis drew from a knowledge base that was common sense to many Harlem residents who had born witness to the police-incited rebellions of 1935 and 1943.

³⁸ Ibid, 193; “Justice Delany Raps Brutality,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 2, 1951.

³⁹ Biondi, *To Stand And Fight*, 60.

⁴⁰ Coincidentally, the article ran alongside another covering Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP’s challenge to segregated schools in Clarendon County, South Carolina in *Briggs v. Elliot*, which became incorporated into the *Brown* case. “Justice Delany Raps Brutality,” *Amsterdam News*, June 2, 1951.

Ten years after the 1943 rebellion, and two years after Delany's article, a 1953 controversy involving the NYPD and FBI finally gave way to a modicum of police reform in New York City. Following an investigation into the brutal beatings of Jacob Jackson, a Black truck driver, and his neighbor Samuel Crawford in Hell's Kitchen in 1952, word got out of a secret agreement that existed between the NYPD and FBI to block federal oversight of police brutality cases in the city.⁴¹ Protests ensued and at the behest of a coalition of 19 community organizations known as The Permanent Coordination Committee on Police and Minority Groups, which included the NAACP, ACLU, National Urban League, and the AFL, the NYPD established the Civilian Complaint Review Board.⁴²

This internal panel, staffed by three non-uniformed members of the NYPD who served in administrative roles within the Community Relations Division was little more than window dressing for a corrupt and inherently oppressive institution. The panel conducted no hearings—its members simply reviewed reports from commanding officers and recommended actions to the Police Commissioner on the basis of the reports they received.⁴³ Furthermore, the Police Commissioner was not mandated to implement any recommendations of this advisory panel. From its inception, the internal nature of the CCRB drew the ire of Black and Latinx populations who felt an internal review board could not possibly

⁴¹ Johnson, *Street Justice*, 22-25.

⁴² Johnson, *Street Justice*, 224; Vincent J. Cannato, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 156.

⁴³ James R. Hudson, "Police Review Boards and Police Accountability," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 36, no. 4 (1971): 523.

be impartial in handling complaints levied against the NYPD. According to Councilman Earl Brown, the new review board was nothing more than “the same old system with a new coat of whitewash.”⁴⁴

As tensions continued to rise with the growth of the modern Civil Rights Movement in the mid-1950s at local and national levels, the internal-review structure of the CCRB came under increased fire from Black and Latinx populations who were disproportionately targeted and mistreated by an overwhelmingly white NYPD. However, the only modification of the CCRB’s procedures, prior to its short-lived reform under Mayor John Lindsay in 1966, came in May 1955 in response to community demands. In essence, the only modifications to the CCRB made in this concession were the ability of complainants to file a claim of misconduct at any precinct and the shift of handling of complaints to the Deputy Commissioner of Community Relations.⁴⁵

It took less than a week for complaints to flow into the new system, one of the first of which came from nine-year-old Elbert Dukes, a Harlem resident who filed the charges with the assistance of the New York Branch of the NAACP. Dukes, an honor student at PS 181, was beaten with a pair of handcuffs by officers inside the 28th Precinct, where his mother found him handcuffed to a steam pipe with blood on his head, face, neck, and chest.⁴⁶ While Dukes’ case drew scant attention

⁴⁴ Johnson, *Street Justice*, 227.

⁴⁵ "Police make it Easier for Public to File Complaints of Brutality," *New York Times*, May 16, 1955.

⁴⁶ "Boy, 9, Says Cops Brutally Beat Him," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 21, 1955.

from media outlets and civil rights organizations in New York, the death of 14-year-old Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi just months later sent shockwaves through the city, nation, and world.

The Murder of Emmett Till and a National Awakening

On August 20, 1955, Emmett Till boarded a train from Chicago, Illinois to the Mississippi Delta to visit his relatives in the town of Money. Like many Black northerners whose families had fled the south during the Great Migrations, Emmett Till still had relatives in the South that he would visit on occasion. Over a forty year span, this mass migration from the South brought Chicago's Black population from around forty thousand to half a million, with 75 percent of these migrants coming from the state of Mississippi. Of the myriad factors that drove Black communities north, one of the most pressing, as Elijah Muhammad testified, was the widespread terrorism inflicted by reactionary white supremacist organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council. With an intention of violently curbing efforts at Black uplift, this reactionary terrorism was particularly evident in the wake of the *Brown v. Board* decision, as multiple politically-motivated racist murders took place in the Delta in the months and days preceding Till's arrival on August 21st. This string of violence visited the 14-year-old one week after his arrival when he was kidnapped, brutally beaten, and shot for allegedly saying "bye, baby" to a white woman in a store in Money. His body was found three days later in the Tallahatchie River tied to the heavy metal fan of a cotton-gin.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, eds., *Voices of Freedom* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 1-15.

Echoing the sentiments of the pamphlet Ben Davis published in 1947 regarding police enforcement of white supremacy in the North, the two men who had savagely murdered Till believed it their mission to uphold herrenvolk society in the South. According to reporter William Bradford Huie, a white journalist who had interviewed the acquitted murderers, the two men felt they “had to make an example of a young man like Emmett Till.” “They were told,” Huie said when asked about their motives, “that with the beginning of the Supreme Court decision, this was a war.”⁴⁸ If it weren’t already clear to Black communities throughout the nation, the abdication of justice in the face of Till’s gruesome murder was an unmistakable indicator that each step toward Black equality would be met with potentially lethal pushback. It was also a call-to-action for a new generation of young African Americans who were both terrified and enraged by Till’s death.

Anne Moody, who in a few short years would become active in the NAACP, CORE, and SNCC, was also 14-years-old in Mississippi at the time of Till’s death. In her 1968 autobiography, Moody recollected, “before Emmett Till’s murder I had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me—the fear of being killed because I was black.” Shortly thereafter, however, this fear turned to anger. “I hated the white men who murdered Emmett Till and I hated all the other whites who were responsible for the countless murders,” Moody reflected, “But I also hated Negroes. I hated them for not standing up and doing something about the murders.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ William Bradford Huie interview with Blackside, Inc., August 30, 1979, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.

The psychological impact of Till's murder reached young African Americans far beyond the state of Mississippi, as well, and inspired many to action when they came of age. Frances Beal, who grew up in Binghamton, New York, was the same age as Till and Moody in 1954 when she heard of Till's death. "It was...some sort of awakening...like, that could happen to me," Beal later reflected. "It created in you a feeling that something needed to be done about this." Beal became active in struggles for equality three years later as a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.⁵⁰ William Strickland, a native of Roxbury, Massachusetts who would later become National Director of the Northern Student Movement (NSM) in Harlem, recalled, "the thing that I think struck the consciousness of everyone and subsequently was the reason, I later discovered, why many people of my generation joined SNCC was the murder of Emmett Till, because *Jet* [magazine] had his pictured displayed."⁵¹

Jet's coverage of Emmett Till's disfigured corpse left indelible impacts on the consciousness of African Americans and people the world over. Mamie Till Bradley Mobley, the mother of the slain boy, had decided to have an open-casket funeral for her son in Chicago, stating that she "wanted the whole world to see" what had been done to her son.⁵² According to historian Jeffery O.G. Ogbar, these images "magnified

⁴⁹ Anne Moody, *Coming Of Age In Mississippi* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1992), 127-147.

⁵⁰ Williams, *Concrete Demands*, 64.

⁵¹ William Lamar Strickland interview with Joseph Mosnier, September 23, 2011, Civil Rights History Project, National Museum of African American History and Culture.

the salience of racial oppression like no single event in recent times had.” Indeed, the hyper-visibility of racial oppression and brutality in Till’s murder, and its tacit acceptance by the state of Mississippi and federal government, sounded a “clarion call” to African Americans far beyond the South and inspired a new generation of activists and leaders that would shape the Civil Rights Movement in their image in the following years.⁵³

In New York, coverage of Till’s murder and trial was carried in newspapers for months, and was a focal point of sermons, speeches, mass meetings, and rallies. Crediting northern struggles with “stimulating” awareness of racial violence and mobilizing protest on a national level in the post-war era, Biondi argues that the agency of Till’s mother and uncle, and the interest in Till’s murder from northern Black politicians and media outlets, “built on...strategies in earlier struggles.”⁵⁴ While the influence of strategies used in post-war struggles against racial violence in New York, such as the NAACP’s visible anti-lynching campaigns, can certainly be seen in the ways that Till’s murder was publicized and mobilized around. In turn, this mobilization energized and influenced new directions in local and national struggles for Black liberation.

In analyzing the impacts of Till’s murder on political mobilization, Rhonda Y. Williams referred to 1955 as a “year of responses.” This was particularly evident in Harlem, as individuals and organizations were spurred to action in ways both old

⁵² Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 5-6.

⁵³ Jeffrey O.G Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 39.

⁵⁴ Biondi, *To Stand And Fight*, 206-207.

and new that year. In the days, weeks, and months following Till's death, advertisements filled newspapers like the *Amsterdam News* promoting voter registration campaigns. Crowds thronged to mass meetings and rallies in Harlem organized by established organizations like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the NAACP. Commenting on a meeting held at Williams Institutional (CME) Church in early October, African American city councilman Earl Brown wrote in an *Amsterdam News* column, "Never before in Harlem's history has a crowd been so big and shown so much determination to do something about the way their people are brutalized in their own country. They want action."⁵⁵ At another early October rally organized by the New York Branch of the NAACP, 3,000 people packed the Lawson Auditorium on 125th Street while another 5,000 reportedly "pushed against police lines" outside. Inside the auditorium, New York Branch president Russell P. Crawford reminded the crowd that "the conditions which spawned these tragic happenings are part of our America's dilemma and exist in some degree throughout the country."⁵⁶ Crawford went on to reference racial discrimination in housing, education, and employment in the city as evidence of the oppression that persisted in the North as well.

Although these demonstrations and campaigns were carried out with a greater sense of urgency in the latter months of 1955, they represented relatively moderate approaches to civil rights agitation. As Councilman Brown noted in

⁵⁵ Earl Brown, "Aroused Race," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 8, 1955.

⁵⁶ T.J. Sellers, "Wave of Terror Sweeps Miss.!", *New York Amsterdam News*, October 8, 1955. According to Sellers, Mamie Till Bradley was scheduled to make an appearance at the rally, but suffered a "nervous collapse" days before and was hospitalized.

response to the October meeting at Williams Institutional (CME) Church, “the Negro people are not only ready to follow their leaders in a battle for equality...they are often ahead of them. This is the situation today.”⁵⁷ Despite the large turnout, the resolutions passed at the NAACP rally at Lawson Auditorium the same week were indicative of the relatively conservative nature of the organization’s approach that would be challenged in New York in the following months. The gathering voted to: send resolutions to Mississippi Governor Hugh White and President Eisenhower protesting the handling of the Till trial and the “atmosphere of lawlessness in the state; appeal to New York voters to prevent white supremacists from being elected to Congress; and call for federal investigations into denial of voting rights in the recent Democratic Primary in Mississippi and the recent murders in the state.⁵⁸ Though these resolutions were noteworthy for their approach in seeking federal intervention in matters of civil rights, which would become common practice throughout the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement, it was becoming clear that a growing number of Black communities were anxious to explore new routes toward liberation. In Harlem, this was particularly evident in the expanding grassroots organizing efforts of Ella Baker, as well as the budding popularity of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam in the late 1950s.

Ella Baker, the NAACP, and the Struggle for Grassroots Leadership

Though the New York branch of the NAACP had been active for decades in struggles for equality in education, housing, and employment, by the 1950s the

⁵⁷ Earl Brown, “Aroused Race,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 8, 1955.

⁵⁸ T.J. Sellers, “Wave of Terror Sweeps Miss.!” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 8, 1955.

branch's influence at the grassroots had significantly waned. This trend was attributable, in part, to heightened government suppression of political dissidents in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As the anti-Communist repression of the Cold War-era expanded in the city and nation under the influence of Senator Eugene McCarthy, the NAACP was mired with internal turmoil over Communist involvement in the organization. Many of the organization's more militant members and leaders were consequently ousted as Communists and those remaining tread a more conservative path so as to avoid further persecution.

This turmoil and government repression soured the branch and organization for many members, leading to a steep decline in membership from 1946 to 1952. Even before the affliction of McCarthyism hit the branch, though, some of its more progressive members had become critical of the branch's effectiveness. Ella Baker, for instance, had resigned as secretary of the branch in 1946, citing an air of condescension toward local people and a general antagonism toward grassroots involvement.⁵⁹ Though Baker would remain involved in the branch for several more years, the nature of her disillusionment was an early indicator of a trending popular movement away from established organizations and towards grassroots political involvement in Harlem in the mid- to late-1950s.

While the Branch took a more activist and grassroots approach to civil rights agitation under Baker's leadership from 1952-1953, particularly in regards to demonstrations for educational equality and police reform, this heightened mobilization was more a reflection of Baker's direction than a sustained

⁵⁹ Biondi, *To Stand And Fight*, 168-169.

organizational focus at that moment. That Ella Baker moved the branch's headquarters from their downtown location to Harlem is indicative of the organizational philosophy that she envisioned for the branch. Baker sought to center and empower local people in organizational direction, decision-making, and action. In the struggles she led for school desegregation and police reform during her tenure as president and beyond, Baker emphasized grassroots participation and tactics, while also building coalitions of local community organizations.

After playing a central role in organizing the "Children Apart" conference and lobbying city officials with the Intergroup Committee on New York's Public Schools, Baker decided to change her focus "from debate to direct action."⁶⁰ Certainly, direct action campaigns were not new phenomena in struggles for civil rights in New York City. This paradigm shift for Baker, however, was symptomatic of a growing trend in freedom struggles in the city as local and national events spurred local people to demand and organize for more immediate action. For Baker, this shift in focus necessitated a shift in organizational approach from established, mainstream civil rights organizations, like the NAACP, to independent, grassroots political organizing capable of mobilizing broader populations for political action.

In response to reticence from City Hall to address educational segregation and inequality on the heels of the *Brown* decision and the ineffectiveness of the New York NAACP in demanding enforcement of the decision, Baker helped to found an organization called Parents in Action Against Educational Discrimination. A grassroots organization of primarily Black and Puerto Rican parents, Parents in

⁶⁰ Ransby, "Cops, Schools, and Communism," 37.

Action employed a variety of tactics, including direct action confrontations, to fight for integrated schools and greater parental involvement in educational policy making. As Ransby argues, Baker's formation of Parents in Action represented an effort to "circumvent the NAACP's paralytic bureaucracy and 'go slow' politics."⁶¹

As Ella Baker sought to connect people and organizations in struggle through local coalitions in Harlem, she also sought to connect local and national struggles for civil rights in ways that emphasized grassroots political mobilization. Just months after the murder of Emmett Till, Rosa Parks decided that she "was tired of giving in" to white supremacy when a bus driver in Montgomery asked her to give up her seat to a white passenger.⁶² In the days that followed, E.D. Nixon, Fred Gray, and Jo Ann Robinson and the Women's Political Council launched a boycott of the bus company that would grow to last 381 days and signal the advent of a sustained national Movement for Civil Rights. To provide support for the boycott from the North, Baker helped to organize a coalition of political, labor, religious, and civil rights groups known as In Friendship. The coalition helped to organize fundraising events in New York City in 1956, including a May rally at Madison Square Garden, to support the efforts of the Montgomery Improvement Association, along with lesser-known struggles for civil rights in Clarendon County, SC and Yazoo, MS. In these efforts, Baker was determined to provide much needed material funds for southern Black communities, as well as to foster the development and empowerment of indigenous

⁶¹ Ibid, 38.

⁶² Rosa Parks, "Tired of Giving In': The Launching of the Montgomery Bus Boycott," in *Sisters in Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, eds. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 61.

leadership. This emphasis on indigenous leadership was reflective of Baker's work in New York with the NAACP, as well as her travels beyond the state as a field secretary, and contributed to the flowering of grassroots organizing that would characterize Black freedom struggles in the early 1960s.⁶³

The Grassroots Organizing and Leadership of Malcolm X and the NOI

As Ella Baker and the New York Branch of the NAACP struggled to adapt to the repressive political climate of the Cold War era and move towards a grassroots approach to civil rights, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam sought to mobilize Black outrage in new organizational directions in the late 1950s. Like Baker, who drew from her post-war organizing roots to influence the grassroots trajectory of Black freedom struggles in the mid-1950s, in the wake of Emmett Till's murder the Nation of Islam found fertile ground for cultivating the Black Mecca's traditions of militant Black nationalism to mobilize local people in ways that would drastically impact the evolution of the Civil Rights Movement. Influenced by the nationalist doctrines of Garvey, the Nation of Islam fervently critiqued the integrationist approach to civil rights advocacy that undergirded the *Brown* decision and Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Elijah Muhammad, who claimed a causal relationship between acts of lynching and increased NOI recruitment, argued that the murder of Emmett Till was a "lesson" for those who sought integration with an inhumane white society.⁶⁴ The NOI's critique of this approach rested on a rejection of the notion of integrating into a morally and politically corrupt society built upon the subjugation and exploitation

⁶³ Ransby, "Cops, Schools, and Communism," 50.

⁶⁴ Ogbar, *Black Power*, 39.

of Black bodies and minds. This sentiment was later poignantly expressed by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*, as he queried in a long-form essay on the NOI, “Do I really *want* to be integrated into a burning house?”⁶⁵

Through another seminal question raised in his best-selling inquisition of American society, Baldwin urged his readers to consider the historical context of the NOI’s emergence as a national force in the late 1950s and early 1960s. “Why,” Baldwin asked, “were [Harlem audiences] *hearing* it now, since this was not the first time it had been said?”⁶⁶ In other words, what factors were responsible for the increasingly popular reception of the NOI’s message at the dawn of the 1960s, considering that Elijah Muhammad had been preaching the same message for nearly thirty years by that point? In a response that foreshadowed Martin Luther King Jr.’s later proclamation that “the arc of history is long, but bends toward justice,” Baldwin suggested that the NOI’s growth in organizational size and influence in shaping political discourse was the natural result of a historical cycle. Though careful to not “minimize [Muhammad’s] peculiar role,” Baldwin argued “in a way...it is not he who has done it but time. Time catches up with kingdoms and crushes them...time reveals the foundations on which any kingdom rests, and eats at those foundations.”

Citing global examples of imperialist aggression that exposed the inherent contradictions of Euro-centric doctrines of “civilization,” “Christianity,” and “morality,” Baldwin argued “time has passed, and in that time the Christian world

⁶⁵ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 94.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 50.

has revealed itself as morally bankrupt and politically unstable.”⁶⁷ Though Baldwin’s analysis explains rising opposition and resistance as a natural consequence of oppressive actions, the agency of individuals and communities in organizing and propelling this resistance must also be given consideration. An analysis of the rise of Black radical thought and organizing, generally, and the NOI, specifically, in the late 1950s, therefore, also necessitates a street-level examination of how ideas, analyses, and resources were mobilized to empower communities, challenge oppressive institutions, and influence the direction of broader social movements.

Certainly, time brought no shortage of revelations of a morally and politically corrupt American society in the 1950s. And as continuous acts of racial violence demonstrated a white backlash to major gains in the struggle for Black equality, the Nation’s critique of the burgeoning southern Civil Rights Movement became increasingly well-received in northern cities. Indeed, a growing number saw the NOI as a useful alternative to integrationist organizing as Black Americans received a clear message that steps toward their advancement would be met with violent retribution and that local and federal governments were not willing to intercede for their protection. Echoing the sentiments of Anne Moody in response to Till’s murder, many critiqued the futility of any reliance upon local and federal authorities for protection, while also challenging the lack of initiative within Black communities to protect themselves, and thus found possible recourse in the theology and praxis of the NOI.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 51.

As Ogbar notes, however, “stories about lynching alone could not convince black people that...Islamic black nationalism was a viable alternative to Christianity and integration.”⁶⁸ As Muhammad’s experiences with racial violence as a child in the South had influenced his espousal of doctrines of separatism and self-defense, the harsh realities of racial oppression experienced in northern Black communities found a voice in Elijah Muhammad and his dynamic minister, Malcolm X. “One did not need to prove to a Harlem audience that all white men were devils,” Baldwin wrote, “they were merely glad to have, at last, divine corroboration of their experience.”⁶⁹ Still, however compelling many found the rhetoric of the NOI to be, few were lining up outside the doors of Temple No. Seven to convert in the mid-1950s. According to Goldman, Malcolm’s early years with Temple No. Seven were “a Sisyphean labor,” characterized by the young minister “begging and badgering” Harlem residents to “hear the word of God,” but rarely able to assemble more than a handful at a time to listen.⁷⁰

Though the emergence of the national Civil Rights Movement certainly attracted attention to the NOI and influenced its growth in the late 1950s, this growth must also be attributed to the grassroots organizing efforts of Malcolm X and his fellow ministers. For years, the Nation’s primary recruiting base was the American carceral system, where ministers offered visions of redemption and reclamation to these hyper-marginalized populations through racial pride,

⁶⁸ Ogbar, *Black Power*, 40.

⁶⁹ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 50.

⁷⁰ Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, 55.

knowledge-of-self, and a strict code of personal conduct. Beyond merely instilling racial dignity and personal reform, however, ministers guided converts in developing analyses of institutional racism that made sense of their incarceration and social marginalization. Though aspects of their theology and analysis may be considered fantastic, the Nation astutely and attractively attributed the social, economic, and political marginalization of their recruits to the symptoms of systemic racism imposed and enforced by a morally deviant white society.

Not only did the Nation offer an explanation for the lived experiences of potential converts, they also provided a tangible avenue to challenge the very systems that created and maintained these oppressive symptoms. By adhering to a strict code of personal and moral conduct that rebuked these symptoms, converts were effectively challenging white supremacy in tangible ways through practicing a devout lifestyle and abstaining from elements of crime, vice, and “immoral” practices that white society sought to impose upon them and thereby maintain social, political, and economic power. Furthermore, the “morality” that the Nation promoted and instilled in its converts and sympathizers, though expressed in theological terms, was also couched within a sense of social, political, and economic responsibility to racial advancement. Poet and activist Sonia Sanchez, a Harlem resident in the 1940s-50s who later joined the NOI in the 1970s, explained this aspect of Nation ideology:

Here was this...organization talking about resurrecting and... reordering your life. And not just, I don't mean moral in terms of dress; I mean moral in terms of responsibility to your people. It was that kind of morality that they were

talking about. 'You are responsible to your people. So, therefore, you must do the following.'⁷¹

The Nation thus promoted the notion of the *personal* as inherently *political*, which provided an accessible vehicle for racial consciousness and empowerment amongst populations that represented an "untapped reservoir of Black political power."⁷²

These were the messages that Malcolm X carried to the streets, pool halls, nationalist meetings, and Christian churches as he worked to expand the Nation's recruitment and organizing of this "untapped" power base in Harlem. In recognizing the competition that existed amongst nationalist organizations for the attention and loyalties of Harlem residents, Malcolm sought to distinguish the NOI through aggressive recruitment campaigns, which he described as "fishing," throughout the neighborhood. By Malcolm's estimation, there was hardly a street that he and a few other ministers had missed. "We would step right in front of a walking black man or woman so that they had to accept our leaflet," Malcolm later told Alex Haley. "And if they hesitated one second, they had to hear us saying some catch thing such as 'Hear how the white man kidnapped and robbed and raped our black race.'⁷³ It was through this blunt rhetoric, which "made it plain," that Malcolm was able to reach and engage broad audiences by breaking down complex analyses of systemic racism in "terms that people could understand," while also giving public voice to conversations that many were already having behind closed doors. As Malcolm X

⁷¹ Sonia Sanchez interview with Blackside, Inc., March 7, 1989, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.

⁷² Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 13.

⁷³ Alex Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as Told to Alex Haley* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 218.

and his other ministers took this approach to the fringes of nationalist meetings and to the sidewalks of storefront churches, they “began to get visible results almost immediately.”⁷⁴

Eschewing notions of respectability politics that constrained participation in established civil rights organizations like the NAACP, as Ella Baker critiqued, Malcolm reached people where they were, and captivated them with his engaging rhetoric that inspired not only a heightened critical political consciousness, but also a sense of racial pride and empowerment. According to Sanchez, who was initially skeptical of Malcolm’s rhetoric and analysis,

...he articulated that kind of oppression and what we needed to do to feel good about ourselves and to make for some kind of movement... he said it in a voice like we had never heard before... he said it for even the brothers on our block who didn't go to church, so couldn't involve themselves in the Civil Rights Movement...who were hanging out on corners.⁷⁵

In addition to reaching out to the “brothers” on street corners or at nationalist meetings attended predominantly by men, Malcolm and his ministers also made concerted efforts to recruit Black women to the Nation. Recognizing that the majority of the “storefront Christians” they “fished” were women, Malcolm tailored his after-church messages along gender lines. Proclaiming the beauty of Black women in the face of an oppressive white society where ads for skin-lightening creams and hair-straightening products proliferated in Black media outlets, Malcolm promoted a gendered sense of racial pride in his speeches to these audiences. In these same speeches, he also invoked gendered notions of “respect”

⁷⁴ Ibid, 221.

⁷⁵ Sonia Sanchez interview with Blackside, Inc., March 7, 1989, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.

and “protection” to appeal to his audience when he preached, “The black man needs to start today to shelter and protect and *respect* his black women!”⁷⁶ Indeed, Malcolm’s appeals to a popular desire for safety and protection from hostile and violent oppression in Harlem at the hands of the police, and at the hands of lynch mobs in the South, found receptive audiences in Harlem in the late 1950s, even if many were still hesitant to formally join the NOI.

“No one man should have that much power”

Malcolm’s active presence on the streets of Harlem finally paid off in 1957, as an incident of police brutality provided the necessary platform to propel he and the Nation into the public eye in New York City. On a late April night, Johnson X, a member of Temple No. 7, and two other men intervened as NYPD officers were “working over” a Black suspect with their nightsticks at the corner of 125th Street and Lenox Avenue. Johnson approached the officers and asked them, “Why don’t you carry the man on to jail?” before walking back into the small crowd that was beginning to grow as more police cars arrived at the scene. Not satisfied with the rate at which the dense crowd was receding, the responding officers began swinging their nightsticks to speed up the process, cracking Johnson in the head in the process. As Johnson yelled a prayer in agony, more officers rushed at him, knocking him down as “blood gushed” from his head, and continued to attack him as he lay

⁷⁶ This quote comes from an example that Malcolm gave to Alex Haley of the types of statements that he would make in trying to appeal to audiences of women outside of storefront churches. Alex Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 221.

bleeding on the ground. Johnson was then taken to the 28th Precinct on 123rd Street, where the relentless beating continued while he was handcuffed to a chair.⁷⁷

As word got around of the beating, a crowd of 500, including members of the Nation of Islam led by Malcolm X, gathered outside the precinct, demanding that the injured Johnson be provided medical attention. After initially being told that there was no such man in the precinct, police eventually permitted Malcolm inside to examine Johnson, as the crowd continued to swell outside. Upon seeing Johnson's condition, Malcolm demanded that the man be taken to the hospital to treat his head injuries. While Malcolm met with police officials, members of the Fruit of Islam, the NOI's regimented unarmed security detail, formed perimeters outside the precinct "arms folded, like a battalion awaiting orders," as an increasingly volatile crowd continued to grow behind them. Upon hearing of Johnson's transfer to Harlem Hospital, the crowd marched up to 135th Street, where 2,000 assembled, eager to catch wind of the man's fate. After being treated, Johnson was quickly released back to police custody and returned to the 28th Precinct, where the crowd continued to swell to an estimated 4,000. While Johnson remained in a cell, Malcolm X once again negotiated with "nervous" police officials who feared that situation outside the precinct was teetering on the edge of a "riot."⁷⁸ Malcolm was assured that Johnson would continue to receive medical treatment, and in return agreed to calm the

⁷⁷ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour*, 9-11; Williams, *Concrete Demands*, 68-69; "Moslem Victim's Own Story of Cops' Brutality," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 18, 1957; James L. Hicks, "Riot Threat As Cops Beat Moslem," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 4, 1957.

⁷⁸ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour*, 9-11; Williams, *Concrete Demands*, 68-69; James L. Hicks, "Riot Threat As Cops Beat Moslem," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 4, 1957.

crowds outside. Upon exiting the precinct, according to *Amsterdam News* managing editor James Hicks, Malcolm “gave one brief command to his followers and they disappeared as if in thin air.”⁷⁹ Astounded by the swift, disciplined dispersal of the NOI and massive crowd, a policeman on the scene infamously commented, ‘no one man should have that much power!’⁸⁰

The “power” that Malcolm demonstrated outside of the 28th Precinct garnered front-page attention in the *Amsterdam News*, under the sub-heading of “God’s Angry Men’ Tangle With Police.” After the story ran, “for the first time,” Malcolm later recalled, “the black man, woman, and child in the streets was discussing ‘those Muslims.’”⁸¹ The standoff on 123rd Street was a major victory for the NOI and Malcolm in Harlem. Not only did Johnson X receive the highest police brutality settlement in city history at the time, the Nation also demonstrated to audiences in Harlem and beyond that they wielded the power to confront racist forces in the city—and win.⁸² “What Harlem wanted from Malcolm and the Muslims,” Goldman wrote, “was proof that they were as big and bad as they claimed to be.”⁸³

At a moment when justice for victims of racial violence was in short supply locally and nationally, the Nation’s offer of protection against a police department

⁷⁹ James L. Hicks, “Riot Threat As Cops Beat Moslem,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 4, 1957.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 236.

⁸² Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour*, 11.

⁸³ Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, 55.

that functioned, as many believed, to “keep the Negroes ‘in their place,” drew many new converts into their ranks. One such convert was Benjamin Goodman, an Air Force veteran who was struck by

...how this man Malcolm X was out front protesting against that act and how the Muslim brothers and sisters reacted. The brotherhood is what attracted me. The unity. How a Muslim goes to the aid of a brother when he is mistreated. It seemed like unity and brotherhood and—*love*. So I went there to seek out the Muslims.⁸⁴

Goodman, an underemployed Black man self-described as having been “born dissatisfied” with racism in America, was one of many in Harlem who found in Malcolm, and the Nation, a sense of empowerment and a way of confronting the oppressive white institutions that colored their lives. In the wake of Johnson’s beating, the Nation grew from “a few hundred,” to an estimated two thousand, “with a presence and impact far larger than the actual number,” as Goldman notes.⁸⁵ Malcolm had effectively proven to the grassroots bases he sought to reach that he could back up his powerful rhetoric with concrete action, and from these populations at the margins of urban society built “an army of people nobody wanted.”⁸⁶

Jesse Gray and the Radical Roots of Tenant Organizing

While Malcolm X built the NOI into the “fastest growing membership organization in urban areas” in the late 1950s after his showdown with the NYPD,

⁸⁴ Ibid, 60.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ According to Goldman, a “black writer” had used this phrase to describe the underclasses that Malcolm X had effectively recruited and mobilized following Johnson’s beating. Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, 59.

the grassroots organizing that he championed was bolstered by the return of another charismatic leader to Harlem. After spending two years in the South, Jesse Gray returned to Harlem in 1957 to form the Lower Harlem Tenants Council, a tenants' rights organization that advocated for poor and working-class renters.⁸⁷

In many ways, Gray's history as an organizer was reflective of major trends in Black liberation struggles in the post-war period through the Civil Rights Era. Born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1923, Gray attended the historically Black Xavier University in New Orleans before joining the Merchant Marine during World War II.⁸⁸ Through the Merchant Marine, the nation's only nonsegregated branch at the time, Gray was introduced to the National Maritime Union (NMU), an 80,000-member left-led affiliate of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).⁸⁹ According to NMU official Josh Lawrence, who would later join Gray in the Community Council on Housing, "in the thirties and even the early forties there were only two places in the South where black and white could meet together—in the black churches and the halls of the NMU."⁹⁰

Indeed, the NMU was founded upon the premise that racial equality was an essential prerequisite for achieving national class solidarity and empowerment. During the war, Ferdinand Smith, the Black vice president of the NMU, had worked

⁸⁷ Roberta Gold, *When Tenants Claimed the City: The Struggle for Citizenship in New York City Housing* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 117.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 116-117.

⁸⁹ Jack O'Dell and Nikhil Pal Singh, *Climbin' Jacob's Ladder: The Black Freedom Movement Writings of Jack O'Dell* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 12.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 13.

alongside Eleanor Roosevelt and Paul Robeson to successfully advocate for Hugh Mulzac, a former Garveyite, to be appointed as the first Black captain of the Merchant Marine.⁹¹ Through his affiliation with the NMU, Jesse Gray “came under the tutelage” of Communist Party leader Harry Haywood, and established himself as part of a cohort of Black radicals, such as Smith, Lawrence, Ewart Guinier, and his college friend Jack O’Dell, whose experiences at sea fostered a radical political consciousness and informed their struggles for rights and power on land.⁹² “Those were my greatest years,” Gray later recalled. Through his experience in the Left-led NMU, Gray “was able to acquire tremendous experience; organizationally, politically, and everything else...the whole Left influence on trade unions was a tremendous education.”⁹³

Primed for off-ship organizing and “intent on overthrowing” Jim Crow society after the war, Gray and O’Dell set up shop at NMU headquarters in New York City. While O’Dell attended the NMU Labor School, Gray continued to periodically ship out of port until the anti-Communist purges of the Cold War era struck the NMU in the late 1940s, effectively purging Gray from its ranks in 1952.⁹⁴ Like Ella Baker, who took charge of the New York Branch of the NAACP that year on the heels of

⁹¹ Biondi, *To Stand And Fight*, 8.

⁹² Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 117; O’Dell and Singh, *Climbin’ Jacob’s Ladder*, 63n31.

⁹³ Jesse Gray interview with Katherine M. Shannon, July 26, 1967, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University Libraries.

⁹⁴ Victor S. Navasky, *The O’Dell File: A Kindle Single* (Victor S. Navasky, 2014), Loc. 458, Kindle; Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 117.

their own Communist purge, Gray built upon his political education and organizing experience in the NMU, as well as traditions of organizing in Harlem, to chart a new course for grassroots organizing in the neighborhood and beyond.

The initial vehicle for Gray's organizing was the Harlem Tenants Council (HTC), a tenants' rights initiative of the American Labor Party (ALP), a left-wing subsidiary of the Communist Party.⁹⁵ In 1952, Gray joined the Council at 28-years-old, and by the following year, was organizing tenants and leading demonstrations against slumlords, deteriorating housing conditions, and city housing agencies as Director of the organization. Gray's early demonstrations with the HTC from 1953-1954 focused on advocating for tenants who had been unjustly evicted from their apartments, demanding repairs and violations be addressed in housing units, petitioning the city's Housing and Rent Commissions on behalf of tenants, and demanding Black representation in leadership positions in housing policy-making bodies.⁹⁶

Despite these early efforts, Gray and the HTC remained relatively weak, and by the end of the decade, only 51% of Harlem's housing stock would be classified as "sound," compared to 85% citywide.⁹⁷ Additionally, only 17% of nonwhite

⁹⁵ Navasky, *The O'Dell File*, Loc 458; Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City* 117; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 403; Biondi, *To Stand And Fight*, 209.

⁹⁶ "Rent Office to Help Two Evicted Families," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 19, 1953; Jesse Gray, "Defends Work of the Tenants Council," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 6, 1954; "Charge Bias in NY City Housing Dept.," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 10, 1954; "Self-Service Lift Draws Tenants' Ire," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 11, 1954; "Tenants Get Warning," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1954; Michael Lipsky, *Protest in City Politics: Rent Strikes, Housing and the Power of the Poor* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1970), 55-56.

households in the city and suburbs would be owner-occupied, compared to 40% of white households.⁹⁸ Furthermore, the agencies charged with addressing housing conditions in the city, including the Housing and Rent Commission and Robert Moses' Committee on Slum Clearance, had no Black or Puerto Rican representation. To many of Harlem's residents, these factors of racial inequality in housing and representation were symptomatic of larger systems of racial oppression in Harlem that created unequal conditions and provided little recourse for redress.

By the end of the 1950s, tenant organizing in Harlem would become emboldened by the upsurge of the Civil Rights Movement nationally and locally, and apartment buildings would become a hub for organizing poor and working-class Black and Puerto Ricans for not just quality housing, but also for political empowerment. Like Malcolm, Gray saw these poor and working-class residents as an untapped well of political power and hoped to inspire sustained political action through first empowering these tenants to change their most pressing problems. As Jesse Gray later said, "People ask me why I spend all my time on heat and hot water and I say heat and hot water is the biggest organizing tool we have; it may even kick off the revolution in the ghetto."⁹⁹



⁹⁷ HARYOU, *Youth in the Ghetto: A Study of the Consequences of Powerlessness and a Blueprint for Change* (New York: HARYOU, 1964), 105-106.

⁹⁸ Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 112.

⁹⁹ Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 57.

In the waning days of the year, *Amsterdam News* editor James Hicks declared 1957 to be the “year Negroes fought back.”¹⁰⁰ In the South, nine Black students in Little Rock, Arkansas braved crowds of intransigent segregationists supported by police and the governor, to compel federal enforcement of the *Brown* decision and successfully desegregate Little Rock Central High School. In New York, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam faced down the New York Police Department in a startling display of power to signal a new challenge to age-old practices of racist policing in Harlem. Across the Atlantic, Ghanaians celebrated their independence from Britain, elevating Kwame Nkrumah to international acclaim and heralding an era of global Black empowerment.

Local, national, and global developments in the three years following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision marked a new chapter in the long struggle for Black equality in Harlem, during which communities built upon traditions of radical political consciousness and action in the neighborhood to engage in new struggles for equality, liberation, and empowerment. Drawing from post-war struggles for civil rights, along with nationalist and labor movements in the city, the surging grassroots organizing efforts of Ella Baker, Malcolm X, Mae Mallory, and Jesse Gray came to shape the Black Freedom Struggle in New York City and beyond in the next decade. Largely eschewing the middle-class respectability politics of older civil rights organizations, these organizers sought to build their bases amongst those at the margins of political society as a way of mobilizing an untapped well of potential political power.

¹⁰⁰ James L. Hicks, “1957: Year Negroes Fought Back,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 28, 1957; Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*, 19.

It was also during this period that a new generation of future activists and organizers began to come of age in their racial and political consciousness. With the murder of Emmett Till in 1955 broadcast nationwide, the wonton brutality of white supremacy in the face of Black uplift sounded a call-to-action for young people across the nation who saw their reflection in the face of the 14-year-old. With the guidance of veteran organizers like Baker, it was this generation of Till's peers who would take to the streets in the early 1960s to alter the trajectory of the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement in the South, as well as the North.

In Harlem, this brief yet momentous period laid the groundwork for protracted struggles for rights and power in New York City that would have profound impacts upon the nature of these struggles nationwide in the following years. Though Malcolm X would rise to international acclaim in the 1960s for his piercing rhetoric that awakened and empowered people of African descent while stripping white supremacy to its core, his rise in Harlem in the mid-1950s was characterized by his dogged organizing efforts at the grassroots and aided by local, national, and global political climates. Like Malcolm, the successes of Gray, Baker, Mallory, and many other organizers in Harlem were grounded in their mobilization of resources that were "not only material but intellectual and emotional."¹⁰¹ The grassroots organizing of these leaders during an era that represented real possibilities for fundamental societal change empowered local people in Harlem to become active in their communities and build movements that would have far-

¹⁰¹ Sales, *From Civil Rights To Black Liberation*, 43.

reaching impacts on the national Civil Rights Movement and city, state, and federal politics in the coming years.

CHAPTER 3

“IN HARLEM WITH A REVOLUTIONARY DREAM”: JESSE GRAY, MAE MALLORY, MALCOLM X, AND THE FLOWERING OF RADICAL GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING IN HARLEM, 1958-1959

You see, Sir, I am also a maladjusted Negro and I wonder why the thousands of other maladjusted Negroes can't get all other Negroes to become maladjusted too. All the progress to be made will be made by maladjusted Negroes.

-Mae Mallory (1956)¹

A rebellion is not a revolutionary movement unless it changes the structural arrangements of the society or else is able to project programmatic ideas toward that end. The Negro movement does not have the latter, and in America neither arms nor demonstrations nor protest marches mean very much without such ideas.

-Harold Cruse (1964)²

In June of 1960, editor James Hicks used his column in the *New York Amsterdam News* as he had in the waning days of 1957—to serve notice to “white people downtown” and “misinformed Negroes” that there was a “New Negro in Harlem.” That summer, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. geared up his campaigning machine as the downtown Tammany Hall Democratic machine mounted a challenge to Harlem democrats in the party primary elections for the second time in two years. Joined by Tammany-defectors J. Raymond Jones, a political veteran in Harlem and Powell’s 1958 campaign manager, and Manhattan borough president Hulan Jack, Powell’s United Democratic Leadership Team swept the six primary contests,

¹ Mae Mallory, “Maladjusted Follower,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 24, 1956.

² Harold Cruse, *Rebellion or Revolution* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1968).

while berating their Tammany-backed opponents as “Uncle Toms.” This decisive victory signaled the possibility of a long-awaited paradigm shift in Black participation in electoral politics in Harlem toward an open rebuke of white sponsorship and party allegiance, and looked toward mobilizing independent political power more broadly in future elections. To Hicks, the results of the primary elections were indicative of one of the most telling characteristics of this “New Negro” in Harlem—“he does not want any white person downtown telling him how to handle his affairs uptown.”³

The political climate in 1960 that welcomed the emergence of this “New Negro in Harlem,” as James Hicks declared, can be attributed in large part to the organizing efforts of grassroots leaders Jesse Gray, Malcolm X, and Mae Mallory and their organizational networks in the waning years of the 1950s. The work of these three leaders from 1958-1960 intersected with a wide array of influential local, national, and international figures and demonstrated the ways in which local people in Harlem were mobilized in consciousness and empowered through action to engage in sustained struggles for rights and power in Harlem and beyond in the 1960s. The demands raised by these leaders for Black self-determination at the grassroots during these years represented a radical challenge to New York’s entrenched white power structures and more moderate civil rights organizations,

³ James Hicks, “Another Angle: Powell’s Power,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 11, 1960; James Booker, “Up and Adam!: Buchanan Leads in Full Sweep,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 11, 1960; “Unity Team Faces Primary,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 4, 1960.

and shaped the course of looming battles over rights to citizenship, human rights, and political power in the city.

As the national Civil Rights Movement continued throughout southern states in the late 1950s, most notably in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957, African American communities in New York City waged struggles of their own for desegregation, equal economic and educational opportunities, human rights, and self-determination. Building upon national and local radical organizing efforts during the post-World War II era, Jesse Gray, Mae Mallory, and Malcolm X helped to shape a popular organizational shift away from middle-class, moderate approaches to civil rights and integration, and toward grassroots organizing and empowerment for human rights and self-determination in ways that would have formative impacts upon the evolution of the Black Freedom Struggle both locally and nationally. By 1959, the growing power and influence of this swelling grassroots militancy would become abundantly clear in New York City as a series of local and national events coalesced in Harlem to issue a challenge—and a warning—to the white power structures of the nation’s largest city.



“Black workers in the back street”: The Post-War Roots of Radical Tenant Organizing

In 1958, Jack O’Dell left the U.S. Communist Party (CPUSA) and found himself back in New York City. In the years since returning from his service in World War II, the 35-year-old Detroit native had cut his teeth as a progressive union organizer and as an active participant in burgeoning struggles for civil rights in the South. The

great-grandson of a self-emancipated slave who had escaped bondage to join the Union Army, O'Dell's racial and political consciousness was shaped at an early age through his family legacy, as well as through the political and symbolic presence of race women and men like Paul Robeson, Marian Anderson, and Joe Louis in popular culture. Closer to home, O'Dell was also inspired by his grandmother's resistance to northern Jim Crow in Detroit, later recalling the influence that her boycott of a downtown soda fountain that discriminated against Black patrons had on his political consciousness.⁴ To O'Dell, the actions of these familial and iconic figures "gave one optimism despite the cold-bloodedness of the insult of segregation" and inspired him to follow in their steps.⁵

O'Dell's entrée to the Communist Party came in 1950 when he joined Jesse Gray, his longtime friend and fellow seaman, and Ferdinand Smith and Paul Robeson, two of his personal "heroes," as a member of the CPUSA.⁶ Joining the Party was a logical outcome of O'Dell's experiences during World War II and in the years following. Like Gray, O'Dell had attended the historically Black Xavier University in New Orleans and joined the Merchant Marine during World War II. The only non-

⁴ Jack O'Dell interview with James Early, May 13, 1997, Box 2, Folders 1-2, Jack O'Dell Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; Jack O'Dell and Nikhil Pal Singh, *Climbin' Jacob's Ladder: The Black Freedom Movement Writings of Jack O'Dell* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 14.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Though there has been scholarly debate surrounding Jesse Gray's affiliation with the Communist Party, an interview between him and Harry Haywood makes Gray's affiliation with the Party a matter of historical fact. See Jesse Gray interview with Harry Haywood, April 6, 1975, Box 6, Folder 3, Harry Haywood Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (henceforth referred to as Haywood Papers).

segregated branch of the armed services, the Merchant Marine provided both O'Dell and Gray with a means of fighting the war against fascism without acceding to the demeaning treatment Black servicemen were subjected to in the other branches. Through the Merchant Marine, Gray and O'Dell became actively involved in the National Maritime Union (NMU), an 80,000-member seafarer's union and left-led affiliate of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). According to scholar Nikhil Pal Singh, the progressive CIO, which had split from the more conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1935, "possessed a legendary status" amongst members of the Black working class in the 1930s-40s, "for its commitment to nondiscrimination and to organizing black workers."⁷ To O'Dell, this reputation was earned through the work of Communist Party members in the NMU and CIO, such as Ferdinand Smith and Harry Haywood, whose organizing efforts influenced the unions' non-segregationist policies and dedication to the advancement of racial equality. "They said an injury to one is an injury to all," O'Dell later reflected, "these were my people and this is where I want[ed] to be."⁸

The Communist Party had made strong inroads in Harlem in the Great Depression era. Recognizing the political, cultural, and intellectual significance that Harlem possessed within national Black consciousness, the Party focused its organizing efforts on Harlem during this period as a means of mobilizing support from the political base of Black Americans. Through their active involvement in

⁷ O'Dell and Singh, *Climbin' Jacob's Ladder*, 12.

⁸ Victor S. Navasky, *The O'Dell File: A Kindle Single* (Victor S. Navasky, 2014), Loc. 476, Kindle.

causes that promoted civil rights and Black equality, including their defense of the Scottsboro Boys, the CP earned a favorable reputation in Harlem. Furthermore, the Party contributed to a political milieu that championed direct action campaigns, including mass marches, rent strikes, and economic boycotts, which shaped the protest landscape in Harlem for years to come.⁹ The Party's early advocacy of civil rights also attracted the membership of radical black women in Harlem, including Audley Moore, who joined the Party in the 1930s, and later became a revered influence within Black nationalist movements. Moore was born into the post-Reconstruction era of white Southern "Redemption" in Louisiana, and was raised on family traditions of self-defense and economic nationalism as means of survival.¹⁰ These traditions attracted her to the program of Marcus Garvey, whom she first heard speak in New Orleans, and she became active in the U.N.I.A. after moving to Harlem in the early 1920s. In Harlem, Moore became involved in various political organizations, demonstrating a continual quest for a political program that effectively synthesized analyses of race, class, and gender oppression into an operational movement for Black liberation and empowerment. Finding racial

⁹ Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1983), xvii-xviii.

¹⁰ Moore's father, a deputy sheriff during Reconstruction, had taught his daughters not to work for white men, and her brother had once broken the jaw of a white mill-owner who made unwanted advances at Audley when she was a child. "That was our tradition," Moore later said, "I came from a tradition of fighters." Queen Mother Audley Moore, Oral history interview, 1972, Oral History of the American Left Collection, OH.002; The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University Libraries. See also: Queen Mother Audley Moore, Oral history interview, December 23, 1981, Oral History of the American Left Collection, OH.002; The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University Libraries.

segregation alive and well while campaigning for the Republican Party in the early 1930s, Moore was drawn to the Communist Party by their defense of the Scottsboro Boys and the Party's position on Black self-determination and nationalism in its Black Belt thesis. Though crediting the Party as where she "really learned to struggle," in part through tenant organizing, Moore eventually left the Party in 1950 when it became apparent to her that they lacked the radical racial consciousness necessary to build a movement for Black liberation and empowerment.¹¹

Like Moore, the organizational training and experience that O'Dell and Gray received in their time with the NMU prepared them to carry the lessons of left-labor-led struggles for rights and power in the pre- and post-war periods into influential positions of leadership in the burgeoning civil rights movement in the late 1950s. The "most advanced workers in the country sailed as NMU seaman," Gray later said, adding that "Black workers in particular gave leadership to the NMU [and] arose then as a tremendous, conscious force."¹² In addition to the praxis of leadership and organizing experiences that the NMU offered through the union's various committees, the educational opportunities that the union afforded were critical in promoting the political development and consciousness of Black sailors like O'Dell, Gray, Smith, and Josh Lawrence. With an NMU policy requiring each ship to carry a library, radical sailors in leadership positions on the ship's committee were able to decide what texts went on the shelves of the ship's library. This leadership position offered the significant opportunity to influence the nature of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jesse Gray interview with Harry Haywood, April 6, 1975.

onboard political dialogue, and it was Gray, as ship chairman of the SS Washington, who introduced O'Dell to the works of W.E.B. Du Bois, including *Black Reconstruction* and *Black Folks: Then and Now*, the latter of which O'Dell credited as one of the most influential works on his political thought.¹³ Lengthy excursions with workdays of only 5-6 hours left O'Dell and Gray with plenty of time to read widely, and both were attracted to works, like those of Du Bois, which provided historical analyses of the ways that race and class intersected in the creation and maintenance of oppressive power structures.

Through their readings and travels, O'Dell and Gray also found inspiration for possible means of challenging these structures. Of particular significance for both men was Friedrich Engels' *The Housing Question*, a discourse on the correlation between capitalism and housing conditions, published in 1877.¹⁴ In this series of articles, Engels argued that "the housing shortage is no accident; it is a necessary institution and it can be abolished together with all its effects on health, etc., only if the whole social order from which it springs is fundamentally refashioned."¹⁵ Though careful to delineate the differences between landlord-tenant and employer-laborer relationships according to Marxist theory, which he helped to shape, Engels argued that housing conditions (shortage and poor quality) were intrinsically linked to capitalist exploitation, and therefore, required the overthrow of capitalist society

¹³ Jack O'Dell interview with James Early, May 13, 1997.

¹⁴ Roberta Gold, *When Tenants Claimed the City: The Struggle for Citizenship in New York City Housing* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 117.

¹⁵ Friedrich Engels, *The Housing Question* (India: Leopard Books, 2016), 58.

to truly eradicate. Recognizing the lengthy trajectory inherent in this proposition, however, Engels conceded that “In the beginning...each social revolution will have to take things as it finds them and do its best to get rid of the most crying evils with the means at its disposal.”¹⁶ Having witnessed the harsh realities of housing conditions faced predominantly by Black communities in Jim Crow Detroit and New York, though, O’Dell and Gray also recognized that “the housing question” was an inherently racial one in American society. Influenced by Engels’ analysis and their subsequent studying of housing policy, “the housing question” became for O’Dell and Gray an undeniable illustration of the relationship between economic and racial oppression in American society, seen most clearly in the Black ghettos of the urban North. “The fact is that housing isn’t just another issue,” O’Dell later asserted, “housing is like bread and butter and a job.”¹⁷ Of even greater significance, however, this “bread and butter” issue represented a possible means by which to bring a social revolution to pass.

The “most crying evils” of housing, Gray and O’Dell believed, provided a widely-identifiable issue that poor Black communities could be mobilized around to mount a political challenge to both oppressive housing conditions and the urban power structures that created and maintained them. It was during a shipment to Great Britain in the mid-1940s that the two found inspiration for this analysis. While in port, O’Dell later recounted in an interview with scholar Roberta Gold, he and Gray learned that the tenant movement in Scotland had “made a breakthrough” in

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 117.

electing representatives to Parliament. Influenced by an era of militant labor organizing in nearby Glasgow, poor and working-class tenants in Clydebank had launched a widespread rent strike in 1920 as a means of challenging exploitative housing and labor conditions. With an initial goal of preventing the repeal of rent controls after World War I, tenants fought through the courts—and through acts of civil disobedience—to maintain government protections for renters, and fostered the political empowerment of economically and politically marginalized populations in Scotland. As a result of their seven-year rent strike, tenants achieved two immediate feats: they prevented the repeal of rent controls and protected their standard of living amidst a period of intense economic hardships for the poor and working classes. Most significantly, though, the Clydebank Rent Strikers were able to form a political base amongst the poor and working classes, capable of electing radical representatives to Parliament.¹⁸

While certainly far short of a “fundamental refashioning” of society, the successes of the tenant movement in Scotland signaled to Gray and O’Dell the potential political power that lay dormant in poor and working-class Black communities in the United States. According to O’Dell, the two men “felt that [the Glasgow residents’ accomplishment] was our goal too, to develop a kind of tenants’ movement, out of these slums and ghettos, people who would fight for a national housing policy that guaranteed that working people had decent housing.”¹⁹ Gray,

¹⁸ Charles Johnstone, “The tenants’ movement and housing struggles in Glasgow, 1945-1990” (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 1992), 252-254.

¹⁹ Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 117.

however, had visions of more expansive—if romantic—possibilities for tenant organizing. The housing question, to Gray, had the potential to “fuse” and mobilize the latent political power of poor people most marginalized by urban society. “Rent is like that; housing can do it,” Gray later argued. “We can base a party in the ghetto, we can bring in the mass of people of unrest, progressives with no place to go.”²⁰ Like the leaders of the tenant movement in Clydebanks, Gray believed that poor and working class tenants could be politically mobilized through issues of housing to foster collective radical consciousness, with the ultimate goal of fundamental societal transformation.

To act on these analyses, however, Gray and O’Dell would have to leave their beloved NMU. After the war, the federal onslaught of McCarthyism and Communist persecution sweeping the nation in the late 1940s and early 1950s effectively subverted and dismantled left-labor-led struggles for racial equality and class solidarity. In this period, the influence wielded by Communist and leftist members in the NMU came under heavy fire in racially charged attacks from anti-communist forces amongst the rank and file, orchestrated by white NMU veteran Joseph Curran, a former Communist himself.²¹ The ensuing purges of CPUSA members and fellow travellers from the NMU led to the ouster of Ferdinand Smith and O’Dell in the late 1940s, and Gray around 1952.²² The Jamaican-born Smith was ultimately deported,

²⁰ Untitled newsclipping, *New York Herald Tribune*, November 29, 1964.

²¹ For an extensive historical analysis of the NMU, see Gerald Horne, *Red Seas: Ferdinand Smith and Radical Black Sailors in the United States and Jamaica* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

O'Dell moved into organizing in the South with the CIO's Operation Dixie and Southern Negro Youth Conference, and Gray slid into housing activism and leftist political organizing in New York City. Though purged from the ranks of the organization that contributed greatly to their political development, O'Dell and Gray left the NMU well prepared to put their analysis of systemic racial and class-based oppression into praxis as the modern Civil Rights Movement emerged in the mid-1950s.

Aware of the limitations that communist persecution placed upon the effectiveness of his organizing in the South, O'Dell left the Party in 1958 and reunited with Gray in Harlem. Having participated in some of the opening salvos of the modern Civil Rights Movement, O'Dell "saw a movement was emerging," but after numerous run-ins with federal and local anticommunist forces, understood that "the sickness of the country was not going to let people who presented themselves as Communists... participate, and I had to participate."²³ While O'Dell had been organizing throughout the South, Gray had begun working in Harlem "with a revolutionary dream," and quickly established himself amongst New York's radical

²² Although Roberta Gold notes that Gray was purged from the NMU "around 1952," evidence of the precise date and nature of Gray's ouster has yet to be presented. The last available record of his affiliation with the NMU was as a representative of the Maritime Peace Committee at a "mass memorial meeting" held for the Martinsville 7 and John Derrick on February 12, 1951. Gray appeared alongside the likes of Paul Robeson and Sidney Poitier at the meeting. See "Mass Memorial Meeting," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 10, 1951, page 4.

²³ Jack O'Dell interview with James Early, May 13, 1997; Navasky, *The O'Dell File*, Loc. 497-502.

tenant organizers in the early 1950s.²⁴ In the post-war years in New York City, tenant councils “became one of the most raucous elements of the city’s left,” according to housing scholar Joel Schwartz.²⁵ Left-led tenant organizing had deep roots in the city, and the American Labor Party (ALP) in particular, made housing a central issue of its political platform as a means of building a voting base in the city’s poor- and working-class renters.²⁶ Founded in 1936 by garment trades union leaders, and later coming under the influence of the Communist Party, the ALP established strong bases in Jewish, Black, and Puerto Rican neighborhoods in New York.²⁷ Gray had joined the ALP around 1952, and immediately became involved in political organizing. That year, Gray led a committee to run former Communist City Councilman Ben Davis—then imprisoned under the Smith Act—for State Assembly in New York City’s 11th Assembly District on the Freedom Party ballot. Offering a glimpse of the showmanship and revolutionary rhetoric that he would come to be

²⁴ Mark Naison, “The Rent Strikes in New York,” *Radical America* 1, no. 3 (1967): 18.

²⁵ Joel Schwartz, “Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1943-1971,” in *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984*, ed. Ronald Lawson et al. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 141.

²⁶ Schwartz, “Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1943-1971”; Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008), 403.

²⁷ Tamar W. Carroll, *Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Antipoverty, and Feminist Activism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 61.

known for in the years to follow, Gray compared the Davis campaign to “electing Kwame Nkrumah from a Ghana jail.”²⁸

In his early experiences with the ALP, Gray’s organizing efforts clearly demonstrated his analysis on the intrinsic relationships between race, class, and the housing question. In addition to campaigning for Davis that year, the 28-year-old Gray also joined the ALP’s Harlem Tenants Council (HTC), quickly rising to lead the tenants rights organization by 1953. While other Party members had gone underground during this period to escape political persecution, Gray remained heavily involved in mass work. “During this period,” Gray later recalled, “the housing movement was really growing, tenants’ struggles, we couldn’t go underground.”²⁹ Like Audley Moore, who described her tenant organizing experiences with the Communist Party in Harlem as “one of the great struggles,” the HTC under Gray’s leadership clearly identified their housing advocacy as an essential component of broader struggles against racial and class-based discrimination. In a leaflet distributed in the early 1950s from their headquarters at 306 Lenox Avenue, the HTC declared—in both English and Spanish—that “THE END OF DISCRIMINATION IN ALL HOUSING IS THE KEY TO THE END OF DISCRIMINATION IN EVERYTHING.”³⁰

²⁸ Gerald Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994), 260.

²⁹ Jesse Gray interview with Harry Haywood, April 6, 1975.

³⁰ “Tenants! Know Your Rights!” (Harlem Tenants Council leaflet), undated; Box 25, Folder 39, Metropolitan Council on Housing Records, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University Libraries (henceforth referred to as MCH Records).

Though the HTC clearly defined their ideological position on the role of tenant organizing within broader liberation struggles, their practical approach to “the housing question” in the early 1950s was much like that of a neighborhood service agency. Like the tenant organizing of ALP clubs and other tenant councils, the HTC mainly operated within the city’s prescribed housing policy channels by facilitating complaints against landlords and advocating for rent control, while also organizing anti-eviction campaigns. Despite the limited reach of this advocacy, the political significance of the HTC’s work should not be discounted. In addition to providing needed services to local constituencies, Gray and the HTC also fought for representation of Black tenants in policy-making positions and campaigned for political candidates that supported the interests of poor- and working-class renters. In a press release from April 1954, the HTC criticized the “complete lack of any Negroes among the new top leadership recently appointed by Mayor Wagner to head the City Department of Housing and Building,” under the headline of “LILY-WHITE LEADERSHIP HIT BY HARLEM TENANT COUNCILS.”³¹ While the early efforts of Gray and the HTC did incorporate political demands for representation, self-determination, and grassroots empowerment within a service-based framework, the organization lacked real political influence or power. It was not until the late 1950s with the rise of the national Civil Rights Movement that demands for tenants rights and political power escalated, and Gray began to build a local political movement around housing.

³¹ Michael Lipsky, *Protest in City Politics: Rent Strikes, Housing and the Power of the Poor* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1970), 56.

“Maladjusted Negroes” and “Hopeful Followers”: The Harlem Nine and Rising Black Militancy

When Jack O’Dell arrived in Harlem in 1958 to work with Gray and his newly formed Lower Harlem Tenants Council, he found a “community that had a rhythm of organization.”³² As younger generations were becoming inspired and mobilized through escalating local and national struggles for rights and power, older residents carried their knowledge and lessons from Depression-Era and post-War organizing into a new national political climate. The successes of the various organizations and individuals that fought for Black equality and empowerment during the post-war era, including Garveyites, the Communist Party, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and the NAACP, provided valuable experiences for a generation of radical organizers who would bring these lessons with them into new, yet familiar struggles in the Civil Rights Movement. Additionally, the shortcomings of these organizations provided a useful foil against which radical Black women organizers, like Ella Baker, Vicki Garvin, and Audley Moore, developed their own analyses of the intersections of race, class, and gender in the 1950s that were shaping the emergence and later direction of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. In many ways, the tempo of the “rhythm of organization” that O’Dell found upon his arrival in Harlem had been set by Black women, and by 1958, they were beginning to pick up the pace.

That September, a group of nine Black mothers began a boycott of three junior high schools in Harlem to protest the inferior education that their children were receiving in segregated schools. On the first day of the new school year, Carrie

³² Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 117.

Haynes, the spokeswoman for the Junior High School Coordinating Committee, announced that the parents of 15 students in Harlem would be keeping their children out of school to protest the unequal, segregated schools they were assigned to.³³ In the wake of the *Brown v. Board* decision four years earlier, parents and civil rights activists in New York City had emerged on the forefront of national struggles for school desegregation, and the emergence of the boycott marked an escalation in these fights, with Black women at the helm. The efforts of these women activists, according to scholar Adina Back, “represented the growing voice of black parents, independent of national civil rights organizations like the NAACP, choosing the boycott rather than the boardroom as the tactic for demanding integrated schools in New York City.”³⁴ The grassroots approach of these mothers was indicative of the growing impatience amongst poor and working-class New Yorkers with the more conservative, middle-class approach to civil rights organizing that the NAACP championed in the late 1950s.

This group of women, whom the *Amsterdam News* dubbed the “Little Rock Nine of Harlem,” had begun planning the boycott a year earlier when they formed the Junior High School Coordinating Committee to wage a campaign for “Freedom of Choice of Junior High Schools.”³⁵ The Coordinating Committee was an offshoot of

³³ Loren B. Pope, “21 Negro Pupils Are Kept Home On Charge of Segregation Here,” *New York Times*, September 9, 1958.

³⁴ Adina Back, “Up South in New York: The 1950s School Desegregation Struggles,” (PhD diss., New York University, 1997), 307-308.

³⁵ Adina Back, “Exposing the ‘Whole Segregation Myth’: The Harlem Nine and New York City’s School Desegregation Battles,” in *Freedom North: Black Freedom*

Parents in Action Against Educational Discrimination, a coalition of organizations formed to organize parents to fight for desegregated schools and greater parental involvement in educational policy making. Among the leaders of the coalition was Ella Baker, who sought to compel action from the apathetic Board of Education –and to sidestep the bureaucratic approach of the NAACP—by organizing a more militant grassroots base to carry out popular, direct-action campaigns for equality and self-determination in public education.³⁶ Though chair of the Education Committee of the New York branch, Baker recognized the limitations of the NAACP and refused to allow her organizing to be constrained in the same ways.

Calling for a citywide campaign of political education and mass action, the organizing efforts of Parents in Action demonstrated a concerted grassroots focus on training and mobilizing parents to become advocates for educational and racial equality. The coalition urged parents to tune into a weekly radio program focused on educational discrimination, write to the Board of Education with their complaints, and sign a petition. Additionally, Ella Baker and other organizers held weekly workshops to educate parents on their rights and organize collective action.³⁷ Through these efforts, Parents in Action essentially created a training institute for mass participation in grassroots political action, culminating in a rally

Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980, eds. Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 72.

³⁶ Barbara Ransby, “Cops, Schools, and Communism: Local Politics and Global Ideologies—New York City in the 1950s,” in *Civil Rights in New York City: From World War II to the Giuliani Era*, ed. Clarence Taylor (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 38.

³⁷ Back, “Exposing the ‘Whole Segregation Myth,’” 72.

at City Hall in September 1957. At the rally, held just two weeks after Governor Orval Faubus used the Arkansas National Guard to physically prevent the integration of Little Rock High School, Baker warned Mayor Wagner of the political implications of his malignant neglect in allowing the city's schools to remain separate and unequal. In concluding her address, which included demands for an open transfer policy, greater parental power, and improved services in predominantly Black schools, Baker called Wagner's attention to a statement he had made regarding the importance of the upcoming mayoral election. "It is with this fully in mind," Baker cautioned, "that we have instituted among parents of the subject schools a registration and voting drive."³⁸ If Mayor Wagner were not willing to take action on school segregation and inequality in New York City, Parents in Action intended to supplant him with someone else who would.

Like her friend and NAACP colleague Daisy Bates in Little Rock, Ella Baker's decision to operate outside of the generally bureaucratic approach of the NAACP and the prescribed channels of city government, affected an "increased fervor on the part of the black communities to make some changes," according to Baker.³⁹ This "increased fervor" can largely be attributed to the emphasis placed on grassroots

³⁸ "Statement Presented to Mayor Robert F. Wagner by Delegation of Parents, Thursday, September 19, 1957, Read by Ella J. Baker," Box 60, Folder 691, Hulan Jack Papers, New York City Municipal Archives (henceforth referred to as Jack Papers).

³⁹ Back, "Up South in New York," 317.

empowerment in Parents in Action, which according to Adina Back, had significant impacts on the “growing militancy” of many Black parents in New York.⁴⁰

Mae Mallory was one such parent, though the roots of her militancy were already firmly planted in the soil that Parents in Action cultivated. Born in Macon, Georgia in 1927, Willie Mae Range was raised on racial pride and self-defense from an early age. After a series of clashes with white children in Macon—one in which she “bloodied” the heads of a group of children who tried to stop her from roller-skating on the paved streets of a white neighborhood—Mae’s mother sent her to live with her grandmother in Brooklyn when she was nine years old.⁴¹ After a brief marriage to Keefer Mallory as a teenager in Brooklyn, Mae Mallory moved to Harlem in the late 1940s, and eventually settled in an apartment at 27 Morningside Drive.⁴²

As a single Black mother to two children, oscillating between employment and welfare support, Mallory was acutely aware of the ways in which the intersections of her race, gender, and class identities within the white, patriarchal, capitalist urban power structures of New York City limited her access to political, social, and economic empowerment. Like Queen Mother Moore, Mallory’s search for meaningful ways to fight for Black equality and empowerment in the face of this triple oppression had led her to the Communist Party in the early 1950s. “Every

⁴⁰ Ibid, 315.

⁴¹ Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 189; Rhonda Y. Williams, *Concrete Demands: The Search for Black Power in the 20th Century* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 66.

⁴² Williams, *Concrete Demands*, 67; Back, “Exposing the ‘Whole Segregation Myth,’” 72.

time I raised a question of better wages, better working conditions, and equality for black people," Mallory later said in an interview with Timothy Tyson, "somebody would tell me that was communist...so I decided I better seek out the communists."⁴³ Also like Moore, however, Mallory found herself disenchanted with the Communist Party due to their lack of a genuine dedication to Black liberation.

After leaving the Communist Party in great disappointment, Mallory tested the waters of Harlem's Black nationalist scene in the mid-1950s. Mallory's involvement, however, went no farther than attending some meetings of various organizations. Finding these organizations to be militant in rhetoric, but lacking in praxis and gender equity, Mallory decided to set her own course in the struggle for Black liberation, "to work with this group and with that group," free from the doctrinaire confines of the Communist Party and Black nationalist organizations.⁴⁴

Mallory did not limit her critique of civil rights leadership to the CPUSA and Black nationalist organizations, however. In a letter to the *Amsterdam News* in 1956, Mallory emphasized the necessities of independent and indigenous grassroots leadership for effectively mobilizing the masses for political action. Proudly declaring herself a "maladjusted Negro," Mallory criticized leaders in Black communities for "being followers themselves of certain groups that dictate to them," and therefore, not being "maladjusted enough." In the letter, Mallory concerned herself with the daily labors of organizing at the grassroots, placing a premium on educating the "stragglers" in Harlem to become actively involved as "hopeful

⁴³ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 189-90.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 190.

followers” in the struggle for Black liberation and empowerment. Like Ella Baker, Jesse Gray, and Malcolm X, Mallory believed that this vast pool of “stragglers” in Harlem represented an essential wellspring of political power that needed to be tapped into for effective, sustained action. To Mallory, the masses needed to become “maladjusted” to an oppressive society through education, agitation, and organization. “All the progress to be made,” Mallory argued, “will be made by maladjusted Negroes.”⁴⁵

By the time Parents in Action, of which she was a member, launched their September rally at City Hall, Mallory had already established herself in the fight for educational equality for Black children in Harlem. Beginning in 1956, Mallory led a year-long charge for the construction of a new school after the death of a Black child during recess at PS 10 prompted her to inspect the conditions of the school her children attended. Finding a building with only two decrepit bathrooms for 1,700 children, Mallory organized a group of mothers to demand a new school be built, and, after battling with city and state officials, the group was ultimately successful in their efforts. “The officials in Albany were not quite prepared for this angry Black woman,” Mallory later wrote.⁴⁶ Nor were local media outlets prepared to recognize her efforts. Like many of the efforts of Black women organizers in the Civil Rights Movement, male members of the group were given credit in the media for leading

⁴⁵ Mae Mallory, “Maladjusted Follower,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 24, 1956.

⁴⁶ Mae Mallory, *Letters From Prison by Mae Mallory: The Story of a Frame-Up* (Cleveland: Monroe Defense Committee, 1963), 29.

the fight.⁴⁷ Regardless, the victory was a formative experience in Mallory's political development. "Getting that school was quite an achievement," Mallory later wrote, "and gave me so much confidence in the fact that you can fight City Hall and win!"⁴⁸

On the heels of her victory at PS 10, Mallory jumped right back in the ring with city officials when her daughter was denied registration at a nearby junior high school. While working with Parents in Action that July, Mallory filed a lawsuit in the state Supreme Court against the NYC Board of Education to challenge the legality of the Board's zoning policy, which prevented her daughter Patricia from enrolling in a "substantially better" school than the one she was zoned for. Represented by Paul Zuber, a young Black attorney and fellow member of the Parents Committee for Better Education, the suit built upon the legal precedent of the *Brown* decision by arguing that the zoning policies effectively forced parents to send their children to segregated schools.⁴⁹ At a public hearing held by the Board of Education earlier that year, Mallory stated that the school her daughter attended in Harlem was "just as Jim Crow" as the school she had attended as a child in Macon, Georgia, and criticized the Board for not providing students at schools in predominantly Black

⁴⁷ Numerous newspaper articles credited Councilman Earl Brown or Reverend Eugene Callender with leading a group of mothers in the struggle for the new school. Though Brown and Callender played important roles in the effort, given their positions of influence in the city, the fight for the new school was initiated and sustained by Black women, who were not given the same degree of credit. See Sara Slack, "New Site Selected For PS 10," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 1, 1957; Earl Brown, "New School For Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 23, 1957.

⁴⁸ Mallory, *Letters From Prison by Mae Mallory*, 30.

⁴⁹ "Jim Crow School Case to High Court," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 6, 1957.

neighborhoods with the same quality of education as those in predominantly white areas.⁵⁰

Of course, the Board of Education was not responsible for the de jure and de facto patterns of housing discrimination and residential segregation that impacted the racial demographics of neighborhood schools. Mayor Wagner acknowledged that segregated schools were the result of “old established housing patterns,” and argued that the solution to the education problem lay in the enforcement of fair housing practices “in order to eradicate any neighborhood restrictions based upon race or ethnic origin.”⁵¹ The Mayor’s sentiment was echoed by Algernon Black of the New York Society for Ethical Culture in his support of the Sharkey-Brown-Isaacs Bill of 1957, which extended protections for fair housing practices in public housing to include privately-owned dwellings as well. Black referred to the bill as the “Number One civil rights action which must be taken in the North if we are to implement desegregation in the schools.”⁵²

Mallory, however, was less concerned with breaking down the barriers of residential segregation than she was with ensuring that Black children received quality education, regardless of where they lived. Notably absent in Mayor Wagner’s

⁵⁰ Testimony of Mrs. Mallory (Speaker #38) from PTA of Public School 10, Manhattan, at the Board of Education Public Hearing, January 17, 1957, Papers of Mayor Wagner, New York City Municipal Archives (Henceforth referred to as Wagner Papers).

⁵¹ Draft of Mayor Robert F. Wagner’s Statement to the Federal Civil Rights Commission, February 2, 1959, Box 60, Folder 696, Wagner Papers.

⁵² Letter from Algernon Black to Robert F. Wagner, May 27, 1957, Box 60, Folder 689, Wagner Papers.

assessment of educational inequality in the city was any mention of plans to resolve problems of unqualified teachers, substandard curricula, and hazardous buildings. The mayor's rhetoric advanced the position that the desegregation of schools, in-and-of itself, would inherently correct the issues of educational inequality plaguing the city's Black communities. To Mallory, however, the desegregation of New York's public schools was a means by which Black students could gain access to "substantially better" education, and therefore better employment opportunities. "I don't want my child to just sit side by side with white children," Mallory said in a television interview, "I just want the same classrooms with equal opportunity for my child."⁵³ Mallory essentially saw school desegregation as a tactic that had the potential to force the city to provide equal resources to all schools, because the fates of white and Black students would be bound together. Though Mallory lost the lawsuit, her efforts set the stage for a dramatic confrontation the following year, when "The Harlem Nine" launched their boycott of New York City public schools.

When the new school year began in September 1958, Mallory and the Junior High School Coordinating Committee announced their boycott of three junior high schools in Harlem. Having found little recourse through the Board of Education or the courts, the group of mothers known as "The Harlem Nine," decided to escalate their tactics by engaging in this collective act of civil disobedience. Though by this point Ella Baker had left New York for Atlanta to work with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the collective action of the boycott

⁵³ Jesse H. Walker, "Theatricals," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 17, 1959.

demonstrated the power of indigenous leadership that she had championed during her years in Harlem. Indeed, Carrie Haynes, Mae Mallory, Viola Waddy, and the other poor and working-class Black women of “The Harlem Nine” had built upon the organizational foundation that Parents in Action laid, to mount a direct action challenge to institutional racism in the City of New York. “Conference upon conference has procured nothing,” Carrie Haynes explained to a reporter in defense of the boycott, adding “we’re going to see this through to the bitter end.”⁵⁴

With the assistance of community leaders, including Rev. Eugene Callender and Attorney Paul Zuber, the boycotting parents arranged private tutoring sessions for their children in order to comply with the state’s compulsory education law. However, when the Board expressed satisfaction with the education the children were receiving in these ad hoc schools, the mothers cancelled the sessions to purposefully violate the compulsory education law and force a confrontation with the Board of Education and city government. To up the ante, the parents also filed a \$1 million lawsuit against the Board of Education, Superintendent, Board of Estimates, and Mayor Wagner, all of whom they accused of “sinister and discriminatory purpose” in maintaining racial segregation in Harlem.⁵⁵ These actions proved successful in finally provoking a response from the Board of Education when Superintendent John Theobald requested a state investigation of the schools—and summoned the Harlem Nine before the Domestic Relations Court for violating the compulsory education law.

⁵⁴ Back, “Exposing the ‘Whole Segregation Myth,’” 73.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 73-74.

The ensuing trials of the Harlem Nine proved momentous for Black freedom struggles in New York. In the first wave of trials brought against six of the Harlem Nine that December, Judge Nathaniel Kaplan ruled that the mothers were guilty of violating the State's compulsory education law. Two of the women folded and agreed to send their children back to school, but the other four, including Viola Waddy and Mae Mallory, were steadfast. "We will go to jail and rot there, if necessary," Waddy told a reporter, "but our children will not go to Jr. High Schools 136, 139, or 120."⁵⁶ Though they had their toothbrushes packed and affairs in order, the women avoided jail time when Justice Justine Polier issued a landmark decision in favor of two of the other boycotting mothers a week later. In her decision, which Carrie Haynes later praised as "one of the great historical documents of our nation," Judge Polier argued that though the Board of Education was not responsible for the conditions of residential segregation that created segregated schools, the Board had "done substantially nothing to rectify a situation it should never have allowed to develop."⁵⁷ Citing the stark contrast in the quality of education provided to students in predominantly Black schools compared to their white counterparts, Judge Polier held the Board of Education responsible for the unequal conditions created by segregated schools. Whereas the *Brown* decision four

⁵⁶ Sara Slack, "We'd Rather Go to Jail': Defy Court's Order in School Boycott," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 13, 1958.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 75.

years earlier had ruled *de jure* segregation to be unconstitutional, Judge Polier's decision was celebrated as the first ruling against *de facto* segregation in schools.⁵⁸

While the Polier decision was lauded by the Black press and community organizations, the reactions it elicited from the Board of Education and white city residents demonstrated a collective desire to defend the city's racial status quo from forced integration. When the Board decided to appeal the decision, Black community leaders and organizations rallied in opposition to the primarily white body. The 350,000-member Empire State Baptist Convention, for example, called for Mayor Wagner to dismiss all white members of the Board and threatened a mass march on City Hall if the appeal was not withdrawn. Dr. Gardner Taylor, a Baptist minister and lone Black member of the Board, asserted that by appealing the decision the City was telling Black and Puerto Rican students "you can't go to schools that are equal, you can't have equal opportunities here." Furthermore, Dr. Taylor argued that with the appeal "the board erased the last line of differences between Little Rock and New York."⁵⁹

Mae Mallory could certainly attest to this erasure, judging by the reprisals and threats that she received for her part in these struggles against school segregation. During her struggle with the Board of Education the previous year, Mallory was arrested on felony charges of receiving welfare assistance while she was employed. To Mallory, the arrest was an obvious act of political retaliation for her outspoken criticism of the Board, as the city had not acted against her, she

⁵⁸ Back, "Exposing the 'Whole Segregation Myth,'" 73-76.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 77-78.

argued, until she spoke out against the Board's zoning policies.⁶⁰ Mallory also received several threatening letters from individuals who opposed her work to desegregate the public schools. One anonymous letter she received from a former resident of Alabama read: "You should have lived down there and told them which school you wanted your daughter to go to. They would have hung you from a tree."⁶¹ Though Judge Polier had ruled in favor of the Harlem Nine, it quickly became clear that their struggles for educational equality would continue to be met by staunch opposition in the city.

The struggles for educational equality these Black women waged in Harlem represented a formative moment for the Black freedom struggle in New York City. In the long run, their boycott laid the groundwork for future school boycotts in the city and forced the city to confront its complicity in establishing and maintaining de facto segregation and institutional racism. In the short run, their actions won immediate, tangible benefits for Black children, demonstrated the collective power of Black women organizers, and contributed to broader conversations about analyses and strategies in local and national struggles for liberation. Harry Haywood, a Black communist leader and mentor of Jesse Gray, for instance, characterized such boycotts as "futile protests against de facto segregation," that merely supplemented the "legalistic and legislative approach of NAACP with

⁶⁰ "Protests School, Arrested on Welfare Charge," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 29, 1957.

⁶¹ Sara Slack, "Receives Threats in School Suits," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 3, 1957.

demonstrations” and avoided “basic economic issues” in the North.⁶² To Mae Mallory, however, her educational activism was inseparable from “basic economic issues,” particularly the ability of Black women to find decent employment opportunities. “I wanted both my children to get the best possible public education that they could,” Mallory later recalled in an interview, “because I wanted to break the cycle of women doing days work or factory work.”⁶³ Guided by the influence of Ella Baker’s emphasis on grassroots political empowerment, the organizing efforts of Mae Mallory and the Harlem Nine in the waning years of the 1950s represented demands for indigenous leadership, the empowerment of Black women, and self-determination that would come to typify struggles under the banner of “Black Power” in the years to come.

“The Vanguard of Racial Liberation”: The 1959 Rent Strikes and the “Negro Revolt”

While there were many organizations that sought to break down the institutional barriers that established segregated northern ghettos, leaders like Mae Mallory, Jesse Gray and Jack O’Dell, sought to mobilize communities within these confines to seize control of the social, economic, and political levers of power in “the Black [wo]man’s land.”⁶⁴ Though Mallory used desegregation as a tactic for educational access and parental empowerment, her primary interest was Black self-

⁶² Harry Haywood, “Black Political Power: The Next Stage in the Afro-American Liberation Struggle,” Haywood Papers.

⁶³ Back, “Exposing the ‘Whole Segregation Myth,’” 81.

⁶⁴ James Boggs, *Racism and the Class Struggle: Further Pages from a Black Worker’s Notebook*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970.

determination and economic, political, and social empowerment. Likewise, the interests of Gray and O'Dell in tenant organizing were as a means to an end of Black liberation and political power. Though organizing around issues of discrimination in housing had deep roots in Harlem, the experiences that informed Gray and O'Dell's analysis of the significance of "the housing question" in struggles for Black liberation differentiated their organizing from that of established civil rights organizations and tenants councils. Unlike the more bureaucratic approach of the newly formed Metropolitan Council on Housing, who one activist described as "older white liberal types, social worker types as opposed to activist types," Gray adopted strategies, tactics, and rhetoric that were more reflective of growing demands for Black civil rights and self-determination.⁶⁵ To O'Dell, the approach of Gray and the LHTC was, in essence, that of "a tenant movement...trying to empower itself," as opposed to "a social service thing," like the MCH and other tenants councils.⁶⁶ Furthermore, while the MCH operated on a citywide basis, the LHTC sought to grow an organization from the grassroots by building at a neighborhood level in Harlem.⁶⁷

Though Gray had built a reputation in Harlem as a vocal advocate for the rights of poor Black renters in the neighborhood, building a movement of tenants proved to be a difficult task. Operating out of their storefront headquarters on 116th

⁶⁵ Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 130.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Though some ALP clubs had toyed with the idea of organizing "block groups" in the late 1940s and early 1950s to promote grassroots political mobilization, the idea was never acted upon. See Schwartz, "Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1943-1971," 144.

Street, Gray and O'Dell organized from 110th Street to 150th Street as the Lower Harlem Tenants Council struggled to establish a substantial base of indigenous leaders who were committed to taking on the responsibilities of organizing.⁶⁸ Despite these organizing struggles, Gray and O'Dell did manage to eek out some minor victories in achieving rent reductions and organizing tenants for anti-eviction protests.⁶⁹ Although their successes largely came in the form of concessions from city agencies and court orders to induce landlord responsibility, Gray and the LHTC showed signs of gaining traction as a burgeoning tenant movement amongst Harlem's poor Black renters. In April 1959, Gray and the LHTC delivered a petition to New York City Housing Authority Chairman William Reid, demanding improved maintenance services and increased police protection. The petition was signed by 1,000 heads of families in the Stephen Foster Houses, a 1,500 family public housing project on Lenox Avenue and 115th Street. The swift response that Gray and the LHTC received from Reid, who vowed to address the situation within a week, demonstrated the impacts that collective tenant action could produce.⁷⁰

On the heels of the victory at the Stephen Foster Houses, Gray announced plans to initiate a larger tenant movement in Harlem's public housing projects.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Jack O'Dell interview with James Early, May 13, 1997; Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 118.

⁶⁹ Joel Schwartz, "The New York City Rent Strikes of 1963-1964," *Social Service Review* 57, no. 4 (1983): 547.

⁷⁰ "1,000 Tenants Got Mad, Got Petitions, Got Action," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 4, 1959.

However, after the initial declaration of these plans, Gray largely turned his focus to organizing tenants in privately-owned tenement buildings who suffered from some of the worst housing conditions in the city. In the months following the petition-drive at the Foster Houses, Gray and the LHTC captured the attention of Harlem and the city as they brought direct action tactics back into the playbook of the growing tenant movement. On the first day of July, tenants from four dilapidated apartment buildings down the block from the LHTC office on West 116th Street declared a rent strike to force their landlords to repair the buildings. Chanting “No repairs, no rent,” a group of fifty tenants—primarily women—walked a picket line in front of the four six-story brick buildings carrying signs that read “My Child is Too Pretty to Die,” “Act Like Landlords: They Do Nothing, We Pay Nothing,” and “Restore Law to Housing.”⁷² As the tenants walked the picket line, Gray patrolled the block, giving instructions to the picketers and passing out leaflets with details about the tenants’ case. “The charges run the same through all the houses,” he told a reporter at the scene. “No paint, falling ceilings, no hot water for months at a time and this terrible plague of rats. Babies can’t sleep at night for them.”⁷³ Though Gray was the leading organizer of the strike, the foot soldiers of the burgeoning rent strike movement consisted mainly of poor and working-class Black women. Gray’s “militant,

⁷¹ Ibid. An article from the *New York Amsterdam News* claimed “Mr. Gray announced that within two weeks [of the Stephen Foster Houses protests] he will call a joint meeting of executive board members of all city projects from 90th Street up.”

⁷² George Barner, “Angry Tenants on Rent Strike,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 4, 1959.

⁷³ Ibid.

maternalistic rhetoric,” as Thomas Sugrue put it, highlighted the oppressive conditions faced by Black women, which not only made for dramatic and empathetic headlines, but also “mobilized angry mothers to demand that government protect their families.”⁷⁴

These housing conditions that the tenants of West 116th Street protested were all too familiar for residents of Central Harlem. Statistics on housing compiled the following year for the 1960 census showed that only 51 percent of housing units in the area were considered “sound,” while 38 percent were “deteriorating” and 11 percent were “dilapidated.” These statistics showed a stark contrast with the rest of New York City, where 85 percent of housing units were sound, while only 12 percent were deteriorating, and 3 percent dilapidated.⁷⁵ The impacts of these conditions for tenants were far-reaching, and often had dire consequences. Deaths from “home accidents” in Harlem were nearly double those of the rest of New York, and just months before the tenants of West 116th Street launched their rent strike, a 2-year-old boy died in a fire in one of the buildings.⁷⁶ In addition to the collective

⁷⁴ Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 404.

⁷⁵ In the 1960 Census, “deteriorating” housing is defined as that which “does not provide safe and adequate shelter,” while “dilapidated” housing is defined as that which “need more repair than would be provided in the course of regular maintenance.” Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, *Youth in the Ghetto: A Study of the Consequences of Powerlessness and a Blueprint for Change* (New York: HARYOU, 1964), 107.

⁷⁶ The 1960 Census showed a rate of 2.3 “deaths from home accidents” per 10,000 population count in Harlem, as compared to 1.2 for the rest of New York City. HARYOU, *Youth in the Ghetto*, 108.

trauma and outrage the child's death induced, tenants also complained that the structural damages caused by the fire had yet to be repaired.⁷⁷

Although launched with the relatively conservative goals of forcing repairs and getting rent reductions, the emergence of the July 1959 rent strike was a significant development in ongoing grassroots struggles for rights and power in Harlem. Coverage of the strike appeared in the *New York Times*, as well as the *Amsterdam News*. The July 4th edition of the latter featured a story on the strike directly below a headline that read "Negro Revolt," in the largest font the weekly newspaper had.⁷⁸ In that issue, which also contained coverage of NAACP pickets over employment discrimination, backlash from white parents over school integration, and political struggles for control of the Harlem Democratic Party, the editorial board evoked a vision of impending mass mobilization for civil and human rights in Harlem. Citing Gray's claims that the LHTC had organized 6,000 tenants in 40 other buildings that were prepared to join the rent strike, one reporter declared that their actions represented "one of Harlem's first major rent rebellions."⁷⁹

Although the paper used the terms "protest," "revolt," and "revolution" loosely and interchangeably to present a provocative vision of a potential coordinated mass movement in Harlem, the editorial board also acknowledged that

⁷⁷ Edith Evans Asbury, "Agent for 2 Harlem Tenements Is Fined \$75 for 99 Violations," *New York Times*, July 2, 1959.

⁷⁸ "Negro Revolt: Harlem Is Seething With Grim Unrest," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 4, 1959.

⁷⁹ George Barner, "Angry Tenants on Rent Strike," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 4, 1959.

the “series of revolts” were the result of “spontaneous efforts” from various uncoordinated organizations. These simultaneous, yet uncoordinated actions represented the diversity in analyses of organizations that sought to mobilize different target populations in Harlem. While the economic protests waged by the NAACP that week scored an immediate victory for Black salesman who had been shut out by white liquor stores, *Amsterdam News* reporters projected the branch’s focus on civil rights agitation for the rights of the Black middle-class onto the economic interests of the larger Harlem community. The tenant organizing of the LHTC, however, was informed by Gray’s analysis of the possibilities for liberation through a mass mobilization of the underclasses in Harlem who were impacted in dire ways by the intersections of institutional oppression based on their race, class, and gender identities. As Sugrue argues, while larger civil rights organizations, like the NAACP, focused on middle-class oriented agitation and saw “quality of life” politics as “marginal,” Gray saw organizing around these issues as the “vanguard of racial liberation.”⁸⁰

Despite the diversity in analysis inherent in these mobilizations, there existed in praxis a unifying emphasis on direct action campaigns. The surge of these campaigns represented a general coalescence of demands for justice, and promoted a popular culture of struggle for rights and power in the waning days of the 1950s. As summer arrived in 1959, Harlem was “seething with grim unrest,” and residents disillusioned with the gradual pace of established civil rights organizations were taking to the streets in greater numbers than in recent years to protest the racial

⁸⁰ Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 404.

inequalities that bounded their daily lives in various ways.⁸¹ Though this uptick in civil rights agitation was not unique to Harlem, the Black Mecca drew the national spotlight that July as national and local struggles for Black liberation intersected in the nation's largest city in a nearly-explosive manner.

Mississippi, Monroe, and Harlem: The 1959 NAACP Convention and the Question of Nonviolence

As the masses were beginning to mobilize through rent strikes and boycotts in Harlem in the spring of 1959, several acts of racial violence rocked the South, and had profound impacts upon Black political consciousness and the direction of national freedom struggles. In late April, a lynch mob dragged 23-year-old Mack Charles Parker from his cell in a Poplarville, Mississippi jail, where he was being held for the alleged rape of a white woman.⁸² As with the brutal murder of Emmett Till four years earlier, the white southern justice system—with the assistance of federal agencies—allowed Parker's killers to walk free after his body was pulled from a nearby river. The responses of southern civil rights leaders to the lynching of Mack Parker, according to scholar Timothy B. Tyson, "revealed that black Southerners were far from committed to nonviolence," and contributed to a growing national dialogue over the use of self-defense in freedom struggles.⁸³ When the news of the lynching reached Jackson, Mississippi, NAACP field secretary Medgar

⁸¹ "Harlem Is Seething With Grim Unrest," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 4, 1959.

⁸² Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 143.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Evers told his wife Myrlie, "I'd like to get a gun and start shooting." In Monroe, North Carolina, where members of the local NAACP branch had formed a rifle club and engaged in open combat with the Ku Klux Klan two years earlier, branch president Robert F. Williams argued that the tragedy could have been prevented with armed self-defense.⁸⁴ In New York City, readers of the *Amsterdam News* followed the case as editor James Hicks reported from Poplarville in weekly installments with headlines such as "Mississippi is Hell," and editorials sprung up in support of armed self-defense. In a May 16th column, titled "They Lynched Us All," City Councilman Earl Brown charged that "the only way to break the chain of one-way death in Dixie would be for the Negroes to kill when attacked."⁸⁵ In a letter to the editor a week later, a Brooklyn resident writing under the name of "Cousin Mack," made the case for the establishment of an armed organization that could move throughout the country and "take reprisals on whatever bigot is unfortunate to find himself within our reach."⁸⁶

The sentiments offered by Councilman Brown and Cousin Mack demonstrated not only the national reach of the Parker lynching, but also the reverberations of a thunderous declaration made by Williams the day after Mack Parker's body was found in the Pearl River. On May 5th, two cases came to trial in

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Interestingly, each of the four times that Brown argued in favor of armed self-defense in the short editorial, he was careful to explicitly mention its application to the southern situation. Earl Brown, "They Lynched Us All," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 16, 1959.

⁸⁶ "We Printed It," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 23, 1959. Cousin Mack may have been an actual cousin of Robert F. Williams.

Monroe, both involving white men accused of brutal assaults upon Black women. Prior to the trials, when Black women and men in Monroe sought to bring these white attackers to justice through violent retribution, Williams urged that they allow the cases to go through the courts. However, when charges were dropped in the first case, and a verdict of not guilty reached swiftly in the second, this blatant miscarriage of justice brought the ire of Monroe's Black women down upon Williams, whom they argued, "was responsible for this man not being punished."⁸⁷ "These people have declared open season on Black women," one woman told Williams outside the courtroom, and pointedly asked "what are you gonna say now?"⁸⁸ The anger of these women, Williams later said, "made me realize that this was the last straw, that we didn't have as much protection as a dog down there, and the Government didn't care about us." At that point, Williams turned to reporters on the scene and declared that the time had come for Black people to "meet violence with violence," and that "we must be willing to kill if necessary."⁸⁹ With these words, Williams sent shockwaves through the nation and stirred the radical imaginations of Black communities that were growing increasingly indignant over the daily violence of American racism.

In the following months, Williams became a national cause célèbre, attracting loyal supporters and fervent detractors alike. Outside of Monroe, Williams found

⁸⁷ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 149.

⁸⁸ *Negroes with Guns: Rob Williams and Black Power*, 2005, accessed May 19, 2017, <https://fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=102927&xtid=49787/>.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

some of his greatest supporters amongst Harlem's radical intellectuals, writers, and organizers, including Julian Mayfield, John Henrik Clarke, and Malcolm X. Williams had first met Malcolm a year earlier during a trip to New York, and found an ardent supporter in the minister and his congregation at Temple Number 7. "Every time I used to go to New York he would invite me to speak," Williams said in a 1968 interview, also noting that "they were giving me money every time I would go to the temple."⁹⁰ With the help of Malcolm and Mayfield, Williams was able to build a veritable arsenal in Monroe, including military carbines, dynamite, and machine guns, the latter of which Mayfield was said to have delivered early that spring.⁹¹

That June and July, Williams made several trips to the NAACP headquarters in New York City to deal with the fallout from his advocacy of armed self-defense, which included his suspension from the organization. Though Williams made these trips for the purpose of appealing his suspension, the visits also allowed the militant leader to strengthen connections with his comrades and supporters in the North. During these trips, Williams spoke to crowds at street rallies, in barrooms, and at various institutions to spread the word of what was taking place in Monroe and share his analysis on armed resistance in domestic and international struggles for Black liberation.⁹²

⁹⁰ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 205.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 145-147.

⁹² "Williams Hearing to Hear Recording," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 6, 1959; "Williams Returns to Speak Again," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 11, 1959.

Though Williams had the fervent support of radical activists and intellectuals in Harlem and throughout the nation, he faced reactionary responses from within and without the NAACP. In addition to the heightened government surveillance that his declaration drew from J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, the late spring and early summer brought a dramatic struggle between Williams and the national NAACP, which sought to distance itself from the Union County president's open advocacy of armed self-defense. Though national executive secretary Roy Wilkins acknowledged privately that "the thought of using violence has been in the minds of Negroes," he actively maneuvered, privately and publicly, to discredit Williams and undermine his growing influence in the organization.⁹³ Indeed, armed self-defense was a common practice as a means of protection and survival for leaders of local branches of the organization throughout the South. The national organization, however, was not willing to affirm a general policy in support of the Constitutionally-protected right for fear of political retribution and alienating its white supporters. The bitter debate in the organization between Williams and Wilkins not only reflected a widening rift in the organization over non-violence and self-defense, but also more broadly, it demonstrated a growing disillusionment over the constraining relationship between the national organization and its local branches.

These debates came to a dramatic head in July during the NAACP's 50th anniversary convention, scheduled for the week of July 13th in New York City. As

⁹³ As Tyson notes, Wilkins went so far as to solicit the cooperation of the FBI to red-bait and discredit Williams, in addition to bribing Little Rock NAACP leader Daisy Bates to publicly denounce Williams' actions. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 149-165.

the convention was nearing its commencement, journalist Louis Lomax reported, there were “deep rumblings of unrest and discontent,” over the organization’s reticence to embrace the tactics of non-violent direct action. The direct mass action campaigns waged by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference had provided tangible benefits to Black communities in Montgomery, while the legal approaches of the NAACP, though highly significant in their own regard, had done little since the *Brown* decision to inspire and mobilize the masses. As the convention neared, this was the primary issue that many delegates sought to raise for debate, in hopes of convincing the executive board to “relinquish its absolute power and institute a more democratic procedure,” according to Lomax. The larger goal of these delegates then, beyond the embrace of non-violent direct action, was to compel the highly bureaucratic organization to develop a more expansive tactical approach that empowered the rank-and-file in its movement for desegregation.⁹⁴ Given the struggles that Ella Baker had undertaken over the past several years to make the New York branch of the NAACP more responsive and accountable to the grassroots, the convention’s location was quite fitting for this debate.

As the convention opened, however, it quickly became apparent that this was not the debate that would be troubling the floor and corridors of the gathering. With the firestorm surrounding the suspension of Robert Williams and his position on armed self-defense, those delegates who supported direct action and the

⁹⁴ Louis E. Lomax, *The Negro Revolt* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962), 101-102.

democratization of the national organization hitched their wagons to Williams' case and their arguments were subsumed within a defense of the embattled leader from Monroe. By conflating the two issues, these delegates played into the hand of Roy Wilkins, who had cunningly stacked the deck against Williams through his maneuverings with many of the most notable speakers and delegates at the convention. As Timothy Tyson notes, a tone of moderate, middle-class respectability was set from the convention's opening session when Governor Nelson Rockefeller took to the stage to address the crowd of 3,000 gathered in the New York Coliseum the evening of July 13th.⁹⁵ After assuring the crowd that segregation was "on its way out" in New York State and in the nation, the Republican governor proclaimed that America had been "fortunate in the kind of leadership the NAACP has given in this great struggle for civil rights." Furthermore, the *New York Times* reported, Rockefeller lauded the gathered delegates for having "made no appeal to violence," for having "rejected retaliation in kind to threat and terrorism," and for having "repulsed the threat of communism to invade your ranks."⁹⁶ This focus of the governor's address, Tyson argued, was "an unmistakable reference to the Williams case," and was designed to firmly establish the narrative set by Wilkins as the defining position of the Convention. The link was made even more explicit after the governor's speech concluded, when the chair of the convention declared that

⁹⁵ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 162-163.

⁹⁶ Farnsworth Fowle, "Governor Wants Housing Bias Law Similar to City's," *New York Times*, July 14, 1959.

deliberations on the Williams situation would be brought before the convention later in the week.⁹⁷

The Nation Meets the Nation: “The Hate That Hate Produced” and the Rising Black Underclass

While those gathered at the New York Coliseum for the convention shuffled in to hear Governor Rockefeller’s speech at the opening session, a startling documentary news series aired on Mike Wallace’s television program, *News Beat*. Viewers who tuned into Channel Thirteen in New York that evening were greeted by the characteristically stern white reporter, as he adjusted his footing and fidgeted with a stack of papers. “While city officials, state agencies, white liberals, and sober-minded Negroes stand idly by,” Wallace began before finding his footing and affixing his gaze to the camera, “a group of Negro dissenters is taking to street corner stepladders, church pulpits, sports arenas, and ballroom platforms across the United States to preach a gospel of hate that would set off a federal investigation if it were preached by southern whites.” To illustrate Wallace’s narration, the program then showed rare video footage of a gathering where Black men, carefully dressed in suits and ties, and Black women, adorning flowing white robes and head scarves, sat on opposite sides of a hall watching a performance of a short play, in which a symbolic white man was put on trial in a Black court for his crimes against humanity. When the spirited prosecutor exhorted the jury to bring back a verdict of guilty, the audience delivered their own verdict through a dignified, yet thunderous applause. Returning to the *News Beat* studio, Wallace explained that this indictment

⁹⁷ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 162-163.

echoed throughout major cities across the country, and recited the predictable guilty verdict. “The sentence,” Wallace paused for dramatic effect, “is death.” New Yorkers, Wallace later said, “were stunned.”⁹⁸

The program, provocatively and problematically titled “The Hate That Hate Produced,” was created as an exposé of the Nation of Islam, who Wallace referred to as “the most powerful of the Black supremacist groups” in the nation. Though Malcolm X and the NOI had gained heightened popularity and notoriety in New York City two years earlier following their intervention in the beating of Johnson X by the NYPD, white New Yorkers and Americans in general knew next to nothing about the growing organization. The news series provided white America—Wallace included—with a frightening first glimpse into the organization’s existence. “What I felt about Malcolm X when I first saw him on film,” Wallace recalled in an interview, “was that he was a demagogue, racist.”⁹⁹ The broadcast was the idea of Louis Lomax, a neophyte to Harlem who, like Wallace, was shocked the previous summer when he first encountered the militant rhetoric that reverberated from nationalist street corner rallies in the neighborhood. Unfamiliar with the history and culture of street corner oration in Harlem, Lomax condemned such rhetoric as “inverse racism,” and an article he wrote for the *Baltimore Afro-American* even compared Black

⁹⁸ Mike Wallace, “The Hate That Hate Produced,” 1959, accessed at <https://archive.org/details/PBSTheHateThatHateProduced>

⁹⁹ Mike Wallace interview with Blackside, Inc., October 12, 1988, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries (henceforth referred to as Henry Hampton Collection).

nationalists to the Ku Klux Klan, White Citizens Council, and Adolf Hitler.¹⁰⁰ Lomax, devoid of a nuanced understanding at that moment of the emergence of the NOI within the historical trajectory of Black nationalist political organizing, was largely responsible for the problematic narrative spun by “The Hate That Hate Produced.” Furthermore, Lomax’s analysis, which reduced the nuances of the Nation’s ideologies and programs to that of a Black counterpart to the KKK, took on different meanings, and had different impacts, when reiterated by a white news anchor.

Though little known to Lomax, Wallace, and most white New Yorkers, the Nation of Islam’s roots ran deep in Harlem and the organization was only just beginning to really bear fruit. In the two years since the beating of Johnson X, the NOI had become the fastest growing organization in American cities, with its influence reaching across the nation and around the globe, due in large part to the dogged efforts of its charismatic minister in New York. Though operating within the doctrinaire constraints of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad’s theology, Malcolm invoked the inherently political implications of the Nation’s ideologies and programs to locate the NOI within the context of local, national, and international struggles for liberation and empowerment. During this window in New York City, Malcolm’s organizing efforts, which connected local and global struggles for Black liberation, demonstrated his development as a Pan-African and nationalist thinker and organizer. While leading several high-profile challenges against police brutality in the city, Malcolm was also building connections with Pan-Africanist organizations

¹⁰⁰ Louis E. Lomax, “Harlem, Saturday Night,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 19, 1958; Lomax, *The Negro Revolt*, 164.

locally and globally. In his address at an African Freedom Day rally in Harlem earlier that spring, part of which aired on “The Hate That Hate Produced,” Malcolm spoke poignantly to an enthusiastic crowd of the interrelation of struggles for liberation throughout the African diaspora. By the time the news series aired, in fact, Malcolm was on a three-week tour of the Middle East and Africa, travelling under the name of Malik El-Shabazz “so that my brothers in the East would recognize me as one of them.”¹⁰¹

As local freedom struggles were being transformed from the grassroots by poor and working-class Black communities, Malcolm was appealing to this base and helping to shape this transformation led by those most deeply and personally impacted by the daily transgressions of an oppressive white society. The NOI’s theology was particularly relevant for many within the ghettoized Black underclasses in American cities, who saw the personification of the NOI’s “white devil” theology in their daily experiences with police officers, teachers, employers, and welfare caseworkers. It was amongst this demographic base that Malcolm and the NOI focused their organizing, with the purpose of mobilizing a mass movement. By focusing their efforts on poor and working-class Black communities, as William Sales has argued, the NOI challenged the notion that the middle-class was the primary “agent of change” in Black communities. Furthermore, this challenge was directed at the middle-class specifically because “its thinking was seen as totally dominated by the integrationist-assimilationist paradigm.” Like Ella Baker, Jesse

¹⁰¹ William W. Sales, Jr. *From Civil Rights To Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 67.

Gray, and Mae Mallory, Malcolm viewed the Black underclasses in urban American society, disaffected with gradualist approaches to liberation, as a grassroots vanguard possessing the potential for bringing forth fundamental societal change. Though their programs and analyses were significantly different, these influential and burgeoning organizers understood that these communities were becoming “the most explosive and dynamic” force in urban society.¹⁰²

“The people of Harlem are in an angry mood”: A “Near Riot” Shakes New York City

The same evening “The Hate That Hate Produced” hit the airwaves, the frustrations and momentum swelling behind the “Negro Revolt” in Harlem nearly reached a tipping point. The afternoon of July 13th, while NAACP members convened in regional organization meetings at the Coliseum on Columbus Circle, Carmela Perez walked into the Regent Restaurant and Bar on Seventh Avenue with a friend to have a drink. It was a warm summer day, and Perez, a 21-year-old Bronx resident of Italian and Puerto Rican descent, came from an earlier party, where she had been drinking for some time. According to John Panuthos, the owner of the restaurant, Perez was “apparently highly intoxicated” when she walked in, and within a few minutes excused herself to the ladies’ room. After about 45 minutes had passed with Mrs. Perez still in the restroom, her companion asked the owner to help “get her out.” The two men pried open the door, and asked two female employees to assist in removing Perez from the bathroom, who was “very drunk” and “refused to leave.” The two women managed to evict Perez from the ladies’

¹⁰² Sales, *From Civil Rights To Black Liberation*, 66-69.

room, but the struggle continued in the dining area, where the young woman “lodged” herself in a booth and was reportedly “kicking, screaming, and swinging” at the employees as they tried to eject her from the restaurant.¹⁰³ “I was drinking a lot but I know what I’m doing when I’m drinking,” Perez told a reporter later that evening, adding that, “I didn’t want to leave, that’s all.”¹⁰⁴

As the employees struggled with Mrs. Perez inside the bar, an NYPD patrol car carrying two officers pulled up and parked outside. Norman Hammes, a white patrolman, entered the restaurant to get a cup of coffee, while Lieutenant John Angrist stayed in the car. With the altercation still continuing in the booth, Panuthos welcomed the timely arrival of Hammes, and approached the patrolman to “get [Perez] out of the place.” According to Panuthos, however, the struggle only intensified with the intervention of Hammes. “The way she was fighting,” Panuthos told a reporter, “he had to use force to subdue her.” Hammes, who Panuthos described as “a little fellow,” struggled with the unruly patron who was “doing everything in her power to try to maim him.” In the struggle, Hammes slapped Perez and eventually pulled her up by her hair as he tried to remove her from the booth.¹⁰⁵ Angrist was now inside, having been called in for assistance, and the two officers reportedly dragged Perez about 40 feet from the restaurant to the patrol car while

¹⁰³ For details of the incident at the Regent Restaurant and Bar, see “Crowd Melted Away After Clerk’s Release,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1959; “Harlem Tensions Cited in Flare-Up,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1959.

¹⁰⁴ George Barner, “Victim’s Own Story,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1959.

¹⁰⁵ “Crowd Melted Away After Clerk’s Release,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1959

punching and kicking the woman, according to a witness statement.¹⁰⁶ Unaware of the confrontation that had taken place inside, many witnesses outside watched as two white officers manhandled a young, olive-skinned woman.

While bystanders looked on, the two officers struggled to get Mrs. Perez into the car, eventually settling for confining her to the floor of the front seat underneath the dashboard. After finally securing Perez around 5:30 PM, according to the same witness who lived across the street from the restaurant, the patrol car “drove off at a high rate of speed” up Seventh Avenue. Within moments, however, the car made a sudden turn at 117th Street, striking the concrete median dividing Seventh Ave. According to the officers, Perez had grabbed the wheel and stepped on the accelerator, causing the vehicle to crash. Charles Samuel, a 30-year-old Black postal worker had been fixing a tire near the intersection of Seventh Avenue and 117th Street when the patrol car crashed, and as a crowd began to form, Samuel approached the police car to see what had happened. Upon finding two white officers struggling with Perez in the car, Samuel demanded to know why they were handling the young woman so roughly. Hammes then got out of the car and grabbed Samuel, while simultaneously drawing his gun as the crowd drew closer. As Samuel struggled to free himself from the officer’s grasp, the .38 chrome-plated Colt was

¹⁰⁶ Al Nall, “Notarized Riot Statement: ‘The Cop Dragged Her Out By Her Hair...,’” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1959.

discharged, striking Hammes in the left hand before hitting Angrist in the lower back.¹⁰⁷

Moments after the gunfire rang out, twenty patrol cars responding to a call for backup arrived on the scene and Perez and Samuel were whisked away to the 28th Precinct on West 123rd Street as the crowds followed in procession. Rumors of police brutality traveled quickly in Harlem, and in a scene reminiscent of the beating of Johnson X two years earlier, a crowd of nearly 1,000 angry Harlem residents soon surrounded the 28th Precinct to demand Samuel's release. That some in the crowd were unaware of what had actually transpired to provoke the demonstration speaks to the perceived prevalence of police brutality in the neighborhood. "I don't know what happened," a protestor told a reporter, "but I know these Harlem cops, and we oughta turn the station out."¹⁰⁸ Just weeks earlier, in response to recent allegations of police brutality against Black women, Malcolm X had in fact warned Deputy Police Commissioner Walter Arm that "if we can't get justice from the law, then we'll have to seek justice elsewhere."¹⁰⁹

As the crowd continued to swell in size and anger outside the precinct, that very sentiment resounded, and a "riot" seemed imminent. Amongst the crowd, however, were State Senator James Watson, Assemblyman Lloyd Dickens, and

¹⁰⁷ Al Nall, "Notarized Riot Statement: 'The Cop Dragged Her Out By Her Hair...,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1959; "Crowd Melted Away After Clerk's Release," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1959.

¹⁰⁸ "Sidelights of the 'Riot,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1959.

¹⁰⁹ "Moslems Didn't Get To See Commissioner," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 27, 1959.

middleweight boxing champion “Sugar” Ray Robinson, who managed to talk their way inside the precinct in hopes of defusing the situation. Robinson, who Watson later commended for preventing “a serious situation from exploding into a race riot,” coolly explained to high-ranking officers in the precinct that in order to prevent the looming threat of violence, the crowd needed to see Samuel walk out of the precinct. The three men were then able to negotiate a compromise, by which the slew of charges facing Samuel, including felonious assault and inciting to riot, were reduced to a summons for disorderly conduct. In exchange, Robinson addressed the crowd to assure them that the police had not abused Mrs. Perez, though he later told reporters “it was apparent the woman had been beaten.”¹¹⁰ Accompanied by his wife and ad hoc negotiating team, Samuel walked out of the precinct and the crowd slowly dissipated.

Though the immediate threat of a potential “riot” was narrowly avoided, the confrontation outside the 28th Precinct put the city on notice, and made a political lightning rod of the conditions faced by Black communities in Harlem that community leaders had been working feverishly to address. As would be the case five years later, politicians, police, newspapers, and community leaders sought to explain the causes of the latest unrest and jostled to devise ways to curb any further trouble. In speaking to reporters about police abuse of Muslims two weeks before the “near-riot,” Malcolm X echoed the sentiments of many Black New Yorkers when he explained that Muslims had been waiting for the police to give them justice, but

¹¹⁰ “Harlem Tensions Cited in Flare-Up,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1959.

now, “I’m not responsible for anything that happens.”¹¹¹ While the city narrowly avoided a violent confrontation that July, it had become clear to many that Harlem’s Black communities were no longer willing to wait to receive justice—they were now fighting to seize it for themselves.



The confrontation outside the 28th Precinct that July represented an initial climax of the heightened demands for rights and power that had been escalating within Harlem’s Black communities in the previous days, weeks, and months. The collective anger that drew over one thousand people to spontaneously protest at the precinct that night was illustrative of a growing impatience with moderate approaches to civil rights advocacy, along with a swelling embrace of militant grassroots political action in Harlem in the waning days of the 1950s. By the end of the decade, there was demonstrated—and growing—support in Harlem for local, national, and global struggles for Black liberation based upon principles of self-determination, indigenous leadership, self-defense, and Black political empowerment. In turn, these local struggles in Harlem were intersecting with and influencing national and global freedom struggles. Though these principles would become most closely associated with the Black Power Movement in the latter-half of the 1960s, the organizational analyses and efforts of leaders such as Ella Baker, Jesse Gray, Mae Mallory, Malcolm X, and others signal that these tenets of Black

¹¹¹ “Moslems Didn’t Get To See Commissioner,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 27, 1959.

Power were firmly grounded in radical grassroots struggles in Harlem in the late 1950s.

In the two weeks following the confrontation at the 28th Precinct, newspapers up and down the east coast, and as far away as Sudan, carried stories of the altercation and rising racial tensions, each seeking to explain the underlying causes that led Harlem residents to nearly storm the building.¹¹² Speaking to reporters the night of the incident, Hulan Jack attributed the conflict to rising racial tensions in the neighborhood, fueled by substandard housing, poor schools, and low-paying jobs. “The people of Harlem are in an angry mood,” Jack said, “and the city’s got to do something about it.”¹¹³ As would be the case five years later when Harlem was rocked by an actual rebellion, media outlets and city officials, like Jack, employed the “powder keg thesis” to explain the causes of racial unrest. According to this analysis, forces of political, societal, and economic oppression made powder kegs of Black communities, filling them with potentially explosive resentment that could be spontaneously sparked by an act of alleged police abuse.

Though inherently flawed for its denial of conscious political agency to those within the hypothetical keg, the thesis nonetheless dominated mainstream explanations of what had taken place in Harlem that July. Acting upon this analysis, which also made invisible governmental complicity in building and filling the keg,

¹¹² On August 22, 1959, the *Amsterdam News* carried an editorial written by Malcolm X from Khartoum, stating that “Racial trouble in New York occupied prominent space on the front pages here and in other parts of Africa yesterday. Everyone here seems aware of America’s color problems.” Malcolm X, “Africa Eyes Us,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 22, 1959.

¹¹³ “Harlem Tensions Cited in Flare-Up,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1959.

city officials launched a series of meetings, studies, and committees in attempts to drain some of the powder from the keg, while also taking measures to fasten down its lid. The former, however, represented mere concessions in an apparent effort to appease moderate-middle class Black leadership in Harlem, in hopes that they could salve the hostility of the masses. However, it had become apparent over the past two years that this class of leadership did not represent the interests of those most disenfranchised by racial oppression in Harlem. Notably absent from a meeting called by Mayor Wagner on July 21st was any representation from grassroots organizations that embodied the growing spirit of militancy and self-determination among the poor and working classes that was beginning to characterize struggles for Black liberation in Harlem and beyond. Indeed, it was this growing militancy that city officials sought to suppress in the years following the “near-riot” through increasingly militarized and oppressive policing.

In a letter to Mayor Wagner following the July 21st meeting at City Hall, Hulan Jack acknowledged the importance of a more responsive government that would allow “the little people of the Harlem community” to “speak for themselves,” “offer suggestions,” and “get results through their city government.”¹¹⁴ Though Jack’s rhetoric on representation and accountability may have been fundamentally similar to the demands of civil rights leaders for equal access to the levers of political power in the city, there existed a grave disconnect between this hopeful rhetoric and the lived realities of Harlem residents that had been continuously and systematically

¹¹⁴ Letter from Hulan E. Jack to Robert F. Wagner, August 3, 1959, Box 5, Folder “Harlem and East Harlem,” Jack Papers.

denied effective avenues for political agency. This disconnect was illustrated in a more personal way when Jack was booed off the stage of an NAACP rally by members of the Nation of Islam in late July.¹¹⁵

By the start of the new decade, growing numbers of Harlem residents were vociferously demonstrating their disillusionment with moderate approaches to Black liberation, and advocating for more independent and radical analyses, strategies, and tactics for achieving fundamental societal change. Building upon the neighborhood's traditions of radical political organizing, grassroots organizers in the final years of the 1950s had begun to awaken and mobilize the masses to challenge and transform the political, social, and economic landscape of the nation's largest city. As James Hicks wrote a few months later, there was a "New Negro in Harlem" who was poised to mount a serious challenge to old ideas and institutions of power.

¹¹⁵ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour*, 22.

CHAPTER 4

“AN EXTREMELY DANGEROUS LUXURY”: THE HARLEM AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

AND THE LIMITS OF LIBERALISM IN HARLEM, 1959-1962

Northerners indulge in an extremely dangerous luxury. They seem to feel that because they fought on the right side during the Civil War, and won, they have earned the right merely to deplore what is going on in the South, without taking any responsibility for it; and that they can ignore what is happening in Northern cities because what is happening in Little Rock or Birmingham is worse. –James Baldwin (1960)¹

The “near riot” outside the 28th Precinct on July 13, 1959 represented a dramatic illustration of the escalating demands for rights and power that had been resonating throughout Harlem that spring and summer. Inspired by local, national, and global struggles for Black liberation and empowerment, greater numbers of Harlem residents were becoming active in grassroots campaigns to build the collective power necessary to improve conditions in housing, education, employment, and law enforcement in their neighborhoods. Just over a week before the incident, the *Amsterdam News* had characterized this surging mobilization as the “Negro Revolt,” marked by the most “hostile and serious” collective mood in Harlem since the 1930s, “when uptowners took measures into their own hands.”² Though the editorial staff specified the reference in regards to economic boycotts aimed at opening job opportunities in the 1930s, the provocative language invoked memories from 1935, when an allegation of police brutality triggered an uprising in Harlem.

¹ James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1962), 69.

² “Harlem Is Seething With Grim Unrest,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 4, 1959.

That rebellion, which many Harlem residents still remembered, had erupted in the spring of 1935 within a context of mounting campaigns against discrimination in employment and law enforcement. Though the protests outside the 28th Precinct did not grow into a large-scale rebellion, most conscious observers in Harlem understood the “near riot” as a logical consequence of decades of oppressive resistance from the city’s white power structure to struggles waged by Black residents for civil rights, human rights, and political power. “If we were disposed to brag and boast,” the *Amsterdam News* editorial staff declared a few days later, “we could scream in headlines: ‘We knew it all the time!’”³

This brief, yet powerful demonstration outside the precinct was a significant moment in the development of the modern Civil Rights Movement in New York City for three primary reasons. First, the fact that a spontaneous protest mobilized nearly 1,000 angry residents shows that there existed a level of collective political consciousness in Harlem that could quickly translate into direct action. Beyond merely demonstrating a popular frustration with continued police abuses, which alone would not account for a collective direct confrontation of such scale, this action reflected the influence of a popular political culture in Harlem that was being shaped by the rhetoric and praxis of a more radical set of grassroots leaders. In other words, the action illustrated that there was a large, and growing, population of Harlem residents, not necessarily affiliated with traditional civil rights organizations, who were nonetheless enraged by racial injustice and believed that they should—and could—do something about it beyond the usual gradualist

³ “Time To Act,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1959.

approaches. Furthermore, that the crowd compelled the release of Charles Samuel from the precinct on reduced charges showed that this type of collective action could yield tangible victories.

Second, contestations over rights and power in Harlem in the immediate wake of the unrest represented a growing popular disillusionment with liberal approaches to addressing issues of institutional racism. The escalation of protests and growing numbers of local people engaged in struggles for civil and human rights in Harlem demonstrated a general dissatisfaction with responses from City Hall that failed to address the underlying racial causes of political, social, and economic inequality. If the outbreak of unrest was predictable to the *Amsterdam News*, then the ensuing responses from City Hall should have come as no surprise. Sticking close to the script that Mayor LaGuardia had drawn up in response to the 1935 uprising in Harlem, Mayor Wagner announced the formation of a committee tasked with studying the conditions in Harlem that led to unrest, and reporting back to the Mayor with recommendations of how city resources could be more effectively utilized to prevent future disturbances. However, it quickly became clear to many Harlem residents that the objective of these efforts was not to attack the foundations of systemic racism in the city, but rather to offer a modicum of reform as a means of easing racial tensions. At the same time, city officials were also taking steps to prepare for the possibility of future disturbances through an increased militarization of the New York Police Department. The general futility of liberal investigation-commission politics to meaningfully address racial inequality in the city, coupled with an expanding police apparatus geared toward curbing resistance

in the aftermath of the “near-riot,” would shape the course of struggles for Black liberation and empowerment in the years to come.

Third, by forcing a public referendum on issues of inequality in Harlem, local people effectively helped to thrust leaders of more radical grassroots organizations into the mainstream of political discourse in the city. That the protests outside the 28th Precinct came on the same day as the opening of the NAACP’s contentious 50th Anniversary conference, and the airing of “The Hate That Hate Produced,” which introduced Malcolm X to the masses by television, is historically significant not because of any causal relationship between these events, but because the correlation of events during a heightened period of protest activities in Harlem places New York City more prominently within the historical trajectory of debates over non-violence, self-defense, Black Nationalism, community control, and self-determination within the evolution of the national Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, Harlem leaders who were buoyed to greater prominence locally and nationally by the events of July 1959, including Jesse Gray, Mae Mallory, Malcolm X, and others, owed much of their political development to their organizing experiences in Harlem. In the years to follow, these grassroots leaders built upon their political education in Harlem and ascended to formative roles in national struggles for Black liberation.



“It was not a riot,” a ranking officer in the New York Police Department told a reporter as crowds dispersed from outside the 28th Precinct on July 13, 1959, “but it

could easily have become one.”⁴ In the following days, it became evident that the demonstration had given City Hall cause for alarm. Although a potentially disastrous confrontation had been avoided that night, the conflict signaled to city officials the potential that existed in Harlem for another rebellion. The highly-charged mass demonstration that night, coming amidst a period of surging demands for Black equality and empowerment in Harlem, struck a nerve in City Hall and set in motion a series of governmental responses aimed at easing racial tensions in the city in hopes of preventing a repeat of 1935 or 1943. The ensuing government actions indicated that many city officials perceived of this “near-riot” as an inherently political demonstration rooted in the social, economic, and political marginalization of Black residents.

Although the mass demonstration forced city officials to acknowledge this reality, their approaches to addressing these issues of racial inequality proved to be geared toward preventing further unrest, rather than rectifying the underlying issues of inequality that bred such protests. Recognized as such by many Harlem residents, the city’s responses to conditions in Harlem demonstrated the limits of liberal governance for achieving meaningful societal change, and contributed to a widening political gulf between grassroots activists and city officials. Sensing that prescribed avenues for political redress were insufficient for improving their lived conditions, greater numbers of Harlem residents became mobilized in the early 1960s to fight for rights and power through direct action campaigns at the grassroots. To better understand this declension of relations between Harlem

⁴ “Sidelights Of The ‘Riot’,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1959.

residents and city government, the actions of City Hall in the wake of the “near-riot” will be analyzed in detail as a case study in how the limits of liberal governance in confronting inequality and oppression in the Jim Crow North can spawn heightened demands and increased agitation for civil and human rights and political empowerment.

The Harlem Affairs Committee: Responses to Racial Unrest in a Liberal City

As news of a Harlem crowd nearly storming a police precinct travelled far and wide, city officials moved quickly to neutralize the threat of greater disorder. The following day, a group of Harlem politicians and officials gathered at City Hall for a closed-session meeting with Deputy Mayor Paul O’Keefe. The meeting, described as “peace talks” by the *Amsterdam News*, was called by Manhattan Borough President Hulan Jack and attended by political leaders in Harlem, including State Senator James Watson and Assemblyman Lloyd Dickens, who had both been present outside the 28th Precinct. The purpose of the meeting, according to Dickens, was to “determine the general angle which brought about the situation,” and to provide these political leaders with a forum to issue recommendations to resolve the unrest.⁵

Though the meeting began with a detailed examination of the charges of police brutality that had triggered the demonstrations outside the precinct, conversation eventually shifted to addressing the political climate and “rising race tension” in Harlem. During the two-hour meeting, Jack charged that this tension was

⁵ Al Nall, “Notarized Riot Statement: ‘The Cop Dragged Her Out By Her Hair,’” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1959.

rooted in an increasing resentment by Harlem residents over “inadequate housing, poor schools, unsanitary conditions, and low-paying jobs.” Jack concluded that what was needed from the Wagner administration was a greater effort to establish channels of communication with Harlem residents to “make them feel as though they’re part of the city.”⁶ To the Borough President, the answer to relieving tensions was simple: make the government more accountable to the people, and make the people feel as though they have a voice in government.

Lloyd Dickens took Jack’s analysis a step further by demanding that Black citizens “be integrated from an executive standpoint” in all city departments, citing particularly the need for Black police captains to command Harlem precincts.⁷ Though Dickens’ demands for Black representation in city policy-making positions in Harlem echoed nationalistic demands for community-control and self-determination, the Black political class in Harlem seemed to be in general consensus that Harlem’s potentially-explosive problems could be solved through the usual channels of representative government. At the conclusion of the meeting, O’Keefe smiled broadly as he posed for photos with the group of officials—and Sugar Ray Robinson—and announced that he would personally investigate the situation and set-up an appointment for the group to meet with Mayor Wagner upon his return from the U.S. Conference of Mayors in Los Angeles.

⁶ “Harlem Tensions Cited in Flare-Up,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1959.

⁷ Al Nall, “Notarized Riot Statement: ‘The Cop Dragged Her Out By Her Hair,’” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1959.

After catching a red-eye flight back into the city two days later, the Mayor met with Police Commissioner Stephen Kennedy for an hour-long briefing on police responses to the unrest earlier in the week. Kennedy had been active all week in mobilizing an increased police presence in the city to curb any threat of further unrest, and had much to say about the matter to the press. In an immediate response to the demonstrations Monday night, Kennedy had deployed an additional 88 officers to the 28th Precinct in an attempt to maintain order. Warning against the continued threat of “race riots” two days later, Kennedy also sent police reinforcements to three other predominantly Black neighborhoods: Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, South Jamaica in Queens, and the East Bronx. These moves to expand the police presence in Black communities drew the ire of many Harlem leaders, who charged Kennedy with trying to create “a police state.” New York NAACP officials Jawn A. Sandifer and L. Joseph Overton, for instance, stated that this increased police deployment would only aggravate the situation, arguing that oppressive policing was one of the leading factors in rising racial tensions in Harlem.⁸

Kennedy harangued these allegations as “outrageous,” and complained that the police were being made “scapegoats” for the various socio-economic factors contributing to racial tension in Harlem. The commissioner defended his actions by publicizing crime statistics for Central Harlem, which he described as “shocking,”

⁸ Peter Kihss, “4 Negro Areas Get Extra Police Units,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1959.

though he refused to provide statistics from other precincts for comparison.⁹ Furthermore, Kennedy couched his defense in fear-mongering terms typical of Cold-War era repression of political dissent. “A race riot,” Kennedy told reporters, “could cause more destruction of community relations than an atom bomb.” With such rhetoric of hyper-criminality and widespread destruction, Kennedy effectively convinced city officials, press outlets, and even some civil rights leaders, that expanded police powers were necessary to maintain law and order and prevent disaster.¹⁰ In the following days, weeks, and months, Kennedy would build upon this platform to further bolster the powers of the NYPD to enforce “law and order” in the city.

Mayor Wagner left his meeting with Kennedy feeling confident in the Police Commissioner’s handling of the incident outside the 28th Precinct. Like Kennedy, the Mayor expressed to reporters the need to preserve “law and order,” but also downplayed the threat of any possible “race riots” in the city. Also like Kennedy, the Mayor pointed to underlying problems rooted in economic inequality as the causes for “tensions” in Harlem. Speaking to reporters after the meeting, Wagner argued that Harlem needed better housing, improved building conditions, more schools,

⁹ *Amsterdam News* editor James Hicks argued in his editorial column on July 25th that Commissioner Kennedy had refused the request of *Amsterdam News* reporters for crime statistics for the 24th Precinct—a predominantly white neighborhood on the city’s west side with reported high crime rates. Hicks also argued that Kennedy’s statistics did not match the monthly reports given at meetings of the 28th Precinct Community Council. James L. Hicks, “Another Angle: Somebody’s Lying,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 25, 1959.

¹⁰ Peter Kihss, “4 Negro Areas Get Extra Police Units,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1959.

more playgrounds, and, “perhaps a closer relationship with the department heads involved.” This last point proved to be the basis for the Mayor’s administrative responses to the problems he saw as contributing to the unrest in Harlem. Moments later, Wagner called for a meeting with community and political leaders in Harlem and city officials the following week to “see whether we can work out better liaison—to have people give complaints more rapidly, and their hopes and aspirations.”¹¹ It was clear that Harlem residents had drawn the attention of City Hall to questions of inequality in the neighborhood. The next step for City Hall was to figure out what answers they could come up with to make these questions less explosive.

On July 21st, the Mayor invited a group of nearly 90 city officials and representatives from Harlem to City Hall for an “initial exploration” of ways in which city and community resources could be “more effectively utilized” to address the problems contributing to unrest.¹² Wagner had requested nearly every department head to attend, including the Police Commissioner, the Commissioner of Housing and Buildings, the Superintendent of Schools, and many others whose departments were implicated in the poor living conditions in Harlem.¹³ Notable

¹¹ Peter Kihss, “Mayor Calls Parley on Harlem; Seeks Liaison to Ease Tension,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1959.

¹² Executive Memorandum from Mayor Robert Wagner to City Commissioners, Box 64, Folder 743, Papers of Mayor Wagner: Subject Files, New York City Municipal Archives (henceforth referred to as Wagner Papers).

¹³ “City Officials at the Meeting of the Mayor with Harlem Community Representatives at City Hall on Tuesday, 2:30 P.M., July 21, 1959,” Box 78, Folder 966, Wagner Papers.

among the Harlem leaders in attendance were Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Councilman Earl Brown, Assemblyman Dickens, Senator Watson, and Assemblywoman Bessie Buchanan. Also in attendance were several members of the clergy, civic leaders, and business owners.¹⁴ In his account of the meeting, Brown described the gathering as “the most imposing group of city officials ever in one room with Harlem citizens to discuss its problems.”

Notably absent from both of these meetings, however, was any representation from community-based organizations or grassroots civil rights leadership, who were in a better position to provide meaningful commentary and analyses of the situation in Harlem. Furthermore, only twelve of the sixty-eight invited representatives from Harlem were women.¹⁵ It was clear that though grassroots leadership was beginning to represent and mobilize a greater number of poor and working-class Harlem residents whose interests were underrepresented in city governance, this leadership was largely excluded from any dealings with the formal political power structure in the city.

Delegates to the meeting voiced a number of suggestions for the alleviation of adverse conditions and the economic, political, and social empowerment of Harlem residents, but the topic of policing dominated the meeting and its press coverage.

¹⁴ Ibid. Other notable figures invited were Jackie Robinson, Sugar Ray Robinson, Hubert Delany, Dorothy Height, Dr. Kenneth Clark, Robert Weaver, and Paul Zuber. Earl Brown, “The City Hall Meeting,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 1, 1959.

¹⁵ “City Officials at the Meeting of the Mayor with Harlem Community Representatives at City Hall on Tuesday, 2:30 P.M., July 21, 1959,” Box 78, Folder 966, Wagner Papers.

“Although bad housing conditions are considered to be Harlem’s gravest problem,” Brown argued in his regular column in the *Amsterdam News*, “nobody uttered a single word about them.”¹⁶ Brown’s claims were overstated; delegates repeatedly suggested improvements in education, housing, health, and sanitation policies, and demanded representation in policy-making positions.¹⁷ Even though hyperbole, Brown’s claims were illustrative of a heightened popular focus on policing. This attention on police in Harlem was logical, since police actions triggered the unrest and brought years of police brutality, abuse, and misconduct to the forefront of popular consciousness and conversation.

One of the most controversial discussions around policing was raised when Powell and Buchanan requested that more Black policemen be assigned to Harlem.¹⁸ Though this request echoed the calls of Harlem residents who had demanded proportional representation in the police force for years, the notion sparked adamant opposition. In their criticisms of this suggestion that race be taken into account in public policy, white and Black officials alike turned the argument on its head and invoked the rhetoric of southern segregation to discredit Powell and Buchanan. “Such an act of segregation is simply not right,” Police Commissioner Kennedy told a press conference, adding that “rather than segregate the police

¹⁶ Earl Brown, “The City Hall Meeting,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 1, 1959.

¹⁷ Memorandum from Joyce Phillips Austin to Deputy Mayor Paul T. O’Keefe, August 7, 1959, Box 109072B, Folder 249, John Carro Files, New York City Municipal Archives (henceforth referred to as Carro Files).

¹⁸ “Commissioner Balks At More Colored Harlem Police,” *New Journal and Guide*, August 1, 1959.

department, we must continue to fight for a truly integrated city.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, Brown took the analogy a step further when he argued that Powell and Buchanan “took the same position that [Arkansas] Gov. Faubus and all other Southern white supremacists have taken about the race problem: Jim Crow the Negro and everything will be fine and dandy.”²⁰

The transcript of the meeting, however, showed that at no point in the proceedings did anyone suggest that Harlem be made a “Black Precinct.” Suggestions *were made* for greater integration of police in Harlem, interracial patrols, and new procedures for handling allegations of brutality.²¹ Police Commissioner Kennedy deliberately mischaracterized requests for reform in an attempt to seize a moral high ground on race relations in the city, in spite of the NYPD’s inhumane reputation in Harlem. Furthermore, the Commissioner found support for his defensive posturing across the aisle. This hostile intransigence from the NYPD, masked with lofty rhetoric to gain popular support, was a tactic that the department would employ frequently in the following years to deceive the public and defend against demands for reform.

If the meeting produced little in the way of tangible benefits to improve societal conditions, it did provide Harlem representatives with a rare opportunity to voice their concerns, complaints, and recommendations to such a collective of city

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Earl Brown, “The City Hall Meeting,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 1, 1959.

²¹ Memorandum from Joyce Phillips Austin to Deputy Mayor Paul T. O’Keefe, August 7, 1959, Box 109072B, Folder 249, Carro Files.

officials. However, it was also recognized that this access to government needed to be extended to the people as well. The most important achievement of the meeting, as Hulan Jack wrote in a letter to the Mayor, was the recognition that channels of communication must be established whereby “little people can come forward to intelligently speak for themselves to make complaints, offer suggestions and get results through their city government without fear or reprisals.” Judging by the influx of letters, telegrams, and phone calls to the Borough President’s office, these meetings did encourage Harlem residents to engage with their political representatives, and thereby, with electoral politics. Messages poured in with complaints of slum housing conditions, inadequate healthcare, poor education, and violations of civil rights, and requests for governmental intervention.

Perhaps sensing the precariousness of his own political standing as elections neared, Jack pled with the Mayor to act upon these grievances through concerted, institutional actions. “The administration cannot afford to even think of letting these people down,” he concluded, “they are with us and they expect and demand that we be with them.” Although the Borough President’s professed faith in his constituents’ loyalty to city government may have been political rhetoric, he nevertheless understood that the Mayor needed to act in a meaningful way to address the deep-seated problems they faced, or risk the alienation of his constituents from electoral politics.²²

Just over a month later, Mayor Wagner did act when he announced the

²² Letter from Hulan Jack to Mayor Robert Wagner, August 3, 1959, Box 3, Folder 72, Wagner Papers.

formation of the Committee on Harlem Affairs (CHA), an “action committee” that would assist his administration in “bringing more effective services” to Harlem. The Committee was composed of five city officials and seventeen representatives from Harlem.²³ After an initial meeting to review a series of reports from various city agencies, the CHA decided to form three subcommittees on housing, education, and law enforcement, based on what they saw as the major problems in Harlem.²⁴ As Hulan Jack had suggested, these subcommittees were tasked with acting as liaison between Harlem residents and city officials, and set out to conduct research on conditions in Harlem in order to provide the Mayor’s office with recommendations of possible programs for implementation.

From its inception, the CHA came under criticism from Harlem residents who had little faith that a city-sponsored committee would have any real impact on improving conditions in Harlem that were deeply rooted within the city’s economic and political structures. In a sardonic critique of the Mayor’s “compulsion” for “government by committee,” *New York Age* columnist Chuck Stone argued that the CHA had little chance for success. “Committees don’t solve problems,” Stone wrote, “votes, tough housing laws, court enforcement of these laws, and unbiased police

²³ Office of the Mayor Press Release, September 10, 1959, Box 5, Folder “Housing, 1958-9,” Papers of Hulan Jack, New York City Municipal Archives (henceforth referred to as Jack Papers).

²⁴ The structure and functions of the CAH closely resembled a similar committee formed by Mayor LaGuardia following the 1935 Harlem rebellion. Staffed by the likes of Countee Cullen, A. Philip Randolph, and E. Franklin Frazier, the six subcommittees of the Mayor’s Commission reported on socio-economic conditions in Harlem that led to a “hostile outburst against racial discrimination and poverty.” Janet Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 142-143.

protection solve problems.”²⁵ *Amsterdam News* editor James Hicks also openly doubted that the committee would be able to implement any suggestions made to it.²⁶

A lack of genuine community representation was also cited as a fundamental objection to the CHA. Shortly after its formation, Hicks described the Committee as consisting of “a bunch of nice guys who don’t know anything about the man in the street.”²⁷ Though leadership from the New York NAACP, Urban League, and various civic associations were amongst the members of the CHA, Hicks’ analysis demonstrated the perceived disconnect between these types of middle-class oriented organizations and the bulk of Harlem’s poor and working-class communities. Though protesters had been in the streets all month, CHA member and President of the Peoples Civic and Welfare Association Glester Hinds, told reporters in late July that there was no tension in Harlem. Furthermore, Hinds charged, “all people, regardless of race, should let the law take its course.”²⁸

²⁵ Chuck Stone, “Okay, Harlem, You’re a Malted Milkshake,” *New York Age*, undated newsclipping, Box 109072B, Folder 249, Carro Files.

²⁶ Hicks was invited to appear before both the Subcommittee on Law Enforcement and the Subcommittee on Housing. In his appearance before the former, Hicks claimed that his recommendations to integrate Black officers into policy-making levels of the NYPD were “twisted out of shape” by Police Commissioner Stephen Kennedy to “make me appear as an advocate of racial segregation.” After this experience, Hicks declined an offer to appear before the latter subcommittee, citing the malignant rejection and misrepresentation of his testimony. Letter from James Hicks to Robert Lowe, February 23, 1960, Box 109072C, Folder 251, Carro Files.

²⁷ “‘Tensions’ in Harlem,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 26, 1959.

²⁸ “You Said It,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 25, 1959.

It was clear to many, however, that Hinds and others in the CHA were out of touch with those in Harlem who were most disenfranchised by political, economic, and social inequality and frustrated by the ineffectiveness of the “course” of the law. Echoing the analyses of grassroots leaders like Ella Baker, Jesse Gray, Mae Mallory, and Malcolm X, Stone and Hicks suggested to their readership that it was this demographic which held the reigns of political power in the city. “In the final analysis,” Stone wrote, “the real persons who are going to reduce Harlem’s problems to their lowest common denominator are not Mayor Wagner or his...committee, but the Negroes themselves.”²⁹ Despite its inherent flaws and lack of popular support, the CHA nonetheless went to work in Harlem at the dawn of the 1960s.

For the next several months, the three subcommittees of the CAH met periodically to discuss their findings, write reports, and issue recommendations. The recommendations issued to the Mayor are significant for understanding the ways in which city and civic leaders proposed to solve what they viewed as the most pressing social problems in Harlem at that time.³⁰ Furthermore, the responses that these recommendations received from the corresponding City Commissioners offer insights into how city officials evaluated their own effectiveness in addressing issues of inequality in Harlem, along with a metric by which to gauge the willingness of city

²⁹ Chuck Stone, “Okay, Harlem, You’re a Malted Milkshake,” *New York Age*, undated newsclipping, Box 109072B, Folder 249, Carro Files.

³⁰ For the purposes of this dissertation, the findings and recommendations of the CHA are presented and analyzed in brief. Further scholarship on this committee, as well as Wagner’s “government by committee” approach to addressing issues of racial inequality, is warranted for a more comprehensive analysis of the ways in which liberal governance in New York City sought to make sense of, engage with, and de-escalate demands and movements for racial equality in the city.

officials to engage with citizens through the democratic process to reform government.

The Subcommittee on Education

At the July 21st meeting, four main suggestions for improving education were raised repeatedly by representatives from Harlem: increased curriculum in Harlem schools, reduced split-sessions, reduced overcrowding by transferring students to under-enrolled schools, and the assignment of experienced teachers to Harlem.³¹ To many Harlem parents and community members, each of these recommendations was aimed at eradicating symptoms of a segregated school system, which continued to trap Black children in underdeveloped schools. None of these suggestions were new, as they had largely provided the basis of struggles waged for educational equality in Harlem over the previous five years in the wake of the *Brown v. Board* decision. Despite the efforts of local leaders like Ella Baker and Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark, however, there had been little progress made toward fulfilling these demands.

From the outset, it became evident that the Subcommittee on Education was particularly troubled by the “de facto” segregation of Harlem schools, which Mae Mallory and the Harlem Nine had garnered national attention for fighting against the previous year.³² Without mentioning these struggles for desegregation in their final report, the Subcommittee criticized the Board of Education for failing to

³¹ Memorandum from Joyce Phillips Austin to Deputy Mayor Paul T. O’Keefe, August 7, 1959, Box 109072B, Folder 249, Carro Files.

³² See Chapter Three.

implement any of the recommendations of the Commission on Integration, which had arisen from the *Brown* decision under the leadership of the Clarks and Ella Baker. The implementation of these earlier recommendations, the Subcommittee argued, was “essential to relieve tensions in Harlem.” Furthermore, the Subcommittee found that as a result of the Board’s sluggish and ineffectual enactment of these recommendations, there had actually been an *increase* in segregated schools over the previous five years.³³

To resolve the problems associated with Harlem’s separate and unequal schools, the Subcommittee insisted that the COI recommendations be implemented, requested timely reports on the progress of school integration, and suggested that an additional committee be established to evaluate the conditions of each school in Harlem. In his official response to these recommendations, Superintendent of Schools John Theobald offered little to those looking for action plans or guarantees to improve Harlem schools. Theobald balked at providing an answer as to why the COI’s recommendations had not been implemented, rejected calls for an advisory committee to evaluate the conditions of schools, and promised that a progress report on desegregation would be forthcoming for the first time since 1957. In essence, four months of work from the Subcommittee produced suggestions for further studies and reports of conditions in Harlem schools, and a public rejection of these meager requests from the Superintendent of Schools.

The Subcommittee on Housing

³³ Initial Recommendations Submitted by the Subcommittee on Education, December 23, 1959, Box 109072B, Folder 250, Carro Files.

In a 1935 report, Mayor LaGuardia's Commission on the Harlem Riot laid out its suggestions for improving housing conditions in Harlem. The Commission's primary points focused on the need for a planned housing program for Harlem to address its shortage of sound units, and a better enforcement of housing codes. Additionally, the Commission encouraged Harlem tenants to organize and protest exorbitant rents, and if these failed, to engage in rent strikes. Deemed too "radical," the 1935 report was never publicly released, and the problems it addressed remained largely unchanged. Nearly twenty-five years later, Harlem was still short on decent housing; building codes still weren't being enforced; and tenant leaders had begun to revive a dormant rent-strike movement.³⁴

With the intractable nature of Harlem's housing problems over the previous two decades, the Subcommittee on Housing was treading on familiar ground as it began its work. Despite Councilman Brown's claims, several suggestions were put forth to combat Harlem's "grave" housing problems at the July 21st meeting. These recommendations demonstrated a collective concern with problems that remained unresolved since 1935, with a few modern twists to reflect current developments. The major points of contention centered on urban renewal and tenant displacement, enforcement of housing codes and laws, development of low and middle-income housing, and Black representation in Robert Moses' Committee on Slum Clearance.³⁵

³⁴ Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles*, 144.

³⁵ Memorandum from Joyce Phillips Austin to Deputy Mayor Paul T. O'Keefe, August 7, 1959, Box 109072B, Folder 249, Carro Files.

These initial comments, though overshadowed by the controversy over policing, provided the foundation for the Subcommittee's work in the following months.

The complexity of Harlem's housing problems was made clear in the Subcommittee's report to Mayor Wagner that December. In an eight-page document that implicated eleven different city agencies, all three branches of city government, and several state and federal departments, the Subcommittee recommended reforms pertaining to urban renewal and relocation, sanitation, building inspections and code enforcement, rodent control, housing development, and healthcare.³⁶ Of greatest concern to the Subcommittee was the need for more housing units for low, and particularly, middle-income residents, and the careful relocation of residents displaced by urban renewal sites.³⁷ Of more immediate concern to many Harlem residents, however, were the dangerous conditions of apartments that low-income families were largely confined to, as residential segregation made it extremely difficult to find housing outside of the ghetto. These were the conditions that were bringing tenants out into the streets, and filling the mailboxes of city officials with complaints. The Subcommittee did offer recommendations for strengthened building code enforcement and harsher penalties for neglectful landlords, though

³⁶ "Initial Verbatim Recommendations Submitted by the Subcommittee on Housing," December 11, 1959, Box 109072C, Folder 251, Carro Files. At no point was any mention of expanding Black homeownership mentioned, despite only 17% of non-white households in New York City being owner-occupied as compared to 40% of white households. Roberta Gold, *When Tenants Claimed the City: The Struggle for Citizenship in New York City Housing* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 112.

³⁷ Memorandum from Hope R. Stevens to Mayor Robert Wagner, February 9, 1960, Box 109072C, Folder 251, Carro Files.

the Department of Buildings deferred any response pending the passage of three bills in to the City Council to provide greater enforcement powers to the City. In the interim, the Department of Buildings conducted a wave of inspections in the following months, turning up thousands of violations.

Though the Subcommittee showed signs of class bias favoring moderate and middle-income Harlem residents in some aspects of their report, Chairman Hope Stevens touched upon a vital point in a post-report memo to Mayor Wagner. “We believe it to be the greatest importance,” Stevens wrote, “that residents of the Harlem community be given proof that they are sharing in the development of the city through participation in its governmental functions at levels where their influence can be felt.”³⁸ To Stevens, a degree of self-determination for Harlem’s Black residents was imperative if hostilities toward the city’s oppressive white power structure were to be eased. More than any other area of racial discrimination, Stevens argued, housing inequality most directly contributed to a “psychological situation around which feelings of hostility with resulting tensions will continue to center.” The nature of this “psychological situation,” Stevens warned Wagner in conclusion, could be greatly influenced by the Mayor’s efforts to empower Harlem residents by providing political representation at policy-making levels to promote a sense of collective agency. Like Jesse Gray, Stevens understood the political gravity of the housing question in Harlem, and his warning to the Mayor proved prescient. The Mayor’s responses to the housing question had profound impacts on the

³⁸ Memorandum from Hope R. Stevens to Mayor Robert Wagner, February 9, 1960, Box 109072C, Folder 251, Carro Files.

direction of struggles for rights and power in the city and will be explored in greater detail in the following section.

The Subcommittee on Law Enforcement

The heated public debate around the actions and policies of the NYPD in the immediate wake of the “near-riot” swelled as the Subcommittee on Law Enforcement got to work. Speaking to a crowd of nearly 5,000 gathered at 125th Street and 7th Avenue for the annual Marcus Garvey Day celebration in early August, United African Nationalist Movement president James Lawson blasted the NYPD for its rampant brutality against African Americans, called for Black police captains in Black neighborhoods, and demanded Stephen Kennedy’s resignation as police commissioner.³⁹

Though the nationalist leader had been painted as a dangerous militant in “The Hate That Hate Produced” just weeks earlier, Lawson’s comments at the rally were hardly radical, and certainly not unique. Indeed, his charges of police misconduct and demands for Black representation within the upper ranks of the NYPD had been brought up by others at the July 21st meeting and consequently became major focal points of the Subcommittee on Law Enforcement’s deliberations. For two months, the Subcommittee held weekly meetings and conferred with individuals and representatives of various organizations and city departments, including *Amsterdam News* editor James Hicks, and the Black police union of the NYPD, the Guardians Association.

³⁹ “Nationalists Demand Kennedy’s Dismissal,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 8, 1959.

The political tug-of-war that ensued over the Subcommittee on Law Enforcement elevated a host of deep-seated racial problems within the NYPD's policies and practices of policing Black communities in New York City to a higher level in public discourse and warrants a more extensive analysis. In their November report, the Subcommittee put forth nine recommendations for improving relations between the police and Harlem community. These included: the appointment of a Black Deputy Commissioner, ending the common police practice of using Harlem as a training ground, improved race and human relations training for police, expanded public relations efforts, ending illegal searches and seizures, and increasing the number of Black officers on the force. In essence, the Subcommittee's recommendations demonstrated a primary concern with improving the image of the police in Harlem through greater Black representation within the NYPD, improved interpersonal police training, and through curbing some of the most flagrant abuses commonly reported by Harlem residents. Notably absent from the report, however, was any mention or suggestion of disciplinary procedures for police officers that violated departmental policies or infringed upon the civil rights of Black citizens.⁴⁰

Although the liberal nature of these recommendations posed hardly any threat to the fundamental structures or powers of the NYPD, they were nonetheless met with a characteristically defensive response from Commissioner Kennedy. Doubling down on his previous refusal to hire more Black officers, Kennedy misrepresented the Subcommittee's recommendation as an illegal quota system,

⁴⁰ Recommendations of the Subcommittee on Law Enforcement, November 12, 1959, Box 109072C, Folder 251, Carro Files.

and declared that appointments in the NYPD would not be made “on the basis of politics, color, race or religion.” Kennedy went on to describe his efforts to professionalize the police force, expand human relations training, and profess his opposition to police misconduct as a means of dismissing each concern laid out in the Subcommittee’s recommendations. As a means of deflecting responsibility for racial tensions in Harlem away from the NYPD, the Commissioner put forth a narrative suggesting that police were being unjustly treated as scapegoats for “the long accumulated ills of the Harlem community.” Kennedy explained that strained police-community relations in Harlem were a result not of police malfeasance, but of citizens taking out their frustrations over racial oppression on officers merely trying to fulfill their duty to “protect the community as a whole.”⁴¹

Kennedy’s response was met with a predictably damning public rebuke from the members of the Subcommittee and other public figures in Harlem. Subcommittee Chairman Thomas Dyett called Kennedy’s comments a “vituperative outburst of fury,” and suggested that the Commissioner’s hostility was based on his realization that tensions in Harlem had grown “steadily and even alarmingly” under his leadership. In this scathing critique, Dyett addressed several of Kennedy’s claims, giving particular attention to the lack of Black officers and illegal searches and seizures. Expanding on the Subcommittee’s insistence on the “psychological importance” of having more Black officers in the NYPD, Dyett argued that Kennedy’s

⁴¹ Letter from Stephen P. Kennedy to Mayor Robert F. Wagner, January 14, 1960, Box 109072B, Folder 249, Carro Files.

failure to appoint a Black deputy commissioner could give the impression that the Police Commissioner “intends to maintain a lily-white staff.”⁴²

Furthermore, Dyett contended that the appointment of only white men as Deputy Commissioners “may in itself be telling evidence of discrimination.” Black residents of New York City hardly needed Dyett to tell them what they already believed to be true. It certainly did not appear coincidental to many that in a police force of 23,000 there were only 1,200 Black officers (5.2%); that of 60 inspectors only one was Black (1.6%); that of 212 captains there was not a single Black officer; or that only 10 of 750 lieutenants were Black (1.3%).⁴³ The significance of Dyett’s claim lay not in the observation of racial disparity, but in the premise of his argument, which held that a disparate adverse impact of otherwise race-neutral policies on a particular racial group constituted evidence of racial discrimination. It would be another five years before this argument became codified in federal law through the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Like the Black mothers of the Harlem Nine, Dyett had issued a challenge to the system of de facto, yet government supported, segregation in the city, which officials like Kennedy had tried to mask with rhetoric that professed allegiance to racial equality.

In addition to his criticism of racial discrimination in employment and promotion, Dyett also took Kennedy to task for his apparent justification of illegal searches and seizures. Though Kennedy noted in his comments that he did not

⁴² “Comments on Recommendations of Sub-Committee on Law Enforcement,” February 19, 1960, Box 109072C, Folder 252, Carro Files.

⁴³ “Commissioner Ought to Resign’: Powell Blasts N.Y. Police Dep’t,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, March 5, 1960.

condone such conduct, he nonetheless went on to justify its occurrence based on the difficulties officers faced in making “split-second” decisions about the civil and human rights of those involved in an alleged crime.⁴⁴ “These split-second decisions,” Dyett charged,

have at times included the shooting of teenagers running away from the scene of a crime, resulting in the handing out of a death sentence by an over-zealous or perhaps vicious policeman for an offense for which the Court of Appeals might hesitate to approve capital punishment.⁴⁵

While Kennedy tried to spin the lived experiences of Harlem residents into a narrative of police benevolence in the face of community hostility, Dyett attempted to provide a check on the Commissioner’s propagandistic interpretation. This advocacy from the Subcommittee on Law Enforcement far outpaced that of the other two Subcommittees of the HAC, yet still proved largely ineffectual in producing meaningful police reform.

Kennedy’s continued intransigence also prompted Adam Clayton Powell to escalate his critiques of the embattled Police Commissioner in early 1960. As he had during the July 21st meeting at City Hall, Powell continued to demand greater Black representation amongst the ranks of the NYPD. During a February sermon at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, Powell berated Kennedy for his repeated refusals to comply with the recommendations of the CHA. Powell echoed Judge Dyett’s charge

⁴⁴ Letter from Stephen P. Kennedy to Mayor Robert F. Wagner, January 14, 1960, Box 109072B, Folder 249, Carro Files.

⁴⁵ “Comments on Recommendations of Sub-Committee on Law Enforcement,” February 19, 1960, Box 109072C, Folder 252, Carro Files.

that the Commissioner had created a “lily-white” department, and went on to demand Kennedy’s resignation.⁴⁶

About a month later, Powell expanded upon his sermon in a statement published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. After explaining in detail his demands for Black representation in policy-making positions within the NYPD, Powell expressed concern over the patterns of police repression that frequently followed any public protests over police actions. “The immediate answer they get,” Powell charged, “is an arrogant statement in the press from the Commissioner immediately followed by the dispatching of ‘shock troops’ to the area in an open attempt to intimidate the people.” Powell’s analysis certainly rang true for the “near-riot” months earlier, and countless other protests of police misconduct in the years and decades prior. Repeating his demand for the Commissioner to resign, Powell suggested that the Mayor appoint “an interim board of responsible citizens to clean up the mess” in the police department. Powell insisted that as a basic tenet of a democratic society, police power must be subjected to civilian control “under the will of the people.” Kennedy’s dogged refusal to submit to the will of the people in Harlem and beyond reaffirmed for the Congressman and his constituents the need to seek out and fight for the realization of this democratic ideal. With Kennedy’s hostility to sensible police reform supported by the Mayor on one side, and surging demands for police accountability and community control on the other, the Subcommittee’s efforts proved to merely stoke the tinder of a looming wildfire.

⁴⁶ Emanuel Perlmutter, “Powell Demands Kennedy Resign,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1960.

In a meeting of the Subcommittee on Law Enforcement with Mayor Wagner in April 1960, Jack Blumstein expressed several points that were indicative of the general ineffectiveness of the Committee on Harlem Affairs in resolving issues of inequality in Harlem. Despite the eight months of work put in by the three subcommittees of the CHA, Blumstein pointed out that racial tensions in Harlem were still high, and that “a spark could set off real trouble.” Blumstein’s comments were nearly identical to those of Mayor Wagner the previous July when he announced the formation of the Committee. “Positive action and quick help is needed,” Blumstein argued, insisting that Black communities needed to be “made aware and aroused sufficiently” to feel as though they had a voice in government and were “a part of the team to maintain law and order.”⁴⁷

The reason for the CHA’s ineffectiveness lay inherently in the premise upon which the committee was founded. As conceived by Mayor Wagner, the purpose of the CHA was not to solve the problems of inequality caused by institutional racism in the city, but rather to ease racial tensions in Harlem through making the government appear more amenable to calls for Black equality and empowerment. “The best way to refuse to grapple with a problem,” Chuck Stone opined, “is to appoint a committee.”⁴⁸ This government-by-committee approach to investigating and reporting on racial tensions in Harlem was exemplary of liberal approaches to issues of racial inequality in New York City. Rather than attempting to meaningfully

⁴⁷ “Remarks of Mr. Jack Blumstein Meeting of Mayor with Subcommittee on Law Enforcement, April 7, 1960,” Box 109072B, Folder 249, Carro Files.

⁴⁸ Chuck Stone, “Okay, Harlem, You’re a Malted Milkshake,” *New York Age*, undated newsclipping, Box 109072B, Folder 249, Carro Files.

address the root causes of racial and economic inequality, this approach dealt with their symptoms in an attempt to ensure tranquility rather than to promote justice.

Because of its fundamentally flawed and limited premise, the CHA proved more effective in further straining relations between Black communities in Harlem and City Hall than in cooling the volatile racial and political climate that had provoked unrest in the first place. Though there was little public faith from the start that the CHA would be able to enact any meaningful reform in Harlem, the Committee's futility in implementing even the most conservative measures of reform affirmed an increasingly popular cynicism of city government's ability to act upon the interests of Black communities in New York City.

Furthermore, although one of the guiding principles of the Committee was to promote greater dialogue between local people and city government, few efforts were actually made to include any representation from the ranks of those in the city most adversely affected by the daily assaults of institutional racism. In a report to the Subcommittee on Law Enforcement, the Guardians Association suggested that this demographic, "the unfortunate, underprivileged, and unstable elements," must be represented within city government, for they were the "most likely group to cause a major community disorder."⁴⁹ Seeking redress for the violence of institutional racism and finding little representation in city government, greater numbers of disenfranchised Harlem residents became mobilized at the dawn of the 1960s to engage in organized grassroots struggles for civil rights, human rights, and

⁴⁹ Memo from the Guardians Association to the Harlem Affairs Committee, September 30, 1959, Box 109072B, Folder 249, Carro Files.

political power. With demands for Black equality and empowerment surging locally and nationally, the ideological rift between City Hall and Harlem appeared to be only widening, despite the nominal efforts of the CHA to narrow the gap as the new decade began.

Tenants Rights, Human Rights, and Political Power in Harlem

Though grassroots community leadership was mostly excluded from the formation and proceedings of the CHA, many leaders and residents saw the Committee as a political tool and seized on the opportunity to raise their concerns and demands to city officials. While struggles for equality in education, housing, employment, and policing had been in motion well before the summer of 1959, the dramatic events that unfolded that summer in New York and the nation forced these fights for civil and human rights to the fore of popular consciousness in Harlem. One of the key movers in this groundswell of activism in Harlem, Jesse Gray's burgeoning tenant movement was also a primary beneficiary of the heightened visibility the summer of 1959 provided.

Gray's organizing efforts to capitalize on this political momentum were aided by a flood of coverage of Harlem housing conditions in local newspapers, particularly the *Amsterdam News*. On the heels of Gray's recently launched rent strikes and the subsequent "near riot," the *Amsterdam News* devoted nearly an entire edition to covering housing problems in Harlem and exhorting readers to take action. In what the editorial board described as an effort to "shock the moral conscience of the city," the front fold of the paper was covered with photographs of

Black men, women, and children holding large rats they had killed in their Harlem apartments. More photographs of Black women and their children who had been bitten by rats appeared in the following pages, alongside a column describing some of the recent infant victims of these “vicious, flesh-loving” rodents.⁵⁰

Like Gray, the *Amsterdam News* emphasized the horrific impacts that rat-infested apartments had on Black women and children to elicit sympathy and outrage amongst their readership. Furthermore, to broaden their audience and gain the support of “the entire city,” the editorial board explicitly encouraged clubs, civic organizations, and individuals to clip out the page of photographs and share them with people who may not have been aware of the housing conditions in Harlem. “We know of no better way to convince city officials that the problem does exist,” an explanatory editorial argued, “than by showing them the actual truth in pictures.” This media tact was not merely an attempt to cast sunlight on a festering illness as a means of disinfecting—it was a call to political action. To familiarize their readership with the city officials “responsible for it all,” the editorial board plastered their headshots, names, and titles directly below the photographs of rat-bitten babies and their mothers.⁵¹

⁵⁰ “Rats Who Run Harlem,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 25, 1959; “Wonder Why Harlem is Mad?—Here’s Your Answer,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 25, 1959; “Courts Fine Landlords \$5 in Rat Bite Cases,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 25, 1959.

⁵¹ “We Apologize (An Editorial),” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 25, 1959; “Wonder Why Harlem is Mad?—Here’s Your Answer,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 25, 1959.

The tactic proved effective, as letters poured into the offices of the Mayor and Borough President in the following weeks and months. Desperate Harlem residents complained of unsanitary conditions, infestations of rats, roaches, and mice, and having gone days or longer without hot water. The influx of correspondence and media attention fueled by protests in the streets resonated throughout City Hall and prompted Hulan Jack and Deputy Commissioner of Buildings Harold Birns to expand the number of buildings they inspected in the early fall.⁵² Few residents, however, had reason to believe that inspections and the nominal fines for violations that typically followed were capable of forcing landlords to make repairs of their buildings. This lack of faith in city agencies to expediently resolve pressing housing problems made joining Gray and the Lower Harlem Tenants Council's rent strike a more appealing option for many. In one striking building on West 118th Street, tenants had been without hot water for over five months when they joined the strike.⁵³ In early August, Gray announced that two more buildings had joined, bringing the total number of striking buildings to twenty-one.⁵⁴ By the end of the month, the *New York Herald Tribune* reported that 125 buildings in the area

⁵² For letters from constituents received by Hulan Jack, see Box 5, Folder "Harlem and East Harlem," Jack Papers.

⁵³ "118th Street Tenants Join Rent Strike," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 5, 1959.

⁵⁴ "Rent Strike Spreads to More Houses," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 8, 1959.

bounded by Fifth and Eighth Avenues and 110th and 118th Streets were engaged in the rent strike.⁵⁵

Though the LHTC's rent strike brought people into the streets by the dozens and hundreds to take part in protests and rallies, direct action campaigns were but one facet of Gray's organizing arsenal. During his many years of organizing in Harlem, Gray had demonstrated his skillful abilities to deal with political movements both in the streets and in the suites. Although much of the scholarly attention that Gray has received focuses on his showmanship in the streets, including dramatic anti-eviction demonstrations and militant street corner rhetoric, his skillful maneuverings within the political system have been under-recognized.⁵⁶ In 1953, Gray and the Harlem Tenants Council successfully waged "a great struggle" to save rent control in New York City when Governor Thomas Dewey proposed a 15% rent increase across the board in the state.

Three years later, Gray and the HTC achieved "a major break" in the community when they forced the passage of the Rooming House Bill in 1956.⁵⁷ By the early 1950s, single room occupancy (SRO) dwellings, or rooming houses, had become the targets of urban developers, such as Robert Moses, for demolition and

⁵⁵ It is likely that this number was inflated, given the stark jump in buildings reported to be on strike from 21 to 125 in the course of one month. "Tenants Picket W. Side Tenement," *New York Herald Tribune*, September 2, 1959.

⁵⁶ See Joel Schwartz, "Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1943-1971," in *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984*, ed. Ronald Lawson and Mark Naison (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

⁵⁷ Jesse Gray interview with Katherine M. Shannon, July 26, 1967, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University Libraries.

redevelopment due to a popular narrative that painted rooming house residents as predominantly Black men who were criminal elements in society and a leading source of urban blight. In reality, however, SRO units were often the only lodgings that tens of thousands of poor and working-class Black families could afford, or find, given the severe housing shortage in Harlem. The bill that Gray and the HTC succeeded in pushing through was designed to stop the summary eviction of tenants from SRO units and to provide a legal guarantee of due process for thousands of SRO tenants.

While coordinating the rent strikes in the summer of 1959 on a building-by-building, and block-by-block basis to demand building repairs in the short-run, Gray was also using this political mobilization to advocate for long-term legislative reform. In a letter to Hulan Jack in August 1959, Gray charged that the squalid housing conditions that were allowed by City Hall to proliferate in Harlem were caused in part by “unscrupulous landlords who hire wine-bibbers and dope addicts as Superintendents.” In addition to the abdication of their duties which created unsafe living conditions, Gray argued that having addicts or drunks as building superintendents also attracted more addicts to congregate in the building’s vicinity, making the housing problem “more trying.” To rectify this problem, Gray and the Lower Harlem Tenant Council demanded that new standards and requirements be set for superintendents, including criminal background checks and quarterly inspections from city agencies. Gray suggested that this legislative reform would

“immediately improve the overall housing situation in Harlem,” adding that the demand was backed by the residents of the 21 buildings on rent strike at that time.⁵⁸

Less than a month later, the Borough President sent an impassioned letter to Mayor Wagner describing at length his position on the housing question in New York and offering legislative solutions to address what he called “the most explosive issue since Civil Rights.” Though Jack’s concerns with housing had developed over a number of years, the influence of Gray’s demands on Jack’s analysis were evident in his correspondence with the Mayor. Citing the rampant problem of landlords hiring inexperienced or irresponsible superintendents as one of the “greatest evils” leading to housing deterioration, Jack urged the Mayor to appoint a city administrator to prepare and introduce legislation to regulate the employment of superintendents. Jack also suggested that the Mayor support legislation to permit the Department of Buildings and Department of Health to seize rents from intransigent landlords and make necessary repairs to housing units.⁵⁹

The latter suggestion echoed a demand that Gray had been raising for nearly a decade—that government be given the power to take control of private property to make emergency repairs for tenants when landlords were either unwilling or unable to do so. Though criticized by a city planning official for being “impatient” and “pressing for faster action than we can achieve,” Jack was not alone in his

⁵⁸ Letter from Jesse Gray to Hulan Jack, August 4, 1959, Box 5, Folder “Harlem and East Harlem,” Jack Papers.

⁵⁹ Letter from Hulan Jack to Hon. Robert F. Wagner, September 2, 1959, Box 5, Folder “Harlem and East Harlem,” Jack Papers.

support for a receivership law.⁶⁰ In early 1960, the New York City Council called upon the State Legislature to pass a receivership bill introduced by Senator James Watson. The bill naturally had the active support of Gray, who brought a “mass delegation” of tenants from the LHTC to Albany that February to demand the bill’s passage, along with other legislative acts to improve housing conditions in Harlem.⁶¹ Despite this support from community activists and city officials, the receivership bill failed to make it through the Republican-controlled state legislature. It would be another two years until such a bill was enacted in New York City.

In addition to making legislative headway, it was clear that by 1960 Gray’s tenant movement was gaining popular momentum in the city, and was capable of scoring some tangible benefits for low-income renters in Harlem. Coupled with the radical zeitgeist of the summer of 1959, Gray’s rent strike and organizing efforts had made Harlem’s housing problems a top priority for city officials. The ensuing “cellar-to-roof” inspections conducted by the Department of Buildings and Department of Health revealed thousands of violations in Harlem tenements, led to stiffer fines and summons for slumlords, and prompted long-overdue repairs. The resulting court proceedings against landlords were indicative of a changing popular tune when it came to building code enforcement in the city. When the attorney for a Harlem landlord brought to trial likened the high bail set for his client to that set for “murderers,” a city magistrate sharply retorted, “is it less than murder to allow

⁶⁰ “Felt Gives Harlem ‘Priority’ in Housing,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 16, 1960.

⁶¹ “Council Asks State Back Watson Bill,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 20, 1960.

buildings to deteriorate and jeopardize the health and welfare of the tenants?" The landlord was eventually fined over \$3,000 and given 60 days to rectify the violations.⁶²

These victories, though perhaps minor in the grand scheme, were significant for movement building and endeared Gray to those residents of Harlem most adversely impacted by race-based housing and economic injustice. As Gray's stature grew in the hallways of Harlem tenements and in the corridors of City Hall, accolades began to pour in for the dynamic leader. Readers of the *Amsterdam News* sent in hundreds of ballots nominating Gray for the honorary title of "Mayor of Harlem" in 1959.⁶³ After delivering an impassioned plea for better housing during a hearing on welfare at the Upper Manhattan Court in 1960, Gray was reportedly "showered with kisses from housewives."⁶⁴ A letter to the editor of the *Amsterdam News* in 1961 lauded Gray as a "patron saint" to tenants in Harlem.⁶⁵

Through winning tangible benefits for his constituents through direct action campaigns and legislative lobbying, Gray and the LHTC were taking pivotal steps towards building a grassroots movement of poor Black Harlem residents for economic and political empowerment. Although he did not "see the revolution

⁶² "Harlem Landlady Pleads Guilty to 18 Violations," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 12, 1960; "Woman Landlord Fined \$3,380, Put on Probation," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 23, 1960.

⁶³ "Ten Nominated For Mayor of Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 19, 1959.

⁶⁴ Les Matthews, "Mr. 1-2-5 Street," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 19, 1960.

⁶⁵ John Hill, "Manifesto," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 18, 1961.

around the corner,” as Northern Student Movement organizer Danny Schechter would later note, Gray’s understanding of the processes of societal transformation emphasized the “need to organize people around struggle.”⁶⁶ The education that Gray received during his time in the NMU and Community Party, along with his subsequent organizing experience in New York, informed his analysis that “struggle unifies the community.”⁶⁷ By organizing tenants to demand improved housing conditions, Gray sought to not only empower renters to improve their daily lives, but to unify the community through struggle to demand and eventually seize economic and political power in the city.

Gray’s efforts to mobilize Harlem tenants and improve housing conditions in the early 1960s were characterized by this duality between long-range movement building and pragmatic housing reform for tangible gains in the short-run. The pressing realities of housing conditions in Harlem made it necessary for the LHTC to use whatever tools were available to protect tenants and demand housing justice, which at times meant working through the channels of liberal housing reform. This duality largely characterized the surging organizing efforts of Gray and the LHTC from 1960-1962.

Throughout 1960, the LHTC waged direct action campaigns to force city agencies to conduct inspections of Harlem housing units and hold landlords accountable for rampant violations. Though Gray was the figurehead of these

⁶⁶ Danny Schechter, *News Dissector: Passions, Pieces, and Polemics, 1960-2000* (New York: Akashic Books, 2001), 39-40.

⁶⁷ Jesse Gray interview with Katherine M. Shannon, July 26, 1967.

demonstrations, the majority of the feet on the streets belonged to Black women who carried signs and picketed in front of various tenements and city administration buildings to demand inspections and repairs. While coordinating these protests in favor of liberal housing reform, Gray was also orchestrating political campaigns in an attempt to translate this groundswell of grassroots mobilization into a movement for community control of the levers of governmental power in Harlem.

That June, Gray and the LHTC challenged the political mainstream in Harlem by backing a slate of candidates for judicial posts on the Tenth Municipal Court. The posts were of particular interest to Harlem tenants, as these justices were responsible for ruling on the grievances levied by tenants against neglectful and exploitative landlords. The week before the primary, 100 delegates to the LHTC's annual convention voted to endorse the candidacy of incumbent Justice Herman Stoute and challenger Connie Jones for the two seats on the bench—thereby opposing candidates supported by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s United Democratic Leadership Team. The LHTC's decision to formally endorse these candidates came after the president-justice of the Municipal Court rejected the organization's demands that he dismiss "pro-landlord" Justice Maxwell P. Shapiro. In responding to the court's rebuke, however, Gray and the LHTC did not limit their involvement to an endorsement of alternative candidates for the bench. At the convention, Gray also sent a more dramatic message to the white power structure in Harlem, when he

announced that Justice Shapiro would be “hanged in effigy” at a mass rally at 125th Street and Seventh Avenue that weekend.⁶⁸

In 1961, when state rent control laws were up for renewal, the LHTC again directed their energies toward ensuring that a proposed statewide rent increase would not make it through the Legislature. The LHTC and other housing organizations called upon political, religious, and civic leaders to oppose the increase and held several rallies along with other organizations to drum up popular opposition and resistance to the planned changes in rent control.⁶⁹ As 1961 was also an election year in the city, the debate became a pressure point upon Mayor Wagner’s re-election campaign, and Wagner’s support for the extension of rent control eased his path to victory.⁷⁰ Despite a “smug” Mayoral administration that prided itself on its support for housing reform, the basic demands of housing inspections raised over the past two years had yet to be meaningfully addressed.⁷¹

While the rent control debate and city elections were swirling that year, Gray and his band of tenants escalated their fight for more expedient housing inspections

⁶⁸ “Tenants Council Holds Convention, Plans Rally,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 4, 1960.

⁶⁹ “Urge Fight On Rises On Rents,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 4, 1961; “Big Rally On Rent Controls,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 18, 1961; Gold, *When Tenants Claimed the City*, 119.

⁷⁰ Joel Schwartz, “Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1943-1971,” 169.

⁷¹ Schwartz described the Wagner administration as “quite smug about the 1961 extension package.” Schwartz, “Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1943-1971,” 169; Mayor Wagner also painted himself as a champion of housing reform in an oral history interview conducted in 1979. Robert F. Wagner interview with Ed Edwin, 1979, Columbia Center for Oral History, Columbia University Libraries.

and code enforcement. For five months that spring and summer, a group of LHTC members “tired of waiting month in and month out” for building inspectors to act against slumlords conducted their own weekly building inspections in an attempt to rouse the city to action on the tenants’ behalf.⁷² Though a relatively conservative action at face value, this initiative demonstrated a willingness of LHTC members to assume the roles of city officials to govern their own community, while also providing a useful organizing tool. The volunteer inspections gave the rank-and-file of the LHTC an entrée into the halls and apartments of buildings and provided an opportunity to build relationships with unaffiliated tenants. Largely conducted by poor and working-class Black women, this type of unglamorous, building-by-building organizing, garnered little media attention, but helped to build and grow the LHTC into a viable organization in the early 1960s.

As patience with the slow pace of housing improvements waned over the following year, LHTC protests continued, and in 1962, city and state legislators responded with policy measures designed to create a “slumless city.”⁷³ That February, after the administration of rent control policy was transferred from the state to the city, Mayor Wagner announced the formation of the Rent and Rehabilitation Administration (RRA) to carry out a “new look” municipal housing program. As one of its fundamental initiatives, the RRA attempted to prod landlords

⁷² “Rats Infesting Beds, Housing Probers Told,” *New York Herald Tribune*, April 9, 1961; “Volunteers Check Harlem Tenements,” *New York Times*, August 20, 1961.

⁷³ Charles G. Bennett, “Wagner Sets Up Housing Agency With Wide Goals,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1962.

into making repairs to buildings through incentives such as government loans and tax abatements. While Gray and the LHTC had been pushing for the proverbial stick to discipline recalcitrant landlords, the Wagner administration was offering them a carrot. To many Harlem residents, the RRA was merely the same old routine of lax building code enforcement dressed up in new clothes.

A more promising legislative action came a few months later, when the state legislature finally passed a receivership bill that Gray, Senator Watson, and other tenant rights activists had been advocating for years.⁷⁴ To Gray, a receivership law represented “one of the most important concepts” for systemically improving housing conditions for low-income renters.⁷⁵ In theory, the receivership bill would allow the city to expedite the process of repairing housing violations by subverting the delays caused by the habitual stalling of negligent landlords. In practice, however, Harlem tenants found that the sluggish routine of inspections, delays, and inaction continued largely uninterrupted that year. That September, a wave of inspections on W. 117th Street turned up over 1,400 violations in 23 buildings, yet by December, tenants were still waiting for repairs to begin.⁷⁶ With the receivership process dragging, Gray and the newly re-named Community Council on Housing (CCH) resorted to pickets and marches on City Hall to demand that the RRA slash

⁷⁴ Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 119.

⁷⁵ Jesse Gray, interview by Katherine M. Shannon, July 26, 1967.

⁷⁶ “1,447 Violations in 23 Tenements,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 29, 1962; “What Happened To Those Promised Cuts in Rent?,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 24, 1962; “Rent Reductions Due 25 Buildings,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 8, 1962.

rents until the city took control of the buildings and made repairs. By the end of January, city officials were still inspecting the buildings and considering seizing some of them through receivership—and many tenants were still without heat or hot water.⁷⁷

While Gray was struggling to force city agencies to utilize legislative tools to improve conditions for Harlem tenants, he was also expanding his analysis and advocacy of Black empowerment outside of these liberal political channels. By the year's end, Gray was beginning to explicitly embrace tenets of Black economic and political nationalism. In June of 1962, rumors began to spread around Central Harlem of a “gentleman’s agreement” between white merchants and the Uptown Chamber of Commerce designed to bar black businesses from opening up shop on 125th Street between Eighth and Lenox Avenues. Nationalist organizations, including James Lawson’s United African Nationalist Movement, formed a coalition to coordinate boycotts and demonstrations of several white-owned businesses on 125th Street to protest the alleged restrictive covenant. Leading the coalition was Lewis Michaux of African Nationals in America and owner of the landmark National Memorial Bookstore, as well as Jesse Gray, who called for a week-long boycott and picket of stores on 125th Street unless a white restaurateur pulled his plans to open a restaurant that would compete with the only Black-owned restaurant in the

⁷⁷ “City May Seize 11 Buildings,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 26, 1963.

commercial hub.⁷⁸ According to the *Amsterdam News*, the City's Commission on Human Rights quickly intervened to "prevent any flareup which would lead to rioting." Though the protests drew the ire of Jackie Robinson and A. Philip Randolph over allegations of anti-Semitic chants at demonstrations, the restaurateur eventually agreed to either take on Black partners or sell the business to Black investors.⁷⁹ The victory was minor, particularly since few Black residents could afford to take over the business, but it nonetheless demonstrated a collective push for Black economic empowerment and community control in a neighborhood long exploited by white outsiders.

Gray's embrace of Black economic nationalism was not isolated, but rather indicative of an evolution in his public political thought. Though he had long been active in radical electoral politics, it was not until the early days of 1963 that Gray began to publicly advocate an explicitly racial political nationalism—a full three years before Stokely Carmichael would seize the national spotlight with his clarion call for "Black Power" in Mississippi. That February, Gray announced his candidacy for Democratic District leader of the 16th Assembly District, declaring, "regardless to how good a white man is, he cannot speak for us." Following his announcement, the *New Pittsburgh Courier* reported that "Mr. Gray is of the opinion that in any area predominantly populated by Negroes or Puerto Ricans, a Negro or Puerto Rican

⁷⁸ "Harlem Threatens Boycott of 125th Street," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 9, 1962; "Pickets March, Tension Mounts On West 125th St.," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 30, 1962.

⁷⁹ "Harlem Business Yields in Dispute," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 13, 1962; "Harlem Pickets Switch Tactics," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 14, 1962; "Seek 125th St. Harmony," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 14, 1962.

should be at the helm of that district.”⁸⁰ Though still on the margins of electoral politics in Harlem in early 1963, Gray had firmly established himself as a key mobilizer of a surging Black political consciousness at the grassroots, which was shaping, and being shaped by, a Black radical political milieu in Harlem in the early 1960s.⁸¹

This embrace of self-determination and community control was not inconsistent with the ideological underpinnings of Gray’s housing advocacy, and indeed was a logical extension of it. Dating back to their days in the NMU and Community Party, Gray, Jack O’Dell, and Harry Haywood had continuously debated “the national question” as it related to Black liberation and Black popular consciousness. The national question, Gray later argued, “must be one of the fundamental questions in building a popular peoples coalition in this country.”⁸² Furthermore, Haywood, Gray’s mentor in the NMU, argued in 1964 that a “grassroots nationalist” movement for Black political power must fight for political control in centers of population concentration to enable Black communities to “control decisions affecting his life and destiny.”⁸³ Gray had continuously advocated for the representation of Black tenants within the political system as a means of

⁸⁰ “New York Political Roundup,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, February 23, 1963.

⁸¹ This Black radical political milieu will be analyzed in depth in Chapter Four.

⁸² Jesse Gray interview with Harry Haywood, April 6, 1975, Box 6, Folder 3, Harry Haywood Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (henceforth referred to as Haywood Papers).

⁸³ Harry Haywood, “Black Political Power: The Next Stage in the Afro-American Liberation Struggle,” Box 5, Folder 1, Haywood Papers.

gaining direct access to, and control over, the levers of power that could improve their housing conditions. The housing question, to Gray, O'Dell, and Haywood, was a means by which raise Black political consciousness at the grassroots and mobilize poor Black communities to build a mass national movement for Black political power and liberation.⁸⁴

Though Gray's organizing efforts from 1959-1962 have been interpreted by scholars as little more than an advocacy of liberal housing reform masquerading as a radical tenant movement, these narratives tend to gloss over Gray's analyses on social transformation that informed his tenant organizing.⁸⁵ Although Gray did utilize the tools of liberal housing reform, this tactic was a part of a duality that characterized his organizing and was more complementary to his visions of a radical housing movement than it was contradictory. In Gray's analysis, organizing tenants to demand reforms in government housing policies was a means by which poor and working-class Black tenants could be mobilized to not only build political power, but also to alter the ideological basis that undergirded housing inequality. When the

⁸⁴ Despite Jesse Gray's burgeoning embrace of Black economic and political nationalism during this period, no evidence has been found to suggest that he applied this model to housing. While he was actively supporting Black ownership of businesses and Black political representation in Harlem, it does not appear that Gray had developed a program for community takeover, control, or ownership of apartment buildings in Harlem.

⁸⁵ Most scholars have glossed over Gray's organizing activities from 1959-1963, and instead focus on the genesis and execution of the 1963-1964 rent strike movement. See Schwartz, "Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1943-1971"; Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*; Michael Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*; Naison, "The Rent Strikes in Harlem"; Mandi Isaacs Jackson, "Harlem's Rent Strike and Rat War: Representation, Housing Access and Tenant Resistance in New York, 1958-1964," *American Studies* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 53-79.

LHTC demanded that city agencies prioritize housing inspections in the early 1960s, the purpose was to force the city government to adopt a more proactive housing policy than the reactive policy of only intervening upon the receipt of complaints.⁸⁶

To Gray, safe and quality housing was a basic human right, a positive right, which a government had an obligation to ensure and regulate. “My principle objective,” Gray later said, “has been to change the 350-year old concept of property first and people second.”⁸⁷ Gray defined this struggle as a “human rights movement,” with a goal of dismantling the systemic race and class based oppression that informed housing policies and maintained a racial and economic hierarchy in the city. In order to supplant the values that informed government policies privileging the right of wealthy white landlords to accumulate property and capital, poor Black tenants needed to organize themselves to seize political power in their communities. Seen in this light, Gray’s demands and mobilization for housing inspections in the early 1960s takes on a less accommodating, and far more radical shape.

By the end of 1962, it was clear that Gray and the CCH were gaining momentum and that Hulan Jack’s earlier assessment of housing inequality as the “most explosive issue since civil rights” had been quite prescient. The organizing efforts of the CCH from 1959-1962, coordinated by Gray and organized by a cadre of Black women tenants, had pushed tenant organizing to the forefront of Black liberation struggles in the city. Fueled by the momentum the CCH helped to

⁸⁶ Jesse Gray interview with Katherine M. Shannon, July 26, 1967.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

generate, a host of influential individuals and organizations became active in tenant organizing during these years. In the spring of 1960, attorney Paul Zuber, who had previously represented Mae Mallory in her suit against the NYC Board of Education, provided counsel for 15 families on 137th Street who had been without running water for over a month. Zuber filed legal complaints in municipal court, and also withheld rent on behalf of the tenants until all repairs were completed in the building.⁸⁸

The direct action tactics characteristic of the Civil Rights Movement and the CCH were also influencing the organizing of more liberal housing advocates. At the third annual conference of the more moderate Metropolitan Council on Housing in 1961, members advocated for “mass demonstrations” to demand a moratorium against demolitions. Yorkville Assemblyman Mark Lane, who had been actively involved with the Political Committee of the LHTC the previous year, called for “mass action” to force a stalled tenement repair bill out of legislative committee. Citing the nonviolent direct action campaigns of the sit-ins and Freedom Rides in his keynote address, housing attorney Harris Present encouraged the MCH to “court mass evictions” to win a moratorium on demolitions. Though the MCH’s advocacy of direct action ebbed and flowed in the following years based on the currents of housing legislation and civil rights organizing in the city and state, it was clear that

⁸⁸ “Hydrant Sole Water Supply For 15 Tenement Families,” *New York Herald Tribune*, April 6, 1960; “Jack Arranges To Get Water For Tenement,” *New York Herald Tribune*, April 7, 1960.

this large, middle-class housing organization was being directly influenced by actions from the grassroots.⁸⁹

With the formation of the East Harlem Tenants Council and a CORE housing clinic on West 125th Street in 1962, the tenant movement that Gray and the CCH had spearheaded in Harlem showed signs of expanding across ethnic lines and into the mainstream of the Civil Rights Movement. For several years, Gray had been attempting to make inroads with New York's rapidly growing Puerto Rican communities and had found a capable comrade in Ted Vélez, a young social worker and City College graduate. Vélez began volunteering with Gray and the LHTC around 1960, and two years later used his experience and connections to establish the EHTC in the barrio of East Harlem. Under the leadership of Vélez and Tony Williams, the EHTC followed the organizational and tactical models of the CCH, and developed a "network of building captains" to promote indigenous leadership and a self-sustaining movement among Puerto Rican renters.⁹⁰

While Vélez and Williams were building their organization in East Harlem, the New York (Harlem) Congress of Racial Equality (NY CORE) was changing their tact on housing activism. Though NY CORE had previously focused their organizing efforts around open-housing campaigns, as demonstrated during a February 1962 protest at Gracie Mansion to demand that City Hall "give us a strong law for

⁸⁹ Schwartz, "Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1943-1971," 169-171; "Tenants Rally Set Sept. 19," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 10, 1960; "Tenants Council Holds Convention, Plans Rally," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 4, 1960.

⁹⁰ Schwartz, "Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1943-1971," 177; Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 134-135.

integrated housing,” by the year’s end the chapter had begun to expand their focus to address the conditions of slum housing.⁹¹ According to Schwartz, NY CORE had found itself “caught in the crosscurrents of civil rights and Muslim nationalism” and opened the housing clinic to keep up with the rising tide of grassroots organizing for community empowerment. Though Schwartz attributes NY CORE’s shift in housing advocacy to the “accelerating civil rights movement,” Gray and the CCH were actively shaping the struggle for Black liberation in New York and played a central role in making tenants rights a fundamental component of these same struggles. At its inception, CORE announced that the housing clinic would send investigation teams into buildings and “call on residents” to inform them of their housing rights.⁹² By the following year, NY CORE would evolve from this limited premise to fall more closely in line with the direct action organizing efforts of the CCH.

The period from 1959-1962 proved to be a formative one for struggles for tenants rights and human rights in Harlem. At the dawn of the 1960s, Jesse Gray and the LHTC/CCH had brought tenant organizing and rent strikes back into the popular lexicon of Black freedom struggles in New York City. Over the following three years, Gray and his cadre of tenant organizers used the momentum of the 1959 rent strikes and heightened demands for rights and power to build a grassroots movement that

⁹¹ Memo from Detective William A. Navero, Shield #306, BSS to Commanding Officer, Bureau of Special Services, February 12, 1962, NYPD Inspectional Services Bureau Files, New York City Municipal Archives; Schwartz, “Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1943-1971,” 174.

⁹² Schwartz, “Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1943-1971,” 174.

pushed tenants rights and housing rights to the center of popular discourse around civil rights, human rights, and political power in Harlem. With this groundswell of activism from the grassroots came important legislative victories, as well as the growth of an organizational framework that politically mobilized poor and working-class Black renters in consciousness and in action. Despite these tangible and intangible strides made by Gray and the CCH, however, the rampant abuses of Black and Puerto Rican tenants continued to plague Harlem communities. The liberal responses from City and State governments proved capable of rectifying violations in some buildings, but wholly incapable of addressing housing inequality in any systematic ways. For some renters and organizers, this piecemeal approach to housing reform had a pacifying effect—tempers cooled as inspectors converged upon buildings and occasionally succeeded in forcing repairs. Many others, however, were growing increasingly impatient with the limited reach of these largely ineffective liberal responses to the most pressing needs of Harlem’s Black community.



In July of 1960, James Baldwin lifted American audiences out of their Davenports and dropped them into the streets of Central Harlem in a gripping essay in *Esquire* magazine. In blunt, yet moving terms in “Fifth Avenue Uptown: A Letter from Harlem,” Baldwin laid bare the material and psychological realities of life on the “fetid block” of the Harlem ghetto built and enforced by whites, and occupied by African Americans. Using the housing situation faced by so many Black residents of Harlem as an entrée and central theme of the piece, Baldwin explained to readers as

few other writers could, the human toll that slum housing conditions took on its residents. “They patiently browbeat the landlord into fixing the heat, the plaster, the plumbing; this demands prodigious patience; nor is patience usually enough,” Baldwin wrote. “Such frustration, so long endured,” he continued, “is driving many strong, admirable men and women whose only crime is color to the very gates of paranoia.”⁹³

This frustration, Baldwin argued, was caused not merely by the seemingly intractable problems of inhumane housing conditions in Harlem, but also by the popular understanding that such conditions were symptomatic of a larger system of racial oppression. Housing projects and policemen, Baldwin explained, were hated for the same reason in Harlem: “both reveal, unbearably, the real attitude of the white world, *no matter how many liberal speeches are made, no matter how many lofty editorials are written, no matter how many civil-rights commissions are set up* [emphasis added].” Having grown up in Harlem and born witness to the daily realities of racial oppression there, Baldwin understood and expressed what few whites were able or willing to comprehend: liberal governance would not, and could not, improve or solve the conditions of a ghetto. The only way a ghetto could be improved, Baldwin argued, was “out of existence.”⁹⁴

Baldwin’s essay read like a direct critique of the anemic liberal responses to racial inequality and unrest from City Hall in the wake of the “near riot” in Harlem in

⁹³ James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1962), 60.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 63-65.

1959. Lofty speeches and editorials abounded while the Mayor's Committee on Harlem Affairs investigated well-known problems and submitted reports offering piecemeal solutions for curbing racial tensions. To be certain, there were genuinely progressive proposals scattered amongst the CAH's proceedings, but the premise upon which the Committee operated was not designed to dismantle the institutional walls of the ghetto, but rather to whitewash them to provide a semblance of reform and to cool a heated political climate. Furthermore, while city officials were touting liberal reforms to psychologically disarm rising protests at the grassroots, they were also taking measures to militarize the city's police force to physically suppress surging demands for rights and power.

Despite the best efforts of City Hall to undercut Black demands for human rights and political empowerment in this period, organizers at the grassroots were succeeding in mobilizing and organizing Harlem residents in consciousness and in action. While Jesse Gray and the CCH were expanding their organizing efforts in Harlem to include more buildings and more fundamental demands, Malcolm X along with a growing cadre of radical Black artists, activists, and organizers were re-shaping the political landscape of Harlem, the city, and the nation.⁹⁵ As more Harlem residents became increasingly aware and impatient with the designed limitations of a liberal government for rectifying institutional inequality in any meaningful way, support for more radical alternatives rose, and an already limited trust in City Hall fell further. By 1963, Harlem was on the cusp of becoming a movement center,

⁹⁵ The organizing efforts of Malcolm X, Mae Mallory, the Fair Play For Cuba Committee, and other Black radical activists and organizations will be examined in detail in Chapter Four.

empowered with a radical political consciousness and united through struggle. In a post-script to “Fifth Avenue, Uptown” published in 1961, Baldwin warned readers that “any effort, from here on out, to keep the Negro in his ‘place’ can only have the most extreme and unlucky repercussions.”⁹⁶

⁹⁶ James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1962), 81.

CHAPTER 5

“MAJESTIC LIONS OF THE VALLEYS AND PLAINS”: MAE MALLORY, MALCOLM X, AND THE “NEW AFRO-AMERICAN NATIONALISM” IN HARLEM, 1959-1963

Passive resistance may work for peripheral things such as the right to eat at a lunch counter, the right to use comfort stations and waiting rooms on a non-segregated basis. Passive resistance has helped to show the need for more militant action. No people under the sun ever won complete liberation by completely passive means. –Mae Mallory to Lorraine Hansberry (1963)¹

They call us racial extremists. They call Jomo Kenyatta also a racial extremist and Tom Mboya a moderate. It is only the white man's fear of men like Kenyatta that makes him listen to men like Mboya. If it were not for the extremists, the white man would ignore the moderates. To be called a 'moderate' in this awakening dark world today, that is crying for freedom, is to receive the 'kiss of death' as spokesmen or leaders of the masses...for the masses are ready to burst the shackles of slavery whether the 'moderates' will stand up or not. –Malcolm X (1960)²

As dawn rose on the new decade of the 1960s, America was startled awake by a new militancy demonstrated by young civil rights activists who were taking bold new steps in the long march toward freedom. In February 1960, college students in Greensboro, North Carolina and Nashville, Tennessee began sitting-in at segregated lunch counters to expedite the process of desegregation through nonviolent direct action. Impatient with the gradual pace of desegregation since the *Brown* decision that had been continually hamstrung by the dogged resistance of local white communities and a complicit federal government, students throughout the South directly confronted segregation in their communities and consequently

¹ Letter from Mae Mallory to Lorraine Hansberry, June 1, 1963, Box 1, Folder 2, Mae Mallory Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University (henceforth referred to as Mallory Papers).

² Louis E. Lomax, *When The Word Is Given* (New York: Signet Books, 1963), 132.

pushed older leaders to embrace new tactics. Images of young, sharply dressed Black men and women being brutalized by white posses at department store lunch counters spread throughout the nation in newspaper and television news reports. In the North, civil rights organizations waged sympathy protests and boycotts of Woolworth's department store in several major cities.

In a matter of months, this new militancy and groundswell of student activists were organized into the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) under the guidance of veteran grassroots organizer Ella Baker. Resisting overtures from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to form a youth branch of Dr. King's organization, SNCC's formation as an independent, grassroots student organization marked a clear departure from the bourgeois leadership that had long dominated mainstream civil rights organizations. With the new decade still in its infancy, this generation of students—the age peers of Emmett Till—had sparked what James Baldwin described as “a revolution in the consciousness of this country which will inexorably destroy nearly all that we now think of as concrete and indisputable.”³

While southern college students waged campaigns against segregation and shifted the Movement into a higher gear, struggles for independence and liberation in Africa and across the Diaspora were reinvigorating a revolutionary international consciousness in African American communities—particularly in New York City. As Rhonda Y. Williams notes, SNCC emerged in an era of resurgent Pan-Africanism

³ James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin's-Marek, 1985), 262.

amidst the establishment of 17 new African nations.⁴ This revolutionary consciousness had deep roots in Harlem, where Marcus Garvey's UNIA had inspired, awoken, and mobilized generations of African Americans. By the early 1960s, Harlem was experiencing a rebirth of Pan-African, nationalist, and revolutionary popular thought, as cadres of nationalist leaders and radical intellectuals brought revolutionary analyses to street corners, salons, newspapers, and rallies. "A militant new generation has arisen," poet Rolland Snellings (Askia Touré) wrote in 1963, "truly Garvey's 'cubs in the woods' have become majestic lions of the valleys and plains."⁵ Though inspired by anti-colonial independence movements in Africa and the Caribbean, this heightened radical consciousness was also fundamentally influenced by the experiences of Harlem's poor and working class communities that had been shaping the direction of local grassroots struggles for equality and empowerment over the past several years. Indeed, the proletarian leadership of this "New Afro-American Nationalism," as Dr. John Henrik Clarke termed the emergent political phenomena, had "turned away from a leadership that was begging and pleading to a more dynamic leadership that is insisting and demanding."⁶

The Civil Rights Movement in Harlem in the early 1960s was marked by a distinct popular break with what singer Abbey Lincoln called the "crumb-crunching,

⁴ Rhonda Y. Williams, *Concrete Demands: The Search for Black Power in the 20th Century* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 72.

⁵ Rolland Snellings, "The New Afro-American Writer," *Liberator* 3, no. 10 (October 1963), 10.

⁶ John Henrik Clarke, "The New Afro-American Nationalism," *Freedomways* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1961): 285-295.

cocktail-sipping Uncle Tom leadership” class and an assertion of liberation and self-determination by any means necessary.⁷ The masses in Harlem and throughout the nation had grown demonstrably impatient with the limits of liberal governance, as well as the lack of vision and sense of urgency that many felt characterized the moderate, middle-class civil rights organizations, to meaningfully address the unceasing inequality and oppression faced by poor and working-class Black communities. This evolution of the Movement in Harlem was not merely rhetorical. Building upon the successes of organizations like the Community Council on Housing (CCH), the Nation of Islam (NOI), and the Harlem Nine in mobilizing communities and achieving tangible victories, existing and emerging civil rights groups began to shift their focus to community organizing and building radical grassroots organizations of the most marginalized communities in Harlem.

The period from 1959-1963 represented a dynamic and formative stage in struggles for rights and power in Harlem that had significant reverberations throughout the nation. Though many years in the making, this evolution was expedited at the dawn of the new decade by the convergence of local, national, and global freedom struggles in Harlem. This chapter analyzes these political trends and catalytic events from Harlem to Havana, and Greensboro to the Congo, which influenced this shift in militancy and organizational analyses in the Black Mecca and beyond. Debates about community organizing, nonviolent resistance, armed self-defense, civil disobedience, liberal reform, self-determination, and revolutionary nationalism were commonplace from street corners to theatre stages and indeed

⁷ Ibid, 287.

characterized the growth of the Movement during this period. By analyzing the evolving actions and ideologies of Mae Mallory and Malcolm X, along with their expansive networks, this chapter considers not only the impacts of broader struggles upon the Movement in Harlem, but more significantly, the formative roles played by local people in challenging racial oppression in the urban north and pushing the national Civil Rights Movement in more radical directions in the early 1960s.



As thousands gathered in New York City in July of 1959 for the 50th Anniversary Convention of the NAACP, copies of a small, unfamiliar newspaper called *The Crusader* made their way through the corridors of the New York Coliseum at the southern end of Central Park. Though members came from across the country to commemorate the organization's "Golden Anniversary," the celebratory impetus for the occasion was overshadowed by the mounting internal debate over the NAACP's positions on nonviolent direct action and armed self-defense. That spring, president of the Monroe NAACP branch, Robert F. Williams, had infamously declared his intention to "meet violence with violence" in the face of unrelenting attacks upon Black women by white men, and now he stood ready to defend himself from being suspended by the organization amidst rising national support for armed self-defense and self-determination. On the other end of the park from where the Convention was being held, copies of Williams' newly launched newspaper, *The*

Crusader, flooded the streets of Harlem, where many Black residents were following the proceedings of the Convention with great interest.⁸

Mae Mallory, herself a vocal advocate of armed self-defense and self-determination, had recently celebrated a major legal victory against de facto segregation in Harlem's public schools when she first caught wind of Williams' fights against Klan violence and NAACP suppression. As the Convention was proceeding, a neighbor approached Mallory at her apartment on West 129th Street and told her to tune into the local radio station WLIB. "She says there is something on there that you would be interested in," Mallory later recalled, "and this was during the NAACP Conference...when Robert Williams was there...brought up on charges by the national body [for] advocating armed self-defense." The radio coverage of the Conference proved a formative moment in Mallory's political development and finally brought her personal analyses on self-determination, human rights, and self-defense within intersectional struggles for Black liberation into organizational practice. "I heard it and I said 'My God, you know, this is only right.' So instead of going to work that day I got up and went in the streets and organized some support for Robert Williams," a man she had never met.⁹ Mallory quickly drew upon her connections with the Harlem Nine and other women in her neighborhood with the intention of picketing the NAACP convention if Roy Wilkins did not "drop the

⁸ Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 193.

⁹ Mae Mallory interview with Malaika Lumumba, February 27, 1970, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

charges against Rob.”¹⁰ Though the protest failed to materialize, Mallory nonetheless threw herself into the struggle to support the Black community in Monroe.

In Robert and Mabel Williams, Mallory found kindred spirits in a grassroots fight against state-sponsored racial violence shaped by class and gender. In Monroe, the Williams’ had effectively organized one of the few working-class branches of the NAACP, a distinction that fundamentally shaped the analyses and actions of the branch, and brought the Monroe branch into conflict with the national organization. Though the right to armed self-defense was guaranteed by the US Constitution and widely practiced within Black communities throughout the South, the national organization, characterized by middle-class, moderate leadership, refused to publically endorse self-defense as an acceptable tactic in struggles against state and vigilante violence. Like the Williams’, Mae Mallory was quite familiar with how class dynamics impacted civil rights organizing. As a contemporary of Ella Baker in struggles for school desegregation in Harlem, Mallory recognized the same limits that the bureaucratic approach of the NAACP placed upon such efforts and thus organized a more militant grassroots base to carry out popular, direct-action campaigns for equality and self-determination in public education.¹¹

¹⁰ Letter from Mae Mallory to Mabel and Robert F. Williams, June 3, 1963, Box 1, Folder 2, Mallory Papers. According to Mallory, her plans to picket the convention were shot down by her fellow activists. “I met with negative response from Penny (Parnella) [Pernella Wattley], Jeanie (not Jeanne Walton) and some others. They have me some stupid excuse about we could not let the whites downtown see us picket the NAACP.”

¹¹ See Chapter Three.

Additionally, like the Williams, Mallory's experiences with gendered and class-based racial violence shaped her political analyses of institutional racism and embrace of armed self-defense. Raised by a community of Black women in the South who advocated self-defense and demanded equality, Mallory was taught at a young age to "hold your head up, stick your chest out, and march to the tune of 'The World Is Mine.'"¹² Mallory brought this resolve to the school boycott, when she was subjected to accusations, death threats,¹³ and criminal reprisals in response to her relentless demands for educational equality for her two children. After early attempts by her children's school principal to paint Mallory as a "Communist" and troublemaker failed to deter her demands for a new school, Mallory was arrested on charges of fraud and grand larceny in 1957 for briefly receiving welfare benefits while she was employed. "I had never been to jail in my life," Mallory recalled, "but this whole furor around the schools stirred up such a thing until the power structure decided that they would try to find something that they could discredit me with."¹⁴ To Mallory, the arrest was not simply a matter of political retaliation to curb the school protests, but a systemic response designed to cripple her ability to find employment and housing, care for her children, and stifle any further protests. "They try to pile as much on you as they can pile on you to see if you will snap, to see if you will break," she said of her persecution, "and I am just determined that I'm not

¹² Mae Mallory interview with Malaika Lumumba, February 27, 1970.

¹³ See Chapter Three.

¹⁴ Mae Mallory interview with Malaika Lumumba, February 27, 1970; "Protests School, Arrested on Welfare Charge," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 29, 1957.

going to.” With the help of Ramona Garrett, a former CPUSA member and Pan-Africanist organizer in Harlem, Mallory had a three-year sentence reduced to thirty days, but the experience left her embittered by the political system and determined to dismantle it.¹⁵

The systemic critique of American society that Mallory had developed by 1960 was reflective of an analysis that was becoming increasingly popular among Black communities in Harlem and throughout the nation. As the protests outside the 28th Precinct had demonstrated that summer, many Harlem residents recognized the inherently oppressive nature of American society and were no longer willing to accept the limitations of liberal governance for redressing grievances. This popular analysis was not only informed by the systemic, intersecting forces of racial oppression faced by poor and working-class communities in Harlem. Coming amidst an influx of liberation movements throughout the African Diaspora, the courageous armed resistance of the Williams’ and the Monroe NAACP inspired a revolutionary fervor amongst Harlem residents, organizers, and intellectuals in their local struggles for human rights and self-determination. Having already established herself within Harlem’s grassroots civil rights milieu through the school boycotts, Mallory played an active role in inspiring and shaping the flowering of this revolutionary consciousness at the grassroots in Harlem at the advent of the 1960s.

Though Robert Williams’ suspension was ultimately upheld by the national NAACP, his unwavering claim to the right of armed self-defense in the face of racial terrorism inspired Black communities across the nation and earned him the

¹⁵ Mae Mallory interview with Malaika Lumumba, February 27, 1970.

allegiance of a powerful cadre of radical organizers and intellectuals in Harlem. As Timothy Tyson notes, Williams' advocacy of Black economic empowerment, self-determination, Black culture, and armed self-reliance "reinvigorated many elements of the black nationalist tradition whose forceful emergence in the mid-1960s would become known as Black Power."¹⁶ These aspects of Williams' political ideology had deep roots in Harlem's Black radical tradition, and his occasional trips to New York City in 1958 and 1959 brought Williams into close contact with the likes of writer Julian Mayfield, historian John Henrik Clarke, and the Nation of Islam's Harlem minister Malcolm X. Williams received warm reception in Harlem, often leaving with donations from Malcolm X for arms and ammunition, and was regularly invited to speak at street corner rallies and in the NOI's Temple Number Seven. "I was the only one from the NAACP who could go down in Harlem and stand on a ladder on a corner and speak there," Williams later said of these visits.¹⁷ These early visits to Harlem provided Williams with valuable inroads into a national network of influential Black radicals, but the heightened publicity he received during the summer of 1959 inspired a more coordinated effort to support the Black community of Monroe.

When Mae Mallory finally heard of the Williams' crusade for human rights, economic empowerment, and self-determination in Monroe on the radio that summer, she launched herself into organizing work to support their fight. "Our group decided that well, we'll all join his chapter," Mallory recalled, "let him set up

¹⁶ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 191.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 205.

his own organization and we'll all join him.”¹⁸ The group that Mallory assembled, whose ranks included Robert Williams’s first cousin Ora Mae Mobley, was a small but determined organization called The New York Crusader Family. Named after the Williams’ newspaper, *The Crusader*, which he and Mabel would send north to Harlem in bundles, The NY Crusader Family (also known as Crusaders For Freedom) initially began their work by distributing the circular throughout New York City. “It was a very interesting little pamphlet,” Mallory continued, “so then we decided let’s send people *The Crusader* for Christmas instead of Christmas cards because this is a greater message, you know, than Hallmark.”¹⁹ Flying under the banner of “Advancing The Cause of Race Pride and Freedom,” the messages carried in *The Crusader* were well received in Harlem. In the place where Cyril Briggs had called for an armed war against the KKK in the 1920s on the pages of his own newspaper, *The Crusader*, Williams found the inspiration for the title of his paper and the vociferous support of nationalist organizers like Mallory and Queen Mother Moore, who “rallied the support teams” for the Black community of Monroe.²⁰

From Havana to Harlem: The Cuban Revolution and Black Radicalism in New York City

From 1959-1961, The NY Crusader Family escalated their organizing efforts to aid the struggle in Monroe, while also supporting national and global freedom struggles from the streets of Harlem. The political climate in Harlem at the advent of

¹⁸ Mae Mallory interview with Malaika Lumumba, February 27, 1970.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 194-202.

the 1960s was charged by the wave of revolutions beginning to sweep through the African continent, as well as its diaspora. In 1958, Guinean independence leader Sekou Toure became the first president of the newly formed Republic of Guinea, and by the end of 1960, 17 more nations in Africa would emerge independent through their own revolutionary struggles. On New Year's Day in 1959, the era of anticolonial revolution appeared at the doorstep of the United States when Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista fled the island nation, signaling the victory of the guerilla army led by Fidel Castro. Happening just 250 miles off the coast of Miami and orchestrated by charismatic leaders of African descent, the Cuban Revolution captured the attention and imagination of African American communities already impatient with the slow pace of racial progress and stoked a revolutionary fervor amongst Black radicals.

African American newspapers and writers throughout the United States extolled the victory of an integrated army, led in large part by Afro-Cubans, over an oppressive dictatorship and carried the words of Castro who vowed to "eliminate all forms of discrimination."²¹ Black journalists like William Worthy, and reporters from the *Amsterdam News* and other syndicates, reported back to African American communities with their experiences on the island and the promises of the revolution. "The important lesson in the Cuban experience," Julian Mayfield wrote, "is that social change need not wait on the patient education of white

²¹ C.W. Mackay, "Fantastic! Inside Cuba," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, January 31, 1959.

supremacists.”²² Rep. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., who had persuaded Congress in the previous year to cease the US shipment of arms to Batista forces, visited the island at Castro’s invitation that January and urged Congress to support the new Cuban government, while also publicly hoping that the Cuban victory would inspire similar revolutions throughout the Caribbean and Latin America.²³

The shockwaves that the Cuban Revolution sent across the globe reverberated particularly loudly in New York City, with Harlem playing host to Castro and other foreign dignitaries in 1960. During a visit to the city in the spring of that year, Fidel Castro was greeted by the roar of 20,000 revelers at Pennsylvania Station in Midtown Manhattan, with 40,000 more gathered in Central Park to celebrate the revolutionary’s arrival in the United States.²⁴ “Every Afro-American in his right mind supports Fidel Castro,” Mae Mallory wrote of the Cuban leader’s popularity in Harlem, “even if he is afraid to do so publicly.”²⁵

Despite the popular reception he received from African American communities across the nation, Castro and his revolutionary government in Cuba quickly became a target of Cold War era suspicion and persecution from the United States government. Perceived as a threat to the economic interests of powerful US investors and the imperial aspirations of US global capitalism under the guise of

²² Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 222.

²³ John Young III, “Harlem Has Big Stake in Cuba,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 7, 1959.

²⁴ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 222.

²⁵ Mae Mallory, “Fidel Castro in New York,” September 1961, Box 2, Folder 10, Mallory Papers.

“democracy,” Castro was subjected to Communist smear campaigns and countless assassination attempts from the CIA. For Black organizers and intellectuals who had been active in left-labor led struggles during the post-World War II era, these repressive tactics that characterized the McCarthy Era were all too familiar, and many organized to actively support Castro’s government in spite of US opposition.

In the spring of 1960, a group of 30 intellectuals and activists formed the Fair Play For Cuba Committee to challenge mainstream media narratives about the Cuban government and to coordinate active support for the revolutionary government. Of the thirty founding members of the FPCC, which included the likes of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and American writer Norman Mailer, nearly one third were African American, most of whom were “drawn from among [Robert F.] Williams’s nationalist supporters in Harlem.” These members included writers James Baldwin, John O. Killens, and Julian Mayfield, journalists William Worthy and Richard Gibson, historian John Henrik Clarke, and Robert Williams himself.²⁶ In June of that year, FPCC provided Williams with the opportunity to visit the island as an official guest of Fidel Castro and the Cuban government.²⁷

On his way to Havana, Williams was given a warm farewell reception from The Crusader Family before flying out of New York City. Though not involved in an official capacity with FPCC, the organizing work that Mae Mallory undertook in Harlem with The Crusader Family brought her into close collaboration with many of

²⁶ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 224.

²⁷ Ibid; Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 29.

the group's members and their broader networks. In many ways, this expansive network of organizations and affiliations that Black FPCC members represented was illustrative of the deeply rooted Black radical tradition that was flowering in Harlem by the early 1960s. Inspired by the impatience of the student sit-in movement erupting in the South, as well as the anti-colonial climate of revolution throughout the African Diaspora, Black activists in New York City escalated their local protest activities within a national and global context in the early 1960s.

This network of affiliations that both preceded and emerged in the wake of the FPCC included organizations such as the Harlem Writers Guild (HWG), the Organization of Young Men (OYM), and On Guard Committee For Freedom (OGFF), publications such as *Freedom*, *Freedomways*, and *Liberator* magazines, and countless ties to the diverse array of notable Black leaders, nationalist groups, and community organizations. Though many of the individuals involved in this radical political milieu lived outside of Harlem, as James Smethurst notes, "when black artists and intellectuals engaged in radical cultural and political African-American identified activities, organizations, and institutions, their symbolic (and often practical) locus was often still Harlem." The continued work of radical grassroots organizers in Harlem, including Mae Mallory and Jesse Gray, and artist-activists like actors Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, Smethurst argues, carried the torch of "the long history of Left and nationalist political and artistic activity" which made Harlem a logical and fertile location for radical organizing in the early 1960s.²⁸

²⁸ James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 114.

Though less known in the artistic and intellectual spheres that many of these activists occupied, Mae Mallory was known in the streets of Harlem and emerged as a driving force behind many of the most explosive organizing activities in the city from 1960-1961. Furthermore, Mallory's evolving political analysis and actions during this period marked a rejection of moderate civil rights organizations and a budding embrace of self-determination, armed self-defense, Pan-African solidarity, and revolutionary nationalism—an evolution that signified a trending radicalization amongst poor and working-class Black communities in Harlem from 1960-1964.

Like Williams, Mayfield, Worthy, and countless other activists, Mallory drew inspiration from the Cuban Revolution that fueled her organizing and political analysis. When Castro visited New York City in September 1960, Mallory and the Crusaders For Freedom coordinated a motorcade to welcome the iconic revolutionary at Idlewild (now John F. Kennedy) Airport, and organized rallies outside of the Hotel Theresa after discourteous treatment at a midtown hotel prompted his move uptown to Harlem. The Crusaders gave Castro a rousing welcome at the Hotel Theresa, chanting “Vive Castro!” and “Venceremos” along W. 125th Street while carrying signs that read “Give em hell Fidel” and “Harlem loves Castro.”²⁹ Mallory herself denounced the brusque treatment Castro had received at the Shelbourne Hotel, charging that the “biased” management was “carrying out the policy of the State Dept., to lie, to be impolite and create as much confusion and chaos as possible.”

²⁹ Mae Mallory, “Fidel Castro in New York,” September 1961, Box 2, Folder 10, Mallory Papers.

Mallory also pointedly questioned the motives of the federal government in attempting to salve the situation by offering Castro's delegation a free stay at the Shelbourne rather than move to Harlem. "In this country of Free ENTERPRISE does it mean that people that the United States Gov't call UNFRIENDLY should live rent free rather than let a native born black man make one cent on his enterprise," Mallory charged, "or is there something that it would behove [sic] the black man in these United States to learn from Fidel Castro?"³⁰ In Mallory's analysis, these intentional and conspiratorial political maneuverings of the State evinced a fundamental contradiction in American society. That a capitalist, "free enterprise" society was willing to sacrifice the principles of free market trade to either prevent Black businesses from earning capital, or to suppress radical internationalist communications, further demonstrated to Mallory the systematic depths of American racism and marked an evolution of her critique of the racist foundations of capitalist society.

If Mallory was correct in her assessment of governmental anxieties over the subversive possibilities of Castro's visit to Harlem, the influence that the visit had on many radical intellectuals and activists proved that Big Brother had reason to be concerned. Like Mallory, Castro's arrival had a profound impact on the political development of Sarah E. Wright, an African American aspiring novelist and member of the Harlem Writers Guild (HWG). "Fidel was part of a flood of new Third World leaders," Wright later wrote, "who were now coming to serve notice that the days of the *Black Man's Burden*...were drawing to a close." Formed in 1950 as a writing

³⁰ Ibid.

salon for radical Black artists and intellectuals, including Wright, Killens, Clarke, Mayfield, and singer Abbey Lincoln, the HWG by 1960 represented what Smethurst describes as “the unrepentant left”—those intellectual-activists who remained unwavering in their support of the ideological bases of the Leftist and nationalist movements of the post-World War II era in spite of the systemic suppression that dismantled such movements during the McCarthy Era.³¹ With the radical fervor of the post-war era showing promising signs of life by 1960, intellectual-activists like those in the HWG brought the radical politics of that era into organized action at the turn of the decade.

The political analysis and activism of many HWG members was also informed by close personal relationships with local, national, and global liberation struggles, which were converging in Harlem during this period with their active assistance. In her reflections on the HWG, Wright explained that firsthand reports of racial violence in the South, where many HWG members had come from, conveyed “a greater immediacy to us than the nightly TV footage.” At the same time, Wright noted, “we were also at one with the seething ghettos of the North, our ears attuned to Malcolm’s message.” And with 1960 dubbed the “Year of Africa” by the United Nations for the anti-colonial revolutions sweeping the continent, HWG members immersed themselves in solidarity work for various armed liberation struggles, and were instrumental in spreading a consciousness of Africa to African American communities. To Wright and other members of the HWG, then, Castro’s nearby

³¹ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 118.

victory and triumphant arrival in Harlem signified that “there was a new day coming!”³²

Wright learned of Castro’s arrival in Harlem during a weekly meeting of the HWG that she was hosting in her Lower East Side apartment with her husband, Joseph Kaye, and attended by John O. and Grace Killens, John Henrik Clarke, and Bill Forde. When a phone call for Clarke announced that the Cuban premier was moving to the Hotel Theresa, the group hastily sped uptown to join the throngs of revelers on W. 125th St. and Seventh Ave., braving the rain and rough police presence to celebrate Castro’s arrival and “protect Fidel against unseen menaces.”³³

Though the majority of those who flocked to lay eyes on Castro may not have been *Fidelistas*, as Julian Mayfield noted, the feeling along 125th Street “was that anybody so completely rejected by white America must have some good points.”³⁴ “While most of white New York was gnashing its teeth, Harlem was erupting!” Wright recalled, echoing Mallory’s assessment of the fearful responses of government agencies to Castro’s arrival, which included FBI surveillance and police suppression of demonstrations. Despite the hostilities displayed by city and federal agencies, and the ambivalence of local “mainstream leaders” (including Jackie Robinson and the previously-supportive Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.), the thousands that greeted Castro on a near-daily basis in Harlem effectively served notice that the

³² Sarah E. Wright, “The Lower East Side: A Rebirth of World Vision,” *African American Review* 27 (Winter 1993): 594.

³³ *Ibid*, 595.

³⁴ Julian Mayfield, “The Cuban Challenge,” *Freedomways* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1961): 185.

collective mood of the people was aligned more closely with that of Mallory and Wright, rather than the established leadership class. As Smethurst notes, Castro's meetings in Harlem with Malcolm X, Robert F. Williams, and other community leaders "energized nationalists and leftists (and Left nationalists), facilitated the circulation of radical ideas in the community, and reinforced the image of Harlem as a center for such ideas."³⁵

Though the immediate exhilaration that Mallory, Wright, and thousands of others in Harlem felt during Castro's ten-day visit would fade, it nonetheless left a lasting mark on the collective consciousness of a generation of activists and local people. "What has always remained...of Fidel's visit," Wright recalled over 30 years later, "is a social vision immersed so deep in my heart it can never be dislodged."³⁶ Like Wright and other members of the HWG, the revolutionary fervor of 1960 stoked the radical imaginations of the African American leftist and nationalist literary communities in New York City and prompted a shift to more active organizational involvement in radical struggles for rights and power in Harlem.

One of the first organizations to emerge from the downtown literary scene amidst this political zeitgeist was the Organization of Young Men (OYM), formed in 1960 by writer LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka). A native of Newark, NJ, Baraka had traveled to Cuba with FPCC that July at the invitation of Richard Gibson, along with Sarah Wright, Harold Cruse, Julian Mayfield and his wife Ana Cordero, where he met Castro and Robert F. Williams for the first time. Seeing the fruits of an anti-colonial

³⁵ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 113.

³⁶ Wright, "The Lower East Side," 596.

revolution firsthand in the streets of Havana, Baraka's tour of the island pulled back the curtains on a concept that had previously seemed "foreign," "romantic," and even "hopeless" to him and other self-fancied rebels in the United States.³⁷ Coupled with the southern student movement, the trip spurred Baraka to reconsider the efficacy of the "bland revolt" that the culture of the downtown beat scene represented and provided the inspiration and push needed to begin putting his evolving radical political consciousness into organizational practice.

Once back in New York, Baraka began working his connections in the literary scene to put together a group to raise political consciousness downtown. The Organization of Young Men emerged from these efforts as an all-Black group of writers, musicians, and intellectuals, including Archie Shepp, Harold Cruse, Calvin Hicks, and A.B. Spellman, who recognized that "it was time to go on the offensive in the civil rights movement."³⁸ According to Smethurst, the OYM was

intended as a vehicle for downtown black artists and activists to engage and enter into the more militant side of the domestic civil rights movement and to link civil rights in the United States with struggles against colonialism and neocolonialism around the world, while maintaining a distance from 'mainstream' civil rights organizations."³⁹

³⁷ LeRoi Jones, "Cuba Libre," *Evergreen Review* 4, no. 15 (Nov.-Dec. 1960), 139.

³⁸ Though the group was composed exclusively of Black intellectuals and artists, Baraka noted in his autobiography that this was not by design. Furthermore, Baraka notes several times that most of these men were married to white women. It is also worth noting that the group's membership, which its name alludes to, was comprised entirely of men. Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997), 248.

³⁹ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 395-96n35.

Smethurst's assessment is evident in a recruitment letter sent in the spring of 1961, in which Baraka sent out a call to "young Negro men...to form some highly militant organization...to combat the rise of Uncle Tomism, shallow minded white liberalism, racism, and ignorance." "The new nations of Africa, and the newly independent peoples of Asia and Latin America," Baraka continued, "form, now, a majority of the peoples of the world. They are, indeed, our brothers...but we must earn this brotherhood by acting."⁴⁰ Though by Baraka's own admission the group lacked a collective analysis and sense of direction, it nonetheless represented "a confirmation of rising consciousness" that resonated throughout the city and would quickly converge with the radical political milieu that was surging in Harlem.⁴¹

Furthermore, as Smethurst notes, the formation of the OYM marked a "crucial step in Baraka's move toward Black Power" and the opening of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School five years later.⁴²

"A nation within a nation": Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam in Harlem, 1959-1961

If Baraka's pilgrimage to Cuba provided the push factor for his involvement in organized political action, this process was expedited by his introduction to Malcolm X through "The Hate That Hate Produced" the previous year. While Mike Wallace's weeklong television special had evoked shock and outrage in white

⁴⁰ LeRoi Jones, "An Organization of Young Men," April 18, 1961, Box 2, Folder 21, Mallory Papers.

⁴¹ Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 248.

⁴² Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 345.

audiences, the stirring visuals of the NOI and its loquacious young minister electrified a generation of Black audiences. “He charged me in a way no one else had ever done. He *reached* me,” Baraka later recalled. To Baraka and many other young militants, the emergence of Malcolm X represented the rise of a dynamic new leadership that rejected gradual approaches to liberation and more accurately reflected the increasingly militant mood and analyses of the Black masses. “What Malcolm said were things that had gone through my mind but he was giving voice to,” Baraka remembered, “his media appearances made my head tingle with anticipation and new ideas. He made me feel even more articulate and forceful, myself, just having seen him.”⁴³ Though “The Hate That Hate Produced” had exposed the Nation to the racist vitriol of white American society, the national visibility the program offered also provided a springboard for their recruitment and expansion.

One of the major facets of the NOI’s recruiting strategies at the turn of the decade was the dissemination of pamphlets, handbills, and newspapers throughout the streets of Harlem, where members ardently “fished” for converts. The NOI’s increased emphasis on producing and circulating literature also had another motivation, though. As Manning Marable notes, the media firestorm that followed in the wake of Mike Wallace’s television special motivated the NOI to establish its own media outlets in an attempt to gain control over its image. Though for years Elijah Muhammad had written columns in the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Los Angeles Herald-Dispatch*, the spotlight that the NOI had attracted by 1959 presented a prime opportunity for the Nation to launch their own publications to both write their own

⁴³ Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 273-74.

narratives and to reach their goal of adding one million converts by 1961.⁴⁴ Despite the increasing demands of leading Mosque No. 7, organizing new mosques across the nation, and managing his heightened public profile, Malcolm X took the lead in launching what would become one of the NOI's "most potent vehicles," *Muhammad Speaks*.

After a short-lived attempt at publishing a magazine titled *The Messenger* in the fall of 1959, Malcolm X scored immediate, widespread success in launching *Muhammad Speaks* in May of 1960.⁴⁵ To get the paper off the ground required tireless dedication from Malcolm, who set aside a room in his house in East Elmhurst, Queens, for the paper's production. "He would have pages plastered all over the wall," Elijah Muhammad's son Wallace Muhammad recalled. "The whole room was just turned into a workplace for the production of the paper."⁴⁶ Printed out of an office at 113 Lenox Avenue in Harlem, the tabloid-sized paper sold for fifteen cents and was billed as "a militant monthly dedicated to Justice for the Black Man."⁴⁷ Bundles of the newspaper were swiftly delivered to Mosques across the nation and members of the NOI were ordered to fill strict quotas of sales and subscriptions. Neatly-dressed members of the Nation became regular fixtures on the

⁴⁴ C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 132.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 132-33; Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking, 2011), 163; William Strickland, *Malcolm X: Make It Plain* (New York: Viking, 1994), 84.

⁴⁶ William Strickland, *Malcolm X: Make It Plain*, 107.

⁴⁷ Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, 133.

streets of Harlem where they hawked copies of the paper, while also setting up shop outside of churches, NAACP meetings, street rallies, and any other places where African Americans congregated.⁴⁸ The relentless salesmanship of NOI members (performed under threat of economic or physical punishment) had remarkable impacts in short time. As Marable notes, *Muhammad Speaks* “quickly attracted tens of thousands of regular readers, the vast majority of them non-Muslims.”⁴⁹ Within its first two years in publication, the newspaper had a circulation of over 50,000 and by 1963 *Muhammad Speaks* would have the largest distribution of any African American newspaper in publication.⁵⁰

In addition to the tireless efforts of the NOI’s ever-present sales force, the paper also drew widespread readership by featuring columns from well-known writers who wrote effectively to the mood of the Black masses in Harlem and the nation. The pages of *Muhammad Speaks* regularly contained columns in the early 1960s from notable Harlem writers Langston Hughes, John Henrik Clarke, and Sylvester Leaks, who helped to shape the political analysis of the widely circulated paper. An activist and associate of Clarke, Leaks was a particularly ideal fit for covering issues of self-defense and self-determination, which were central pillars of NOI ideology. Described by Julian Mayfield as a “militant writer” who knew when it

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Marable, *Malcolm X*, 163.

⁵⁰ Louis E. Lomax, *When The Word Is Given* (New York: Signet Books, 1963), 73, 147.

was time to “lay down his pen, stop talking and wade in with his fists,”⁵¹ Leaks in the following years would become head of Crusaders For Freedom and a fixture at street rallies and radical organizing campaigns.

After its early successes in Harlem, production of *Muhammad Speaks* eventually shifted to the NOI’s national headquarters in Chicago, where Elijah Muhammad and his inner circle could exercise closer control of the paper. Though Muhammad’s conservative doctrine of political abstinence, Victorian social mores, and Black capitalism was reflected in his columns, Smethurst points out that “the general editorial direction of the paper was militantly antiracist and anti-imperialist (and often anticapitalist) as well as nationalist.” This juxtaposition of Muhammad’s conservatism with the radical leftist and nationalist leanings of a national editorial staff drawn from veterans of the African American press and Popular Front in Chicago foreshadowed looming contestations over political ideology and activism between Muhammad and Malcolm.⁵²

As Malcolm and the NOI shot into surging national conversations around civil rights, integration, Black nationalism, self-determination, and self defense by 1960, the Harlem minister was increasingly sought after for public debates and lectures on these issues that were shaping the direction of the Black Freedom Struggle. Malcolm X used these opportunities to not only confront misrepresentations of the NOI’s theology as racist or hate-mongering, but also to expound his positions on the

⁵¹ Julian Mayfield, “And Then Came Baldwin,” in *Harlem USA*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (Brooklyn: A&B Book Publishers, 1971), 168.

⁵² Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 181-82.

direction of the Black Freedom Struggle and challenge the legitimacy of its mainstream leadership. In March, Malcolm X was invited to debate Rev. William M. James of the Metropolitan Community United Church in Harlem on a local radio broadcast moderated by radical white attorney William Kunstler. Citing claims by Roy Wilkins that the NOI was “no better than the Ku Klux Klan,” Kunstler quickly pressed Malcolm to defend the racial separatism preached by Elijah Muhammad. In defending the nation’s theology, Malcolm rejected Wilkins’s comments as uninformed and called attention to the hypocrisy of western religions that historically practiced racial discrimination but now condemned the Nation of Islam for religious exclusivity.⁵³

While affirming the Nation’s theology in public appearances that spring, Malcolm also explained its nationalistic ideologies that drew from traditions of secular Black nationalism while also contributing to its resurgence in the early 1960s. At a lecture at Boston University the same month, Malcolm X devoted much of a two-hour question and answer session to explaining the NOI’s position on the “nation question” and reparations. As “back salary” for generations of enslavement, Malcolm told the interracial crowd, Elijah Muhammad called for the United States to compensate Black Americans with “either a tract of land, or several states, wherein they could form their own government.”⁵⁴ Although these aspects of the Nation’s theology built upon past generations of Black nationalist political organizing, in

⁵³ Marable, *Malcolm X*, 169-70.

⁵⁴ “Malcolm X Defends Muhammad At Boston U.,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 5, 1960; “Defends Muslim Leader At Meet,” *Chicago Defender*, March 15, 1960.

these early appearances Malcolm exercised caution in explicitly commenting on the Black Freedom Struggle as mandated by Muhammad's position on political noninvolvement.

While most of Malcolm's public appearances at the dawn of the 1960s were dedicated to explicating the theology and programs of the Nation of Islam, he did make overtures to local civil rights and nationalist groups in Harlem. Though he had actively supported Robert F. Williams with funds and a public platform when he visited Harlem over the previous few years, Malcolm X's primary engagement with Harlem's freedom struggles had been in the realm of psychological decolonization and empowerment through his revelatory public speeches and dramatic stands against police brutality. "People use that cliché, 'the university of the streets,'" Peter Bailey recalled, "but that really was the university of the street because it was a tremendous learning experience."⁵⁵

Malcolm X, who Bailey described as a "master teacher," also recognized that if the Nation were to bring about fundamental societal change, they would need allies to put their liberatory education into praxis. Having cut his teeth on the street corners of Harlem's grassroots nationalist scene, Malcolm knew fully well that the sectarian nationalist groups competing for followers were stifling collective action. As John Henrik Clarke would describe the following year, "this nationalism is being hampered by too many organizations and too many leaders with conflicting

⁵⁵ William Strickland, *Malcolm X: Make It Plain*, 115.

programs.”⁵⁶ With the likes of James Lawson, Carlos Cooks, Eddie “Pork Chop” Davis, Bessie Philips, and many other veteran speakers and organizers staking claims to various corners and constituencies, Malcolm made a move in the spring of 1960 to bring these nationalist factions, civil rights groups, and community leaders together under a common banner of Black liberation and empowerment in Harlem.

In May 1960, an advertisement in the *New York Amsterdam News* announced a “huge 6-hour outdoor” rally to be held at the corner of 125th St. and 7th Ave. Under a bold headline announcing the Harlem Freedom Rally, a stone-faced photograph of Malcolm X issued a call to religious, political, business, and civic leaders in Harlem. “Let us forget our religious and political differences. We must come together on the same platform in a great display of UNITY against our common enemy, and fight for one common cause...complete and immediate FREEDOM for the Black Man in America.” The list of speakers invited to the rally represented a veritable cross-section of African American political thought in Harlem, many of whom had been involved in the Mayor’s Commission on Harlem Affairs the previous year. The expansive guest list included Roy Wilkins, Lester Granger, Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, Jackie Robinson, Hope Stevens, James Watson, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., James Lawson, and Sugar Ray Robinson, among many others known in Harlem’s political, religious, and social circles.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ John Henrik Clarke, “The New Afro-American Nationalism,” *Freedomways* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1961): 286.

⁵⁷ “Harlem Freedom Rally,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 21, 1960.

Shortly after noon on May 28th, an estimated four thousand people flocked to Harlem Square where speakers blasted Louis X's "A White Man's Heaven is a Black Man's Hell" from a stage set up in front of Louis Michaux's bookstore.⁵⁸ On the grandstand, Bessie Philips, Percy Sutton, Wallace Muhammad, Max Roach, Louis X, Hope Stevens, and Louis Michaux looked out onto a bustling crowd on the streets and sidewalks where dozens raised signs reading "We Must Have Some Land."⁵⁹ Rising to the podium, Malcolm began his address with calls for unity amongst Black leaders for the purpose of achieving freedom, equality, justice, and human rights so long denied by the American government.

Far from a sentimental call for symbolic brotherhood, Malcolm explained that this unity in leadership must be built and directed by the grassroots. The purpose of the rally, he explained, was for the masses to become familiarized with "our leaders who have been acting as our spokesmen." Reflecting a growing local and national disillusionment with gradualist leadership in the wake of the "near-riot" in Harlem and the sit-ins throughout the South, Malcolm pointed to the need for local people to control their own movements. "We want to get behind leaders who will fight for us...leaders who are not afraid to demand freedom, justice, and equality," he declared, "we do not want leaders who are hand picked for us by the

⁵⁸ Marable, *Malcolm X*, 170.

⁵⁹ Memo from Ernest B. Latty to Commanding Officer, May 30, 1960, NYPD Inspectional Services Bureau Records, New York City Municipal Archives (henceforth referred to as BOSS Records); Memo from Bernard F. Mulligan to Chief Inspector, June 1, 1960, BOSS Records.

white man. We don't want any more Uncle Toms."⁶⁰ Keeping with NOI doctrines, Malcolm challenged the crowd to begin this process by building unity in their neighborhoods by abstaining from "immoral habits" that divided the community. From there, Malcolm argued, the people needed to "form a platform that will be good for all our own people, as well as for others," and give "intelligent active support to our political leaders" who would fight fearlessly and unselfishly for this platform of Black liberation.

In this speech, Malcolm blended elements of the Nation's theology of moral conservatism, racial separatism, and economic nationalism with calls for self-determination, secular Black nationalism, and Pan-Africanism that were characterizing grassroots freedom struggles in Harlem at the time. Describing the 20 million Black Americans as constituting a "nation within a nation," Malcolm invoked the "Spirit of Bandung" and cited his recent trip to Africa to call for "freedom from colonialism, foreign domination, oppression and exploitation." It was clear in his speech that Malcolm saw the Bandung Conference and ongoing anti-colonial liberation struggles as models for building a revolutionary united Black freedom movement in the United States led by the militancy of the masses.

Using Jomo Kenyatta and Tom Mboya as examples of "extremists" and "moderates," respectively, Malcolm explained the centrality of "extremists" in advancing liberation struggles, despite the disparaging connotation of the term in mainstream media outlets. "To be called a 'moderate' in this awakening dark world today...is to receive the 'kiss of death' as...leader of the masses," Malcolm declared,

⁶⁰ Lomax, *When The Word Is Given*, 128-29.

“for the masses are ready to burst the shackles of slavery whether the ‘moderates’ will stand up or not.”⁶¹ With Hope Stevens as the only invited speaker to actually show up, it was evident that “moderate” leaders were generally unwilling to engage in talks with the “extremist” spokesman for the Nation of Islam at this point. Though Marable may have overstated his claims that the rally was responsible for “transforming Malcolm into a respectable political leader in Harlem’s civic life,” the Harlem Freedom Rally nonetheless marked a significant entrée for Malcolm into coalition building in Harlem and showed an early step toward active engagement in political organizing.⁶²

While it is unclear if Elijah Muhammad objected to Malcolm’s focus on politics and Pan-Africanism in his Harlem Freedom Rally speech, he was explicit in his displeasure when Malcolm held a summit with Fidel Castro in the Hotel Theresa that fall. To be certain, Malcolm had been a regular fixture at Harlem rallies for visiting African leaders, including Guinean President Sekou Touré the previous fall and a Nigerian attaché months later. Throughout the summer of 1960, Malcolm spoke at Harlem street rallies about the “march toward freedom of the dark masses throughout the rest of Africa, Asia and even Latin America,” warning of the “explosive Congolese situation” where global neo-colonial forces threatened the leadership of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba.⁶³ So when Malcolm made his way to the Hotel Theresa to greet Fidel Castro that fall as part of a previously formed

⁶¹ Ibid, 132.

⁶² Marable, *Malcolm X*, 170.

⁶³ “Malcolm X Speaks Sat.,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 13, 1960.

welcoming committee, it was a culmination of sorts for this early period of his Pan-African thought.

Joined by *Amsterdam News* columnist James Booker, NOI member Luqman Abdul-Hakeem, and a few others, Malcolm and Fidel met in the revolutionary leader's ninth floor room around midnight as throngs of revelers milled about on the sidewalks outside. After Malcolm expressed his support for the revolutionary government and assured Castro that the masses in Harlem were not deluded by the anti-Cuban "propaganda" in the US media, Castro expressed his solidarity with Pan-African liberation struggles. "We are all brothers. It is wonderful that 14 new African nations are in the United Nations," Castro warmly expressed to Malcolm. "They are oppressed and exploited just as we are," he continued, "the new nations and we in Latin America are all African Americans."⁶⁴ Though their conversation was brief, Malcolm left the Hotel Theresa inspired by Castro and his successful overthrow of an oppressive government. Castro also threw down an indirect challenge during their meeting, which was surely not missed by Malcolm. "We in Cuba have done in 18 months," Castro stated plainly, "what you are still trying to do for 400 years."⁶⁵

While Muhammad fumed from Chicago, telling reporters that he would have prevented Malcolm from visiting Castro had he known, the masses in Harlem were galvanized and empowered by the international stage and proximity to

⁶⁴ James Booker, "Castro Talks," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 24, 1960.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

revolutionary power that one of their own now occupied.⁶⁶ “Malcolm was considered a grassroots leader,” Abdul-Hakeem later noted, “he was very popular in Harlem.”⁶⁷ Though still largely ostracized by mainstream civil rights leaders, it was evident that Malcolm’s credibility among the masses in Harlem and other major cities was rapidly growing. Within just a few years time, the militant minister had successfully taken on the NYPD, been featured in a weeklong television broadcast, challenged moderate leaders to embrace the militancy of the masses, and summited with revolutionary leaders—all while maintaining his active presence in the streets of Harlem.

While his meteoric ascension was met with scorn from moderate civil rights leaders and white liberals, apprehension from Muhammad, and repression from law enforcement, it was enthusiastically embraced by thousands of African Americans. From 1959-1961, the membership of Mosque No. 7 in Harlem rose from 1,125 members (569 of whom were considered “active”) to 2,369 members (767 active).⁶⁸ By 1960, the Nation of Islam had grown to 200 Mosques nationwide with 50,000 members, with tens of thousands more who never joined but were in sympathy with

⁶⁶ Wallace H. Terry, “Black Muslim Elijah’s Lowly Start,” *The Washington Post*, December 12, 1960.

⁶⁷ Aida Alami, “The man who drove Malcolm X around and introduced him to Fidel Castro,” *Africa Is A Country*, November 2, 2017, <http://africasacountry.com/2017/11/the-man-who-drove-malcolm-x-around-and-introduced-him-to-fidel-castro/>.

⁶⁸ Marable, *Malcolm X*, 196.

or actively supported the NOI's positions.⁶⁹ Much of this growth must be directly attributed to Malcolm's organizational skills in building many of these Mosques, as well as his liberatory rhetoric, which was mobilizing ideological resources by empowering thousands to break free from the chains of psychological colonialism and embrace more radical analyses and actions.

The UN "Riots" and the Emergence of the "New Afro-American Nationalism" in Harlem

While participating in solidarity campaigns in support of international liberation struggles, intellectuals and activists in New York City were also organizing on behalf of struggles in the southern United States—all while continuing their local fights for African American rights and power. Like Wright, Baraka, Malcolm X and countless other radical New Yorkers, Mae Mallory understood these seemingly diverse struggles as intrinsically linked aspects of a global struggle for the human rights and self-determination of racially-oppressed peoples. As sit-in demonstrations swept through the South, heralding the emergence of southern student involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, the New York Crusader Family was routinely on the front lines of solidarity protests and demonstrations in Harlem.

In March 1960, the Crusader Family, CORE, and the NAACP co-sponsored a protest at a Harlem Woolworth's, drawing 300 people to the corner of 125th Street and 7th Avenue. At the rally, the Crusader Family distributed flyers calling for a national boycott of Woolworth's, couching their demands in language familiar to

⁶⁹ William W. Sales, Jr. *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 66.

those involved in New York City's vibrant post-war organizing network. "We fought for democracy everywhere and we demand the right to eat anywhere," the flyer read, "We will no longer fill the front lines overseas—and go in the back doors at home!...Join the picket line in the fight for freedom in the free? world."⁷⁰ Through this type of rhetoric, The Crusaders, like OYM downtown, challenged Harlem residents to locate the fight against segregation in public accommodations in the South within the context of national and global armed struggles to advance the causes of democracy and freedom, all while becoming actively involved in these struggles in their neighborhoods.

Mallory's impressive track record of local organizing, coupled with her relationship with Rob and Mabel Williams through The Crusader Family, brought her directly into the fold of an emergent network of radical organizations operating out of Harlem. By the spring of 1961, it was clear that the Pan-Africanist, leftist, nationalist, and revolutionary ideologies promoted by generations of radical organizers and street corner speakers in Harlem had gained traction in a way unseen since the Garvey Movement. Just months after Castro's visit to Harlem, local and global Black freedom struggles converged in New York City in an explosive way that February following the assassination of Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba.

The first leader of the newly liberated African nation, Lumumba had risen to power in June of 1960 after being released from jail for his part in political uprisings

⁷⁰ Memo from Ernest B. Latty to Commanding Officer, March 6, 1960, BOSS Records.

against the Belgian colonial government the previous year.⁷¹ With his rise to power and the liberation of the Congo from Belgium's notoriously horrific control coming amidst a wave of African liberation movements, Lumumba's charisma and bold defiance in the face of colonial oppression endeared him to African American radicals and aspiring revolutionaries. "Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, and Sékou Touré were the Holy African Triumverate which radical black Americans held dear," Maya Angelou lamented years later, "and we needed our leaders desperately."⁷² So when Lumumba's death was made public on February 13th, 1961 after a neo-colonial power struggle in the Congo, Black radicals in the United States were incensed by what they (correctly) assumed was a calculated political assassination, coordinated by the Belgian government with support from the United States and United Nations.⁷³

The fallout from Lumumba's assassination in the US was fast and furious, particularly in New York City, as radical activists and organizers of all stripes coalesced to protest the active roles played by the American government and United Nations in suppressing the interrelated struggles for African independence abroad and Black liberation domestically. "Suddenly...Lumumba became Emmett Till and all the other black victims of lynch law and the mob," John Henrik Clarke wrote. "The

⁷¹ Lowell "Pete" Beveridge, "The Death of Lumumba," *Liberator* 1, no. 1 (March 1961).

⁷² Maya Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), 170.

⁷³ Christopher M. Tinson, *Radical Intellect: Liberator Magazine and Black Activism in the 1960s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 17-22.

plight of the Africans still fighting to throw off the yoke of colonialism and the plight of the Afro-Americans,” Clarke continued, “became one and the same.”⁷⁴ As had the murder of Emmett Till nearly six years prior, the assassination of Patrice Lumumba galvanized Black communities, who recognized the culprit of this foul deed as the global system of white, Euro-American supremacy, and sparked a momentous protest at the United Nations headquarters in New York City just days after the word got out.

With the U.N. Security Council set to meet on February 15th, 1961, members of the HWG and Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage (CAWAH) drew upon their expansive connections with Black leftist and nationalist groups to quickly mobilize a diverse coalition of radical organizations and local people for a demonstration at the UN. This network was illustrative of the resurgent radical milieu in Harlem, which had begun to establish a semblance of cohesion through active common support for the militant struggles waged by the likes of Robert F. Williams, Fidel Castro, and Patrice Lumumba. Though Richard Gibson would later claim “it was Williams who inspired that much publicized and highly effective demonstration in the United Nations,” it was Black women who turned that inspiration into organized action.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ John Henrik Clarke, “The New Afro-American Nationalism,” 285.

⁷⁵ Tinson, *Radical Intellect*, 18. Like Gibson, Timothy Tyson also credits Williams with “inspiring” the demonstration at the UN, citing a “fiery” speech Williams gave at a Harlem street rally the night of February 14, 1961, before leaving to speak in Michigan the next morning. While Williams’ rhetoric may have spurred more than a few Harlem residents to action the next morning, credit for breaking the news of Lumumba’s assassination and initiating the demonstration at the UN

One of the key architects of this ad hoc coalition was novelist and trade-union activist Rosa Guy, a co-founder of the HWG and CAWAH, who had migrated to Harlem from Trinidad as a young girl.⁷⁶ Over the previous year, Guy's fluency in French had allowed her to foster a close relationship between HWG members and the Congolese UN delegation, which had felt otherwise isolated in New York because French was the only European language most of the delegation spoke.⁷⁷ The intimate connection Guy, the HWG, and their extended network had established with their brothers and sisters from the Congo made Lumumba's assassination all the more personal and sharpened their resolve to protest this international injustice.⁷⁸

In response, Guy, Maya Angelou, Sarah Wright, and Abbey Lincoln, all founding members of the recently formed nationalist women's group CAWAH (as well as members of HWG), organized a mass demonstration at the United Nation's headquarters on 42nd Street in about two day's time.⁷⁹ According to Angelou, the women had initially settled on staging a symbolic protest at the UN donning black

must be given to the Black women of CAWAH who orchestrated the event. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 237.

⁷⁶ Williams, *Concrete Demands*, 70.

⁷⁷ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 118.

⁷⁸ Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman*, 170. In fact, it was through her friends in the Congolese delegation that Rosa Guy first received word of the assassination, which she passed along to her comrades in CAWAH.

⁷⁹ Smethurst and Williams both credit CAWAH for organizing the protests at the UN. Peniel Joseph states that the demonstration "partially originated from meetings held at the penthouse apartment of jazz singer Abbey Lincoln and jazz drummer Max Roach." Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 39-40.

veils and rising from their seats in a solemn protest when Adlai Stevenson began his announcement of Lumumba's death. Recognizing a need to connect their demonstrations with the masses, however, the women decided to put the word out in Harlem—with the help of Lewis Michaux—to inform the people of Lumumba's death and drum up support for a much larger demonstration. Two days before the UN Security Council was scheduled to meet, Angelou, Guy, Lincoln, and other CAWAH members addressed an evening rally in front of Michaux's bookstore at the intersection of 125th Street and 7th Avenue. After Michaux warmed up the crowd, Abbey Lincoln stepped to the microphone, and told the thousands gathered in Harlem Square that Lumumba was dead. "The whites killed a black man," she icily informed the crowd, "another black man." The crowd was livid, and seized on the opportunity to join the women in their demonstration at the U.N. that Friday.⁸⁰

When the UN Security Council convened the morning of February 15th, about 75 activists, many wearing black armbands or black veils, sat in small groups in the gallery having made their way through the swirling crowd of protestors outside the building. Harlem had turned out for the demonstration, with thousands milling about on the sidewalks seeking an outlet to channel their righteous anger. Just outside the chamber doors, scores of other activists representing CAWAH, HWG, On Guard Committee For Freedom (OGFF), the Liberation Committee for Africa (LCA), and the Crusader Family waited in line to gain entrance to the council chamber.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman*, 169-180.

Despite the picket lines marching outside the building and the bustling crowds trying to gain entry to the chamber, the Council session came to order and proceeded in normal fashion until Adlai Stevenson took to the podium and began his first formal speech as U.S. representative to the United Nations. When Stevenson declared his support for U.N. secretary general Dag Hammarskjöld, the man responsible for Lumumba's protection, the session quickly went south.⁸²

As Stevenson glibly announced US support for the man who many African and African Americans saw as complicit in the murder of Lumumba, a member of OGFF rose from her seat in the gallery in protest. Any intentions that CAWAH had of staging a peaceful protest were thwarted when the gallery quickly erupted as security guards "rushed" at the woman and protestors lashed out at the Council with cries of "Killers!" and "Murderers!" As the crowd chanted "Lumumba! Lumumba!" in unison, the chamber doors swung open and the throngs of activists who had been waiting outside rushed in, "bowling over" guards and shutting down the council session.⁸³ Bedlam roared in the chamber as a wave of guards swept in to clear the room while protestors inside tussled with guards and white bystanders. Carlos Moore, an Afro-Cuban nationalist well known in the streets of Harlem, jumped on the back of a white man and brought him to the ground, while Maya Angelou

⁸¹ "Riot in Gallery Halts U.N. Debate," *New York Times*, February 16, 1961; Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour*, 38-42; Tinson, *Radical Intellect*, 17-18; Williams, *Concrete Demands*, 70.

⁸² Tinson, *Radical Intellect*, 17-18.

⁸³ "Riot in Gallery Halts U.N. Debate," *New York Times*, February 16, 1961; Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 38-42; Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman*, 182-187.

watched as a “stout black woman” grabbed another white man by the jacket and “shook him like a dishrag.”⁸⁴ OGFF leader Calvin Hicks was dragged from the gallery by a group of guards, as a photographer snapped a picture that landed on the front cover of the next day’s edition of the *New York Times*.

Though Angelou did not identify this woman by name in her autobiography, it is possible that she was describing Mae Mallory, who had been involved in coordinating the protests and had made her way inside the chambers that morning.⁸⁵ Despite having previously organized picket lines and similar demonstrations in New York, Mallory rarely participated in nonviolent direct action herself. “I couldn’t follow any discipline of non-violent demonstration,” Mallory later said, “so I never bothered to go out on any of the picket lines or anything.”⁸⁶ Described as “a very physical woman, a block of granite” by Conrad Lynn, a notable New York civil rights activist-attorney who had represented Robert F. Williams, Mallory did not take kindly to being accosted by guards inside the U.N. When a guard grabbed her as she pushed her way into the chambers, Mallory swiftly took

⁸⁴ Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman*, 187.

⁸⁵ Tinson, *Radical Intellect*, 18. Tinson’s claim that Mallory “influenced the protest from the beginning” is not contradictory to Angelou’s account of the leading role that CAWAH played in instigating and orchestrating the demonstrations. It is likely that Mallory heard the news of Lumumba’s assassination at, or shortly after, the rally in Harlem Square and quickly mobilized members of The Crusaders to participate in cooperation with organizers within her network, which included OGFF, HWG, OYM, and LCA.

⁸⁶ Mae Mallory interview with Malaika Lumumba, February 27, 1970.

off her shoe and “cracked his head with my shoe heel. Then I wrapped my fist in the necktie of another guard.”⁸⁷

As protestors and bystanders alike surged out of room to escape the brawl and influx of security guards, the conflict spilled out onto the sidewalk, where the thousands of protestors who had not been able to enter the building became enlivened by the news that a “riot” had taken place inside. Though the crowd wanted “an extravagant disorder,” as Maya Angelou remembered, the police on the scene “yearned for vindication.”⁸⁸ From the steps of the building, a group of officers looked down on the crowd, “their eyes glittering” before charging at Mae Mallory, Calvin Hicks, and LeRoi Jones (Baraka) who were now marching on the sidewalk. “They attacked us, clubs flying,” Baraka later recalled.⁸⁹ Once again, Mallory capably demonstrated her right to self-defense. “Mae put up a terrific battle,” Baraka continued, “the police were sorry they ever put their hands on her. It took several of them to subdue her.”⁹⁰ According to Conrad Lynn, Mallory “took two policemen and cracked their heads together and knocked them unconscious.”⁹¹

Though Baraka and Mallory were forcefully stuffed into a paddy wagon and several security guards were left injured inside the building, the protests continued

⁸⁷ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 237.

⁸⁸ Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman*, 187-88.

⁸⁹ Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman*, 188; Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 267-68.

⁹⁰ Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 268.

⁹¹ Conrad Lynn, *There Is A Fountain: The Autobiography of Conrad Lynn* (Brooklyn: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993), 163.

throughout the day on the west side of 1st Avenue between 42nd and 43rd Streets. As the afternoon wore on, crowds shepherded by various nationalist and leftist groups braved the cold and a zealous mounted police force to bring their protests to the Belgian Consulate and to Times Square before regrouping in Harlem for a rally later that evening.

At the end of the day, Lumumba remained in his grave and the raucous demonstrators at the UN were no closer to bringing to justice those responsible for the African leader's assassination. To be fair, few expected from the outset that the protests would yield these types of results, and many had merely sought a vehicle for channeling their anger and demonstrating their opposition to global white supremacy through direct action. If there was an element of catharsis in the protest, however, it was a useful byproduct of an organized action that marked a watershed moment in Black Freedom Struggles in the city. Not only did the protestors shed light on the destructive potential of the active political fault lines that ran between Black communities and white-dominated power structures on an international stage; they also revealed the rapidly expanding gulf between mainstream, middle-class civil rights organizations which were presumed to represent Black communities, and the radical activists and grassroots organizations that were once again proving more capable of playing that role. "Harlem was in commotion," Angelou testified, "and the rage was beyond the control of the NAACP, the SCLC or the Urban League."⁹²

⁹² Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman*, 196.

The heated debates that helped carve these divisions played out in newspaper coverage of the demonstrations in the following days and weeks. Hinging fundamentally on conflicting analyses of local, national, and global white supremacy and what means constituted acceptable Black responses, radical intellectuals including James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry challenged the typical narratives spun by white commenters and moderate Black “leaders.” Columns in the *New York Times* described the protests as “disgraceful” and chided the “race consciousness” of Black nationalism as “an enemy of democracy.”⁹³ NYPD commissioner Stephen Kennedy once again set his sights on Malcolm X, who he claimed was the chief instigator of the whole ordeal. In Washington, the *New York Times* reported, US officials characteristically blamed “Communist agitators” for fomenting pro-Lumumba sentiments and orchestrating unrest, while President Kennedy affirmed his support for the UN and alluded to Soviet involvement in the Congo.⁹⁴

Joining the papers and politicians in their condemnation of the UN protestors were City Councilman Earl Brown and head of the National Urban League Lester Granger. Caping for the white power structure and moderate Black leadership, Brown decried the “disgraceful,” Communist-backed protestors, while Granger described in his *Amsterdam News* column the “sick shame” he felt while “screaming men and women milled around the U.N. venting their ignorant frustrations or

⁹³ “The Hoodlums,” *New York Times*, February 16, 1961; “Harlem ‘Nationalism,’” *New York Times*, March 5, 1961.

⁹⁴ “Riot in Gallery Halts U.N. Debate,” *New York Times*, February 16, 1961.

malicious anger.”⁹⁵ United Nations Under Secretary Dr. Ralph Bunche went so far as to apologize for the behavior of his “duped” and “misled” fellow citizens. The conduct of the protestors, Dr. Bunche assured his colleagues, “was in no way representative of the American Negro’s.”⁹⁶

Over the next several weeks, however, Baldwin and Hansberry took turns assuring readers of the *New York Times* that the conduct of the demonstrators at the UN was a much more authentic representation of the climate in Black America than Dr. Bunche professed in his condemnation. In a lengthy article titled “A Negro Assays the Negro Mood,” Baldwin swiftly rebuked the accounts of white pundits and “prominent Negroes” who blamed Communist infiltration for the disruptive protests and used his platform to draw attention to the domestic issues which fueled the vigor of the demonstration. “What I find appalling—and really dangerous,” Baldwin opined, “is the American assumption that the Negro is so contented with his lot here that only the cynical agents of a foreign power can rouse him to protest.” Baldwin characteristically challenged white readers to look introspectively at their society which denied any semblance of agency to their Black compatriots, while also calling attention to the complicity of northern white liberals for their gradualist mentality toward Black equality. At bottom, Baldwin argued, the UN demonstrations sent a clear message to white America. “Any effort, from here on out, to keep the Negro in

⁹⁵ “Negroes Picket U.N. Without Riots,” *Washington Post*, February 17, 1961; Lester Granger, “Manhattan and Beyond,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 25, 1961.

⁹⁶ “Bunche Deplores Riot By Negroes in Council,” *New York Times*, February 18, 1961.

his 'place," he warned, "can only have the most extreme and unlucky repercussions."⁹⁷

In her letter to the editor of the *New York Times* two weeks later, Hansberry piggybacked on Baldwin's assessment of African American identification with African liberation struggles, calling for Pan-African unity and placing the blame for Lumumba's assassination squarely on Euro-American imperialism. A gifted young playwright who had enjoyed international acclaim following her landmark Broadway debut of *A Raisin in the Sun* two years prior, Hansberry pulled no punches when it came to her rebuke of Dr. Bunche. Whereas Baldwin alluded to the remarks of the UN Under Secretary, Hansberry called him out by name and challenged his assumed right to speak on behalf of African Americans. "As so many of us were shocked and outraged at reports of Dr. Ralph Bunche's 'apologies' for the demonstrators," she wrote, "we were also curious as to his *mandate* from our people to do so." If Hansberry's condemnation of the leadership role assumed by, or bestowed upon, Bunche and others of his ilk were not clear enough, she concluded her letter with an apology to Pauline Lumumba and the Congolese people for Bunche's remark.⁹⁸ Through this apology, Hansberry not only disavowed the leadership of moderate male "leaders," but also claimed such a role for herself and the masses of disaffected African Americans who were more capable of authentically representing their own interests and analyses.

⁹⁷ James Baldwin, "A Negro Assays the Negro Mood," *New York Times*, March 12, 1961.

⁹⁸ Lorraine Hansberry, "Congolese Patriot," *New York Times*, March 26, 1961.

While the mainstream media and various levels of government explained away the explosive political significance of the UN demonstrations, activists in Harlem mobilized the sentiments expressed by Baldwin and Hansberry and calculated their next steps for channeling this momentum into sustained, organized action. Most organizers recognized, as Baldwin had in his *New York Times* article, that the mass participation and explosive nature of the protests had as much to do with the assassination of Lumumba as they did with the socio-economic conditions in Harlem created by systemic racism. Drawing inspiration from the protest, HWG members Calvin Hicks and Sarah Wright expanded their organizing efforts for their nascent organization On Guard For Freedom. As a member of both OYM and OGFF, Hicks managed to orchestrate a merger of the groups to strengthen the coalitions formed over the demonstrations. Like Jones (Baraka), Hicks urged downtown Black artists to engage in organized struggle and understand the vital links between art and politics. Through OGFF, which operated out of Harlem, “downtown black bohemians” were brought together with uptown artists with roots in the older leftist movements in Harlem.⁹⁹

Dan Watts, a former architect turned journalist, effectively used the furor over the protests to formally announce the formation of the Liberation Committee for Africa (LCA), which had been organized the previous year. The radical Pan-Africanist organization, Tinson notes, “distinguished itself from the Civil Rights establishment” through its critiques of gradualism, demands for “immediate liberation,” and embrace of the activism of more militant leaders like Rob Williams,

⁹⁹ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 119.

Malcolm X, and Mae Mallory.¹⁰⁰ In the wake of the UN demonstrations, the LCA carved out a major role in the production and dissemination of leftist and nationalist political thought and analysis through its literary organ, *Liberator*. Through the monthly magazine, Watts, editor Lowell “Pete” Beveridge, and a cadre of intellectuals, artists, and writers, exposed and opposed global white supremacy and analyzed domestic and international struggles for self-determination. In the following years, the writings of this talented collective of writers, many of whom would influence the emergence of the Black Arts and Black Power movements in the years to come, would play a formative part in promoting and shaping a popular radical political consciousness in New York City and beyond.¹⁰¹

For Harlem historian John Henrik Clarke, the UN demonstrations marked the emergence of a new era in African American freedom struggles. Indeed, the protests had brought together a coalition of Black leftist and nationalist groups in New York, which Smethurst notes, “had not been seen for years, if ever.”¹⁰² This was a powerful manifestation, given the often-contentious sectarian disputes between nationalist and leftist groups in Harlem that often precluded cooperative action. In an article in *Freedomways* that fall, Clarke declared that this formative moment signaled the arrival of “the new Afro-American Nationalism.” Though incubated for decades in Harlem, the New Afro-American Nationalism had been rekindled by the

¹⁰⁰ Christopher M. Tinson, “The Voice of the Black Protest Movement:’ Notes on the *Liberator* Magazine and Black Radicalism in the Early 1960s,” *Black Scholar* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2008), 3-4.

¹⁰¹ Tinson, *Radical Intellect*, 20.

¹⁰² Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 118.

“international lynching of a black man on the altar of colonialism and white supremacy” when the collective wounds from the murders of Emmett Till and Mack Parker were still fresh.¹⁰³

Fostered by the grassroots efforts of various organizations, including the NOI, UANM, CAWAH, LCA, and OGFF, the New Afro-American Nationalism was characterized by a collective identification with Pan-African anticolonial liberation struggles, an appreciation of cultural heritage, demands for self-determination, and a rejection of bourgeois leadership and integration as a panacea for American apartheid. Clarke understood this resurgent political consciousness to be an inherently proletarian movement against internal colonialism; a movement to achieve national and personal liberation through the efforts of independent, indigenous leadership. “In taking this historical step,” Clarke prophesized, “they have turned away from a leadership that was begging and pleading to a more dynamic leadership that is insisting and demanding.” Though the coalition of leftist and nationalist organizations that comprised the UN demonstrations may have sounded the clarion call of this new consciousness, one of its key progenitors had abstained from involvement.

“The one that is most feared by white people”: The Resistance and Repression of Malcolm X

A few days after the watershed protests at the United Nations, Maya Angelou and Rosa Guy visited Malcolm X at the Nation of Islam’s restaurant on 116th Street in Harlem. Having witnessed the explosive anger over racial injustice swelling in

¹⁰³ John Henrik Clarke, “The New Afro-American Nationalism,” 285.

Harlem, the two young writers feared that such fury would turn inward on the community if not channeled into organized progressive action. Almost immediately, Angelou and Guy decided to consult the Nation of Islam for guidance on the matter. "With their exquisite discipline and their absolute stand on black-white relations," Angelou wrote, the Nation would surely "know how to control and use the ferment in Harlem."¹⁰⁴ It was their first time meeting Malcolm X and Angelou was immediately struck by the minister's radiant aura and "masculine force." The two women explained their involvement in the protest over tea, seeking Malcolm X's counsel on how they should proceed.

The response they received, however, was not what either had expected. "You were wrong in your direction," Malcolm X stated bluntly. He conceded that the people of Harlem were rightfully enraged, but advised that "going to the United Nations, shouting and carrying placards will not win freedom for anyone, nor will it keep the white devils from killing another African leader. Or a black American leader."¹⁰⁵ Restraining her frustration with Malcolm's response, Guy pushed him to explain what, then, should be done. After briefly reciting aspects of the Nation's theology and Elijah Muhammad's stance on noninvolvement with demonstrations and rejection of integration, Malcolm offered a degree of support. He would not ask the people of Harlem to march or to confront violent white authorities, but he also would not deny the validity of the protests and vowed to make a statement of veiled support. "I will say that yesterday's demonstration is symbolic of the anger in this

¹⁰⁴ Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman*, 196.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 198.

country,” Angelou recalled Malcolm saying, “That black people are saying they...will not always allow whites to spit on them at lunch counters in order to eat hot dogs and drink Coca-Cola.”¹⁰⁶

Though Angelou and Guy left the restaurant feeling defeated, Malcolm kept his word. When the mainstream press and moderate leaders lambasted the “riots” at the UN, as he had predicted at the restaurant, it was not Angelou nor Guy who bore the brunt of the media backlash, but Malcolm and the Nation of Islam. In the media firestorm of fingerpointing and scapegoating that implicated Communists and Black nationalists, the “Black Muslims” were frequently targeted as the key instigators of the most recent racial unrest in New York City. After a briefing with NYPD commissioner Stephen Kennedy and deputy commissioner Walter Arm, Adlai Stevenson singled out the “Black Muslims” as having been responsible for the disorder during his speech at the UN. Kennedy was reported to have described the NOI as “a fanatic Negro national cult, which is one of the most dangerous gangs in the city,” adding that the NYPD had been actively investigating the group for the past few years.¹⁰⁷

In a national wave of fear mongering, news columns like the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, picked up where Kennedy left off, describing the Nation of Islam as “the most sinister of all Negro cults in the United States.”¹⁰⁸ The *Washington Post*

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 198-200.

¹⁰⁷ “Muslims to Sue Adlai Stevenson,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 25, 1961.

explained to their readers in no uncertain terms that members of the Nation of Islam were “being conditioned and trained for the ‘War of Armageddon’ when the blacks—as they refer to themselves—will kill the whites.”¹⁰⁹ While insisting that the Nation of Islam abstained from any local, national, or international political involvement, and therefore, should not be implicated in the fallout from the protests, Malcolm X refused to condemn the demonstrators at the United Nations. “I am not Moise Tshombe,” he told inquiring reporters, “and I will permit no one to use me against the nationalists.”¹¹⁰ Though his active support for the demonstrations was constrained by Muhammad’s conservative political doctrine, Malcolm supported them in spirit and offered the limited support that he was afforded in his capacity as a minister of the Nation of Islam.

Despite their lack of involvement in political action during the UN protests, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam were fundamentally a part of, and making undeniable contributions to, the surging militancy of Black freedom struggles in New York City. That Malcolm X was the first person the initiators turned to for advice in the wake of the protest is telling of his increasingly prominent role within Harlem’s convoluted radical milieu—an often contentious terrain that he had taken initial steps toward bringing a degree of unity to months earlier.

¹⁰⁸ Jack Fox, “What Was Behind Riot at UN?,” *New Journal and Guide*, March 4, 1961.

¹⁰⁹ George E. Sokolsky, “These Days: The Nation of Islam,” *The Washington Post*, February 25, 1961.

¹¹⁰ “Muslim Vows He’ll Sue N.Y. Papers, Adlai Stevenson,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 4, 1961.

To Mae Mallory, the treatment that the NOI and various nationalist groups received from the news media and government officials was meant to drive a wedge between the working coalition present at the UN that February. “The attempt on the part of the White Supremacists to split the Muslim Afro American from the non Muslim Afro American is doomed to failure because their (sic.) is one thing that we have in common that supersedes other differences,” Mallory warned, “and that is a desire to rid ourselves of White Domination and exploitation.” In her response to the misrepresentations of the protests in the mainstream media, Mallory echoed Malcolm’s earlier calls for a Black united front that reached across borders, oceans, and ideologies. The death of Lumumba signaled to Mallory “that the price of division is death and defeat for Black people” and that only a united front could “ensure us of complete victory and liberation from the white exploiters.”¹¹¹ It was this type of demonstrable influence on political thought and praxis that the Nation and its powerful Harlem minister wielded that led John Henrik Clarke to describe their movement as “the most dynamic force for protest and change in the United States” a few months later.

Of all the groups comprising the New Afro-American Nationalism in Harlem, the frequent attacks upon the Nation of Islam from mainstream media outlets and government officials demonstrated that the NOI had quickly become “the one that is

¹¹¹ Letter from Mae Mallory to Sir, February 1961, Box 2, Folder 10, Mallory Papers. If the similarities in their analyses were coincidental, Mallory’s later writings leave little doubt about the influence that Malcolm X had upon her political development and political analysis.

most feared by white people.”¹¹² This white fear was explicit in the increasingly repressive tactics employed by the NYPD in the four years since the beating of Johnson X to check the rapid growth of the Nation with heightened surveillance and counterintelligence programs. “We were watched. Our telephones were tapped,” Malcolm X later told Alex Haley. “When I was speaking publicly sometimes I’d guess which were FBI faces in the audience...the police and the FBI intently and persistently visited and questioned us.”¹¹³ Although the NYPD and FBI had kept a watchful eye on the NOI since the early 1950s, the tense standoff outside the 28th Precinct in 1957 had created a sense of urgency to curb the growing power of its Harlem minister. “He was regarded mostly as a rabble-rouser among white police,” Detective William DeFossett recalled, “a source or possibility for trouble.”¹¹⁴

In their efforts to keep pace with the growing militancy that the NOI so clearly embodied, the NYPD employed two primary tactics. First, as they had after the 1959 “near riot,” the department made nominal efforts to improve police-community relations through the use of precinct councils and police liaisons to improve communication and trust between the NYPD and Harlem community.¹¹⁵ DeFossett, a Black detective in the BOSS unit who had grown up in Harlem, acted as

¹¹² Clarke, “The New Afro-American Nationalism,” 286-87.

¹¹³ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as told to Alex Haley* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 257-58.

¹¹⁴ Interview with William DeFossett, June 23, 1992, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.

¹¹⁵ Malcolm X actually served as a member of the 28th Precinct Council along with James Hicks, James Lawson, and several others notable Harlem residents.

liaison between the NYPD and the NOI. "I was no secret to the Nation of Islam," DeFossett recalled. "They knew who I was, they knew where I lived, they knew all about me...it wasn't a secret operation. It wasn't cloak and dagger."¹¹⁶ Though DeFossett downplayed in his oral history the NYPD's interest in the Nation of Islam as a matter of keeping peace and maintaining order, the records of the Bureau of Special Services bear a much different story.

In addition to the use of precinct councils and community liaisons, the NYPD also employed secretive surveillance tactics to keep a watchful eye on the NOI and other civil rights and nationalist groups. "I had heard that there were all kinds of means used to infiltrate the Muslims," former deputy commissioner Robert Mangum recalled, "they used every means they could to acquire as much information as they could about the Muslim movement."¹¹⁷ Scattered amongst the crowd at nearly every meeting or rally the NOI held in Harlem in the late 1950s and early 1960s were a handful of plainclothes detectives from the Bureau of Special Services (BOSS), the NYPD's counterintelligence squad that targeted individuals and organizations deemed "subversive." At the Harlem Freedom Rally, for example, BOSS sent six undercover detectives to observe, record, and report on the speeches made and people in attendance.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Interview with William DeFossett, June 23, 1992.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Robert Mangum, June 23, 1992, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.

¹¹⁸ Marable, *Malcolm X*, 170.

At dozens of other meetings, BOSS detectives would stake out down the block, jotting down license plate numbers of vehicles carrying passengers to NOI gatherings. Detectives then cross-checked these license plate numbers with vehicle registrations and conducted background checks on the owners of the vehicles, often soliciting support from neighboring states. Through this type of indiscriminately invasive surveillance, local people were unwittingly caught in a national dragnet cast by agents charged with protecting the interests of the white State. Rather than keeping peace and maintaining order, as DeFossett contended, BOSS engaged in a concerted effort to suppress dissent in the city through the active surveillance of a wide range of individuals and organizations that sought to upset the racial, economic, or social status quo.

The counterintelligence programs that BOSS waged against the NOI and others in New York City were part of a national surveillance network of local and federal law enforcement agencies aimed at infiltrating, disrupting, discrediting, and dismantling groups involved in the Black Freedom Struggle. As the counterintelligence agency of the nation's largest city, BOSS played a major role in shaping this national network through sharing information and strategies with other municipalities and federal agencies. In an August 1961 memo to the Chief of Police in Portland, Oregon, BOSS commander Sanford Garelick laid bare the unit's confidential counterintelligence methods used against the NOI: "Infiltration of the organization's ranks; Direct contact with the organization leaders by Negro police officers; Close cooperation and exchange of data with Federal and State

investigative agencies; Intensive investigation and constant surveillance of the members and activities of the members of the cult.”¹¹⁹

In addition to the national surveillance campaign BOSS was contributing to, the House Un-American Activities Committee announced shortly after the UN protests that it would conduct investigations into the activities of Pan-African, Muslim, and Black nationalist groups in an attempt to prove communist infiltration, as they had tried the previous year with Jesse Gray. Though critical of the NOI and other nationalist organizations, the inherent contradictions of these inquisitions were glaring to the editors of the Baltimore *Afro-American*. “We are unable to share the committee’s alarm over the activities of the black supremacists as long as the Congressional red hunters hear and see no evil in the subversive practices of the white supremacists.”¹²⁰ As white violence continued unabated throughout the South and images of white barbarism against peaceful sit-ins flashed steadily across television screens, many Black communities, if not fully supportive of the NOI, fully understood the inherent hypocrisy of law enforcement targeting Black freedom fighters.

Though Malcolm actively disassociated the NOI from explicit political involvement amidst the whirlwind of abuse from the media and law enforcement, he nonetheless utilized the elevated platform the protests provided to expound his positions on Black nationalism, the Civil Rights Movement, and Pan-African

¹¹⁹ Memo from Sanford D. Garelick to Commanding Officer, August 7, 1961, BOSS Records.

¹²⁰ “We’re Not Alarmed,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, March 25, 1961.

liberation struggles. At a debate sponsored by the NAACP Youth Council at City College the following month, Malcolm X again denounced integration as a solution to American racism and called for reparations in the form of land for a separate Black nation. "All over the world," Malcolm told the crowd of 300, "dark people are rejecting integration with their former oppressors."¹²¹ If Malcolm was unable, or unwilling, to provide organizational support for Angelou and Guy in the wake of the UN demonstrations, he left little doubt that he stood in solidarity with their Pan-African analysis and shared this perspective with crowds by the hundreds and thousands that spring. Reflecting the surging militancy in Harlem that the UN protests very clearly illustrated, Malcolm bluntly explained to the crowd "it'll take more than a cup of tea in a white restaurant to make us happy."

Though Malcolm's outright rejection of integration had substantial backing in Harlem, it remained a primary objective of national civil rights organizations. This national primacy placed upon direct action to achieve integration was on full display three days later, when CORE national director James Farmer issued a call for Freedom Riders to test the federal government's resolve in enforcing the Supreme Court's ruling against segregation in interstate travel in *Morgan v. Virginia* fifteen years earlier.

As the Freedom Riders prepared for their journey through the south in the early spring, with a handful departing from New York City, Malcolm was touring the nation during a wave of speaking tours on college campuses. After besting historian

¹²¹ "In City College Debate: Muslims' Malcolm X and NAACP's Wright Clash," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, March 11, 1961.

and presidential advisor Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. during an impromptu exchange at Atlanta University earlier that year, Malcolm X embarked on a national campaign of public lectures and debates to face the NOI's critics and elevate their theology through the spotlight the events provided.¹²² A week after the NAACP debate at CCNY, Malcolm traveled up to his old stomping grounds for a public forum at the Harvard Law School. In his address, Malcolm denounced the folly of "token integration" while explaining the growing impatience of the Black masses for anything short of sweeping, systemic change. "There is no such thing as a second class citizen," Malcolm declared after citing the violent white objections to demands for educational equality, "we are full citizens or we are not citizens at all."¹²³

Among those in attendance at the forum were Louis X, the minister of Boston's Temple No. 11, and William Strickland, a Marine Corps veteran and student at Harvard. A native of Roxbury and former member of the NAACP Youth Council, Strickland had known both Malcolm Little (Malcolm X) and Louis Eugene Walcott (Louis X) from around the neighborhood growing up. Immediately drawn to Malcolm's rhetoric and analysis, Strickland used their shared Roxbury connections to re-introduce himself after the event. The meeting marked the beginning of a lifelong friendship that profoundly shaped Strickland's political development. While finishing his degree, Strickland frequented Temple No. 11 and arranged for Malcolm X to speak on Harvard's radio station when he was in town. When travelling to New York City on school recess, he would stop into the NOI's restaurant on 116th Street

¹²² Marable, *Malcolm X*, 184-85.

¹²³ Lomax, *When The Word Is Given*, 123-126.

to see if Malcolm was around. “Though I never joined the Nation, it was Malcolm’s political perspective that I imbibed,” Strickland remembers, “because in the same way that Karl Marx is the fundamental critic of capitalism and Frantz Fanon is the fundamental critic of colonialism, Malcolm X is the fundamental critic of American racism.”¹²⁴ Malcolm had even prophesied the kind of profound personal impact that Strickland experienced during his speech at Harvard. “The same Negro students you are turning out today,” Malcolm X predicted, “will soon be demanding the same things you now hear being demanded by Mr. Muhammad and the Black Muslims.”¹²⁵ By the end of 1963, the Roxbury connection that Malcolm X and Strickland shared would come to influence the course of grassroots struggles for rights and power in Harlem when Strickland became national director of the Northern Student Movement that fall.

The explosive demonstrations at the UN in the beginning of 1961 had clearly shaped the landscape of struggles for rights and power in New York City. Though not physically involved, Malcolm and the NOI had tilled the ground from which such radical analyses and actions had begun to sprout. In turn, the ever-expanding focus on the NOI in the wake of the UN “riots” provided Malcolm with an elevated platform in Harlem and throughout the Nation from which to awaken the masses with his forceful deconstruction of white supremacy and compelling advocacy of

¹²⁴ William L. (Bill) Strickland, “Remembering Malcolm: A Personal Critique of Manning Marable’s Non-Definitive Biography of Malcolm X,” in *A Lie of Reinvention: Correcting Manning Marable’s Malcolm X*, eds. Jared A. Ball and Todd Steven Burroughs (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2012), 81-83.

¹²⁵ Louis Lomax, *When the Word is Given*, 126.

self-determination, self-defense, and Black nationalism. Despite the increasingly suppressive actions of local and federal “law enforcement” agencies and the theological restrictions from Elijah Muhammad that hamstrung Malcolm’s political activism, he was nonetheless fundamentally impacting local, national, and global freedom struggles throughout the year of 1961.

Furthermore, along with inspiring a new generation of militant activists and intellectuals at the grassroots, the popularity of Malcolm’s analysis was also pushing Muhammad to toe the line of political advocacy. Speaking to the thousands gathered at Harlem’s 369th Infantry Armory that August, Muhammad declared “Harlem should elect its own leaders and should not accept the leaders set up for them by the white man.” Though still adamant about precluding the NOI from active political involvement, surging demands for self-determination in Harlem forced Muhammad to concede to the collective mood. “We must elect our leaders and if they do not do right,” Muhammad warned, “we should cut their heads off.”¹²⁶ Though Muhammad’s analysis was couched in demands for a separate Black nation, Malcolm had nonetheless succeeded in nominally sliding the scale of the NOI’s involvement. It would not be long, however, before Malcolm would no longer be willing to accept the continued constraints on his political involvement.

“Unleashing this Black power”: Self-Defense and Self-Determination in Harlem

On a personal level, the demonstrations at the UN proved to have a galvanizing influence upon Mae Mallory’s political development. Though she had long claimed the right to self-defense dating back to her childhood in Macon and had

¹²⁶ Marable, *Malcolm X*, 192.

actively organized in support of the Williams' armed struggle in Monroe, Mallory's analysis of the centrality of armed struggle in service of Black liberation evolved in the months immediately following her clash with police outside the United Nations building.¹²⁷ In a little over a year's time, Mallory had gone from fighting City Hall for educational equality in Harlem to openly advocating armed revolutionary struggle in the United States and throughout the African Diaspora.

Mallory's personal experiences in challenging the dominant white power structure in New York City and her association with an emerging network of revolutionary organizations operating out of Harlem can help account for her radical political development during this period.¹²⁸ In her writings, Mallory had laid bare her critiques of the oppressive powers of the State following her earlier arrest for welfare fraud and the contradictions she observed during Castro's visit. Following the UN demonstration, however, her analysis had evolved from a condemnation of the white power structure to an advocacy of its destruction. In a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* on behalf of Crusaders for Freedom, On Guard, and Black Liberation Movement shortly after the demonstration, Mallory

¹²⁷ Though Mallory does not appear to have mentioned the outcomes of her altercation with the NYPD outside the U.N. in her correspondence or oral history interviews, Conrad Lynn stated in his autobiography that Mallory was arrested and charged with assault. "I represented her against the assault charge and we won," Lynn claimed, "The police were to embarrassed to admit what a woman had done to them, and their case fell apart." Lynn, *There Is A Fountain*, 163.

¹²⁸ In his autobiography, Baraka states that Mallory was a member of On Guard. Though her records do not indicate any formal association with OGFF, it is evident that she worked in close cooperation with the group, as evidence by a joint letter she wrote on behalf of Crusaders for Freedom, On Guard, and Black Liberation Movement. Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 267; Letter from Mae Mallory to Sir, February 1961, Box 2, Folder 10, Mallory Papers.

stated in no uncertain terms that not only did the Crusaders call for “death to the murders of Patrice Lumumba,” but that they would henceforth “dedicate ourselves to the task of unleashing this Black power until the world is rid of White domination and exploitation.”¹²⁹

The organizing activities that Mallory dedicated herself to in the following weeks and months demonstrated that this was no hollow threat, but rhetoric that she was prepared to back up with action. After JFK’s failed attempt at overthrowing Castro during the Bay of Pigs invasion two months later, Mallory joined a national group of militant Black leaders in issuing a manifesto warning the Kennedy administration that any attempt to overthrow the Cuban government would be met with an armed struggle in the US.¹³⁰ Though Mallory’s politics were clearly within the vein of international revolutionary struggle, her organizing on the ground in Harlem continued to revolve mainly around supporting the armed struggle in Monroe. Mallory’s intentions in her support of Williams were clear. Her immediate interest, of course, was to aid the armed struggle in Monroe as a means of protecting and liberating Black communities from racial, economic, and sexual terrorism. At

¹²⁹ Letter from Mae Mallory to Sir, February 1961, Box 2, Folder 10, Mallory Papers.

¹³⁰ This group included the likes of Conrad Lynn, James Boggs, John Henrik Clarke, Julian Mayfield, William Worthy, Ossie Davis, Ora Mobley, and Calvin Hicks. Lynn, *There Is A Fountain*, 171. Although the manifesto was largely ignored by the media, and consequently the federal government, Mayfield argued that “it was a significant straw in the winds of change sweeping the earth, a warning that some Americans of African descent are prepared to lock arms with combatants against racism everywhere, even those who do not enjoy the approval of our State Department.” Julian Mayfield, “The Cuban Challenge,” *Freedomways* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1961): 189.

the same time, Mallory hoped that her efforts in Monroe would inspire a more widespread embrace of self-defense and armed resistance. “Remember the school struggle started with just one then nine,” Mallory wrote to a friend, “perhaps the idea of self-defense will bear fruit the same as the idea of the school boycott.”¹³¹ As proven by the “near riot” in 1959 and more recently at the UN, Harlem was fertile territory for Mallory’s analyses, and throughout the spring and summer of 1961 she and the Crusaders organized rallies and events to raise consciousness and support for armed struggles in the South.

Mallory’s organizing in this period was representative of not only a widespread embrace of militancy in Harlem, but also a widening gap between moderate, middle-class civil rights organizations and poor and working-class Black communities. In May, the Crusaders held a mass rally in Harlem Square to protest “southern injustice and brutality” and criticize the ineffective responses of “so-called leaders” in the face of unabated racial terror. The Crusaders circulated leaflets throughout Harlem ahead of the event, referring to the 2nd Amendment as the “first condition for our freedom” and inviting the community to join in the hanging in effigy of Alabama Governor John Patterson.¹³² Earlier that month, the Crusaders led local people in shutting down an NAACP rally in Harlem Square, featuring Roy Wilkins, Daisy Bates, Manhattan Borough President Edward Dudley, and others, for refusing to allow Rob Williams to speak. The majority of the 3,000 in attendance,

¹³¹ Letter from Mae Mallory to Jeanne, June 23, 1963, Box 1, Folder 2, Mallory Papers.

¹³² “How Long Will We Turn The Other Cheek?,” Box 2, Folder 10, Mallory Papers.

some carrying placards of Patrice Lumumba, shouted down speaker after speaker—even throwing eggs at Roy Wilkins—until the NAACP leaders conceded their demands to hear Williams. The militant leader was met with a thunderous applause as he denounced the “Uncle Tom” leadership of the NAACP and urged Black communities to defend themselves.¹³³ In other leaflets that spring, the Crusaders cited the unpunished murders of Emmett Till and Mack Parker as evidence that “passive resistance is a fraud,” while referring to Martin Luther King, Jr. as a “phoney” and a “passive handkerchief head.”

The militant rhetoric of the Crusaders in condemning moderate civil rights leadership and its enthusiastic reception in Harlem that spring is illustrative of the disillusionment with gradualist programs and leaders that was flourishing at the grassroots. This power struggle within the Black freedom struggle in Harlem drew national attention and contributed to a broader shift toward localized leadership and self-determination—hallmarks of Ella Baker’s leadership in New York City and with SNCC. Writing to congratulate Mae Mallory on shutting down the NAACP rally, Clark Atlanta University professor Dr. Lonnie Cross (Abdulalim A. Shabazz) declared, “the rout of the NAACP in Harlem...proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that the NAACP and the whole of the black bourgeoisie do not speak for the black masses. They never did. They simply filled the void of the absence of the masses’ own chosen leadership.”¹³⁴ Cross, an active supporter of Williams and The

¹³³ Crusaders For Freedom, “Militant Mass Protest Causes NAACP To Abandon Rally And Turn It Over To Robert Williams!,” May 17, 1961, Box 2, Folder 10, Mallory Papers.

Crusaders who would join the Atlanta Temple of the Nation of Islam by the year's end, understood self-determination for poor and working-class Black communities within freedom struggles as a pre-requisite for achieving liberatory societal transformation. For Mallory and many Harlem residents, the adherence of mainstream civil rights organizations to nonviolence in the face of unabated racial terrorism demonstrated that the NAACP and SCLC were out of touch with the realities of their lives and incapable of effectively advocating for rights and power on their behalf. Furthermore, the successes that Mallory and The Crusaders had in mobilizing thousands of local people demonstrated that self-defense was an issue that Harlem residents could be effectively organized around.

The escalation of white terrorism that summer in Monroe solidified for Mallory and other supporters of Williams in Harlem the impotence of nonviolent resistance and the need for greater involvement in the armed struggle in the South. Furthermore, these organizing efforts led Harlem intellectuals and activists to an increased militancy in their analyses of white supremacy and liberation struggles. By June, members of OGFF, OYM, the Crusaders, and HWG had formed an ad hoc coalition called the Afro-American Alliance for Action (AAAA) to coordinate efforts in active support of armed liberation struggles in Monroe and beyond. In a June meeting attended by Mallory, Williams, John Henrik Clarke, Ossie Davis, Calvin Hicks, Conrad Lynn, Julian Mayfield, and Ora Mobley, the AAAA debated the topics of "integration or separation," "methods of protest," "economic aspects of struggle,"

¹³⁴ Letter from Lonnie Cross to Mae Mallory, May 22, 1961, Box 1, Folder 1, Mallory Papers. Cross was an active supporter of Rob Williams, as well as The Crusaders for Freedom, who would join the Nation of Islam in Atlanta that year.

and “propaganda and legal problems.” The minutes of the meeting illustrate a clear concern with economic inequality as a central pillar of the Black freedom struggle, debates over the creation of a landed Black state, and a near-consensus on the position that “in forging their struggle Afro-Americans must separate themselves from whites.”¹³⁵ The influence of the post-war leftist and nationalist roots of these activists are evident here, as well as the growing influence of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, whose positions on these questions were used as a foil against which these activist-intellectuals clarified their own positions on economic inequality, racial violence, and Black nationalism. Subsequent meetings focused on how these analyses could be put into action, with an immediate interest in raising local, national, and global awareness of the struggle in Monroe and recruiting Harlem residents to become actively involved through rallies and picket lines.¹³⁶ In early July, the AAAA distributed 25,000 leaflets in Harlem that briefly described the history of Klan violence in Monroe, and extolled the successes of armed self-defense in curbing white supremacist terrorism.

The right to armed self-defense was one position that was taken for granted in the meetings of the AAAA, and raising funds for arms in Monroe remained a primary mission for the group. Mayfield and Clarke had previously made trips to Monroe to deliver weapons, but the escalation of violence that spring and summer made the task all the more pressing. “Finally in 1961 when [Williams] was under

¹³⁵ “Meeting of Afro-Americans, June 14, 1961,” Box 2, Folder 4, Mallory Papers.

¹³⁶ “Preparations for Activity for Action for Gaining Support for Rob Williams, June 29, 1961,” Box 2, Folder 4, Mallory Papers.

heavy attack by the Klan, he called and asked for financial help,” Mallory reflected, “so again, I went out and organized a rally to buy guns.”¹³⁷ The same evening that Conrad Lynn and Julian Mayfield addressed a rally at the United Mutual Auditorium in Harlem to spread the word about the situation in Monroe, Mallory and the AAAA held a meeting with the explicit purpose of raising money to purchase guns for Williams and his allies. Contributions were received from an array of individuals and organizations, including Vincent Copeland of the Marxist-oriented Workers World Party, Dan Watts of Liberation Committee for Africa and *Liberator* magazine, *Negro Digest* editor Hoyt Fuller, several members of the OYM and Socialist Workers Party, and a handful of local people from Harlem and the Lower East Side.¹³⁸ Through donations of \$12.50 per gun, the AAAA was able to collect a total of \$167.50 that evening—enough to send thirteen firearms to Monroe.¹³⁹

While the AAAA achieved some modest success in drumming up local support for the militant southern struggle, their activities also drew the eye of the FBI. If Mallory was aware of the FBI’s increasingly active surveillance programs at the time, she showed little regard for their actions when asked years later. “I didn’t hide the fact that I was raising money to buy guns for black people in the South.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Mae Mallory interview with Malaika Lumumba, February 27, 1970.

¹³⁸ Pledges for Donations from July 10, 1961 Meeting of AAAA, Box 2, Folder 3, Mallory Papers; “LCA Finances Arms for Defense of Afro Americans in Monroe, N.C.,” *Liberator* 1 (July 1961).

¹³⁹ It is worth noting that \$12.50 in 1961 is equivalent to \$102.72 at the time of this writing (December 2017), according to the CPI Inflation Calculator.

¹⁴⁰ Mae Mallory interview with Malaika Lumumba, February 27, 1970.

Like Williams in the South, Mallory refused to censor her right to self-defense in the face of governmental and extrajudicial repression. Even if Mallory had been less forward in her embrace of armed self-defense, it is doubtful that she would have been able to evade the reach of local and federal surveillance programs. The FBI had already begun keeping tabs on most of the activists in her network, including Williams, Julian Mayfield, LeRoi Jones, John Henrik Clarke, Hoyt Fuller, and John O. Killens, and had an informant in the July fundraising meeting of the AAAA.¹⁴¹ At the local level, the NYPD's Bureau of Special Services (BOSS), its counterintelligence department tasked with surveilling, infiltrating, and subverting civil rights organizations, had been keeping a watchful eye on The Crusaders and various other organizations through undercover agents and confidential informants.¹⁴² Her earlier arrest for alleged welfare fraud had provided Mallory with a first-hand lesson on the powers that law enforcement agencies wielded to suppress those who challenged the white-dominated power structure. In the month following the AAAA's Harlem rally, Mallory's education on the repressive powers of the State would continue when Rob and Mabel Williams called for reinforcements to come to Monroe.

¹⁴¹ FBI record of Julian Mayfield, "F.B. Eyes Digital Archive," Washington University Libraries.

¹⁴² Minutes of a meeting of the Crusaders for Freedom on June 10, 1961 suggest that the group may have suspected they had been infiltrated. According to the notes taken by Mallory, "Clarence Scott was present and behaved in a manner that lead us to believe that he was sent to cause dissension." "Meeting Minutes of the Crusaders for Freedom," June 10, 1961, Box 2, Folder 10, Mallory Papers.

“Yours for Freedom Now”: The Monroe Defense Committee and Harlem’s Radical Milieu

Throughout that summer, the correspondence that Mae Mallory received from Mabel and Rob Williams became increasingly alarming, warning of impending danger to Monroe’s Black community from racial terrorists. “He called me up one day and he told me that they expected an attack by the Ku Klux Klan and that he would suggest that all of the people that wanted to come down there come,” Mallory later recalled, “so Julian Mayfield and I went down.”¹⁴³ She had made it known, however, that she would not be participating on any picket lines because of her steadfast adherence to self-defense. On August 27th, Mallory was tending to business at the Williams family home as Freedom Riders and local people trickled in from a nonviolent demonstration downtown. “Some people had come in from downtown all agitated and said all hell had broken loose downtown and white folks were trying to kill the blacks,” Mallory recalled, “and people just came from nowhere, they wanted to fight, they wanted directions.”¹⁴⁴

At the urging of the local police chief, over a thousand armed and hostile whites had come in droves to forcefully suppress the protests of the Freedom Riders. As the mob attacked the peaceful demonstrators that afternoon, including SNCC leader James Forman who had his head split open by the butt of a rifle, Mayfield and the self-defense guard quickly drove to town, breaking through

¹⁴³ Mae Mallory interview with Malaika Lumumba, February 27, 1970.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 20.

blockades to whisk the protestors away from the crazed mob and police to the Williams home where hundreds of Black folks were beginning to gather.¹⁴⁵

The crowd outside the Williams house had already begun arming themselves in anticipation of a white onslaught as the sun began to set and a black car carrying a white couple came rolling down the block. Charles and Mabel Stegall were known to be members of the local Klan who had paraded through the neighborhood the previous day with a banner on their car reading “Open Season on Coons.” By this point, Mallory had come outside and, according to Tyson, was in the front of a “crowd of angry blacks” that surrounded the car and yanked the Stegalls out.¹⁴⁶

Realizing the implications of the crowd actually killing a white couple, Rob Williams brought the Stegalls into the house where Mallory brusquely kept watch of them.

As word of a hostage situation got out and circulated through the county, it appeared to Williams as though a pogrom were on the horizon as state and federal law enforcement prepared for a raid on the house. Though the Stegalls left safely under their own power, Williams was a marked man. To avoid the all but certain fate of being lynched, whether legally or extrajudicially, Williams made the decision to flee Monroe. He called Julian Mayfield who was stationed at a house across town to coordinate the escape, quickly explaining “if he didn’t leave Monroe there would be a bloodbath.” Armed with several guns, Williams stealthily led his wife, two sons,

¹⁴⁵ For more expansive narratives of the conflicts in Monroe, see Robert F. Williams, *Negroes With Guns* (New York: Marzani & Munsell, Inc, 1962), 75-110; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 262-286; James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 193-211.

¹⁴⁶ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 278.

and Mae Mallory to a designated meeting place where Mayfield was waiting in his car.¹⁴⁷ “Rob told me to get out in the event that, you know, nobody else can make it,” Mallory later recalled. “Somebody had to get out, come back to New York and tell everybody what happened.”¹⁴⁸ The five sped north out of Union County in Mayfield’s red Dodge Rambler, arriving in Harlem the next morning.

News of the situation in Monroe traveled like wildfire. By the morning, the Williams family and Mae Mallory had learned that they were wanted on kidnapping charges and acted quickly to evade southern “justice.” While the Williams family covertly made their way to Cuba as political fugitives, Mallory fled to Cleveland, Ohio to hide out with family and friends. For Mallory, going underground was not merely a means of staying out of jail, but a means of staying alive. The horrors of the southern “justice” system were well documented, and Mabel Stegall may as well have been speaking on behalf of the majority of Monroe’s white population when she told reporters a few months later that “Mae Mallory ought to be strung up and if she ever come up to Union County she might get just that.”¹⁴⁹

Over the next month, the FBI conspired with local police to dig up information on Mallory and set up a national dragnet for her capture. Federal agents in New York interrogated Mallory’s friends, family, and coworkers, and made several visits to her mother’s home, where they harassed and intimidated the elderly woman and Mallory’s daughter, Patricia. Mallory’s face circulated

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 282-3.

¹⁴⁸ Mae Mallory interview with Malaika Lumumba, February 27, 1970.

¹⁴⁹ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 280.

throughout the country on posters marked “Wanted By FBI,” describing the 34-year-old mother of two as someone with “a violent nature” who “reportedly carries a .22 caliber pistol concealed on her person.” After tapping phones lines and intercepting mail, the FBI finally got a lead in early October through their surveillance of Conrad Lynn, who had addressed a letter to Mallory in Cleveland.¹⁵⁰ Federal agents acted quickly to put the screws to members of Mallory’s extended family in Cleveland to ascertain her whereabouts, and on October 12th, agents were at the door of her cousin’s home where she was staying. “That Thursday about 25 members of the FBI came into the house with guns drawn and everything to arrest me,” Mallory recalled. At that moment, Mallory’s mind raced back to when she was a young girl in Macon and white police surrounded her aunt’s house for punching a white girl in self-defense.¹⁵¹ This time, however, the police didn’t leave and Mallory was taken to the Cuyahoga County Jail. Though she was released on bond for five months, Mallory would spend the following year in the jail fighting extradition to Monroe.

With Williams exiled in Cuba, Mallory jailed in Cleveland, and three others jailed in Monroe, a network of activists in New York City, as well as Cleveland, rallied to defend their comrades and continue their freedom struggles. Within a matter of days, newspaper advertisements in several major northern cities announced the formation of the Monroe Defense Committee (MDC). Described as a “broad, non-partisan defense committee,” by executive secretary Calvin Hicks, the

¹⁵⁰ Yie Foong, “Frame Up in Monroe: The Mae Mallory Story,” (Master’s Thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 2010), 45-46, 69.

¹⁵¹ Mae Mallory interview with Malaika Lumumba, February 27, 1970.

national organization with its headquarters on 125th Street included an array of New York activists, artists, and intellectuals with ties to leading radical groups, such as the Crusaders, OGFF, CAWAH, AAAA, LCA, HWG, and other leftist and nationalist groups. Among the MDC's many notable sponsors were James Baldwin, John Henrik Clarke, Richard Gibson, LeRoi Jones, Shirley Graham, Julian and Ana Mayfield, Gerald Quinn, Bayard Rustin, Dan Watts, Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln, Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, Sylvester Leaks, Ramona Garrett, and Jesse Gray. "The committee was organized and is sponsored by many individuals who may not agree with each other on the way in which full equality for Afro-Americans is to be achieved," Hicks explained in a letter seeking support for the group. "However, they do agree that the oppression, brutality and travesty of justice in Monroe, N.C. which forced Robert F. Williams to flee for his life must be rectified."¹⁵² While the MDC may not have constituted a singular united front, the cooperative convergence of this array of activists and organizations in Harlem did offer a promising sign for those who had been calling for a Black united front for many years.

Initially, the MDC positioned itself as an information organ responsible for countering the dominant narratives of white-owned media outlets and politicians while raising national and global awareness of the true situation in Monroe. Through explaining the depths of racial violence in Monroe and exposing the culpability of government officials, including US Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, to Black communities throughout the nation, the MDC aspired to "achieve mass solidarity behind the fighting spirit of Monroe citizens and Robert F.

¹⁵² Tinson, *Radical Intellect*, 34.

Williams.”¹⁵³ Articles from MDC members offering radical analyses on the situation in Monroe circulated throughout New York and the nation on the pages of *Liberator* and *Freedomways*. Posters with a headline of “Save Mae Mallory!” appeared on utility poles throughout Harlem, reminding local people that their neighbor had fought and won against segregated schools in New York and was now “being persecuted because of her militant fight for Black Liberation.”¹⁵⁴ Street rallies were organized in Harlem to educate the masses on the local, national, and global contexts and implications of the struggle in Monroe. Fundraisers were also organized to contribute to legal expenses and Ossie Davis dedicated a performance of his widely successful play *Purlie Victorious*, starring Ruby Dee, as a fundraiser for the MDC.¹⁵⁵

In Cleveland, the MDC that Mallory had helped organize while initially out on bond had an even more active presence on the ground under the leadership of Audrey Proctor and Clarence Seniors, organizing picket lines, holding mass rallies, and tirelessly pressuring the governor, along with national and international leaders, to prevent Mae Mallory’s extradition to Monroe.¹⁵⁶ Though the “unknown”

¹⁵³ “Monroe, North Carolina Victims of Racial Injustice Need Your Help,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 21, 1961.

¹⁵⁴ Abiola Sinclair, “Mae Mallory Harlem Activist,” in Klytus Smith and Abiola Sinclair, eds., *The Harlem Cultural/Political Movements 1960-1970: From Malcolm X to “Black is Beautiful”* (New York: Gumbs and Thomas Publishers, Inc., 1995), 61.

¹⁵⁵ Flyer for Benefit Performance of *Purlie Victorious* for Monroe Defense Committee, Robert F. Williams Papers, Black Power Movement Microform Collection (henceforth referred to as Williams Papers).

Mallory and her “group with a way out philosophy of self-defense” were initially met with a cold reception in Cleveland—particularly from the “so-called respectable organizations”—the MDC’s active presence in the city’s quickly garnered the support of Black communities and contributed to the flowering of a militant grassroots milieu in the Midwestern city.¹⁵⁷ The influence of the MDC in Cleveland was apparent to Mallory in the results of the 1962 elections, when “every candidate that had publicly supported us won except one.”¹⁵⁸

Mallory’s fight also captured the attention and imagination of aspiring revolutionaries in Cleveland, such as Donald Freeman, a graduate of Western Reserve University and member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).¹⁵⁹ Freeman and the Afro-American Institute collaborated with the MDC and Cleveland CORE on demonstrations at the Cuyahoga County Jail to demand Mallory’s release and even secured the endorsement of the local NOI mosque for the protest.¹⁶⁰ By the end of 1962, Freeman and Max Stanford (Muhammad Ahmad), another Ohio student inspired by the armed struggle waged by Williams and Mallory, had formed the

¹⁵⁶ The Cleveland MDC was also responsible for publishing a collection of Mallory’s writings from the Cuyahoga County Jail, which offers remarkable insights into her political ideologies and analyses of Black liberation struggles. Mae Mallory, *Letters From Prison by Mae Mallory: The Story of a Frame-Up* (Cleveland: Monroe Defense Committee, 1963).

¹⁵⁷ Mae Mallory, “Memo From a Monroe Jail,” *Freedomways* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1964), 210.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Williams, *Concrete Demands*, 78-79.

¹⁶⁰ Donald Freeman, “The Cleveland Story,” *Liberator* 3, no. 6 (June 1963), 7-8.

Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), a nascent revolutionary nationalist organization that would profoundly influence Black freedom struggles in the years to follow.¹⁶¹

Though the MDC's formation in New York offered a glimmer of hope for a Black united front of nationalist activists and organizations, the organization quickly became entangled in factionalist disputes with another organization called the Committee to Aid the Monroe Defendants (CAMD). While a detailed account of the bitter rivalry of the individuals and organizations comprising the two groups is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the contestations over ideology, representation, and influence offer important insights into the deeply rooted histories of leftist and nationalist organizing in New York City during this period. Effectively operating as an arm of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) through the leadership of Berta Green and George Weissman, the CAMD was at odds from the start with many of the MDC's nationalist members and those who had ties (former or existing) with the Communist Party.¹⁶²

The conflict, however, was much larger than leftist sectarianism. In the estimation of Dr. Albert Perry, an associate of the Williams' in Monroe and the

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² As Smethurst notes, "The Trotskyist SWP alienated many young black militants on the Lower East Side and in Harlem for what was perceived as a proclivity for heavy-handed sectarian attempts to control organizations liked the Monroe Defense Committee and Fair Play for Cuba." Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 144-45. In Cleveland, this factionalism was more acute, as the Cleveland MDC had aligned itself with the Workers World Party which had defected from the SWP in Buffalo, NY in 1959. Paul Boutelle, interview with Robert Wright, August 2, 1970, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

titular head of the CAMD, the four main debates that undergirded the division between the two committees were over interracial organizing, support for the Freedom Riders, the ban of the word “Negro,” and salaried officers.¹⁶³ More broadly, the division hinged upon the MDC’s steadfast dedication to Black self-determination and the rejection of white leadership in Black political organizations, as well as their general disavowal of nonviolence as the only strategy for Black liberation. Conrad Lynn explained the matter quite frankly to Berta Green, the organization’s white executive secretary in a letter from May 1963. “The basic reason is plain...politically, the black people are no longer willing to accept white leadership of their cause.”¹⁶⁴

Though the CAMD was more successful in garnering financial and reputational support from organizations like the NAACP, UAW, and the Baptist Ministers Conference of Greater New York and Vicinity, Inc.—organizations which had ardently opposed Williams previously—the militancy that the MDC represented was more in step with the “New Afro-American Nationalism” John Henrik Clarke described that was surging at the grassroots in Harlem and elsewhere. To be fair, the CAMD’s fundraising was indispensable in securing legal representation and

¹⁶³ Letter from Albert E. Perry to Calvin Hicks, September 30, 1961, Williams Papers. Though many supporters of the MDC applauded the Freedom Riders for escalating the tempo of the Movement through exposing the naked brutality of southern racism, Dan Watts and others also criticized the Freedom Riders for announcing their plans and adherence to nonviolence in advance, so as to welcome violence upon helpless demonstrators.

¹⁶⁴ Letter from Conrad J. Lynn to Berta Green, May 7, 1963, Williams Papers. Though Lynn had remained a member of CAMD while representing the Monroe defendants, his decision to do so was likely strategic, as the interracial organization was more successful in its fundraising efforts and was paying for Lynn’s legal services.

raising bail for the Monroe defendants and also coordinated a landmark debate at the Palm Gardens on May 1, 1962 featuring Malcolm X, William Worthy, and James Farmer, among its other contributions to the Monroe struggle.¹⁶⁵ These forums, Smethurst notes, “brought young black militants from the Lower East Side, Harlem, and elsewhere in the city in contact with each other” and contributed to “the growth of community and communication among new radical black artists, intellectuals, and activists.”¹⁶⁶ However, that the CAMD welcomed the support of mainstream civil rights organizations and focused much of its organizing efforts downtown, where its office was located, indicates a fundamental difference in organizational approach between the CAMD and MDC.

While acknowledging the important roles played by the CAMD in a letter she wrote to Mabel and Robert Williams in April 1963 after being released on \$15,000 bond from the Cuyahoga County Jail, Mae Mallory argued that “it is obvious to all who care to see that in spite of all our disadvantages it was The Monroe Defense Committee that offered the leadership.”¹⁶⁷ Though the Cleveland MDC played a much larger role in the defense of Mae Mallory, she credited the leadership of the national organization in New York City with inspiring Congressman Adam Clayton

¹⁶⁵ Though conceived as a fundraiser for the CAMD, Malcolm X requested that the group not be mentioned explicitly to remain “clear of any political charge.” See Flyer for The Challenge of Racism, May 1, 1962, Williams Papers; Letter from William Worthy to Robert F. Williams, April 18, 1962, Williams Papers. For more information on the debate, see Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 65-67.

¹⁶⁶ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 145.

¹⁶⁷ Mae Mallory, “Memo From a Monroe Jail”, 211; Letter from Mae Mallory to Mabel and Rob Williams, April 10, 1963, Williams Papers.

Powell, Jr. to “denounce the NAACP, CORE, SCLC, etc. for the white domination in the leadership of Black organizations.” Mallory was referring to a bold declaration Powell had made in Washington, D.C. just weeks earlier. “The white man has given the Negro in America just about as much as he intends to,” Powell stated, “we will achieve only that which we fight for and it can only be done by those organizations that are totally owned, controlled and maintained by the Negro people.”¹⁶⁸ While Mallory qualified her commentary on the “opportunist” Powell’s advocacy, she also credited the Harlem congressman with being “able to recognize the trend the liberation movement is taking.”¹⁶⁹ This “trend” of Black self-determination that Mallory described was a hallmark of the “New Afro-American Nationalism” that Clarke had heralded on the pages of *Freedomways* two years earlier following the UN demonstrations. “No people are really free,” Clarke wrote, “until they become the instrument of their own liberation.”¹⁷⁰ Though Mallory would continue fighting extradition throughout that year, it was clear to her and many other radical Black leaders that the physical and legal fights she and the Monroe defendants had waged for nearly two years had helped to galvanize the radical liberation movement in Harlem and throughout the nation by 1963.

The New Afro-American Nationalism in Theory and Praxis

While Mallory, Williams, and the Monroe defendants continued their struggles in the courts and in the streets, the ideological and organizational debates

¹⁶⁸ “Welcome home, Adam,” *Liberator* 3, no. 5 (May 1963), 2.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ John Henrik Clarke, “The New Afro-American Nationalism,” 295.

that swirled around their activism and defense were taken up in leftist and nationalist journals. In Clarke's *Freedomways* article, he argued that the new wave of Black nationalism that Mallory and her network of radical activists in Harlem embodied represented a proletarian "revolutionary force" in the United States. Characterized by a collective identification with Pan-African anticolonial liberation struggles, an appreciation of cultural heritage, and a rejection of bourgeois leadership and integration as a panacea, the "New Afro-American Nationalism" was also based upon the foundational analysis that African Americans represented an internal colony of the United States.

In an era where revolutionary nationalist movements were throwing off the chains of European colonialism and re-mapping the globe, Black leftist and nationalist critic Harold Cruse noted, it was only logical that an analysis of domestic colonialism would spur African American nationalist mobilization. In Cruse's analysis, however, the self-defense movements waged by Williams specifically, and Mallory by association, did not constitute a veritable nationalist or revolutionary struggle. Rather, he argued in a 1962 article in *Studies on the Left*, Williams personified a third trend between proletarian Black nationalism and bourgeois integrationism—a "rebel" who had been forced to disavow the NAACP over differences in approach rather than objectives.¹⁷¹ Williams had only adopted armed self-defense as a tactic to achieve equality through integration, Cruse maintained, but the militancy of the tactic had been popularly mistaken for a "revolutionary"

¹⁷¹ Harold Cruse, *Rebellion or Revolution* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1968).

struggle despite Williams' own insistence at that time that he was not a "Black Nationalist," but rather an "Inter Nationalist" concerned with fighting for the liberation of oppressed people throughout the world.¹⁷² Nonetheless, Cruse took it upon himself to ensure that would-be revolutionaries would not mistake Williams's iconic struggle for something it was not, and thus set unrealistic expectations for activism based upon a false premise.

While aspects of Cruse's critiques of Williams read as scornful or dismissive of the profound impacts of his struggle upon the broader Black Freedom Struggle, his analysis did raise vital questions about the relationship between revolutionary theory, program, and action in movements for African American liberation and societal transformation. In a 1963 article in *Liberator*, Cruse described the Monroe movement as an example of a local "rebellion" against "the American racial status quo" and argued "a rebellion is not a revolutionary movement unless it changes the structural arrangements of the society or else is able to project programmatic ideas toward that end." Cruse rejected the possibility, or even the value, of African American communities becoming fully integrated into the social, economic, political, and cultural institutions of the United States, and thus deemed the programmatic ideas of the moderate, mainstream civil rights organizations like the NAACP, SCLC, Urban League, and CORE insufficient for achieving Black equality and liberation. While dismissing the integrationist programs of these organizations, Cruse also argued that sound theoretical analysis and "programmatic ideas" were crucially absent within the praxis of more militant organizations, and in their absence,

¹⁷² Robert F. Williams, *Negroes With Guns*, 119-120.

“neither arms nor demonstrations nor protest marches mean very much.”¹⁷³ In other words, a social revolution was required for African Americans to truly achieve liberation and self-determination, and this could only be achieved by seizing control of the levers of economic, political, and cultural power in society. And to Cruse, the more militant factions of the Black Freedom Struggle had no comprehensive program for gaining control or influence over these power structures and therefore could not succeed in bringing a social revolution to pass.

Though arguably patronizing, these critiques that Cruse posited in his essays offer a useful framework for analyzing the radical thought and praxis of Mae Mallory and the “New Afro-American Nationalists” in New York City in the early 1960s. On the one hand, Cruse’s critique has merit in that Mallory seemingly lacked a comprehensive program for translating her analyses of institutional racism, economic inequality, gender discrimination, nationalism, self-determination, and armed self-defense into organized action for fundamental societal transformation and Black liberation. In her writings, Mallory frequently pointed to the potential for armed self-defense to inspire the masses and provide the basis for organized struggle. However, the records of her correspondence and organizational activities during this period do not indicate that Mallory had developed an analysis of how self-defense would programmatically achieve economic, social, and political self-determination for Black communities.

¹⁷³ Harold Cruse, “Rebellion or Revolution? (1 of 3),” *Liberator* 3, no. 10 (October 1963), 20.

A letter Mallory wrote to Lorraine Hansberry in June 1963 is indicative of her general analysis on self-defense that she expressed in correspondence to various individuals involved in the Black Freedom Struggle:

There is a very important principle involved here; one that must be resolved. The whole question of self-defense. Passive resistance may work for peripheral things such as the right to eat at a lunch counter, the right to use comfort stations and waiting rooms on a non-segregated basis. Passive resistance has helped to show the need for more militant action. No people under the sun ever won complete liberation by completely passive means.¹⁷⁴

Mallory went on to describe the limitation of “passive resistance” for adequately confronting the growing economic crises for African Americans amidst rampant automation, employment discrimination, and cuts to welfare. While pointing to the need for “more militant action” and a more expansive arsenal of tactics to achieve economic, political, and social equality, however, Mallory did not explain in this or other letters how the “question of self-defense” could be utilized to reach these ends aside from protecting communities who faced racial terrorism in their struggles for such.¹⁷⁵

On the other hand, that Mallory may not have had a comprehensive program for utilizing armed self-defense for achieving Black liberation and self-determination should not discount its immediate necessities and tangible contributions. To criticize Williams, and Mallory by association, for not developing a

¹⁷⁴ Letter from Mae Mallory to Lorraine Hansberry, June 1, 1963, Box 1, Folder 2, Mallory Papers.

¹⁷⁵ Though in other correspondence she expressed her support for armed revolutionary struggles in Africa, there is no evidence to suggest that Mallory advocated a similar approach in the United States during this time. Letter from Mae Mallory to Richard Gibson, August 24, 1963, Box 1, Folder 2, Mallory Papers.

revolutionary analysis while using armed self-defense to protect the livelihoods of Black communities fighting for equality is to ignore the realities of life under a violently oppressive society and devalue bold action to meet immediate needs. Furthermore, by lumping the range of personalities involved with the “Monroe Movement” into a singular category, Cruse ignored the variations in analyses that those involved in, or inspired by, the struggle in Monroe had developed. Mallory, specifically, had put forth critical analyses of the institutional intersections of racial oppression through economic exploitation, gender discrimination, and political disenfranchisement. Additionally, through her organizing experiences in New York, she had advocated for Black self-determination within movements and in society writ large, while also supporting Black political parties and pondering the formation of a Black state. These types of analyses, rooted in prior nationalist and leftist struggles in New York, re-emerged within the public lexicon in Harlem and the nation through the organizational networks that Mallory occupied and shaped.

So while Cruse’s critique of Williams as a glorified integrationist may have had merit for signaling the need for critical analysis of liberation struggles to advance more revolutionary theories and actions, it devalued not only the vital contributions that the Williams’, Mallory, and the Monroe defendants made to protecting Black life, but also the formative influences that their struggles had upon the development of more militant and revolutionary analyses and praxis at the grassroots.

Emerging within the context of an increasingly radical political milieu charged by the Cuban Revolution, the demonstrations at the UN, and escalating local

and national struggles for human rights and self-determination, the MDC and CAMD effectively parlayed Mallory's national persecution into a public referendum on armed struggle, state violence, Black nationalism, and political empowerment in Harlem and beyond. Through street rallies, mass meetings, public forums, and Black media outlets, these organizations brought local people into the dynamic conversations and organized actions that were shaping national struggles for Black liberation. This type of grassroots outreach and organizing was an imperative for many organizers, including Rosa Guy, who saw "untapped" revolutionary potential within the Black communities of Harlem. In Guy's analysis, the militant spirit embodied in the Monroe movement had inspired local people to push local and national freedom struggles in more assertive and radical directions. "Certainly," she wrote to Robert Williams in 1963, "the militant but limited stance the leaders are now taking is because of the millions of Robert Williamses behind them."¹⁷⁶

In addition to mobilizing local people to embrace and act upon militant demands for economic, political, and social justice, the organized struggle to free Mae Mallory and vindicate Williams also "fostered relationships between older and younger black radicals," as Ashley D. Farmer notes, "and introduced them to the nationalist aspects of the black freedom struggle." These "younger black radicals" that Farmer describes included Donald Freeman, who established working coalitions with CORE, the MDC, and the Nation of Islam through his organizing to support Mallory with the Afro-American Institute in Cleveland, and Max Stanford (Muhammad Ahmad), who met his future mentor, Queen Mother Audley Moore, at a

¹⁷⁶ Letter from Rosa Guy to Robert F. Williams, July 4, 1963, Williams Papers.

“Free Mae Mallory Meeting” in her home in Philadelphia.¹⁷⁷ Stanford was introduced to Queen Mother Moore through another mentor in Philadelphia, Ethel Azalea Johnson, a comrade of Robert and Mabel Williams and a confidante of Mae Mallory.¹⁷⁸

Mallory, however, was not merely an inspiration or coincidental connection for the budding revolutionaries. When Stanford and Stan Daniels were beaten and arrested at a protest against economic discrimination at a Philadelphia construction site in the summer of 1963, Mallory wrote to Johnson offering guidance, legal advice, and strategies for coordinating the pair’s defense.¹⁷⁹ As Mallory’s political development had been shaped by older generations of leftist and nationalist thinkers and organizers in New York City, it was clear by the summer of 1963 that her own brand of grassroots militancy was now inspiring and influencing the evolution of freedom struggles across the country.

Ronald Stokes and Malcolm X’s Political Thought in Transition, 1962-1963

Though his affiliation with the Nation of Islam continued to constrict his involvement with the types of direct political action that Mae Mallory had engaged in during these years, Malcolm X was very much in the thick of the radical networks that Mallory was involved with. By this time, Malcolm had established close

¹⁷⁷ Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 48; Donald Freeman, “The Cleveland Story,” *Liberator* 3, no. 6 (June 1963), 7-8.

¹⁷⁸ Williams, *Concrete Demands*, 80-81.

¹⁷⁹ Letter from Mae Mallory to Ethel Azalea Johnson, June 9, 1963, Box 1, Folder 2, Mallory Papers.

personal relationships with many of the most influential leftist and nationalist activists and intellectuals in Harlem, many of whom had played active roles in the defense of Mallory and Williams. Whether on stages at Harlem Square, in television studios, or in private meetings, Malcolm made frequent contact with a cross-section of political thought in New York City, including such notable figures such as Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln, William Worthly, Percy Sutton, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Vicki Garvin, Hope Stevens, Eloise Moore, John Henrik Clarke, Sylvester Leaks, Bayard Rustin, and James Baldwin. Through these relationships and many others, Malcolm forged and sharpened his political analysis as he inched toward an embrace of secular Black nationalism and revolutionary internationalism. Though the theological nationalism and program of the NOI had empowered Malcolm to transform his life and connected him with the Garveyite roots of his childhood, as Sales notes, “by 1962 they also represented the major barriers” to his “intellectual and activist development.”¹⁸⁰ It was through this network of activists and intellectuals he had cultivated in Harlem, however, that Malcolm was able to continue his development in the early 1960s, in spite of the restrictions imposed by the NOI.

While the impacts of Malcolm’s prodigious oratory and organizing skills upon the trajectory of local and national freedom struggles have received a substantial amount of scholarly analysis, less attention has been given to the influence that Harlem activists, intellectuals, and local people had upon the evolution of Malcolm’s political thought. Notably absent in many narratives of Malcolm’s political evolution

¹⁸⁰ Sales, *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation*, 60-61.

are the significant roles that Black women played in shaping his radical consciousness and praxis. With deep roots in Harlem's Left and nationalist movements during the Great Depression and post-war eras, as Eric S. McDuffie and Komozi Woodard note, Queen Mother Moore and Vicki Garvin had significant influences on the radical political milieu that Malcolm would enter upon his return to Harlem in 1954.

A Pan-Africanist and former Garveyite like Malcolm's parents, Moore had established herself as a legendary street corner speaker during the Depression in Harlem and was active in tenant organizing and anti-eviction campaigns. Garvin had migrated north to Harlem during the Depression, where she was a pillar in the formative Boycott Movement and People's Committee that launched Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. into local and national political power. By the 1950s, Garvin was continuing the grassroots organizing methods that she had helped to cultivate in Harlem throughout the North and West through the National Negro Labor Council.¹⁸¹ In fact, Garvin had attempted to recruit Malcolm Little into the Communist Party in the 1940s during his days as a hustler in Harlem. As Malcolm was beginning to make a name for himself with the Nation of Islam in the early 1950s, Moore spread the word about his budding potential to her network of revolutionary nationalists, including Cyril Briggs and Harry Haywood.¹⁸² Through

¹⁸¹ Eric S. McDuffie and Komozi Woodard, "If You're In A Country That's Progressive, The Woman Is Progressive," *Biography* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2013), 514-519.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 507-516.

their maintained contact with Malcolm, these radical Black women were “forging his approach to community organizing in Harlem during the 1950s and early 1960s.”¹⁸³

Although both Moore and Garvin had left Harlem by the turn of the decade, they had laid the groundwork for a network of radical intellectuals, including Eloise Moore and John Henrik Clarke, who would serve as Malcolm’s informal secular advisors in the early 1960s. “I became a part of a shadow cabinet that Malcolm had,” Clarke later said. “I was the man in history and historical information, and historical personalities. There were other people on politics, another person occasionally on sociology, the diversity of people in this shadow cabinet, none of them Muslims, was equivalent to the faculty of a good university.”¹⁸⁴ Although Clarke was cautious in withholding names for fear of misrepresentation of the nature of these advisors, Queen Mother Moore’s younger sister Eloise occupied one of these roles.

Before her death in 1963, Eloise Moore played a formative role in shaping Malcolm’s budding Pan-Africanist consciousness. While Elijah Muhammad’s insistence on the Asiatic origins of Black Americans and condescending views toward Africans had hamstrung Malcolm’s outward embrace of Pan-African thought in the 1950s, the elder Moore later explained in multiple interviews that her younger sister had fueled Malcolm’s international perspective by the end of the decade.¹⁸⁵ “Eloise taught Malcolm about Africa,” Moore recalled, “and I can tell you

¹⁸³ Ibid, 514.

¹⁸⁴ Interview with John Henrik Clarke, June 30, 1992, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.

that when I wanted to talk to Malcolm about Africa, he couldn't mention the word." According to Audley Moore, she made the trip to Chicago to confront Elijah Muhammad about his disavowal of the African heritage of Black Americans, but was unsuccessful in changing his perspective after three days of debate in his home. "We had to teach Malcolm, you hear, and that's how he was able to get a new insight, put that to work."¹⁸⁶

Though this type of intellectual prowess that grassroots intellectuals like Audley and Eloise Moore and John Henrik Clarke brought to Malcolm's "shadow cabinet" profoundly influenced his political development in the early 1960s, Malcolm alone was responsible for distilling their guidance into his own analysis and action. "None of us ever told Malcolm what to say," Clarke insisted, "he asked for correct information on the subject and he did his own interpretation."¹⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the influence of Malcolm's secular advisors point to the profound impacts that Harlem's radical grassroots political milieu had upon the political consciousness and praxis of a leader who was fundamentally shaping the course of local, national, and global freedom struggles in the early 1960s.

¹⁸⁵ Eloise Moore was an unheralded staple in grassroots Pan-African and nationalist movements in Harlem in the 1950s and early 1960s. After Patrice Lumumba was assassinated, Moore was at the UN demonstrations and later procured a casket for a symbolic funeral service at Louis Michaux's bookstore.

¹⁸⁶ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes interview with Audley "Queen Mother Moore," June 6, 8, 1978, cited in McDuffie and Woodard, "If You're In a Country That's Progressive," 521. See also Interview with Queen Mother Audley Moore, 1972, Oral History of the American Left Collection, The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University Libraries.

¹⁸⁷ Interview with John Henrik Clarke, June 30, 1992.

By early 1962, it was becoming increasingly evident that Malcolm X was identifying more with the expansive secular nationalist ideologies that his cabinet espoused than the Nation of Islam's narrow theology. According to Manning Marable, the sermons and lectures that Malcolm delivered in early 1962 "rarely mentioned the core values of the Nation's theology."¹⁸⁸ As the naked brutality against sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and voter registration campaigns in the South captivated northern audiences, Malcolm was regularly pressed by reporters and college students to give his positions on these campaigns and the broader Civil Rights Movement. When northern Freedom Riders journeyed into the South in the spring of 1961, for instance, Malcolm X denounced the notion of activists taking up the problems of the South when trouble abounded in northern ghettos. Reflecting on his statements to reporters at the time, Malcolm X told Alex Haley "if the Northern Freedom Riders wanted more to do," they could stay in their communities and "light some fires under Northern city halls, unions, and major industries to give more jobs to Negroes."¹⁸⁹

This type of political commentary that was occupying greater space in Malcolm's public life drew reproach from Elijah Muhammad, who wrote to Malcolm in February 1962 instructing him to abstain from delving into political analysis, including any discussions of the Nation's position on the "nation question" which had been the crux of many of his speeches throughout the previous year.¹⁹⁰ With the

¹⁸⁸ Marable, *Malcolm X*, 201.

¹⁸⁹ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 271.

¹⁹⁰ Marable, *Malcolm X*, 202.

pace of local and national freedom struggles seeming to accelerate by the day, Elijah Muhammad's move to re-assert control as the sole Messenger of Allah and the Nation of Islam fostered a nascent frustration within Malcolm X over the NOI's policy of political non-engagement.

Despite the restrictions placed upon him by Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X continued to engage in critical dialogue about Black liberation through his classes at Mosque No. 7 and in public appearances. The curriculum that Malcolm developed for his grueling weekly public speaking class, according to NOI member Benjamin Karim (Benjamin 2X Goodman), was grounded in "geography, current events...American history, the history of colonialism."¹⁹¹ Aspiring ministers were assigned readings from local, national, and global newspapers to promote an expansive worldview and foster the skills of critical inquiry and analysis that were central to Malcolm's own development and effectiveness as an intellectual and organizer.

That spring, Malcolm X also debated the merits of integration with James Farmer at Cornell and shared a pulpit with Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. at his Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. Speaking to the congregation of 2,000 packed inside Abyssinian, Malcolm characteristically cast doubt upon the viability of integration while also defending the Nation of Islam against charges of not backing up their militant rhetoric with concrete action. "Just because a man doesn't throw a

¹⁹¹ Interview with Benjamin Karim, June 27, 1992, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.

punch doesn't mean he can't do so whenever he gets ready," Malcolm warned, "so don't play the Muslims and the nationalists cheap."¹⁹²

Though Malcolm toed the line for the Nation in public, he privately sympathized with the premise of this kind of criticism that was swirling within Black communities by 1962. "Privately I was convinced that our Nation of Islam could be an even greater force in the American black man's overall struggle—if we engaged in more *action*," Malcolm later confessed. Malcolm privately predicted that if the Nation did not relax their non-engagement policy and actively participate in the national liberation movement, the Nation would find itself "one day suddenly separated from the Negroes' front-line struggle."¹⁹³ Malcolm's concerns would prove to be prophetic. Just weeks after he had defended the Nation against charges of inaction in the face of injustice, the brutal murder of NOI member Ronald Stokes by the Los Angeles Police Department threw down a formative challenge for the Nation to back up its militant rhetoric of self-defense with action.

Shortly after midnight on April 27, 1962, NOI member Ronald Stokes was killed by the LAPD after two officers provoked a confrontation with a group of Muslims outside Mosque No. 27. Over seventy officers arrived at the scene, indiscriminately beating and opening fire upon members of the Mosque that Malcolm himself had organized in 1957. In the aftermath of the police siege of the temple, dozens were injured and seven men were shot, leaving one paralyzed and

¹⁹² Marable, *Malcolm X*, 204.

¹⁹³ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 289.

one dead.¹⁹⁴ Ronald Stokes, the Mosque's secretary and Korean War veteran who had grown up only a few blocks from Malcolm's sister Ella Collins in Boston, had been unarmed and in the process of surrendering when an officer shot him in the back while his arms were raised above his head.¹⁹⁵

The brutal killing sent shockwaves through the Nation of Islam and Black communities across the country waited with bated breath to see how the Muslims, for all of their fiery rhetoric, would respond. "Malcolm was furious," recalled photographer Gordon Parks, who Malcolm X had urged to meet him in LA immediately after the shooting. "I expected that particular moment something really explosive to take over."¹⁹⁶ Parks remembered an anxious Malcolm in Los Angeles, pacing, shaking his head, and repeating, "they're gonna pay for it, they're gonna pay for it." Already cognizant by this time of the murmurs within Black communities that the Nation of Islam was a paper tiger, Malcolm X was preparing for a direct confrontation with the LAPD. However, a pit stop to the Messenger's Phoenix home en route back to the east coast once again stifled any designs Malcolm had for organized political action. Muhammad ordered his minister to stand down, instead blaming Stokes' death on Malcolm's lack of faith and even Stokes' own cowardice in surrendering.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Marable, *Malcolm X*, 207.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid; Strickland, *Malcolm X: Make It Plan*, 81.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Gordon Parks, 1992, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid; Marable, *Malcolm X*, 208-9.

Malcolm X was fuming when he returned to New York City for a public forum hosted by the Socialist Workers Party on May 1st. Joining Malcolm X in the event to raise funds for the Monroe Defendants were William Worthy and James Farmer. As the last speaker to address the packed meeting hall, Malcolm X pulled no punches in his excoriation of the white supremacist society that had stolen the life of his friend. Making frequent comparisons between the LAPD and the Gestapo forces of Nazi Germany, Malcolm described what had happened in Los Angeles as “one of the worse crimes, one of the most inhuman acts of atrocity that have ever been committed in a...so-called civilized society.” To Malcolm, the murder of Stokes was the type of damning evidence of a morally bankrupt society that made the Nation’s position against integration not merely justifiable, but imperative for Black survival. “I’d rather be dead,” Malcolm declared, “than integrate into a society like this.”¹⁹⁸

Furthermore, as the abuses of Black women in Monroe had for Robert Williams, the murder of Ronald Stokes solidified for Malcolm the necessity of Black Americans to defend themselves against the violence of white supremacy by any means necessary. “In America when a Black man resists letting a white man put a rope around his neck, the Black man is accused of violence,” Malcolm explained. “In America when a Black man says, ‘I have to defend myself,’ you should call that what it is, self-defense. And if America has the right to defend herself from her enemies, the Black man in America has a right to defend himself from his enemies.” Citing the armed anti-colonial revolutionary struggles waged in Angola, Algeria, and the

¹⁹⁸ Malcolm X, “The Crisis of Racism,” May 1, 1962, accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WA_YixhCP2g/.

Congo, Malcolm X argued that as a colonized people, Black Americans had the right to “defend ourselves from the atrocities that these white American colonialists have been inflicting against us.” To Malcolm, Black Americans had been colonized by a people that had “perfected the art of hypocrisy to such high degree they’ll stand up and make themselves look like angels in disguise when they’ve got blood of black people dripping from their mouths and dripping from their fingers.” This rampant hypocrisy practiced by explicit white supremacists and liberals alike was the fundamental basis for Malcolm’s argument against integration, which he concluded his fifteen-minute address with. “We believe, that as you sow, so shall you reap. And if you’re going to reap what you have sown, then we don’t want to integrate with you.”¹⁹⁹ Though he had not called for Black communities to take any specific direct action, thereby abiding by Muhammad’s edict, it was clear that his patience with the Messenger’s inaction and restrictions had nearly worn out.

As the murmurs about the Nation steadily turned to roars following the Stokes’ murder, it quickly became evident that Malcolm was hardly alone in his disillusionment with Muhammad’s non-engagement policies. Though their action in defense of Johnson X had endeared the NOI to the Black masses in Harlem, many had grown impatient with their rhetoric that now appeared toothless. Dan Watts captured this collective mood in an editorial in the May 1962 volume of *Liberator*, in which he challenged Malcolm X to “reconcile his militant talk with the non-militant action of his followers.” While Watts expressed his support for the minister’s truth-telling about the “savagery and uncivilized nature of the white man,” he noted that

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

members and supporters of the Nation of Islam needed “more substantial weapons than the truth of Allah” to defend themselves against the police and other white supremacist forces.²⁰⁰ This frustration with the Nation’s inaction was not limited to those outside the religion, as many within the NOI used Muhammad’s refusal to act upon Stokes’ murder as a critique of his broader policy of non-involvement. “A lot of us sort of became dissatisfied because...we weren’t doing anything to help our people who were being brutalized by the whites and the police during the Civil Rights Movement,” Benjamin Karim recalled. One of Malcolm X’s most trusted assistant ministers at Mosque No. 7, Karim said that he and others—Malcolm X particularly—felt that they “should have gotten involved...we should have been able to retaliate or train those people to retaliate.”²⁰¹ Though Malcolm remained silent in his welling frustration with the Nation’s continued inaction after Stokes’ death, this moment proved a watershed in his relationship with Elijah Muhammad.

As both Marable and Sales note, this contestation that arose between Malcolm and Muhammad over the Nation’s response to Stokes’ death marked the emergence of a new period in Malcolm’s political development that would culminate in his departure from the Nation two years later. This period, Sales argues, was characterized by Malcolm’s efforts at defining his ideology of Black nationalism through an “extraction of the secular Black nationalist core of Muslim ideology from

²⁰⁰ Dan Watts, “Unarmed Afro-Americans Beaten By Armed Police,” *Liberator* 2, no. 5 (May 1962), 3.

²⁰¹ Interview with Benjamin Karim, June 27, 1992.

its religious form.”²⁰² In addition to redefining his political analysis intellectually, Malcolm X was also taking steps toward redefining his role in struggles for rights and power in Harlem. Although he had ceded to Elijah Muhammad’s command that he take no part in organized protest activity in Los Angeles, he began to take greater political liberties in Harlem by the year’s end.

As his renewed calls for a Black united front in the wake of the Stokes murder illustrated, Malcolm increasingly saw himself and the Nation of Islam as a fundamental part of the national Black Freedom Struggle. In fact, after another nearly explosive confrontation between the NYPD and the Black community in Harlem the previous summer, Malcolm had joined a group of civil rights, religious, and labor leaders as part of a committee to combat the symptoms of institutional racism in Harlem.²⁰³ As part of the Emergency Committee for Unity on Social and Economic Problems, which included the likes of A. Philip Randolph, L. Joseph Overton, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, and Percy Sutton, Malcolm X cooperated with moderate leaders to demand a broad platform of policy initiatives to rectify racial inequality in employment, housing, education, and policing.²⁰⁴ In the months

²⁰² Sales, *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation*, 73.

²⁰³ Harold L. Keith, “Leaders Bury Differences, Merge: New York Group Formed to Uplift Negro Masses,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct 7, 1961.

²⁰⁴ The policy demands listed by the Emergency Committee are worth noting for their breadth and emphasis on progressive economic action. They included: “elimination of discrimination in job training, a city FEPC, minimum wage law, a city committee on Equal Opportunities, an investigation of city contracts, a probe into Consolidated Edison’s employment practice, creation of a New York City Work Project Administration, establishment of Information Centers in working class communities, enforcement of city and state housing laws, elimination of red-tape in

following the Stokes murder, Malcolm drew upon these connections to call for greater protest and political activity in Harlem. At a July rally convened by Mosque No. 7 in Harlem Square, Malcolm X shared the stage with Cleveland Robinson (Negro American Labor Council), Bayard Rustin, Eddie “Porkchop” Davis, and Anna Arnold Hedgeman, demonstrating this nascent cooperation between Malcolm X and mainstream leaders in the service of building a Black united front.²⁰⁵

One of the primary targets of Malcolm’s rhetoric at rallies throughout that year was the NYPD, who had stepped up its harassment of the Nation that summer amidst a broader crackdown on nationalist organizations and activities. After the “near riots” in the summer of 1961, the NYPD had flooded Harlem with members of its paramilitary Tactical Patrol Force and announced new regulations on nationalist street rallies, including a curfew.²⁰⁶ The following summer, officers began harassing members of the Nation while selling *Muhammad Speaks* with greater frequency, leading Malcolm to predict that “the time will come when the Muslims will not be

housing and health law cases, a vigorous program of fire prevention, adequate staffing of Harlem Hospital, higher allowances for families on public welfare rolls, human relations education for all police officers and revocation of licenses of exploitative private employment agencies.” Evelyn Cunningham, “Harlem Job Rally Set for Sept. 6,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, September 9, 1961; Harold L. Keith, “Leaders Bury Differences, Merge: New York Group Formed to Uplift Negro Masses,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct 7, 1961.

²⁰⁵ While Robinson and Hedgeman chastised unions and city officials for their complicity in the discrimination and exploitation of Black laborers, Malcolm denounced city politicians for only caring about Harlem during election season. Edward Silberfarb, “War Chants From a Muslim Rally,” *New York Herald Tribune*, July 22, 1962.

²⁰⁶ “Good Rules,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 16, 1962.

able to leave their homes.”²⁰⁷ By the end of the year, this surveillance and harassment had progressed to such a degree that Malcolm made his first foray into civil disobedience, demonstrating his budding embrace of direct action in open defiance of Elijah Muhammad.

On Christmas Day, two Muslim men were arrested at gunpoint at 42nd Street for allegedly blocking a subway entrance while selling copies of *Muhammad Speaks*. When the men went to trial two weeks later, 30 members of the Nation picketed outside the courthouse, carrying signs that read “America Is Against Human Rights” and “We Are Living In A Police State.” After the two men were found guilty, the 250 Muslims who had packed the courthouse spilled outside, where Malcolm X compared New York’s criminal justice system to that of Mississippi and announced “if the Muslims can’t get justice in court then they will hold court in the street.”²⁰⁸

A month later, Malcolm made good on his promise when he led a demonstration in Times Square to protest the Christmas Day arrests and the recent police siege of the Rochester Mosque that resulted in the brutal arrests of over a dozen Muslims. In the middle of rush hour the evening of February 13th, Malcolm X and Joseph X (Yusef Shah) led 200 members of the Fruit of Islam as they marched along the sidewalks from Times Square to Rockefeller Center with signs reading “America Violates the UN Charter on Human Rights” and “We Charge Genocide.” Joining the protestors were William Worthy and Socialist Workers Party leader Fred

²⁰⁷ Marable, *Malcolm X*, 215.

²⁰⁸ Memo from John L. Kinsella to Chief Inspector, January 12, 1963, BOSS Records.

Halstead. As the pickets disrupted the flow of rush hour traffic, Malcolm and others distributed leaflets under a heading that declared “America has become a Police-State for 20 Million Negroes.” Exhorting Black communities in Harlem and throughout “the whole Dark World” to act in support of their jailed brothers in Rochester, the flyers boldly professed, “We will all go to jail today for what we believe. We will all fight for what we believe. We will all die for what we believe.” If the protest was an act of nonviolent direct action, the flyers also made it explicitly clear that the demonstrators were prepared to return any violence inflicted upon them. “We must let the white man know...that we don’t endorse the foolish philosophy of ‘turning the other cheek’...We demand Justice or Death!!!!”²⁰⁹ Fortunately, there was no need to act upon these professions, as BOSS detectives kept a watchful eye on the illegal demonstration but did not intervene.

The protest was uncharacteristic of both the Nation of Islam and the Times Square area. Demonstrations were technically illegal in New York’s commercial hub, a fact that was pointed out to Malcolm the day prior by Det. DeFossett. The detective’s report on his meeting with Malcolm X that day illustrates Malcolm’s intentions to engage in an act of civil disobedience—a tactic that betrayed the Nation’s doctrines of non-engagement and obeying the law. Despite his clear intentions to coordinate a mass protest against police brutality, Malcolm X shielded himself from accusations of such with feigned coyness. Referring to the planned march as a “walk,” Malcolm explained to DeFossett that he intended to merely

²⁰⁹ Memo from John L. Kinsella to Chief Inspector, February 14, 1963, BOSS Records.

“exercise his rights as an individual citizen to walk on the sidewalk in Times Square.” If anyone were to walk in front or behind him, Malcolm explained, “that is his business.” Malcolm explained that this “walk” would take place “in the height of rush hour when people are getting out of work.” As DeFossett continued to badger him about the next day’s obvious protest, however, Malcolm X eventually conceded the nature of his plans. “If we are going to get in trouble for nothing,” he explained to DeFossett, citing the arrest of the two Muslims in Times Square, “we might as well get in trouble for something.”²¹⁰

If Malcolm X felt constrained by Muhammad’s order to stand down in Los Angeles following the Stokes murder, the Times Square protest represented an effort to loosen these reigns. In his move toward secular nationalism, Malcolm was beginning to consider and embrace not only new political analyses, but new tactics as well. And these tactics, it must be noted, proved at least mildly successful in achieving immediate and longer-range results. As *Liberator* contributor Rose Finkenstaedt noted in her coverage of the protests the following month, whereas “anonymous black men are murdered, beaten, and convicted with impunity day after day,” Malcolm’s actions had resulted in dropped charges for one of the arrested Muslims and forced a parlay between he and Mayor Wagner regarding the NYPD’s suppression of the Nation of Islam.

In Finkenstaedt’s estimation, in these minor victories scored by Malcolm’s use of direct action and civil disobedience were major lessons for those involved in the Black Freedom Struggle. “The fact is that the Black Muslims are an indication of

²¹⁰ Ibid.

what can be done against another power structure in America,” Finkenstaedt wrote. “For those of us who might want a little more from this rich and powerful society,” she added, “there might be much to learn from our brothers, the Muslims, in how we can beat the white man at his game.”²¹¹ While Finkenstaedt’s appraisal speaks to the influence of Malcolm and Mosque No. 7 on radical political consciousness in New York City, it is also clear that Malcolm and the Nation of Islam had been learning much from the people of Harlem at the dawn of the 1960s. The surging militancy of the Black masses who demanded action to achieve rights and power, along with the ideological leadership of grassroots intellectuals who helped shape collective political analyses, had fundamentally impacted Malcolm’s political development in theory and praxis by 1963.

The Freedom Now Party and the Politics of Black Nationalism

Though the *Amsterdam News* had kept relatively quiet about this swelling militancy and nationalism in Harlem, *Freedomways*, *Muhammad Speaks*, and *Liberator* dutifully chronicled and analyzed the groundswell of Black radical politics that Mae Mallory and Malcolm X represented to ensure its proliferation at the grassroots. “The space *Liberator* created and the voices it represented,” Tinson argues, “reveal the critical concern of everyday citizens for the political, economic, and cultural spatial and power relations remapping the world.”²¹² The surging

²¹¹ Rose L.H. Finkenstaedt, “A Black Muslim Story: Never On Christmas,” *Liberator* 3, no. 3 (March 1963), 16-18.

²¹² Tinson, *Radical Intellect*, 56.

grassroots militancy in Harlem reflected on the pages of these publications was also forcing more mainstream presses to focus their attention uptown.

In early June of 1963, *The New Yorker* sent staff reporters to Harlem to observe and describe the social, economic, and political conditions there for the magazine's predominantly white, middle-class subscribers. In their walking tour, the reporters happened upon a crowd of 800 people gathered at Harlem Square for a mass rally sponsored by the Harlem Anti-Colonial Committee.²¹³ The small group led by Bill Jones and Selma Sparks, a veteran of the Negro American Labor Council, counted amongst its few but distinguished members John Henrik Clarke, Sylvester Leaks, William Worthy, and Pernella Wattley, each of whom had played an active role in supporting the Monroe defendants.²¹⁴ Billed as a protest against "black people's treatment in the white man's court," the rally had been organized to spread critical awareness of Mae Mallory's extradition fight, the murder of Ronald Stokes by LAPD the previous year, and William Worthy's scurrilous arrest for the Cold War crime of "failing to travel with a valid passport."²¹⁵

Among the speakers at the rally were Jones, Sparks, Worthy, Conrad Lynn, Leaks, and Mae Mallory's mother, Willie Lee Brown. In their speeches to the enlivened crowd, Leaks and Lynn both extolled the use of armed self-defense in

²¹³ "The Talk Of The Town," *The New Yorker*, June 15, 1963.

²¹⁴ Tinson, *Radical Intellect*, 61. It is worth noting that Wattley had also been an active member of FPCC, and, alongside Mae Mallory, was one of the Harlem Nine.

²¹⁵ Flyer for Harlem Anti-Colonial Committee Rally, Box 2, Folder 18, Mallory Papers. For more on Worthy's arrest under the McCarran Act, see Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 47-51.

struggles for Black self-determination. “We have guns, and we’re going to make our presence felt,” Lynn declared after deriding Dr. King’s adherence to nonviolence in spite of the recent vicious attacks on protestors and bombings of his hotel room and his brother’s home in Birmingham. “We have power,” Lynn went on to say, as the crowd grew in size and vigor, “and we’re going to use it!”²¹⁶ Leaks, who had been writing as a featured columnist for *Muhammad Speaks* at the time, expounded Lynn’s point in his address by declaring that African Americans in the South would have little trouble voting if they brought their rifles when they went to register.²¹⁷

Whereas Lynn and Leaks spoke on the need for Black communities to seize political power by any means necessary, Worthy used his platform to decry the repressive two-party system and call upon Black voters to chart a new direction. To Worthy, the right to vote wasn’t worth dying for if the candidates on the ballot were white men with no interest in Black liberation. Reflecting the spirit of the “New Afro-American Nationalism,” Worthy argued that Black communities must be in positions of power to control their own liberation, and thus proposed the formation of an independent Black political party. “Do you know what would happen if Fidel Castro were President of the United States instead of John F. Kennedy?” Worthy asked the audience to illustrate his point. “Bull Connor would be given a fair trial and then shot. Ninety-five per cent of the police would have to flee to South Africa for political asylum. J. Edgar Hoover would be thrown into an integrated cell. If that didn’t cure him, he’d be left there for life.”

²¹⁶ “The Talk Of The Town,” *The New Yorker*, June 15, 1963.

²¹⁷ “Harlem,” *Liberator* 3, no. 7 (July 1963): 19.

Worthy's point was well received by the sizable crowd who laughed in appreciation and cheered in agreement. By this point, few amongst any crowd at Harlem Square had any illusions of racial liberation being bestowed upon Black communities by the national two-party system or the predominantly white liberal government of New York City. "There's going to be trouble," one observer stated plainly, citing the decades of systemic inequality and police violence that the powers-that-be had refused to address in Harlem. "On a hot summer night," she predicted, "it wouldn't take much to set off a riot—not isolated violence but a kind of revolution."²¹⁸

Although in numerous interviews Lynn credited Worthy's speech as the impetus for creating the Freedom Now Party, the idea of forming an independent Black political party had deep roots in New York's history of Black radical thought and had been discussed amongst nationalist activists and intellectuals in New York City for some time before the June rally at Harlem Square. However, the grotesque racist brutality visited upon the SCLC's Birmingham campaign that spring by southern Democrats added a greater sense of urgency and spurred the masses to earnestly consider rejecting the national Democratic Party in favor of a progressive third party.²¹⁹ During a meeting of the AAAA in Harlem two years earlier, Calvin Hicks had floated the idea of forming a political party and several other members

²¹⁸ "The Talk Of The Town," *The New Yorker*, June 15, 1963.

²¹⁹ William Worthy, "An All Black Party," *Liberator* 3, no. 10 (October 1963), 18.

suggested that membership be limited to Afro-Americans.²²⁰ In the fall of 1962 Dan Watts and William Worthy had appeared on a panel discussion televised by CBS, where Watts queried if the interests of Afro-Americans could only be served by “a political party of his own.”

In her reporting on the program, which aired two days before President Kennedy’s own televised pronouncement of an embargo of Cuba, *Liberator* columnist Rose Finkenstaedt argued “the interests of the black will never be considered until he becomes an independent political force.” To Finkenstaedt, however, independent Black political power was not just a vehicle by which to achieve African American liberation. “If the meaning of America is freedom, democracy, and anti-colonialism,” Finkenstaedt proposed, “the true interests of America will only be served through effective Black-led political power.”²²¹ Finkenstaedt, Watts, and Worthy had no lofty illusions about the “meaning of America” after 300 years of racial oppression, political inequality, and capitalist-imperialism. Rather, as part of a global anti-colonial struggle of oppressed peoples for liberation and self-determination, they argued that independent African American political power wielded the potential to supplant the global system of Euro-American hegemony in the United States with a society built upon “man’s

²²⁰ “Meeting of Afro-Americans, June 14, 1961,” Box 2, Folder 4, Mallory Papers.

²²¹ Rose H.L. Finkenstaedt, “Needed: An Afro-American Political Party,” *Liberator* 2, no. 11 (Nov.-Dec. 1962), 5.

attainable ideals” of “freedom, justice and equality for all in a classless, hate-free society.”²²²

Though Watts and Worthy may have had atmospheric aspirations for such a party, they were also pragmatic in their expectations. Speaking at a mass rally organized by Donald Freeman and the Afro-American Institute in Cleveland that March, Worthy conceded that the party “cannot realistically anticipate meaningful 1964 victories at the polls.” Explaining this first election cycle as a “training ground” for independent Black politics, Worthy declared “1964 should therefore be regarded as the year for uniting and educating all militant forces in the black community.”²²³ The idea was already floating around Harlem, where Progressive Labor Party leader Bill Epton had begun formulating his campaign for Councilman-at-Large “as a means of introducing the concept of independent Negro political activity and action.”²²⁴

With a groundswell of militancy reverberating through its streets, Harlem was the logical choice for establishing the FNP’s national headquarters after the party was officially formed at the March on Washington that August. Alongside SNCC activists who had planned more disruptive protests at the March to leverage the power of the masses gathered at the nation’s capital for more immediate and substantive federal action on civil rights, the steering committee of the FNP

²²² William Worthy, “Our Power Can Change The World,” Michigan Committee for a Freedom Now Party, September 1963, Box 2, Folder 12, Mallory Papers.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ William Epton, “An Alternative Policy: Political Power,” *Liberator* 3, no. 9 (September 1963), 15-16.

represented the more radical factions of national Black freedom struggles in Washington that day. As the steady flow of demonstrators made their way toward the Lincoln Memorial, Conrad Lynn, William Worthy, and several other FNP organizers distributed leaflets calling for a new political party with “an all-black slate and a platform for liberation.” In their manifesto, titled “The Declaration of Washington,” the organizers called for “all-black political action” that could “deliver knock-out punches to the enemies of equality” and promote economic justice, adequate housing, educational equality, and global self-determination.²²⁵

As the crowds filtered out of the capital, the fledgling group met at the Park Sheraton Hotel to plan their next actions and establish the formal organization. After five hours of deliberations, a national committee was formed with Conrad Lynn as acting chairman and Harlem Nine veteran Pernella Wattlely as corresponding secretary. The group also emerged with plans for a sit-in at the FBI’s headquarters to protest the agency’s inaction amidst the unabated racial terrorism sweeping through the South that had claimed the life of Medgar Evers two months prior.²²⁶

The formation of the FNP was met with predictably polarizing receptions from white commenters, moderate civil rights leaders, and Black communities. In an editorial published two days before the MOW, the *New York Times* declared that the FNP would “extend racism into politics,” increase divisiveness, and embolden white

²²⁵ “The Declaration of Washington,” August 28, 1963, Michigan Committee for a Freedom Now Party, September 1963, Box 2, Folder 12, Mallory Papers; Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour*, 84-87.

²²⁶ For details on the sit-in and meeting with J. Edgar Hoover, see Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour*, 85-87.

racists in the South. Further, the editorial cited the great progress African Americans had made in recent years and arrogantly stated that the party's formation "implies a total misunderstanding of the nature of our political parties and the great flexibility of the American political system."²²⁷ Similar sentiments were expressed in a letter to the editor of the *Amsterdam News* from a Long Island City resident, who reflected the general concerns and opposition of white communities to the FNP that would come to characterize popular responses to "Black Power" three years later. "You are fighting...for freedom, equality, etc. and now fighting for segregation?" the writer pointedly queried, while offering a prediction that "confusion and violence will lose the gains made."²²⁸

These sentiments echoed in the responses of some conservative Black leaders, such as novelist and *Pittsburgh Courier* editor George Schuyler, who referred to Lynn and Worthy as "crackpots."²²⁹ Roy Wilkins, however, was notable for his lukewarm embrace of the FNP, demonstrating the successes that the militant Black masses had in shifting the scales of "acceptable" political thought and action. While stating that he "would hate to see purely racial political action in this country," Wilkins also conceded that "white people in the South have made the

²²⁷ "Racism in Politics," *The New York Times*, August 26, 1963.

²²⁸ Justus Seebode, "Why 3rd Party?," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 14, 1963.

²²⁹ George S. Schuyler, "The World Today," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, September 7, 1963.

parties white parties, and the only logical answer for the Negro is to raise a black party."²³⁰

Though Malcolm X and the NOI had played a significant role in promoting Black separatism at the grassroots and prompted local organizations to adopt similar political analyses, the response of Wilkins is significant for its demonstration of Black nationalist thought entering the discourse of mainstream of civil rights leadership. Although the NOI's continued abstinence from political involvement prevented Malcolm X from giving an explicit endorsement when asked for comment on the FNP, he did point toward the latent power the eight million unregistered Black voters across the nation possessed. If this massive base was activated and organized, Malcolm posited, "they would upset the entire political picture."²³¹

At a Harlem rally that June, Malcolm had made his position on the oppressive nature of the American political system characteristically plain. "The Conservative is a wolf, he lets you know that he does not want you around. The Liberal is a fox, he pretends to be your friend," Malcolm explained to the crowd of 2,500 gathered at the corner of 115th and Lenox. "Both are dogs, and whatever the Negro chooses he is still in the doghouse."²³² Though Malcolm himself played no formal role in the organization of the FNP, it was abundantly clear that his brand of nationalist

²³⁰ "Wilkins Warns of Racial Trouble if Congress Fails on Civil Rights," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, September 14, 1963.

²³¹ Marable, *Malcolm X*, 267.

²³² Memo from Det. Ernest B. Latty to Commanding Officer, June 30, 1963, BOSS Records.

thought and analysis had formatively influenced this new direction in Black political action.

As the collective high from the MOW quickly receded, particularly in the wake of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham two weeks later, the FNP's national committee got to work in Harlem. In the minds of the more radical factions of the Movement, and even in some of the mainstream leadership, the March had created an "impasse" from which organizations would need to emerge with new tactics and broader objectives or risk losing precious momentum and leverage. From their office on 125th Street, Lynn, Wattle, and the FNP worked to move the focus of the national movement from protest to politics by coordinating a national grassroots political campaign ahead of the 1964 election cycle. In contrast to the hierarchal status quo of the national two-party system, the national office of the FNP was designed to serve as a facilitating body, while the party's platform and policies were to be defined collaboratively at the grassroots. Worthy described his visions for the process in an article in *Liberator* that fall, in which he invited every reader to form "a study and action group of six to ten persons meeting regularly in homes, maintaining contact with other such groups in the same community, federating to form local committees for a Freedom Now Party, and working towards a founding congress of the new party."²³³ Over the next several months, local and regional committees worked to develop a draft of the FNP's first platform, which *Liberator* would publish in early 1964.

²³³ William Worthy, "An All Black Party," *Liberator* 3, no. 10 (October 1963), 18-19.

Through the economic, political, and cultural aspects of the platform, the FNP put forth a national program to transform the groundswell of Black nationalist thought into a workable “political vehicle” to unite the masses and effect systemic social change.²³⁴ The economic platform contained provisions for collective ownership of multiple dwelling housing in cities, nationalization of industries threatened by automation, a universal healthcare program, and federal aid for the “economic and cultural rehabilitation” of all Black communities. The political platform cited the necessity of unified political action at local, regional, and national levels, flexibility and democratic participation in defining policies and programs, and the primacy of functional policies over emotional positions.

The cultural platform was the most extensive and centered around a program of “Cultural Revolution.” Likely influenced by FNP member Harold Cruse’s analysis of the primacy of African American cultural institutions in social revolution, the program called for the democratization and nationalization of cultural production in American society and pointed to the necessity of progressive cultural production for advancing unification of the African American masses.²³⁵ Through this platform, which showed the influence of the leftist and nationalist movements of prior generations as well as the “New Afro-American Nationalism” surging in Harlem and beyond, the FNP evinced their intentions for a clean break with the “liberal wing of the Democratic Party” and mainstream civil rights leadership to

²³⁴ “Freedom Now Party: Draft National Platform,” *Liberator* 4 (February 1964), 4-5.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

bring about fundamental economic, political, and cultural changes in American society.

Freedom Now, Malcolm X, and Revolutionary Nationalism at the Grass Roots

While the national committee was at work in New York City on both building a political party and coordinating public protests to draw local attention to national politics, the most influential of the regional committees was organizing its base in Michigan.²³⁶ Under the direction of Rev. Albert Cleage, Jr., the militant preacher in Detroit who had been leading campaigns there against urban renewal, educational inequality, and police brutality, the Michigan Committee of the FNP effectively mobilized the state's radical milieu for political action. At the fore of Cleage's network of associations was the Group on Advanced Leadership (GOAL), one of the city's most radical organizations, which he had founded alongside Milton and Richard Henry (Gaidi and Imari Obadele) in 1961. By the summer of 1963, the militant and nationalist politics that Cleage and the Henry brothers embraced had earned GOAL such notable allies as Malcolm X and James and Grace Lee Boggs, but also drew the scorn of mainstream civil rights leaders whose gradualist positions they openly criticized.²³⁷

The rift between mainstream leadership and grassroots radicalism that was sweeping the nation that summer was stark in Detroit, as Cleage clashed with Rev.

²³⁶ In October 1963, William Worthy was arrested along with eight others for blocking the entrance of the Waldorf-Astoria in midtown where Robert F. Kennedy was slated to deliver an address. "Pickets Seized Before Speech By Robert Kennedy," *New York Times*, October 6, 1963.

²³⁷ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour*, 56-58.

C.L. Franklin over the involvement of leftists and nationalists in a coordinating conference for northern civil rights leaders planned for the fall. Conceived as a follow-up to the Walk for Freedom, a widely successful dress rehearsal for the March on Washington, the Northern Negro Leadership Conference was planned as a national forum on the state of the Civil Rights Movement with Cleage as chair of the planning committee. However, as Peniel Joseph notes, Cleage's invitation of Dan Watts, William Worthy, and Conrad Lynn as speakers drove a wedge between the conference chair and Franklin, a close associate of Dr. King who objected to "black nationalists and other radical groups" taking over the event.²³⁸ As a result of the split, Cleage opted to organize his own conference that was more reflective of the calls for "Freedom Now," self-determination, economic justice, and revolutionary nationalism that were resonating at the grassroots.

It was this split that launched the Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference and provided the impetus for the delivery of Malcolm X's most powerful and significant public address to this point. While Worthy, Lynn, and Wattley were busy building the framework for a national Freedom Now Party, Malcolm had been actively promoting secular political action and the need for a Black united front at a series of street rallies in New York City that summer. "Around 1963, if anyone had noticed, I spoke less and less of religion," Malcolm X later told Alex Haley. "I taught social doctrine to Muslims, and current events, and politics. I stayed fully off the subject of morality."²³⁹ Speaking to a crowd of 500 at a rally in Brooklyn that July

²³⁸ Ibid, 87.

amidst mass demonstrations against hiring discrimination at the Downstate Medical Center construction site, Malcolm renewed his calls for Afro-American unity and announced that he would “no longer malign other black leaders.”²⁴⁰ Though members of the NOI did not participate in the demonstrations due to their professed rejection of nonviolent direct action, a BOSS detective reported, Malcolm X “made it clear that if at any time the non-violent pickets are in need of Muslim aid they would be present to heed their call.”²⁴¹

At a Harlem rally two weeks prior, Malcolm X was joined by Akbar Muhammad, the Messenger’s youngest son who had just returned from a semester at university in Egypt. After Malcolm explained Harlem’s dire housing conditions as symptomatic of institutional racism, Muhammad issued a call “for unity for all black men in America and eventually for black men all over the world.” Displaying a revolutionary Pan-African vision that would lead the younger Muhammad to split from his father, Akbar Muhammad informed the crowd of 2,500 that several African nations were prepared to break diplomatic relations with the United States. Muhammad reported that one of these nations was even “ready to support the black

²³⁹ Though Malcolm X attributed this change to the revelations of Elijah Muhammad’s sexual transgressions, this transition to a more secular analysis had been years in the making as Malcolm became increasingly disillusioned with Muhammad’s policy of non-engagement in the national Black Freedom Struggle. Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 294.

²⁴⁰ It is worth noting that just a month before this profession, Malcolm X had derided the Urban League as a “bourgeois” organization and called Martin Luther King, Jr. an “Uncle Tom” before a crowd of 2,500 at a rally at 115th St. and Lenox Ave. Memo from Ernest B. Latty to Commanding Officer, June 30, 1963, BOSS Records.

²⁴¹ Memo from John L. Kinsella to Chief Inspector, July 29, 1963, BOSS.

struggle in the US with money, arms, and know how.”²⁴² Through his close rapport with leaders of newly independent African nations, Muhammad had brought visions of Malcolm’s earlier rhetoric about an African American armed anti-colonial struggle in the wake of the Stokes murder out of the abstract and into the realm of possibility for those at the rally.

Like Mae Mallory, whose experiences with incessant racial violence had inspired an embrace of armed revolutionary struggle, the continued State-sanctioned violence inflicted against members of the Nation of Islam, Medgar Evers, and protestors in Birmingham that year pushed Malcolm to support such a struggle in more explicit terms. This revolutionary rhetoric, in turn, was attracting the attention of more militant activists who gravitated toward Malcolm X. One such activist was Sherron Jackson (Amina Rahman), a high school student from Harlem who had been a member of SNCC, Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited (HARYOU), and the Northern Student Movement (NSM). After an impromptu debate with Malcolm X at protests at the Harlem Hospital construction site that summer challenged her to reconsider her positions on nonviolence and integration, Rahman disavowed her involvement with the Civil Rights Movement and joined the Nation of Islam—despite her apprehensions about the Nation’s theology, gender roles, and reticence toward political action.²⁴³ For Rahman, Malcolm X was the draw and over

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Interview with Amina Rahman, 1992, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.

the next several months she was a regular fixture with him on stage at street rallies in Harlem.

At these rallies, Rahman routinely criticized her prior participation in nonviolent demonstrations to achieve integration, arguing that freedom is not the right to dine at an integrated restaurant, but rather the right to “own the land on which the lunch counter stands.”²⁴⁴ In addition to this type of economic nationalism derived from Malcolm’s analysis, Rahman also demonstrated an embrace of the revolutionary nationalism that was beginning to characterize Malcolm’s rhetoric. Speaking at a mass rally at 114th Street and Lenox Avenue that September, Rahman told the crowd of 700 that Black Americans “will never gain anything until they see the light and place their faith in a god who will represent them. When this is done black people will then be united in the world wide black revolution and will then stop turning the other cheek and fight force with force.”²⁴⁵

Though the words were her own, Rahman’s address echoed the sentiments of a statement made by Malcolm X at a rally they both spoke at a week earlier. “You don’t get freedom non-violently, without bloodshed or by turning the other cheek,” Malcolm explained to the thousands gathered near Mosque No. 7. “You don’t get freedom without being willing to fight for it.”²⁴⁶ Malcolm’s call to action would take

²⁴⁴ Memo from Ernest B. Latty to Commanding Officer, September 9, 1963, BOSS Records.

²⁴⁵ Memo from Frederick Jenoure to Commanding Officer, September 14, 1963, BOSS Records.

²⁴⁶ Memo from Ernest B. Latty to Commanding Officer, September 9, 1963, BOSS Records.

on an even greater sense of urgency a week later when a white supremacist's bomb ripped through the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, stealing the lives of four young Black girls.

Coming amidst a national wave of heightened militancy, direct action confrontations, and white reactionary violence, Malcolm's speeches at these rallies in New York City throughout the spring and summer of 1963 laid the groundwork for his address at the Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference in Detroit that November. As Malcolm X strode to the pulpit of the King Solomon Baptist Church on November 10th, he was greeted by the applause of nearly 2,000 Black people of all political stripes who had gathered there instead of at the more moderate conference being held at Cobo Hall. Among the thousands packed into the church's pews were 138 of the 500 civil rights leaders that had been invited to C.L. Franklin's conference—along with many others who had been purposefully excluded— dwarfing the meager 22 who had showed up to the NNLC.²⁴⁷

That the Grass Roots Leadership Conference had attracted greater participation than the NNLC was indicative of the increasingly popular identification with the grassroots militancy represented by the Conference's conveners, including Rev. Cleage, James and Grace Lee Boggs, and the Henry brothers, as well as the invited speakers, such as William Worthy, Donald Freeman, and Malcolm X. During a series of workshops the previous day, radical leaders from across the country, including Gloria Richardson, Selma Sparks, Dan Watts, Rev. Milton Galamison,

²⁴⁷ Lowell "Pete" Beveridge, "King's Dilemma," *Liberator* 3 (December 1963), 3; Sterling Gray, "Architect of a Revolution," *Liberator* 3, no. 12 (December 1963), 8-9.

Lawrence Landry, Stanley Branche, and Jesse Gray had collectively analyzed the problems confronting urban Black communities and discussed organizing strategies around self-defense, independent political action, educational equality, and economic empowerment.²⁴⁸

By the time Malcolm X took to the rostrum that Sunday evening, participants had already passed a series of resolutions that included endorsements of the Freedom Now Party, advocacy of self-defense, and support for Mae Mallory's ongoing fight against extradition to North Carolina. In many ways the resolutions passed by this impressive network of leading radical activists, as Stephen Ward notes, indicated "a direct connection to the nationalist organizations and black radical politics that had developed over the preceding two years."²⁴⁹ Thus, when it came time for Malcolm X to speak, he was addressing a crowd that was bearing the fruits of the "New Afro-American Nationalism" that he and many of the other participants had cultivated in Harlem.

The speech that Malcolm X delivered that evening, now immortalized as his "Message to the Grass Roots," represented a synthesis of the varying strands of secular nationalism, anti-colonialism, Pan-Africanism, and revolutionary nationalism that had been bubbling up to the surface of his speeches over the

²⁴⁸ Sharon Harley, "Chronicle of a Death Foretold": Gloria Richardson, the Cambridge Movement, and the Radical Black Activist Tradition," in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, eds. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 190; Stephen Ward, *In Love and Struggle: The Revolutionary Lives of James and Grace Lee Boggs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 311.

²⁴⁹ Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 312.

previous several years. Indeed many of the comments, analogies, and turns of phrase he would use that night had been heard by crowds in Harlem months earlier. After reiterating his calls for a Black united front in opposition to a white “common enemy,” Malcolm swiftly took up the complex topic of revolution and characteristically “made it plain” for those in the pews.

Drawing from the histories of various successful revolutions across the globe, including ongoing anti-colonial liberation struggles on the African continent, Malcolm distilled their lessons to offer a biting rebuke of the limited scope of integrationists and moderate civil rights leaders, as well as a charge to would-be Black revolutionaries. In his analysis, there existed within the Afro-American Freedom Struggle a decisive contestation between those who advocated for a “Negro revolution” and those who sought a “black revolution.” The former represented the middle-class, moderate leadership, while the latter more closely resembled the radical consciousness surging at the grassroots. “There’s no such thing as a nonviolent revolution,” Malcolm explained, “the only kind of revolution that is nonviolent is the Negro revolution.” In real revolutions, he continued, oppressed communities did not seek integration with their oppressors, but rather sought self-determination by breaking free from such a society by any means necessary and asserting their right to independence by claiming land through armed struggle. “A revolutionary wants land so he can set up his own nation, an independent nation,” he argued, “these Negroes aren’t asking for any nation—

they're trying to crawl back on the plantation.”²⁵⁰ Malcolm's espousal of Black liberation and nation-building through an armed revolution marked a distinct evolution in his political thought and program. Whereas his previous speeches under the aegis of Elijah Muhammad had called for the United States to grant Black Americans monetary and territorial reparations to establish an independent Black nation under threat of Allah's destructive wrath, he was now calling for Black Americans to act as their own liberators and take up the necessary tools to dismantle an oppressive society and build their own anew.

After laying out his analysis of revolutionary struggle, Malcolm X invited the audience to consider what he saw as the historical roots of the division amongst the ranks in Black America that was stifling the nascent revolutionary fervor of the masses. It was here that Malcolm most famously put forth his analogy of the “house Negro” and the “field Negro,” which he had raised on occasion in years prior. In his analysis, the moderate, middle-class leadership of the Civil Rights Movement were the heirs of “house Negroes,” who Malcolm argued identified with their white masters and protected his interests as their own. “That house Negro loved his master, but that field Negro—remember, they were in the majority, and they hated the master,” Malcolm explained, “when the master got sick, the field Negro prayed that he'd die.”

To Malcolm, this dichotomy between the “house Negro” and the “field Negro” was analogous to the differences between middle-class civil rights moderates and

²⁵⁰ George Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 4-10.

the disenfranchised Black masses—a type of divergence that been playing out in Harlem over the previous decade and was coming to define a broader rift that was widening within the national movement. Driving his point home, Malcolm argued that as the slavemasters of old had used the “house Negroes” to “keep the field Negroes in check,” the “same old slavemaster today has Negroes who are nothing but modern Uncle Toms...to keep you and me in check, to keep us under control, to keep us passive and peaceful and nonviolent.”²⁵¹ To support his claim, Malcolm pointed to the co-optation of the March on Washington by the Kennedy administration and white religious and labor groups who he argued had defanged the mass mobilization of its planned disruptive militancy. Through this analogy, Ward notes, Malcolm delivered his central message to the Black masses: “the civil rights movement and its leadership could only offer a ‘Negro revolution’; it could not bring black liberation. It was up to the black masses—the grass roots—the descendants of field Negroes, to move the struggle ahead and to achieve full and complete liberation.”²⁵²



Malcolm X’s keynote address marked the apogee of a two-day conference that sought to re-evaluate and redefine the Black Freedom Struggle in the midst of what *Liberator* magazine dubbed “the year of violence.” Despite the federal government’s professed support for the ideals of equal rights, the slow pace of reform coupled with the increasingly repressive measures and reactionary violence

²⁵¹ Ibid, 10-12.

²⁵² Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 313.

meted out by those with a vested interest in white supremacy had forced a referendum within the national Civil Rights Movement on the ideologies of nonviolence, integration, self-defense, self-determination, nationalism, and revolution. Far from an organic response to systemic violence, this reckoning was spurred by local people and radical activists who had been engaged in militant grassroots struggles for economic justice, fair housing, equal education, and political power in Harlem and other communities across the nation. In many ways, these grassroots struggles had both spawned and advanced the New Afro-American Nationalism which John Henrik Clarke had described two years earlier, and was now beginning to chart the course of the national Black Freedom Struggle. And while Malcolm's "Message to the Grass Roots" speech, as Cedric Johnson notes, "conveys the critical spirit of the New Afro-American Nationalism," the influence of the local people and grassroots intellectuals who served as midwife for this strain of the movement must be acknowledged.²⁵³

Though the grassroots organizing of Mae Mallory and Malcolm X during this period largely marked a disavowal of working within the confines of the political system, their contributions to the evolution of the Black Freedom Struggle in Harlem and throughout the nation were based less on scoring piecemeal victories through policy reform than on empowering a Black radical consciousness that would become a revolutionary force in America. This emphasis on psychological liberation and radical imagination was central to the organizing efforts of Mae Mallory during

²⁵³ Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 50.

this formative period of struggles for rights and power in Harlem. As Ashley D. Farmer contends, through her intersectional political analysis and praxis, Mae Mallory “argued that, for black working-class women, adopting a nationalist political agenda and militant persona was a viable path to liberation, but only if they were willing to reimagine themselves as vital nationalist political actors.”²⁵⁴

While both weathered the criticism of moderate, middle-class leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and radical intellectuals alike for what they perceived as a dearth of a practical program for bringing forth their radical political analysis, these types of critiques failed to appreciate the formative psychological contributions that Mallory and Malcolm X made to the evolution of the Black Freedom Struggle. As William Sales has pointed out, these types of contributions were minimized by Mallory and Malcolm’s contemporaries—as well as scholars—because such analyses overlooked the significance of “intellectual and emotional” mobilization within liberation struggles. Citing sociologist Max Weber, Sales argues that the social movements that Malcolm X and Mallory orchestrated during this period “provide the strong emotional support necessary to make the initial break with the dominance of oppressive ideas over the thinking of the exploited. Once that break is made, organizational development seems to accelerate.”²⁵⁵ Like Jesse Gray, who saw tenant organizing as a vehicle by which to draw local people into broader struggles for Black liberation and political transformation, Mae Mallory and Malcolm X sought to unleash the revolutionary potential of the Black masses through their grassroots

²⁵⁴ Farmer, *Remaking Black Power*, 48.

²⁵⁵ Sales, *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation*, 43.

organizing, radical rhetoric, and practical embodiment of the New Afro-American Nationalism in Harlem.

While Malcolm's "Message to the Grass Roots" heralded this radical evolution of Black Freedom Struggles nationally, it also marked a watershed moment in his personal evolution. As they sat listening to his gripping speech that day, Gloria Richardson and Grace Lee Boggs could not help but notice something different in Malcolm X. "It seemed to me that he was coming just a little bit away from the sectarian kind of religion thing," Richardson later recalled. "It sounded like the preface that he always gave to those speeches was becoming more rote."²⁵⁶ Richardson was now hearing firsthand what careful observers in Harlem would have surely noticed throughout that spring and summer. Boggs also took notice of this curt way in which Malcolm delivered his ordinarily effusive homage to Elijah Muhammad in his speech that evening. To Boggs, this seemingly trivial aspect of his powerful address was telling of a deeper evolution in Malcolm's political consciousness and analysis. "The tribute to Mr. Muhammad was so nominal and mechanical as contrasted with the passion and urgency in his 'off-the-cuff, down-to-earth chat' that I whispered into the ear of Rev. Cleage who was sitting next to me on the platform, 'Malcolm's going to split with Mr. Muhammad.'²⁵⁷ Though Grace Lee Boggs had no way of knowing the impending firestorm that would embroil the Nation of Islam in the days to come following the assassination of John F. Kennedy

²⁵⁶ Interview with Gloria Richardson, July 1, 1992, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.

²⁵⁷ Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 129.

and the revelations of Elijah Muhammad's infidelities, her intuition proved prescient. "After two decades of attending political meetings," Boggs later reflected, "my ear had become sensitized to the rhetorical changes that suggest that a radical political change is in the offing."²⁵⁸

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 6

“TALKING AND ACTING IN OUR INTEREST”: INTERRACIAL ORGANIZING AND BLACK COMMUNITY POWER IN HARLEM, 1960-1963

If we are successful...in getting the support of the Black Nationalists including Malcolm X we will need to offset the impact of their participation by involving as much of the white community as possible. We are playing with dynamite. The nationalists have a stronghold in Harlem; and we may have to choose between the possibility of having them with us or against us. –Carl Anthony (1962)¹

If bigotry would slow down, then it might be possible to consider the argument of gradualism. The fact is that bigotry and indifference makes steady inroads into our communities and our fight must be hard, constant and effective. The Negro is like a man being strangled. We say stop the choking now, at once. You can't afford to be gradual about stopping a strangulation. –Gladys Harrington (1963)²

In the fall of 1959, thousands of New York City residents received a letter from James Robinson, the executive director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). “Many say that the Battle for Brotherhood is being lost in the great cities of the North,” the letter read, “while advances are painfully made in the South.” From their national headquarters in downtown Manhattan, Robinson and other CORE officials had surely borne witness to the turmoil that was swelling uptown that summer as Black communities fought for their liberation in the chambers of the NAACP’s national convention, on the airwaves of local television stations, and in the streets of Harlem. Though Robinson tacitly acknowledged the progresses which had

¹ Letter from Carl Anthony to Peter Countryman, June 19, 1962, Box 8, Folder 10, Northern Student Movement Records, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (henceforth referred to as NSM Records).

² Thomas A. Johnson, “Freedom Now Or Gradualism Fight on in L.I.,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 12, 1963.

been made in New York, largely through the efforts of local people in Harlem and elsewhere, he also noted “there is no doubt that much segregation remains here, and racial tensions have been rising.”³

A white, Catholic pacifist from upstate New York, Robinson was a founding member of CORE in 1942 and had spearheaded the New York chapter’s direct action campaigns in support of the Sharkey-Brown-Isaacs fair housing bill in 1957 shortly after he was named executive director of the national organization.⁴ Though CORE claimed credit for the passage of this landmark housing legislation and garnered much media attention for their efforts, the local chapter and the national organization had been largely moribund in the late 1950s—despite the dramatic resurgence of struggles for African American rights and power locally and nationally. Even as tenant organizing and fair housing campaigns had come alive by the end of the decade in ways unseen since the Left-led housing activism of the Depression-era, NY CORE was largely a bystander to this heightened mobilization. To Robinson, CORE’s marginalization during these years demonstrated a need to re-tool the interracial organization’s programs to more adequately combat the institutional nature of Jim Crow society in the urban North. “The challenge lies in

³ Letter from James R. Robinson to New Yorkers, November 30, 1959, The Papers of the Congress of Racial Equality, 1941-1967 (microfilm), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (henceforth referred to as CORE Papers).

⁴ August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 5-6, 94-95.

making CORE work in large northern cities,” Robinson wrote in the fall of 1959, “and unless we can do this, CORE is outmoded except in the border and southern states.”⁵

All this would change at the turn of the decade, as a new wave of southern student activism reinvigorated the Civil Rights Movement and launched CORE back into national prominence at the forefront of the Movement. Through their active support of the sit-ins in early 1960 and their inception of the Freedom Rides the following spring, CORE mobilized communities throughout the nation—Black and white—to engage in direct action campaigns in support of the southern movement and in service of freedom struggles in their own neighborhoods. While the initial “sympathy strikes” brought individuals into the fold of organized action, northern CORE chapters quickly seized on the momentum generated by the southern movement to wage local campaigns for fair housing practices, equal employment opportunities, and police reform.

At the same time, however, local people in New York City and throughout the nation were pushing their local CORE chapters, and consequently the national organization, to adopt more militant tactics to achieve more immediate and expansive liberation in their own communities. In Harlem, specifically, where a deeply rooted radical political milieu had begun to flower at the grassroots, Black communities saw CORE not as a messianic force in civil rights struggles, but rather as a vehicle by which they could realize their demands for human rights and self-determination. New York native and CORE member Jimmy McDonald succinctly expressed the way many Black residents of Harlem felt about interracial, nonviolent

⁵ Ibid, 94.

organizations like CORE during these years when he told an interviewer, “to hell with the way you go as long as you are on the road towards my freedom.”⁶

In the wake of the Freedom Rides in 1961, another interracial organization joined CORE “on the road” toward Black liberation in Harlem. Growing out of a shared concern for supporting the student-led movement in the South, the Northern Student Movement (NSM) drew waves of college students from their campuses into northern cities beginning in 1962. Largely organized by white college students on the pristine campuses of liberal arts colleges in New England, the formation of the NSM in the fall of 1961 marked the emergence of a network of students outside of the South who saw their fate in America as intertwined with their southern counterparts fighting for equality and justice many miles away.

Though many of these students were drawn into the fledgling organization through its early fundraising campaigns for SNCC, most came to see northern cities as the next frontier of the Civil Rights Movement. “New York is the most important city in America,” Columbia University student Carl Anthony wrote in the summer of 1962. “A really dynamic student civil rights movement here would set the North on fire.”⁷ Like CORE, however, the ideologies that initially guided NSM’s organizational praxis quickly evolved as its members established “projects” in several northern

⁶ Jimmy McDonald interview with James Mosby, November 5, 1969, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

⁷ Letter from Carl Anthony to Peter Countryman, June 19, 1962, Box 8, Folder 10, NSM Records.

cities and became immersed in the Black radical traditions of communities in Harlem, Philadelphia, Boston, and New Haven.

This chapter traces the development of both CORE and NSM in Harlem from 1960-1963 to analyze the ways in which local people shaped the emergence and evolution of national organizations in ways that transformed broader struggles for Black liberation. Beginning as interracial organizations dedicated to supporting the southern Civil Rights Movement through fundraising and nonviolent direct action campaigns, by 1963 these organizations had shifted their focus to community-based organizing for Black equality and empowerment in the urban north. Through the active involvement and influence of grassroots organizations and indigenous leaders, these organizations would transform their positions on integration, community-based organizing, self-determination, nationalism, and nonviolence, and in the process, emerge as leading forces in northern Black freedom struggles.

“I should get on that line”: Sympathy Strikes and CORE’s National Revival

News of the sit-ins in Nashville and Greensboro swept across the nation in the early months of 1960, leaving few places or people untouched by the bold actions of young African American students willing to put their bodies on the line for desegregation and civil rights. Even in communities like Harlem where African American-led struggles for rights and power were already in motion, the southern students energized and inspired local people to greater action in their shared struggle. As the sit-ins spread across the South, civil rights organizations in New York mobilized protests of department stores like Woolworth’s and S.H. Kress to pressure the national chains to end their segregationist policies. With many in its

Black community already in step with the tempo of organizing set during the summer of 1959, Harlem became the locus for the emergence of sympathy protests in New York.

From February through October of that year, New York CORE was among a handful of organizations that led pickets, demonstrations, and sit-ins at department stores in Harlem and throughout the city. Two weeks after the sit-ins in Greensboro, NC captivated the nation, members of NY CORE and Columbia University CORE launched their first sympathy protest in New York City at the Woolworth's store on 125th Street and Lenox Avenue in Central Harlem. "Within a half hour the store was cleared of customers," Columbia University student and CORE picket captain Martin Smolin wrote. "Hardly anybody on this busy thoroughfare crossed our picket lines."⁸

Over the next several weeks, CORE collaborated with a range of community leaders and organizations, including radical attorney and State Assemblyman Mark Lane, Mae Mallory and the New York Crusader Family, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the NAACP, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, and Jesse Gray and the Lower Harlem Tenants Council (LHTC), as part of an ad hoc coalition to coordinate protests throughout the city. With his flair for spectacle, Gray and LHTC Director Horace Townsend led one of the more colorful protests that February when demonstrators carried a casket on a picket line in front of the Woolworth's on 116th Street to signify the death of Jim Crow.⁹

⁸ Martin Smolin, "The North: 'We Walk So They May Sit,'" in CORE, "Sit Ins: The Student Report," May 1960, NYPD Inspectional Services Bureau Records, New York City Municipal Archives (henceforth referred to as BOSS Records).

Among those on the initial picket lines was Jimmy McDonald, a Yonkers native who had become involved with the local NAACP as a teenager in the late 1940s after a trip to Richmond, VA where he “saw a black man hanging” and Klansmen roaming about. “It was from that day on,” McDonald later recalled, “that I began to become conscious of my blackness, in the fact that I was a 14 year old kid out here who had to make it in this white man’s world.” By the late 1950s, McDonald had become a fixture as a singer and actor in the café scene in Greenwich Village, where he first caught wind of CORE’s planned “sympathy strikes” in Harlem. The national coverage of the Greensboro sit-ins captivated McDonald, who by this time had become disillusioned with the perceived inactivity of the civil rights establishment he had previously been involved with. “The NAACP wasn’t doing a goddamn thing,” he later recalled, “they were still having their cocktail sips and it was the elite organization of the black bourgeoisie.”

Having participated in earlier CORE struggles to desegregate a public pool in the Palisades in New Jersey, McDonald was anxious to re-engage in direct action struggles after serving in mainly a fundraising capacity through his performances over the past several years. So when NY CORE announced their plans to picket Woolworth’s on 125th Street, McDonald recalled, “it was only natural before I went to work that night I should get on that line. And I did that.” For McDonald, joining in the picket line alongside CORE veterans James Peck and Marvin Rich proved an impetus for his greater engagement in the organization. In the following weeks and

⁹ Memo from Ernest B. Latty to Commanding Officer, February 25, 1960, BOSS Records.

months, McDonald would spend his days in the CORE office and his nights in the cafés of Greenwich Village.¹⁰

As the weather began to warm that spring, members of NY CORE expanded their campaigns against Woolworth stores throughout the city. Aroused to action by the disturbing images of white mobs attacking peaceful students at southern lunch counters and the increased mobilization in the streets of Harlem, Black communities throughout New York, along with some whites, heeded the call to “get in step with our brother and sister youth in the South.” By early April, CORE members were coordinating pickets and sit-ins at scores of Woolworth’s in all five boroughs of the city. The high point of the protests came the first weekend of that month, when CORE spearheaded the picketing of over 80 Woolworth’s across the city, culminating in a mass rally in front of the Hotel Theresa where Bayard Rustin, Jackie Robinson, and A. Philip Randolph addressed a crowd of 3,000.¹¹

Though the pickets had mobilized thousands and drastically reduced Woolworth’s patronage in New York City that weekend, illustrated by photos of an empty lunch counter at the 125th Street store in the *Amsterdam News*, many CORE leaders saw these northern protests as little more than a means to an end of dismantling southern segregation. “We don’t want to put Woolworth stores and others out of business in the North by our picket lines,” CORE field secretary Gordon

¹⁰ Jimmy McDonald interview with James Mosby, November 5, 1969.

¹¹ T.R. Bassett, “3,000 Picket in Harlem To Aid South Sitdowners,” *New York Herald Tribune*, April 3, 1960; “First Sit-In Staged At Store Here,” *New York Herald Tribune*, April 3, 1960.

Carey told reporters that weekend. “We just want to put justice in business in the South.”¹²

Though the contributions of CORE chapters and supporters in New York City in reaching their goal of southern desegregation are immeasurable, as Meier and Rudwick note, the national leadership believed that their national boycott campaign had been directly responsible for the 8.9 per cent drop in sales from the previous year that Woolworth’s reported in March 1960.¹³ These economic sanctions, in turn, had compelled southern stores to reconsider their racially discriminatory policies. By July, when the stores in Greensboro began serving Black customers, Woolworth’s had begun to desegregate its stores in 27 southern cities. Within the next few weeks, ninety towns in eleven southern states had reported changes in their local store’s racist policies.¹⁴ Locally, the sympathy strikes also had the significant impact of drawing students and local people, like Jimmy McDonald, into the active ranks of NY CORE and into direct action campaigns in their communities.

Although their vanguard efforts in Harlem had helped the national organization coerce the desegregation of southern department stores and lunch counters, NY CORE struggled to find their place within Harlem’s activist milieu in 1960. While predominantly Black organizations like the LHTC and NY Crusader Family had mobilized Harlem communities to join picket lines at local Woolworth’s as part of their broader programs, the mostly white demonstrators from NY CORE

¹² “Plan Stepped Up Picketing,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 9, 1960.

¹³ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 111.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 112.

and Columbia CORE were essentially viewed as interlopers in a majority Black neighborhood when they launched their protests against southern segregation. When the group of students first began walking the picket lines in Harlem that February, according to Brian Purnell, “many black pedestrians looked askance at the overwhelmingly white group.” In a neighborhood where Black nationalist rhetoric resonated from street corners and was increasingly characterizing political thought at the grassroots, the white students stuck out like a sore thumb. However, through active outreach to local churches, civic groups, and politicians, NY CORE eventually earned the endorsement of prominent leaders such as Adam Clayton Powell, who agreed that the problem of segregation was a national issue and urged that all “American citizens interested in democracy stay out of these stores.” Through their outreach and continued presence in front of multiple Woolworth’s, the NY CORE picket lines drew a larger proportion of Black demonstrators by the early spring.¹⁵

Despite the greater racial parity along the picket lines, however, the middle-class orientation of NY CORE’s organizational policies and emphasis on respectability politics stood in the way of building authentic coalitions with grassroots organizations and poor and working-class communities in Harlem. At a February meeting of the chapter, CORE’s white executive director James Robinson stressed that “well-dressed pickets were received more favorably by the public than those who carried casual dress to the extreme,” while others debated the merits of having quiet, orderly picket lines. Two days later, the national office issued

¹⁵ Brian Purnell, *Fighting Jim Crow in the County of Kings: The Congress of Racial Equality in Brooklyn* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2013), 38.

guidelines for all CORE pickets, which closely resembled these discussions of the NY chapter and instructed demonstrators to abstain from any disruptive actions or “abusive” chants or slogans.¹⁶

So when Jesse Gray, Horace Townsend, and the LHTC staged more raucous demonstrations at the picket line on 125th Street, CORE demonstrators were quick to confront the LHTC leaders about the “extremely noisy” protest and their organization’s “lack of discipline.” When Gray and Townsend defended their chanting of slogans, which “had at certain points turned into jeering and wisecracking,” Robinson hesitantly conceded but proposed that the groups sing instead.¹⁷ Although NY CORE had scored a modicum of success in mobilizing Black communities in Harlem through their sympathy protests, it was clear that the organization would need to reconsider its programs and policies at the local and national levels in order to get in step with the rhythm of grassroots organizing in Harlem.

As a result of their efforts to actively support the southern sit-in movement, CORE witnessed an exponential growth in 1960. From July through December of that year, the number of chapters grew from 24 to 49 nationwide. Despite this national growth, however, there remained only a handful of chapters outside the South, and most of these chapters were predominantly white.¹⁸ Furthermore, the flurry of activity that year strained the capacities of the national office and exposed

¹⁶ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 111.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

rifts over leadership styles and organizational philosophies. To Marvin Rich, a white Army veteran, member of NY CORE and the National Action Committee, and CORE's national community relations director, the bureaucratic leadership style of national director James Robinson was inhibiting CORE's emergence as a front-line civil rights organization.¹⁹ According to Rich, the decision to name James Farmer as national director in 1961 was the culmination of extensive internal efforts to shift CORE from "essentially a leader organization to a mass organization." At the same time, the national office realized that Black leadership was critical to actualizing this shift to a "mass organization."²⁰

As a predominantly white, middle-class organization as late as 1961, Rich and others in the national office understood that for CORE to build a mass movement they needed to appeal to greater numbers of African Americans, specifically poor and working-class communities. Jimmy McDonald was just one of many who "resented the fact" that the interracial civil rights organization was led primarily by white men like Rich, Robinson, and field staffer Gordon Carey.²¹ By hiring Farmer, a dynamic speaker with a magnetic personality, CORE sought to draw upon the successes of charismatic leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and energetic college students who were effectively mobilizing and empowering Black communities in the South in the late 1950s. "Lots of things were done to make the

¹⁹ Ibid, 126-131.

²⁰ Marvin Rich interview with James Mosby, November 6, 1969, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

²¹ Jimmy McDonald interview with James Mosby, November 5, 1969.

organization more appealing to black masses,” Rich recalled. Hiring Farmer to succeed James Robinson “was done in part with that in mind.”²² Though the organization remained steadfast in its position on building an interracial mass movement, CORE’s selection of James Farmer as national director represented a tacit acknowledgement of the organizational imperative of rising calls at the grassroots for Black self-determination within civil rights organizations in the early 1960s.

“We have much to learn as well as do”: New York CORE Moves Uptown

Though the sit-in campaigns marked the emergence of NY CORE and spawned the formation of other chapters, most notably Brooklyn CORE, it was also clear that the northern chapters of CORE needed to chart their own course of action if they were to confront the racism deeply embedded within northern cities. That February, when CORE’s National Action Committee appointed James Farmer as the organization’s new national director, the twenty-year veteran of struggles for civil rights made clear his intentions to bring the organization into step with the demands of northern Black communities whose interests in southern sympathy campaigns had waned. Speaking at the national convention that year, Farmer explained that the northern chapters of the organization could not survive solely “on sympathy with the South,” but needed to engage in local struggles that addressed the range of pressing needs in the North.²³ “CORE’s method of direct, non-violent action will be used in aggressive efforts during the coming year to end the evil of

²² Marvin Rich interview with James Mosby, November 6, 1969.

²³ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 131, 182.

segregation not only at lunch counters," Farmer announced, "but also in theaters, housing, employment and transportation."²⁴ Despite the ongoing dramatic struggles for civil rights in the south, Farmer and others in the national office put a premium on organizing in the urban north, particularly in New York City where CORE's national headquarters was located. Farmer wasted little time in setting the organization's northern agenda, telling *Amsterdam News* reporters just days after his appointment that CORE's top priorities would be "the complete wiping out of discrimination in housing" and "the end of segregation in employment" in the city.²⁵

By the time Farmer dedicated the national office to open-housing campaigns in the city, NY CORE's housing secretary Gladys Harrington had already laid the groundwork for such efforts. Born in Gainesville, Florida in 1928, Harrington had graduated from Florida A&M and participated in the 1956 Tallahassee bus boycotts before moving to Corona, Queens in the late 1950s.²⁶ A social worker by day, Harrington quickly established herself amongst the leadership ranks of NY CORE, and by the spring of 1960 she was coordinating open housing drives throughout New York City. Although NY CORE had been an active supporter of the 1957 Sharkey-Brown-Issacs Bill which outlawed racial discrimination in housing rentals, discriminatory rental practices persisted in the city and Harrington used the momentum of the sit-in campaigns as a springboard to promote integrated

²⁴ "CORE Gets New National Director," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 4, 1961.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Letter from Marvin Rich to Paul Berger, April 20, 1961, accessed at [www.harlemcore.com /](http://www.harlemcore.com/).

neighborhoods in the city. In the spring of 1960, Harrington announced NY CORE's plans to test the city's enforcement of its fair housing law by having white CORE members apply for rental units after Black applicants had been denied. In cases where Black applicants were denied, but white applicants were accepted for a rental, Harrington led CORE members in demonstrations and sit-ins at rental offices to protest the discrimination, while also filing complaints with the city's Commission On Intergroup Relations.²⁷

Harrington and NY CORE's approach to tackling the housing crisis facing Black communities in New York City was fundamentally different than that of Jesse Gray and other tenants rights activists in the city. Whereas Gray and the LHTC organized tenants to fight against exploitative landlords and for humane housing conditions and political empowerment within Black communities, Harrington's mission was to break down the barriers that restricted Black residents to neighborhoods where poor housing predominated. Upon announcing these early housing efforts, Harrington pointed out that CORE did not intend to wage a "broadside campaign," but rather to assist those who wanted to obtain housing "outside ghetto areas."²⁸

Despite a handful of successes in securing housing for middle-class Black renters in Brooklyn, including future NY CORE chairman Clarence Funnyé in the summer of 1961, CORE's open housing drive was limited in its impacts for two

²⁷ "CORE Starts Direct Action Drive Here," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 14, 1960; "Housing Bias Victims Stage Realty Sit-In," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 20, 1960.

²⁸ Ibid.

primary reasons. First, as Meier and Rudwick note, “few blacks had the money, inclination, and stamina to move into white neighborhoods,” therefore restricting the benefits of CORE’s efforts to those in the Black middle-class while failing to engage poor and working-class communities whose interests were outside the scope of CORE’s organizing.²⁹ Second, by leaning heavily on the city’s Commission on Intergroup Relations CORE fell into the trap of advocating for civil and human rights through an apparatus of the liberal governance which had already proven wholly incapable of bringing forth any meaningful political or social reform. Despite these obvious shortcomings in CORE’s early housing programs, Harrington was influential in employing confrontational direct action tactics to protest housing conditions—a tactic which would come to define CORE’s approach to community organizing in Harlem after she was elected chair of the NY chapter later that year.

Though the sit-in movement and open housing campaigns of 1960-61 buoyed CORE’s national and local reputation, the membership of NY CORE remained dismally low. With a total membership base of less than 50 people, NY CORE was still the largest active chapter outside of the South, but paled in comparison to the number of members and supporters that other organizations in the city claimed.³⁰ In addition to the middle-class bias of their organizing efforts and protest ethos, NY CORE’s bureaucratic membership policies largely discouraged the active

²⁹ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 183-84. It is worth noting that the two-bedroom apartment CORE helped Clarence Funnyé to secure was rented for \$141 per month in 1961. The median income for residents of Central Harlem in 1960 was \$3,480. See HARYOU, *Youth in the Ghetto: A Study of the Consequences of Powerlessness and a Blueprint for Change* (New York: HARYOU, 1964), 133.

³⁰ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 151.

participation of the grassroots. According to Meier and Rudwick, field staff were “instructed to zealously maintain CORE’s tradition of ‘closed membership” by mandating that chapters restrict formal membership to “those who served a probationary period, participated in action projects, received approval from two-thirds of the chapter, and committed themselves to following the CORE Rules For Action.”³¹ In addition to its reputation as a white organization, this rigid membership process contributed to popular perceptions in Harlem that CORE only accepted people with a college education.³²

Furthermore, operating out of a donated office space in mid-town Manhattan, NY CORE was a civil rights organization with no brick and mortar presence within the borough’s largest African American community. Though the members of other groups like the Organization of Young Men and On Guard For Freedom largely lived downtown or in Brooklyn, they also recognized the importance of locating their organizational efforts in the streets of Harlem. Despite the momentum generated by the sit-ins and the minor victories scored in housing integration, these factors left NY CORE floundering in a city where the Black masses were ready to move. This began to change, however, when Farmer became national director in early 1961 and embarked on one of the most impactful and iconic campaigns of the Civil Rights

³¹ Ibid.

³² Doris Innis interview with August Meier, October 12, 1971, Box 56, Folder 9, August Meier Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library (henceforth referred to as Meier Papers).

Movement. "When Jim came in," Jimmy McDonald recalled, "a whole new thing took place."³³

Farmer's appointment that winter coincided with the organization's search for a new national campaign that would allow CORE to penetrate the Deep South with nonviolent direct action while launching the organization into the vanguard of the Civil Rights Movement. "That began another era in CORE," McDonald later said, "Jim came in and they began talking about a freedom ride."³⁴ The same week that Harrington announced NY CORE's plans to apply the Gandhian tactics of non-violent resistance to housing desegregation in New York City, a group of thirteen CORE members left the nation's capital on two Trailways buses headed South. The interracial group, which included NY CORE members James Peck and Jimmy McDonald, set out to test the Supreme Court's recent decision in *Boynton v. Virginia*, which outlawed segregation in interstate bus and train terminals.

As the Freedom Rides grew that spring and summer amid bus bombings, brutal beatings, and relentless violence, activists from throughout the country joined the campaign in waves, departing from points across the South. It was during these latter waves of Freedom Rides that John Lowry, a white student from New York, made the trip to Monroe, NC in early August in an attempt to prove that nonviolent direct action could work in a crucible of white supremacist violence. After dozens were beaten and arrested during nonviolent demonstrations, including SNCC leader James Forman, Lowry was charged with kidnapping alongside Mae

³³ Jimmy McDonald interview with James Mosby, November 5, 1969.

³⁴ Ibid, 19.

Mallory and Robert F. Williams and spent months in jail and years battling the spurious criminal charges. Despite their failure to curb racial violence and segregation in Monroe, the Freedom Riders did largely succeed in eliminating segregation in interstate travel facilities by provoking confrontations that exposed the naked brutality of southern racism and forced federal intervention.

While the Freedom Rides and their impacts upon the Civil Rights Movement have been extensively documented and analyzed, the specific ways in which this watershed campaign influenced the development of NY CORE and local struggles in New York City have received less scholarly attention. Like the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides energized and inspired Black communities in Harlem—particularly the poor and working classes—to engage more actively in local struggles for rights and power. Whereas the sympathy strikes and other demonstrations had previously drawn the support of predominantly white, middle-class protestors, by the summer of 1961 CORE saw an influx of working-class Black participation.

With this changing demographic came a shift in organizational priorities and policies, which came to more closely resemble the grassroots militancy that was beginning to flower in Harlem at this time. Increasingly disillusioned with gradualist approaches to Black equality and empowerment and recognizing CORE as a potential vehicle for social transformation in the wake of the Freedom Rides, this new wave of activists would push the organization to adopt more militant tactics to achieve more immediate and fundamental goals in the months and years to follow. This groundswell of poor and working-class local activists, furthermore, was forcing local and national CORE officials and members to wrestle with the debates over

nonviolence, grassroots community organizing, self-determination, integration, and Black nationalism that were shaping the broader Black Freedom Struggle.³⁵

While NY CORE remained dedicated to its principles of nonviolence and integration during this period, some organizers were also sewing the seeds of a militant nationalism that would flower in the years to follow and cause a major rift amongst the New York chapters. As Farmer's appointment in early 1961 indicated, there were growing demands in New York and across the nation for increased Black representation in the national decision-making bodies of CORE and other civil rights organizations. At the same time, NY CORE and other local chapters were fighting for the decentralization of the national leadership, seeking greater representation in the decision-making process and greater autonomy for local chapters. Gladys Harrington herself expressed concern "that participation in the arm that is responsible for the day to day decisions (program and policy) of CORE by the areas and persons most affected is noticeably absent."³⁶

These struggles came to a head in the fall of 1961, when Harrington and former executive director James Robinson waged a successful struggle to democratize the national organization through restructuring CORE's governing body, the National Action Council.³⁷ More importantly, however, these internal debates were reflective of broader demands for Black community control and self-

³⁵ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 144-46.

³⁶ Letter from Gladys Harrington to Alan Gartner, January 6, 1962, CORE Papers.

³⁷ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 144-46.

determination within both civil rights organizations and American society writ-large. “Perhaps, we are still in the throes of birth pains as a National Civil Rights organization and we have much to learn as well as do,” Harrington suggested in early 1962. “In the process, let us not lose faith with the people we are fighting with and for.”³⁸ With these ends in mind, Harrington and other CORE leaders in the NY metropolitan area increasingly identified their organizational approaches with the needs and aspirations of poor and working-class Black communities who were fueling these calls for more immediate self-determination, human rights, and political empowerment.

Though Harrington and NY CORE struggled throughout 1961 and the following year to devise comprehensive direct action programs that could effectively challenge the systemic racism of the urban north, they did take important steps in this direction. The earlier open housing campaigns had scored only minor, piecemeal victories, but had provided useful lessons on the programmatic limitations of open-housing campaigns that catered to the middle-class. Recognizing the need to develop new programs that would attract the active support of the grassroots, who were quickly becoming the most dynamic force within the Black Freedom Struggle, Harrington announced in September 1961 that NY CORE would be moving its office to Harlem.

By November, NY CORE had set up shop in a building on 125th Street that also housed the New York branch of the NAACP. To the editorial staff of the *Amsterdam*

³⁸ Letter from Gladys Harrington to Alan Gartner, January 6, 1962, CORE Papers.

News, the close proximity of these two major civil rights groups held the promise of a dynamic collaboration that could mobilize the masses in Harlem. “A hard-hitting youthful NAACP branch, working side by side from the same offices, with a free-swinging, two-fisted CORE unit,” an early November editorial predicted, “should cause many who have been too long walking on their heels in this community to get back up on their toes again.”³⁹ While Malcolm X’s calls for a Black united front at this time had largely gone unanswered by integrationist leaders and organizations, the *Amsterdam News* saw the makings of a similar, if more moderate, coalition in CORE’s move uptown. Though the editorial staff may have overestimated the influence of the NAACP in Harlem at this time, they nonetheless recognized the impacts that a youthful organization that championed direct action could have upon the progression of the Movement and the realization of economic, political, and social justice in Harlem.

More than a symbolic gesture, the move to Harlem represented a formative moment in NY CORE’s evolution as a community-based organization. Though some of the chapter’s members objected to the move, arguing that an organization advocating an open society should not move into the “heart” of a “ghetto,” the majority of its membership felt otherwise. “We are desperately trying to get more Negroes involved. That’s why we moved to Harlem,” one of the chapter’s leaders said, while also acknowledging that most of the organization’s efforts to that point had been geared toward “the bourgeois, the educated.”⁴⁰ Though Meier and

³⁹ “Welcome,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 4, 1961.

Rudwick credited the Freedom Rides with stimulating CORE chapters in the North to take a greater interest in grassroots organizing within Black communities, such attribution fails to acknowledge how the existing groundswell of activism in such communities influenced this organizational shift. In actuality, the move to Harlem really signified a tactical recognition of a powerful radical grassroots milieu, nurtured by Black communities and leaders, which had been fueling Black freedom struggles in northern cities.

The grassroots base that CORE sought to attract with their move uptown was part and parcel of this radical milieu. While participating in CORE's nonviolent direct action protests, members of the organization like Harlem native Peggy Trotter Dammond Preacely were also deeply moved by the Black nationalism that was surging in their communities. "We heard Malcolm X speak at the local Muslim mosque, and we hung out late into the night at Micheaux's famous black bookstore on 125th Street," Preacely later wrote.⁴¹ In order to truly get their organization "off the ground" in New York City, the organization would need to tap into this wellspring of radical Black activism in Harlem that was informing grassroots political consciousness and action throughout New York City and the nation. In the years to follow, however, this local radical milieu that NY CORE sought to mobilize into a nonviolent movement for an open society would end up pushing the local and national organization to reconsider many of its positions on integration, self-

⁴⁰ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 198.

⁴¹ Peggy Trotter Dammond Preacely, "It Was Simply In My Blood," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts By Women In SNCC*, ed. Faith S. Holsaert et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 166.

determination, and nonviolence in the service of a more expansive program for Black liberation and social transformation.

“Their fight is now our fight”: The Genesis of the Northern Student Movement

By the time NY CORE made the move uptown, it had become clear that they weren't the only interracial group with their sights set on Harlem. As the Civil Rights Movement surged across the nation in the summer of 1961, an interracial group of Cornell University students left the scenic gorges of Ithaca, New York to get a first hand glimpse of what was happening on the front lines of the Movement. As part of an initiative called “Project Understanding,” the group of seven students visited Harlem that summer to “learn from Lenox Avenue.” “More than most streets in America,” group member Danny Schechter wrote, Lenox Avenue had “a lesson to offer.”⁴²

Led by Schechter, a Jewish labor-relations major at Cornell and Bronx native, the group sought out lessons on the realities of the Jim Crow North in the classrooms of the streets of Harlem. During their brief trip, the students saw churches and bars, Sugar Hill and tenement blocks. They visited the Nation of Islam's Temple No. 7, and ate bean pies while Malcolm X “spoke about soul.” But the most effective teachers of Harlem, Schechter reflected, were “the men who do nothing more than stroll down this broad promenade.” If Malcolm X and other observers were right in their assessment of urban Black underclasses as the most

⁴² Danny Schechter, *News Dissector: Passions, Pieces, and Polemics, 1960-2000* (New York: Akashic Books, 2001), 32.

explosive element in American society, then the students had learned from some of the most capable teachers of northern racism in the nation.

Though a relatively minor undertaking, “Project Understanding” was part of a rising tide of concern about American racism and civil rights that was sweeping across college campuses throughout the nation. The prior year, Black students across the South had galvanized the Civil Rights Movement with widely-publicized sit-ins, and ushered in a new phase of nonviolent civil disobedience and student activism. In 1961, the Freedom Rides launched by CORE, and continued by SNCC, sent shockwaves through the nation as footage of burning buses and bloodied Freedom Riders flashed continuously across television screens in American households. SNCC’s emergence as an independent, grassroots student organization marked a clear departure from the bourgeois leadership that had long dominated mainstream civil rights organizations. With the new decade still in its infancy, this generation of students—the age peers of Emmett Till—had sparked what James Baldwin described as “a revolution in the consciousness of this country which will inexorably destroy nearly all that we now think of as concrete and indisputable.”⁴³ Inspired by the bold actions of their southern counterparts, college students in the North began to engage in mobilization efforts to aid in the southern struggle.

As the Freedom Rides were underway through the South in the spring of 1961, stirrings amongst concerned white college students in the North began to coalesce into coordinated action for involvement in the national Civil Rights

⁴³ James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin’s-Marek, 1985), 262.

Movement. In New Haven, Connecticut, a meeting with three Black students from Virginia Theological Seminary and College proved inspirational for Yale University sophomore Peter Countryman. A white philosophy major from Chicago, Illinois, Countryman had been assisting youth workers with programs for Black children in a local neighborhood when the three young women from Virginia came to discuss their experiences at a recent sit-in demonstration. "I was very impressed with their honesty and integrity and sacrifice," Countryman said of the encounter, "it made the academic world seem pretty sterile, and I decided I had to do something." Moved by the experience, and told of the dire condition of the school's library by one of the young women, Countryman cut class for the next two weeks to wage a personal campaign to send six thousand books to Virginia.⁴⁴

Countryman's chance encounter with the students from Virginia Theological Seminary proved a formative moment in his personal and political development. More importantly, however, it provided the impetus for the organization of northern college students for collective involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. At a conference sponsored by the New England Student Christian Movement that June, Countryman was chosen as chairman of a committee to "investigate the possibility of creating a Northern student civil rights movement."⁴⁵ The committee

⁴⁴ R.W. Apple, Jr., "The Ivy League Integrationists," *The Reporter*, February 14, 1963.

⁴⁵ Ibid; "Northern Student Movement," Box 5, Folder 4, NSM Records; As Elizabeth Tobierre notes, this meeting featured keynote speeches by Dr. John Maguire of Wesleyan University and Yale law student Marian Wright, who spoke about their experiences with Freedom Rides and sit-ins. Elizabeth Tobierre, "Black Power Does Not Come Out of the Sky': The Emergence of Black Power Politics in the

initially decided to coordinate a fundraising campaign to support the Freedom Riders in the South, but by October, Countryman had pressured the committee to pursue a more expansive program. That October, representatives from twenty college campuses gathered in New Haven under the auspices of the Northern Student Movement Coordinating Committee to develop a program and structure for a national movement of northern college students. "As students we can no longer disregard the challenge put to us by the indomitable spirit of the Southern student movement," the members of the fledgling "movement" declared in their founding document. "We are not free until they are free; their fight is now our fight; their burdens, ours also."⁴⁶

The first year of the Northern Student Movement's (NSM) involvement in civil rights activities was characterized by a two-pronged approach: providing support for the Southern student movement and developing programs to confront "Northern Civil Rights Problems." By 1962, the NSM had raised \$9,000 for SNCC's voter registration campaigns in the South and sent 10,000 books to Miles College in Birmingham, Alabama.⁴⁷ The major sources of these contributions came from college and church organizations, as well as minor individual donations.⁴⁸ In

Northern Student Movement, 1961-1968," (BA thesis, Duke University, 2014), 23-24.

⁴⁶ "Definitive Statement of the Northern Student Movement Coordinating Committee of New England (in New Haven), Box 8, Folder 5, NSM Records.

⁴⁷ "Northern Student Movement," Box 5, Folder 4, NSM Records.

⁴⁸ Bill Strickland, "NSM Goals & History, and Other Reflections," Box 4, Folder 13, NSM Records.

addition to raising financial support for the southern movement, the NSM also understood the importance of raising individual awareness of the “urgency of the racial problem” in communities that were largely untouched by the conflicts sweeping the nation.

As a northern campus movement of predominantly white students at its inception, the NSM’s initial target population was other white students who were not directly impacted by racial oppression and had few ties to the southern struggle. Countryman and other NSMCC organizers understood the problem of American racism as “basically psychological” and “rooted in the individual,” and therefore designed their early organizing efforts to confront racism and inspire political action on college campuses at a personal level.⁴⁹ “The motivation then, was essentially personal,” Bill Strickland later wrote of NSM recruitment in this period. “There was...a strongly felt need to educate college students to the reality of the racial situation.”⁵⁰

To activate this latent demographic, NSM organizers promoted a moral imperative based upon their identities and privileges as college students to inspire empathy and compel students to become actively involved in struggles for civil and human rights. In a flyer to drum up financial support for SNCC’s voter registration drive, the NSM described the experience of a student from Trinity College who was left scarred by a shotgun blast while participating in voter registration work. “There

⁴⁹ Letter from Peter Countryman to Anne Marting, February 16, 1962, Box 11, Folder 8, NSM Records.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

are constant threats of beatings, shootings, and lynchings—but these students stay there,” the flyer read. Students reading the flyer on northern campuses were then prompted to ask themselves why their southern counterparts would stay there despite the great risk to life and limb. “Mainly because they believe that what they’re doing is right and is important,” the flyer concluded, “and because it sometimes seems that if they don’t try to help, no one else will.”⁵¹

Over the next several months, the NSMCC focused its energies on outreach and organizing on college campuses in the Northeast, primarily liberal arts colleges in New England. To Peter Countryman, who himself had undergone the type of political awakening that he was trying to replicate, recruiting students into a northern movement required that students first be drawn into the southern Civil Rights Movement vicariously through these campus solidarity campaigns. Once this level of consciousness had been established and mobilized, Countryman believed, students could then be organized “to concentrate on the less spectacular” problems of racial oppression in the North.⁵² By the summer of 1962, the NSMCC had mobilized this approach on dozens of college campuses and took its first steps toward organized direct action campaigns in the urban north.

In April 1962, 300 delegates from 60 colleges converged on the Bronxville campus of Sarah Lawrence College for an Inter-collegiate Conference on Northern

⁵¹ Northern Student Movement Leaflet, 1962, Box 11, Folder 8, NSM Records.

⁵² R.W. Apple, Jr., “The Ivy League Integrationists,” *The Reporter*, February 14, 1963.

Civil Rights convened by the NSMCC.⁵³ As the founding convention of the NSM, the conference was called to educate students on the realities of racial discrimination in the urban north and to build a program for organized student participation in the northern Civil Rights Movement. To develop such a program, the NSMCC called upon the expertise of leaders in northern Black Freedom Struggles, such as Kenneth Clark, Mark Lane, Paul Zuber, and Rev. Leon Sullivan, to explain how a northern brand of Jim Crow shaped conditions in housing, education, employment, and policing in Black communities.⁵⁴ Clark, Lane, and Zuber were all seasoned veterans of ongoing struggles for equal justice in education, housing, and politics in Harlem. Sullivan, a stalwart in civil rights struggles in Philadelphia and uncle of Sarah Lawrence student Joan Cannady, spoke to students about a series of “selective patronage” campaigns that he coordinated to successfully protest discriminatory hiring practices of several businesses in his city.⁵⁵ Sullivan encouraged the students to undertake similar campaigns in their own cities, while also building more expansive programs for African American empowerment.

While focusing specifically on engaging with northern struggles for rights and power, Countryman and the NSMCC coordinators understood their “movement” as intrinsically linked with the southern struggles that they had been supporting

⁵³ Tobierre, “Black Power Does Not Come Out of the Sky,” 26-28.

⁵⁴ Ibid; United States National Student Association Press Release, April 11, 1962, BOSS Records.

⁵⁵ R.W. Apple, Jr., “The Ivy League Integrationists,” *The Reporter*, February 14, 1963; Tobierre, “Black Power Does Not Come Out of the Sky,” 38-40; Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 181.

from afar for several months prior. At the Sarah Lawrence conference, NSM organizers demonstrated that they not only looked south for personal inspiration to engage in similar struggles in their own communities, but also for guidance in translating that inspiration into strategic organizing as part of a national student movement. Countryman had been in frequent correspondence with southern organizers as he worked to build the NSM, and had invited Charles Sherrod and Chuck McDew of SNCC to speak to northern students at the conference about their organizing experiences in the South.⁵⁶ McDew, chairman of SNCC at the time, and Sherrod, director of the organization's Southwest Georgia Voter Registration Project, provided the students with materials on SNCC's organizational structure and leadership principles, and explained how voter registration campaigns emerged from a collective belief that liberatory societal change was possible in the Jim Crow South through individual empowerment and collective action.⁵⁷ With this education and inspiration, delegates at the Sarah Lawrence conference resolved that NSM would expand upon their supporting role in the southern Movement to officially begin organizing campaigns in northern Black communities.

⁵⁶ Tobierre, "Black Power Does Not Come Out of the Sky," 27.

⁵⁷ Ibid; Also in attendance at the conference was Philadelphia-native John Churchville, who had dropped out of Temple University to pursue a career as a jazz composer and pianist in New York City. While in New York, Churchville was a regular visitor of the NOI's Temple No. 7, where he met Malcolm X and underwent a political and psychological transformation through his introduction to "the black nationalist thing." At the conference, Churchville was recruited by SNCC staff to drive a donated bus to SNCC headquarters in Atlanta, where he stayed as a member of the organization's field staff. Countryman, *Up South*, 181-182.

The Northern Student Movement Comes to Harlem

The students of the NSM were certainly not alone in their ambitions to organize northern campaigns for African American rights and power within the framework of a broader national movement. Rather, the NSM's efforts were symptomatic of escalating efforts of northern organizers to connect their struggles in the Jim Crow North more prominently within the surging national Civil Rights Movement. For the past several years, New Yorkers had mobilized in support of southern struggles through solidarity protests and fundraising campaigns, while also framing their own struggles within the context of the more highly publicized southern movement.

The same night as the Sarah Lawrence Conference, members of CORE and SNCC organized a mass meeting at the Roosevelt Auditorium in Union Square to "protest the treatment of southern freedom fighters and to call attention to the atrocities going on at present." Among the 200 attendees of the meeting were a host of nationally recognized civil rights leaders, including Cleveland Robinson of the Negro American Labor Council, James Farmer and Jim Peck of CORE, Elton Cuff and Chuck McDew of SNCC, comedian and activist Dick Gregory, and Bayard Rustin. Rustin, who served as chair of the meeting, called attention to the under-recognized national scope of American racism, plainly stating that "equality of housing, government jobs, and other fields of endeavor is not yet prevalent in New York." Though hardly news to those in attendance, Rustin's declaration was a call to action for a national coordination of civil rights organizations to confront the expansive nature of an American apartheid that knew no geographic borders. "Inequalities

must be suppressed not only in the South,” Rustin declared, “but also in New York.”⁵⁸

Rustin’s charge to the mass meeting at Roosevelt Auditorium was indicative of a popular recognition of a northern civil rights milieu, nurtured by local people and grassroots organizers, which the NSM sought to engage with. Emerging from the Sarah Lawrence conference with a sense of purpose and direction, members of the NSM launched several nonviolent, direct action campaigns to protest racial discrimination, and began organizing community projects in several cities. That summer, 100 students formed a day-long picket line outside an apartment complex in Rye, NY to protest the landlord’s refusal to rent to an African American family.⁵⁹ During the fall, the NSM sent busloads of students to the Eastern Shore of Maryland to participate in sit-ins at restaurants that refused to serve African American customers. Recognizing the systemic nature of racial inequality in the region, the interracial group of students involved in the Eastern Shore Project escalated their organizing efforts to focus on voter registration campaigns in Easton, Cambridge, and Chestertown with the broader goal of building a self-sustaining local movement through the promotion of “a community consciousness and an indigenous leadership among the Negroes.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Memo from Robert L. Cea to Commanding Officer, April 12, 1962, BOSS Records.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 31; “Northern Student Movement,” Box 5, Folder 4, NSM Records.

⁶⁰ Tobierre, “Black Power Does Not Come Out of the Sky,” 32; “Northern Student Movement,” Box 5, Folder 4, NSM Records.

The most expansive initiative that the NSM began in 1962, however, was aimed at leveraging the skills, privileges, and access to resources that college students possessed to confront the gross racial inequalities in public education in northern cities. In Philadelphia, Harlem, and Prince Edward County, Virginia, NSM field staff established tutorial programs that summer to provide underserved high school students with greater access to educational opportunities, as well as to organize communities against the oppressive conditions of public education that pervaded African American communities.⁶¹ Despite the organizing efforts of community leaders such as Ella Baker, Kenneth and Mamie Clark, Mae Mallory, and Paul Zuber over the previous decade, African American students in Harlem—and throughout New York City—largely remained in segregated, underfunded, and overcrowded schools. NSM organizers understood these persistent conditions of Harlem’s schools as symptomatic of the systemic racial oppression that created and enforced the institutional restraints of urban ghettos.⁶² At the same time, NSM organizers believed, this systemic denial of educational opportunity was inherently oppressive by design and served to perpetuate a ghetto pathology marked by resignation, apathy, unemployment, criminality, and hopelessness. Therefore,

⁶¹ “Northern Student Movement,” Box 5, Folder 4, NSM Records; Bill Strickland, “NSM Goals & History, and Other Reflections,” Box 4, Folder 13, NSM Records.

⁶² The broader analysis of systemic racial oppression held by NSM organizers was succinctly summarized by Harlem Education Project staff member Kathie Rogers in an undated essay in which she wrote, “Our economics, our politics and our prejudiced social values are responsible for the underdeveloped ghetto.” Kathie Rogers, “Some facts about the N.Y.C. public school system,” Box 8, Folder 12, NSM Records.

organizing to improve and expand educational opportunity held the potential to disrupt this “vicious circle,” and the possibility to inspire “the awakening of the ghetto to the extent of its own power.”⁶³

With grand visions and modest beginnings, student members of the NSM formally launched the tutorial program in Central Harlem in July 1962.⁶⁴ In the months following the Sarah Lawrence conference, a coordinating committee of student organizers worked with the Harlem Neighborhood Association (HANA), a community coalition of 80 church and civic groups, to build the organizational framework for what would become the Harlem Education Project (HEP). At its inception that summer, HEP’s tutorial program consisted of 25 tutors recruited by NSM members from various colleges and universities and 50 students. Twice a week, tutors would meet with small groups of students at HANA headquarters and the nearby Harlem YMCA for tutoring sessions in basic academic subjects.⁶⁵ By September, 215 college students were tutoring Harlem students in bi-weekly sessions at five community centers. In addition to the tutoring sessions, HEP also

⁶³ “A Statement of the Aims and Philosophy of the Harlem Education Project and a Prospectus for the Summer of 1963,” Box 8, Folder 11, NSM Records; Bill Strickland, “NSM Goals & History, and Other Reflections,” Box 4, Folder 13, NSM Records.

⁶⁴ Though the idea for a tutorial program in Harlem was first conceived in the fall of 1961, the project “did not gain support” until the Sarah Lawrence conference. Harlem Educational Project, “GET HIP WITH HEP,” Box 8, Folder 10, NSM Records.

⁶⁵ NSM, “Summer Tutorials—1962,” Box 76, Folder 24, Meier Papers.

launched a student newspaper, *The Harlem Voice*, and held workshops in art, dance, and drama.⁶⁶

One overlooked, but central aspect of HEP's educational programming was a series of public lectures and discussions on African American history and the Civil Rights Movement. These weekly sessions were led by prominent Black intellectuals and activists in Harlem, including intellectual-activist and *Freedomways* associate editor Dr. John Henrik Clarke, sociologist Dr. Robert Johnson, and SNCC chairman Chuck McDew. Discussions focused on "the historical and cultural heritage and contributions" of African American communities, as well as ongoing campaigns for rights and power led by civil rights organizations such as CORE, the NAACP, SNCC, and NSM. According to an informational leaflet distributed by HEP, these community sessions were designed "to draw the Harlem students into these activities in their own community through such action programs as voter registration projects and selective patronage campaigns."⁶⁷ Though the turnout for these sessions was generally smaller than the tutorial sessions, the impact upon the consciousness of students and tutors alike was no less significant. "I enjoyed the programs very much," one student testified, "they had almost the effect of a revolution on my mind."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Andrea Cousins and Quentin R. Hand, "Harlem Education Program, Inc. Prospectus: September 1963-September 1964," Box 8, Folder 11, NSM Records.

⁶⁷ Harlem Educational Project, "GET HIP WITH HEP," Box 8, Folder 10, NSM Records.

⁶⁸ NSM, "Summer Tutorials—1962," Box 76, Folder 24, Meier Papers.

Interracial Organizing, Black Nationalism, and “Operational Education in the Ghetto”

More than just a supplemental element of HEP’s educational programming, these community sessions were indicative of a larger organizational focus on promoting societal transformation through educational empowerment. According to an assessment by HEP tutor and eventual project director Andrea Cousins, one of the fundamental analyses that guided NSM’s involvement in Harlem held that “the power of community organization to sustain itself grows largely out of the sustained education of its constituents; and that a method of problem-solving must become part of local perspective, if that community is to become politically powerful.”⁶⁹ Cousins was introduced to the NSM as a student at Sarah Lawrence, when the “very charismatic” Peter Countryman came to the campus “spreading the word about a northern civil rights movement.” A native of New Canaan, CT, Cousins had grown up in an affluent, white liberal family, and was the daughter of the well-known editor of *The Saturday Review*, Norman Cousins. Like many of her peers, however, Cousins had become disillusioned with the shortcomings of white liberalism to meaningfully remedy the political, economic, and moral crises fostered by a racist, imperialist, and capitalist American society. “In that time of my life,” Cousins later recalled, “I was always arguing with my father. Liberals and radicals to me were incompatible.”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Andrea Cousins, “Harlem: The Neighborhood and Social Change,” April 2, 1964, Junius Williams Collection.

⁷⁰ Andrea Cousins interview with author, October 19, 2017.

The “radical” political education and awakening that Cousins experienced during her years at Sarah Lawrence represented a personal embodiment of the intersections of the New Left, African nationalism, the southern Civil Rights Movement, and Black Freedom Struggles in the urban north, and shaped her organizing in Harlem. During the summer of her junior year, Cousins traveled to the recently independent nation of Guinea with Organization Crossroads Africa, where she saw Sékou Touré “in the streets in his white Cadillac.”⁷¹ While she was in Africa, Tom Hayden and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) published “The Port Huron Statement,” the manifesto of the New Left and the surging student movement, which had a formative influence on Cousins’ political thought and analysis.⁷² Upon returning to Sarah Lawrence for her junior year, Cousins started volunteering at the HEP storefront office at 135th Street and 8th Avenue, where she met SNCC organizer Stokely Carmichael, who had grown up in New York City and was an occasional visitor to the office.⁷³

⁷¹ Ibid; According to Elizabeth Tobierre, the localized, community-based work that Cousins participated in while in Guinea influenced her analysis of the centrality of neighborhood organizing as director of HEP. Tobierre, “Black Power Does Not Come Out of the Sky,” 60.

⁷² Cousins credits her close friend Tom Hayden and The Port Huron Statement with shaping her political ideology and identity. “When I met Tom Hayden,” Cousins recalled, “Tom explained to me I was not a liberal—I was a radical. We were radicals.” When asked how she defined the term “radical,” Cousins replied, “The Port Huron Statement...I think it was a very rosy vision of students, and farmers, and poor people, and Blacks, and American Indians, and all of us getting together and getting local control...local control, people power.” Andrea Cousins interview with author, October 19, 2017.

⁷³ Ibid. Carmichael came by the HEP offices from time to time, even participating in a HEP tutor orientation program in June 1963, where he spoke

The influences of this cross-section of radical political activity in the early 1960s were evident in the analyses that Cousins put forth in her 1964 assessment of the organizational philosophies and actions of HEP and the NSM in Harlem. Demonstrating the centrality of community empowerment and self-determination that undergirded these varying freedom struggles, Cousins wrote that one of the two primary objectives of the NSM in Harlem was “to bring the local population into greater control of their own lives, and consequently of the institutions which exerted power upon them.”⁷⁴ Though this organizational focus on self-determination was complicated by the outsider status of many of the NSM and HEP staff, who also saw Harlem as a possible proving ground for building a sustainable interracial movement, the project endeavored to seek out the involvement of indigenous leadership to inform their organizing initiatives and eventually take over the program. “Our idea was that the whole thing would eventually be taken over by local people,” Cousins later recalled.⁷⁵

Despite their connections with Harlem leaders and professed dedication to supporting community leadership, the interracial organization’s entrée to Harlem was met with a mixed reception. NSM’s arrival in Harlem coincided with a period of resurgent racial consciousness and Black Nationalist organizing in the city. “Like

about “Direct Action” on a panel with NSM staffers Carl Anthony, Bob Knight, Roger Siegel, and Kathie Rogers. The Harlem Education Project, “Tutor Orientation,” June 28-29, 1963, Box 8, Folder 10, NSM Records.

⁷⁴ Andrea Cousins, “Harlem: The Neighborhood and Social Change,” April 2, 1964, Junius Williams Collection.

⁷⁵ Andrea Cousins interview with author, October 19, 2017.

black ghettos throughout the country,” Danny Schechter observed in 1962, Harlem “is reasserting its blackness.”⁷⁶ Though still a student at Cornell at the time, Schechter had kept a watchful eye on happenings in his native New York City.

That March, Schechter had invited Malcolm X to Cornell for a debate with CORE national director James Farmer in a program titled “Which Way Civil Rights: Separation or Integration?” In his first debate with a national civil rights leader, Malcolm X chided Farmer for being married to a white woman, while also characteristically speaking of the shortcomings of integration and nonviolent direct action campaigns for achieving justice for the centuries of brutal oppression faced by African Americans. “We’ve been giving slave labor for 400 years and we’re not going to get sufficient payment through any Jackie Robinsons, Marian Andersons or a cup of coffee.”⁷⁷ As though to illustrate Malcolm’s analysis, Jackie Robinson was the target of picketers in Harlem three months later after he criticized nationalist groups for alleged anti-Semitic chants during an economic boycott of a Jewish restaurateur on 125th Street.⁷⁸ Though Robinson and boycott leaders, including Louis Michaux, later buried the hatchet during a radio broadcast, it was nonetheless clear that Robinson’s moderate brand of civil rights advocacy was resonating less with the masses in Harlem than was Malcolm’s.

⁷⁶ Danny Schechter, *News Dissector: Passions, Pieces, and Polemics, 1960-2000* (New York: Akashic Books, 2001), 37.

⁷⁷ Joe Matasich, “2 Negroes With Opposing Views Debate Segregation-Integration,” *Ithaca Journal*, March 8, 1962, in Manning Marable and Garrett Felber, eds., *The Portable Malcolm X Reader* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013).

⁷⁸ “Negroes in Harlem Picket Ex-Dodger Jackie Robinson,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 15, 1962.

Though Schechter was still a year away from joining the NSM, his appraisal of Harlem's rising racial consciousness and militancy closely resembled those of organizers on the ground who expressed concern about the efficacy of an interracial organization within this radical political milieu. Even before joining NSM, Andrea Cousins was made explicitly aware of her place as a white woman within this political climate charged with revolutionary fervor. During her freshman year at Sarah Lawrence, Cousins went with her African American "big sister" to a "huge African Nationalist program" in New York City where Miriam Makeba performed and Hubert Humphrey spoke. "As I was riding back on the train to Sarah Lawrence...with my big sister...she told me that when the revolution came, she would have to kill someone like me. So that was an eye opener," Cousins later recalled.⁷⁹

The realities of this kind of racial dynamic in Harlem presented members of the interracial organization with difficult, and often contentious, conversations about race and American society as they struggled to formulate a program for their involvement in the community. NSM organizers in Harlem, including Peter Countryman who was there on occasion, were often confronted by local people who challenged their positions on integration and the assumed leadership roles of white students in predominantly Black communities. These critiques were also lobbied by

⁷⁹ Andrea Cousins interview with author, October 19, 2017. It is likely that the program that Cousins described was the Africa Freedom Day Rally at Hunter College in April 1961. The rally was attended by the likes of Hubert Humphrey, Miriam Makeba, James Baldwin, Tom Mboya, Kenneth Kaunda, James Farmer, and Dizzy Gillespie. See "Kenneth Kaunda African Freedom Day Speaker," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 8, 1961.

individuals within the organization, including Carl Anthony, an African American student at Columbia University and NSM member, who had worked in Harlem throughout the summer of 1962. At an October 1962 meeting of the NSM in New Haven, Anthony expressed his frustrations with having to interpret the lived realities of racial oppression that informed Black political consciousness for his white comrades, and criticized Countryman and others for their failure to truly read the temperature of Harlem's political climate. "The point that I'm trying to make," Anthony explained, "is that something is happening in Harlem which is causing black people to reject your kind of analysis. It's as simple as that."⁸⁰

As an organization with a stated goal of achieving an integrated society, however, NSM organizers needed to find a way to reconcile their integrationist ideals with rising demands for Black self-determination in Harlem. From the outset of their involvement in Harlem, NSM organizers attempted to walk what they saw as a political tightrope. On one side, organizers recognized that if they were to be successful in building programs in Harlem, they would need to tap into the ideological, if not organizational, base of Black Nationalist groups. "For, the Malcolm X's of the generation have 'stirreth the eagles nest,'" HEP organizer Bob Knight noted, "now it becomes our role to challenge that anger and channel that massive human resource into a sense of community."⁸¹ On the other side, however, many organizers believed that to embrace the political zeitgeist of Black Nationalism in

⁸⁰ Carl Anthony, "Harlem," in Northern Student Movement, "Negro Militancy in the North," October 21, 1962, Box 76, Folder 24, Meier Papers.

⁸¹ Robert F. Knight, "An Analysis of the Community," undated, Box 8, Folder 12, NSM Records.

Harlem meant to risk alienating moderate whites that they sought to bring into the fold of the Civil Rights Movement. “We are playing with dynamite,” Carl Anthony wrote to Peter Countryman in 1962. “The nationalists have a stronghold in Harlem; and we may have to choose between the possibility of having them with us or against us.” Anthony and other organizers feared that aligning too closely with radical Black organizations would cost the NSM a critical opportunity to create “a really dynamic student civil rights movement” in New York City, which, Anthony believed, had the potential to “set the North on fire.”⁸² To walk this tightrope meant that NSM would need to develop an analysis and approach that “could encompass extreme points of view and communicate with either a nationalistic negroe [*sic*] or an cautious white.”⁸³

To work within this tenuous political and organizational territory, HEP embraced a broad base of programs beyond the initial tutorial program. By developing a variety of community-based programs under the broad ideological umbrella of empowerment through education, HEP organizers were able to reconcile their aspirations of creating a vibrant student movement with the organizational imperative of promoting Black self-determination. Through the tutorial program, hundreds of college students were recruited from local campuses to come into Harlem and provide needed educational support for students. During their time in Harlem, the interracial corps of tutors gained a more intimate

⁸² Letter from Carl Anthony to Peter Countryman, June 19, 1962, Box 8, Folder 10, NSM Records.

⁸³ Letter from Barbara to Tom, October 15, 1962, Box 8, Folder 10, NSM Records.

understanding of the complexities of life in the Jim Crow North and many were inspired to take larger roles in local struggles for rights and power. “HEP has allowed me to act rather than just study,” one tutor testified, “while at the same time it has made me more aware of the complexities of America’s race problem and has encouraged me to look further and do more.”⁸⁴ Another student who experienced a similar political awakening as a HEP tutor began working with the parents of his tutee to organize tenants to demand repairs of their building. Although the tutorial program did not present the “dramatic” mobilization of a student civil rights movement that Carl Anthony initially hoped for, it brought hundreds of students into active engagement with struggles for educational justice and laid the groundwork for NSM’s involvement in grassroots struggles for rights and power in Harlem.

The Sealtest Boycott and New York CORE’s “Ghetto Thrust”

Like the NSM, NY CORE in 1962 was attempting to navigate a political terrain that had been charged by the militant rhetoric and praxis of grassroots organizers like Mae Mallory, Malcolm X, Jesse Gray, and their expansive networks of radical activists. As local branches and the national organization struggled throughout that year to develop an effective program in the city, CORE leaders repeatedly pushed the organization to identify with the needs of poor and working-class Black communities who were fueling this grassroots militancy in Harlem. By that point, nearly all of CORE’s northeastern branches had Black chairmen, reflecting the

⁸⁴ “The Northern Student Movement, HEP, The Harlem Education Project,” Box 8, Folder 11, NSM Records.

earlier push for greater Black representation in leadership positions. However, the middle-class focus of many of CORE's organizing campaigns, like the open-housing drives, did little to win the allegiance of the majority in Black communities in New York and elsewhere. At a workshop at the national convention that year, CORE members resolved that the organization was "primarily middle-class, and to broaden our base, we must begin to concentrate on the needs of the working class."⁸⁵ In many ways, this resolution represented a national recognition of calls that had resonated from the streets of New York City, where CORE leaders like Gladys Harrington and Lincoln Lynch were pushing for greater attention to mass movement building. Earlier that year the New York Metropolitan Area Coordinating Council, a confederation of CORE chapters in and around New York City, "overwhelmingly passed a motion offered by Lincoln Lynch that the organization must make itself 'more attractive to rank and file Negroes.'"⁸⁶ For Harrington, Lynch, and other CORE leaders in New York, the logical move to bring the Black working classes into the fold of organized action was to address their immediate needs of fair employment opportunities.

Though NY CORE had waged earlier protests against major corporations in New York City over discriminatory hiring practices, these demonstrations never really gained the same type of organizational attention or popular traction as the sympathy strikes. In many ways, these early employment campaigns had the same shortcomings as those waged by the NAACP around this time, in that the primary

⁸⁵ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 196.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

focus was on breaking the color barrier through placing a handful of Black workers into middle-class jobs that were out of reach to most of the community. Meier and Rudwick go so far as to claim that from 1960-1962, “not one of New York CORE’s employment projects brought worthwhile gains.”⁸⁷ By early 1962, however, local grassroots struggles for economic justice and fair hiring practices were pushing CORE chapters and the national organization to reconsider their programs for confronting employment discrimination. In Philadelphia, Rev. Leon Sullivan had been engaged in a years-long selective patronage campaign to coerce white-owned national companies into hiring Black employees. In Harlem, where economic boycotts had a rich history and nationalist organizations routinely mobilized “Buy Black” campaigns, an ad hoc coalition was in the midst of boycotting a white-owned steakhouse on 125th Street in the heart of Central Harlem and the nascent Northern Student Movement was helping to orchestrate a boycott of a major dairy company. So when the national office announced that year that CORE would be taking a different line on issues of employment discrimination, its leaders were largely following the lead of Black communities that were already in motion.

CORE’s first major action that demonstrated this new approach to discriminatory hiring practices came in the fall of 1962 when the national office endorsed a boycott of Sealtest Dairy in New York City. That summer, Carl Anthony and a handful of other NSM members began organizing a coalition of religious, civil rights, and labor leaders to coordinate protests against the national dairy company, which employed only twelve Black and Puerto Ricans among its workforce of 1,500

⁸⁷ Ibid, 188.

across four New York plants. After negotiations between the NSM and Sealtest stalled that August when representatives claimed the company was “already doing everything in our power to employ qualified Negroes and Spanish-Americans,” the students announced plans for a boycott.⁸⁸ CORE chapters in New York joined the protest campaign that fall after the NSM’s low numbers caused the boycott to flounder and by December the national office had thrown its weight behind the campaign.

The Sealtest boycott provided the national office with an opportunity to put its new organizational emphasis on “compensatory hiring” into direct action. Recognizing that token integration was insufficient given the rampant national problem of racial discrimination in hiring practices, the National Action Council earlier that year had debated the issue of preferential hiring practices. “We used to talk simply of merit employment, i.e., hiring the best qualified person for the job regardless of race,” field secretary Gordon Carey wrote that fall. “Now, National CORE is talking in terms of ‘compensatory’ hiring. We are approaching employers with the proposition that they have effectively excluded Negroes from their work force for a long time and that they now have a responsibility and obligation to make up for their past sins.”⁸⁹

This new emphasis was reflected in the demands that CORE and their allies made upon Sealtest that December. In negotiations with Sealtest representatives, CORE leaders demanded that the company hire at least ten Black or Puerto Rican

⁸⁸ “Sealtest Fact Sheet,” January 1963, CORE Papers.

⁸⁹ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 191-92.

laborers within 30 days, and a minimum of 50 within a year's time; implement an affirmative action hiring plan to rectify the racial imbalance of their workforce; and meet with CORE representatives at 90-day intervals to evaluate progress made toward these ends.⁹⁰ Although Sealtest representatives initially rejected these demands outright, the pressures that CORE, NSM, and the New York Selective Patronage Coordinating Committee put upon the company through the two-month boycott brought Sealtest back to the bargaining table in early 1963. Though Sealtest maintained that its hiring practices "had not been discriminatory," they agreed to immediately hire ten Black or Puerto Rican workers and pledged to give "initial exclusive priority" in all job openings in 1963 to Black and Puerto Rican applicants.⁹¹ Satisfied with this compromise as "evidence of the company's good faith," CORE called off the boycott in early February.⁹²

The Sealtest boycott, as Meier and Rudwick note, marked a turning point for CORE's national office in its embrace of more progressive programs to rectify systemic racial inequalities in employment opportunities. For NY CORE, the boycott marked the emergence of mass protests against employment discrimination that would take center stage in the city by the summer of 1963. Implicit within this shift away from demands for token hiring and toward affirmative action programs was an organizational recognition of grassroots demands for systemic change, rather than piecemeal reform. Harlem residents were no longer satisfied with a handful of

⁹⁰ CORE, "Sealtest Fact Sheet," January 1963, CORE Papers.

⁹¹ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 192.

⁹² Unmarked clipping of CORE press release, 1963, CORE Papers.

white-collar Black workers being hired by a company while the unemployment rate in Harlem remained double that of white communities.

While the thrust for this change in CORE's approach came from the grassroots, the shift was put into praxis in NY CORE largely through the efforts of Velma Hill, the chair of the branch's employment committee, and her husband Norman Hill, a member of the national office's field staff. The Hills came to New York in the fall of 1962 from Chicago, where Velma had been the president of the NAACP Youth Council and Norman was the executive secretary of the Illinois Socialist Party.⁹³ From their respective leadership roles in the local and national organization, the Hills sought to make CORE "more appealing to grass-roots people" through loosening membership restrictions, focusing on community-organizing and indigenous leadership, and undertaking campaigns that would benefit poor and working-class Black communities.⁹⁴

As chair of the employment committee, Velma Hill pushed NY CORE to use the momentum generated by the Sealtest boycott to propel the chapter into greater involvement in employment campaigns as part of a broader "ghetto thrust."⁹⁵ It was clear through their rhetoric and programs that both Velma and Norman Hill viewed

⁹³ Norman Hill interview with August Meier, May 24, 1969, Box 56, Folder 8, Meier Papers.

⁹⁴ Velma Hill interview with August Meier, July 1971, Box 56, Folder 8, Meier Papers; Norman Hill interview with August Meier, December 15, 1970, Box 56, Folder 8, Meier Papers; Norman Hill interview with August Meier, August 2, 1971, Box 56, Folder 8, Meier Papers.

⁹⁵ Velma Hill interview with August Meier, July 1971, Box 56, Folder 8, Meier Papers.

the Black poor and working-classes as the most powerful force in the Black freedom struggle, particularly as seen in the successes of radical organizations in mobilizing Black people in Harlem by the thousands in the early 1960s. To Norman Hill, the Sealtest boycott represented a template that could be used to not only combat the “pattern of discrimination in all job categories,” but also to “provide a direct alternative to the Muslims in terms of aims, programs, and results.”⁹⁶

Like Carl Anthony and the NSM, the Hills and NY CORE remained weary of cooperating with radical organizations like the NOI, even while they tried to court the same demographics that such organizations had proven so popular with. As leaders of NY CORE continued to shift their focus to community organizing in the following months, however, the grassroots militancy of the poor and working-class residents that the chapter sought to recruit would push the organization to adopt more radical ideologies and militant actions, thereby setting the stage for dramatic confrontations with the city’s power structure in the summer of 1963.

Nurturing Indigenous Leadership through the Neighborhood Commons Project

While Velma Hill worked with Gladys Harrington and the other leaders of NY CORE in an effort to help develop this sense of community leadership and action, NSM began supporting neighborhood improvement and “social action” projects that had the potential to foster indigenous leadership. Like Jesse Gray, who NSM staffers would soon become intimately acquainted with, NSM organizers did not see “quality of life” problems as marginal within the framework of the Black Freedom Struggle,

⁹⁶ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 208.

but rather as issues around which communities could be organized and empowered through collective action. One of the earliest “social action projects” that NSM organizers became involved with was the Sealtest boycott in 1962. Inspired by Carl Anthony’s work with the New York Selective Patronage Coordinating Committee that summer, as well as the boycotts led by Rev. Sullivan in Philadelphia, Countryman pushed for NSM on a national level to coordinate “SNCC drives, sel. pat. [selective patronage], and tutorial in one package...in Negro communities throughout the East.”⁹⁷ Though NSM involvement in selective patronage campaigns proved to be short-lived, the efforts provided organizers with an introduction to various leaders in the city, including Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph, James Lawson, and Malcolm X, and represented an early foray into community organizing campaigns.

While participating in the selective patronage campaign, Anthony also played a key role in coordinating HEP’s first social action project, the Neighborhood Commons Project. Initially proposed in May of 1962, the “Commons” sought to bring together college students with local laborers and teenagers to clean up and develop vacant, city-owned lots in Harlem into community recreation spaces. The location chosen for the project was a large, debris-filled lot on 147th Street between Bradhurst and 8th Avenues. One of the fundamental goals of the project was to supplement the education of local students with practical experience in architecture, masonry, carpentry, horticulture, and commercial art in the service of

⁹⁷ Letter from Peter Countryman to Carl Anthony, October 3, 1962, Box 8, Folder 10, NSM Records.

developing a space for communal gatherings.⁹⁸ HEP organizers envisioned the Commons as a meeting space where community concerns could be discussed and plans could be developed for collective action. In addition to the outdoor recreational space, HEP also acquired and renovated unused basement-level spaces in the buildings that faced the lot for educational programming. By the fall of 1963, HEP was using these spaces for a Science Workshop, where students learned and practiced game and computer theory, an office space for the Commons staff, and plans were in place to establish a low-cost daycare center, music workshop, and gymnasium.⁹⁹

Though conceived as a plan to convert vacant lots into pocket parks for badly needed recreational space, HEP organizers envisioned the project as a means of fostering community empowerment and “indigenous leadership” through active involvement in all aspects of its development. Using their connections with various community organizations, HEP staff recruited neighborhood teenagers and adults to build a corps of local leaders who would work in cooperation with architectural students to design and build the commons. “All of their lives these people have been using their skills working for other people,” Anthony told *The New York Times*, “we want to show them what they can do if they use their skills for themselves.”¹⁰⁰ The

⁹⁸ “A Statement of the Aims and Philosophy of the HARLEM EDUCATION PROJECT and a Prospectus for the Summer of 1963,” Box 8, Folder 11, NSM Records.

⁹⁹ Letter from A.W. Finch and James D. Cook to Hortense Gabel, in Andrea Cousins and Quentin R. Hand, “Harlem Education Program, Inc. Prospectus: September 1963-September 1964,” Box 8, Folder 11, NSM Records.

larger goal, then, for the Neighborhood Commons Project was not the piecemeal construction of recreational spaces, but the demonstration of “how scattered resources can be brought together in a so-called ‘slum community’ to create a new reality.”¹⁰¹

Through the Neighborhood Commons Project and the visibility gained through the tutorial, HEP provided a springboard for the empowerment of indigenous community leadership. Though the Commons took about a year to finally get underway, it marked the start of a concerted shift in HEP’s programmatic focus toward dedicating more energy and resources to community organizing. By the end of 1963, with the plans for the Commons underway, HEP moved from their storefront office on 8th Ave. and 135th St. up to a railroad apartment in a tenement on 147th St. that bordered the vacant lot.¹⁰² The re-location provided HEP organizers with a base within a community from which they could expand their tutoring, programming, and organizing initiatives. “There was a lot of work on community organization,” Andrea Cousins recalled, led in large part by Roscoe “Chick” Bradley.¹⁰³ A neighborhood resident and community activist, Bradley began working with HEP in the spring of 1963 with another local resident, Earl Spence, to furnish and supervise a small gymnasium for teenage boys as part of the

¹⁰⁰ “Harlem Back Lot To Become A Park,” *The New York Times*, undated clipping, Box 76, Folder 24, Meier Papers.

¹⁰¹ “HEP Prospectus for Neighborhood Commons Project,” May 1962, Box 8, Folder 12, NSM Records.

¹⁰² Andrea Cousins, “Harlem: The Neighborhood and Social Change,” 2-3.

¹⁰³ Andrea Cousins interview with author, October 19, 2017.

Commons.¹⁰⁴ Within a few short months, Bradley had established himself as the head of the 147th St. Neighborhood Council, HEP's hyper-local community decision-making body, "which in democratic fashion was to determine the nature of block redevelopment."¹⁰⁵ Bradley's involvement with the Commons spurred a life-long dedication to community empowerment in Harlem and demonstrated that HEP's seemingly trivial focus on local issue-organizing was capable of supporting the development of impactful local leaders.

By the fall of 1963, many HEP organizers were dedicating more of their time and resources to community organizing than the operations of the tutorial, setting the stage for a major rift in the movement by the year's end. Though the model of grassroots empowerment evident in the Commons did influence an evolution in the tutorial program toward a sustainable, community-controlled model, staff members increasingly recognized the educational inequalities that they had been battling as symptomatic of an inherently unjust society. HEP and NSM continued to organize around educational empowerment in various ways, including the establishment of Freedom Schools and support for school boycotts, but the inherently limited scope of the tutorial program, critiqued by some as a "service program," was no longer seen as viable for creating a movement for societal transformation. "We have always had a high degree of success in the educational programs," NSM staffer Gordon

¹⁰⁴ Letter from A.W. Finch and James D. Cook to Hortense Gabel, in Andrea Cousins and Quentin R. Hand, "Harlem Education Program, Inc. Prospectus: September 1963-September 1964," Box 8, Folder 11, NSM Records.

¹⁰⁵ Andrea Cousins, "Harlem: The Neighborhood and Social Change," 3.

Davis wrote in 1964, “but this only partially fulfilled our aspirations.”¹⁰⁶ With the Civil Rights Movement and white violence raging in Birmingham and throughout the South that summer, and the March on Washington looming large in public consciousness, NSM organizers felt a need to engage more assertively in the northern struggle to achieve more immediate results.

“Our fight must be hard, constant and effective”: NY CORE’s Construction Site Protests, 1963

While NSM members and local people labored to build the Neighborhood Commons and foster long-range community empowerment through education and collective action, Gladys Harrington and NY CORE sought to speed up the tempo of the Black Freedom Struggle in New York City. Despite the nearly ten years of continued organizing efforts waged by local people and national organizations in New York City, few systemic reforms had been won and city officials and white citizens continued to preach patience and gradualism amidst growing racist violence and Black discontent nationwide. Furthermore, with 1963 marking the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, many civil rights leaders were sounding the call for “Freedom Now” after one hundred years of waiting for the rights of full citizenship. Though many white New Yorkers prided themselves on their racial liberalism in the absence of explicitly racist laws and policies in the city and claimed the legacies of Union soldiers who had supposedly fought for the emancipation of enslaved people of African-descent, few understood their insistence

¹⁰⁶ Letter from Gordon Davis to Robert Hess, June 23, 1964, Box 5, Folder 6, NSM Records.

upon gradual equality for Black people as inherently complicit in the continuation of racial oppression.

Such was the case when a white Long Island resident publicly criticized Lincoln Lynch in January 1963 after the LI CORE chairman called for a “massive and sustained assault on the bastions of degradation and debasement of Negroes and Puerto Ricans.” Accusing Lynch of yelling “Fire!” in a crowded theatre, the white commentator argued such an approach “is not the way to win equality in the North, which is acutely aware of its own shortcomings and equally aware that its soldiers freed the slaves.”¹⁰⁷ As the nation entered the centennial year of the Emancipation Proclamation, this defensive criticism of Lynch became a hot topic of debate in newspapers throughout the Northeast. In many ways, the conversations arising from this exchange captured the increasingly tense atmosphere in the city, as Black New Yorkers grew impatient with the pace of racial reform while their white counterparts tired of the constant commotion and responded with increasingly hostile rhetoric and governmental policies.

Of those who came to Lynch’s defense, Gladys Harrington was among the most vocal and assertive in her appraisal of racial tensions and the state of the Movement in New York. “If bigotry would slow down, then it might be possible to consider the argument of gradualism,” Harrington told reporters. “The fact is that bigotry and indifference makes steady inroads into our communities and our fight

¹⁰⁷ Thomas A. Johnson, “Freedom Now Or Gradualism Fight on in L.I.,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 12, 1963.

must be hard, constant and effective.”¹⁰⁸ Under Harrington’s leadership, NY CORE had grown substantially in the year leading up to the Sealtest boycott. Whereas the chapter had floundered from 1960-1961 with an active membership of less than 60 people, by 1962 NY CORE’s membership had nearly quadrupled as the ranks swelled with working-class Black members.¹⁰⁹ Described by CORE member Doris Innis (née Doris Funnyé) as “a very strong woman” who had an innate ability to motivate people to action, Harrington’s emphasis on dramatic nonviolent protest campaigns, including sit-ins, fasts, and pickets at government offices, had proven effective in growing the ranks, even if the protests achieved few tangible policy results. Indeed, it was the sit-ins that Harrington organized at a Brooklyn rental office in 1961 to help Clarence Funnyé secure an apartment that drew his sister, Doris, into the ranks of NY CORE. “She had a technique that was not abrasive or overly aggressive, but of making you feel she was asking you to do something important,” Innis recalled, “that she had faith in you.”¹¹⁰

Despite her relatively moderate political analysis as a staunch integrationist, it was clear that Harrington had become an effective organizer who was capable of mobilizing Harlem residents to engage in collective action. Though she remained dedicated to the principles of nonviolence and integration as the means to achieve Black equality and empowerment, Harrington’s presence within a political milieu

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Doris Innis interview with August Meier, October 12, 1971, Box 56, Folder 9, Meier Papers.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

that “encouraged a nationalist thrust,” as CORE field secretary Gordon Carey described Harlem in the early 1960s, had spurred an increased militancy in her political praxis by 1963. From 1960-1962, Harrington’s organizing campaigns had largely consisted of interracial nonviolent direct action protests aimed at coercing public officials to act on the interests of Black communities through moral suasion. By 1963, however, the protests waged by NY CORE under Harrington’s leadership began to demonstrate the growing influence of a grassroots militancy that was coming to define the uptown chapter and changing the course of local and national Black Freedom Struggles.

Most evident in a series of protests against employment discrimination at publicly funded construction sites that summer, this evolution in Harrington’s political praxis reflected a broader shift in the northern Movement. That summer, Harrington and NY CORE served notice to the city’s white power structure that they were no longer patiently asking for equality to be granted to Black people. Rather, through civil disobedience and disruptive protests, NY CORE and their supporters signaled their intentions to gain social, economic, and political justice through more assertive and militant means. Though Harrington remained apprehensive about leaders like Malcolm X, the influence of the radical milieu he helped to shape was undeniable in Harrington’s rhetoric by the dawn of 1963. “The Negro is like a man being strangled,” Harrington declared. “We say stop the choking now, at once. You can’t afford to be gradual about stopping a strangulation.”¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Thomas A. Johnson, “Freedom Now Or Gradualism Fight on in L.I.,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 12, 1963.

In the spring of 1962, Mayor Wagner had announced long-awaited plans for a major construction project to renovate and expand Harlem Hospital on 135th Street and Lenox Avenue. Promising “decent high-level medical and hospital care” for all, Wagner broke ground on the \$48 million project that fall as 800 residents looked on at the ceremonial event.¹¹² Though better healthcare was on the minds of many community members who for years had pleaded with city officials to make improvements to the public hospital, the question of who would be employed in the projected three-year construction project was also a pressing concern. In a community where the unemployment rate was over twice that of white communities due to racial discrimination in hiring practices and a general lack of adequate training and educational opportunities, few had reasons to believe that the economic windfall that the construction project would bring to laborers in the construction trades would extend to Harlem residents.¹¹³

The building and construction trade unions, which largely determined those employed in construction projects like the Harlem Hospital, were notorious for discriminating against Black and Puerto Rican laborers. So when the plans were laid for this major project in the heart of Harlem, many residents assumed that the site would, as the *Pittsburgh Courier* later predicted, become a “beehive of skilled workers—lathers, brick-layers, electricians, plumbers, painters, etc., among whom

¹¹² “Mayor Sets October to Begin Expansion of Harlem Hospital,” *New York Times*, June 6, 1962; “New Building Begun at Harlem Hospital,” *New York Times*, November 1, 1962.

¹¹³ HARYOU, *Youth in the Ghetto*, 246.

Negroes would have been as scarce as hooded Klansmen on Seventh Ave. and 125th St.”¹¹⁴

Though racial discrimination in employment was technically illegal in New York City, as Dr. Kenneth Clark noted, the laws were rarely enforced and racial discrimination remained a particularly common practice in the construction industry. Restrictive apprenticeship training programs and union membership policies, along with “gentleman’s agreements” and other forms of covert racism, largely precluded Black laborers from employment in the construction trades.¹¹⁵ Local 28 of the Sheet Metal Workers, for example, counted zero African Americans amongst its membership of 3,300 at this time.¹¹⁶ When Black workers were hired in the construction trades, it was usually for so-called “Negro jobs”—unskilled positions with “menial status, minimum wages, and little if any security.”¹¹⁷

Adding to the economic anxieties and frustrations of Black laborers, a study put out by the New York City Department of Labor that year predicted a decline of 70,000-80,000 unskilled and semi-skilled jobs by the end of the decade.¹¹⁸ Within the local and national context of surging demands for Black rights and power—

¹¹⁴ Thomas A. Johnson, “Job Protest at Hospital Site Jolts Gotham,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, June 29, 1963.

¹¹⁵ Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 38.

¹¹⁶ “Promise Mass Action on Building Trade Unions,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 8, 1963.

¹¹⁷ Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 38.

¹¹⁸ HARYOU, *Youth in the Ghetto*, 252-53.

particularly in a community with a tradition of supporting economic nationalism—such economic insecurity in the face of a major, publicly funded construction project that would predictably bring white laborers into Harlem fueled community resentment toward the Hospital site. “Such a situation building up, this mass of unemployed and frustrated Negro youth, is social dynamite,” the anti-poverty social service agency Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited (HARYOU) explained. “We are presented with a phenomenon that may be compared with the piling up of inflammable material in an empty building in a city block.”¹¹⁹

Though HARYOU was primarily concerned with the pathological implications of unemployment in Central Harlem, the organization also noted with great interest the propensity of economic inequality for drawing the community into collective struggles for equitable employment opportunities. This was certainly the case in the summer of 1963, as a coalition of civil rights groups in Harlem, including NY CORE, organized mass resistance to the Harlem Hospital construction to demand jobs for Black and Puerto Rican workers on the project. Just weeks after police forces turned their dogs and hoses on peaceful protestors in Birmingham, Alabama, and days after William Worthy called for a Freedom Now Party in Harlem, the Joint Committee for Equal Employment Opportunity announced plans to picket the Harlem Hospital construction site in early June after city officials and union leaders refused a meeting to discuss charges of employment discrimination on the project. “For years,” NAACP labor secretary Herbert Hill declared, “we have attempted through conferences, memoranda and interminable negotiations to make progress for Negro

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 247.

workers in the AFL building trades craft unions. This has been an exercise in futility.”¹²⁰

As spokesperson for the coalition, which consisted of CORE, the NAACP, the Urban League, the Negro American Labor Council, the Workers Defense League, and the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, Velma Hill (no relation to Herbert) announced that the Joint Committee demanded an immediate commitment from city officials, union leaders, and contractors “that discrimination against Negro and Puerto Rican construction workers will end.” With work already underway on laying the foundation of the hospital buildings, Velma Hill noted that of the 64 laborers working on the job, only nine (14%) were African American. Building on the affirmative action demands of the Sealtest boycott, Hill demanded that Black and Puerto Rican workers be hired immediately with a goal of reaching 35% of the workforce.¹²¹

Early in the morning of June 12, the Joint Committee led an interracial group of 150 protestors in a picket line at the entrance of the construction site at 135th Street and Lenox Avenue. The previous night, members of the six organizations distributed leaflets throughout Harlem as a soundtruck drove along the streets urging residents to join the demonstration. When workers arrived to the construction site that morning, they were greeted with chants of “If we don’t work, nobody works,” as groups of protestors sat down in front of the entrances on 135th

¹²⁰ “Promise Mass Action on Building Trade Unions,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 8, 1963.

¹²¹ Samuel Kaplan, “Race Group Plans Hospital Pickets,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1963.

and 136th Streets, barring workers and delivery trucks from entering the site. The predominantly white construction crew milled about outside the fenced in site, awaiting instructions from contractor Julius Nasso, who pleaded with Herbert Hill and other demonstrators to allow the workers to pass through their lines.

The pickets were resolute, however, and a scuffle broke out when Hill, Urban League member Ramon Rivera, and several others broke through a police barricade to block the remaining open entrance. As officers struggled to forcefully remove the group, which also included CORE member William Mahoney and NAACP members Morris De Lisser and Isaiah Brunson, reinforcements of 300 officers arrived on the scene to forcefully keep the entrance clear. In the ensuing confrontation, police manhandled the group of nonviolent demonstrators and shoved De Lisser up against a fence, leaving him hospitalized with head and neck injuries.

Coverage of the demonstration in the *Amsterdam News* included a photo of a man lying on the ground in front of a police barricade “after being kicked and assaulted” during the confrontation. Promising to file a formal complaint of police brutality against the NYPD, Hill said that the situation was “worse than Philadelphia,” where police officers had beaten and arrested RAM leaders Max Stanford and Stan Daniels weeks earlier. Though the massive police presence allowed workers to enter the site around 9am after the scuffle, the confrontation coerced Deputy Mayor Paul Screvane to warn that he would halt construction if the

building trade unions “did not act immediately to end any discriminatory practices there.”¹²²

Screvane, who was serving as acting Mayor while Wagner was in Hawaii for a conference, made good on his threat the following day as protests continued at the construction site. While demonstrators were back on the picket line at six o'clock that morning, again attempting to block the entrances to the site, leaders of the Building and Construction Trades Council met at Screvane's request to discuss the allegations of racial discrimination against their unions. The Council's president, Peter Brennan, was to report to Screvane immediately following the meeting with their proposed action plan to address the allegations. As the day dragged on with the protestors awaiting word from the acting Mayor about the outcomes of the meeting, the atmosphere at the construction site grew increasingly tense. Several of Harlem's most notable nationalist leaders, including Malcolm X and James Lawson, along with journalist Louis Lomax, looked on as groups of bystanders who had been watching from the sidewalks joined the demonstration and protestors laid in front of cement trucks in an effort to block their deliveries.¹²³

In the early afternoon, police clashed with protestors for the second time in as many days when a group tried once again to barricade an open entrance to the

¹²² Samuel Kaplan, “Unions Here Get Warning On Bias,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1963; “3 in Harlem Biracial Demonstration Injured During Clash With Police,” *The Washington Post*, June 13, 1963; “Pickets, Police Brawl At N.Y. Hospital Site,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 13, 1963; “300 Cops Present: Pickets Clash At Hospital Site,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 15, 1963.

¹²³ Samuel Kaplan, “City Halts Work At Site In Harlem,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1963.

site. Within minutes of the heavy police presence forcefully securing the entrance, however, word spread through the crowd that the construction workers had been ordered to stop and the site was officially shutdown. Citing concerns over “public safety,” Screvane’s order to halt construction pending an investigation over charges of discrimination was met by cheers from the hundreds of protestors at 135th Street and Lenox Avenue.

Despite the initial elation at the construction site, City Hall’s intervention was met with mixed reactions from community leaders in Harlem. After conferring with Mayor Wagner, Screvane announced that the Mayor would appoint a three-person committee to investigate the charges of racial discrimination in the construction industry. The move was characteristic of Wagner’s passive approach toward resolving issues of racial inequality and tension in the city through commissions, evoking memories of the Committee on Harlem Affairs formed in the wake of the 1959 “near riot.”¹²⁴ While CORE’s assistant program director Norman Hill welcomed Screvane’s proposed committee investigation as “a step in the right direction,” NAACP labor secretary Herbert Hill was less enthused. To Hill, such a token response from City Hall was “sheer fakery” which represented only “a further postponement for justice to the Negro worker in New York City.”¹²⁵

Hill’s assessment, shared by other leaders of the Joint Committee for Equal Employment Opportunity including Velma Hill and Gladys Harrington, proved

¹²⁴ “Rights Picketing at Fair Construction Is Planned,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1963. For more on the Committee on Harlem Affairs, see Chapter Four.

¹²⁵ Samuel Kaplan, “City Halts Work At Site In Harlem,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1963.

prescient. The Mayor's "action committee," which had no representation from civil rights organizations or community groups, deliberated for nearly a month while the site remained closed, finally releasing a public report in mid-July. Without once using the word "discrimination," the committee's report detailed the exclusion of Black and Puerto Rican laborers in scores of construction unions in the city while lauding others for "actively trying to recruit more nonwhites." To rectify these racial disparities in union labor, the committee offered a series of recommendations to open union membership to qualified Black and Puerto Rican workers through "voluntary compliance" from the building and construction trades unions.¹²⁶ In effect, the committee proposed that unions voluntarily desegregate with minor provisions for governmental oversight of the integration process—the type of resolution that few Harlem residents had any faith would bring any meaningful change whatsoever.

Hoping to salve the mounting protests by striking a compromise between the unions and the communities they systematically discriminated against, city officials quickly found themselves facing opposition from both sides. Building and Construction Trades Council President Peter Brennan maintained that the 122 unions the Council represented did not discriminate and would not tolerate "dictation by any outside group" as to their membership practices and policies. In a statement characteristic of union defenses against charges of discrimination in membership and employment at the time, Brennan told a press conference that the

¹²⁶ Clayton Knowles, "City Panel Gives Job Racial Plan," *New York Times*, July 12, 1963.

unions were against discrimination, but “would not lower its standards for employees to accommodate a situation.” Dismissing the legitimate claims of racial discrimination, the narrative that Brennan and other union leaders put forth explained the lack of Black and Puerto Rican laborers among their ranks as an absence of qualified applicants rather than the presence of discriminatory policies and practices. Furthermore, Brennan suggested that the unions were so “thoroughly maligned” by such accusations that they “may start picketing ourselves.”¹²⁷ Rather than budging on any policy reforms recommended by the Mayor’s committee, the unions appeared ready to dig in their heels and fight back against the protests that were spreading throughout the city by mid-July.

While the unions fought against the Mayor’s committee, community leaders criticized the shortcomings of their recommendations and demanded stronger action from City Hall. Even before the committee released their report, the Joint Committee for Equal Employment released their own recommendations for rectifying the discriminatory practices of the unions. Among the demands of the Joint Committee were the admission of all qualified Black and Puerto Rican journeymen into the unions, the opening of apprenticeship programs for Black and Puerto Rican workers at twice their proportion of the city’s population, and that such skilled workers need only pass a test to gain admission to a building trades union.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Samuel Kaplan, “Union Rejects Racial Plan of Mayor’s ‘Action Panel,” *New York Times*, July 18, 1963.

When the Mayor's committee finally released their report, the Joint Committee acknowledged that it "showed progress in thinking," but asserted that any program based on voluntary compliance remained weak and was "no substitute for meaningful action."¹²⁹ Spokesman Ramon E. Rivera announced that the Joint Committee would give the unions and building contractors ten days to study the recommendations of the Mayor's committee and report back on how they would put the recommendations into action. If the unions failed to act, Rivera said, the Joint Committee would escalate their protests to force Mayor Wagner and Governor Rockefeller to shut down all city and state construction projects until the unions adopted a "meaningful program of integration." At the same time, the Joint Committee asked the Mayor's committee to recommend legislative action to the Mayor to force union adherence to the committee's program.¹³⁰

While representatives of the Joint Committee convened with city officials and union leaders, the rank and file of the organizations within the Committee had been escalating their protests on the ground. Hoping that the Harlem Hospital shutdown would result in government action to create a model for fair employment policies throughout the city, *Amsterdam News* editor James Hicks urged the civil rights organizations involved in the protests to "immediately turn their attentions to some

¹²⁸ Samuel Kaplan, "Job-Equality Group Demands Unions Here Admit Minorities," *New York Times*, July 8, 1963.

¹²⁹ Samuel Kaplan, "Job Plan Scored By Racial Group," *New York Times*, July 13, 1963.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

other city project and force home the same conditions.”¹³¹ Gladys Harrington and NY CORE needed little encouragement from Hicks to expand their protests against employment discrimination in the construction trades throughout the city that summer. “The Harlem Hospital demonstrations,” historian Brian Purnell notes, “made fighting against racial discrimination in the building trades the most important civil rights issue in the city.”¹³²

While excluded from the Mayor’s “action committee,” Harrington and other CORE leaders ensured that City Hall would hear from them in other ways. In the second week of July, Harrington led a handful of CORE members in round-the-clock sit-ins at the offices of Mayor Wagner and Governor Rockefeller to demand legislative action for fair employment on publicly-funded construction projects. “We feel the Governor is empowered to act within the scope of present discrimination laws,” Harrington told reporters. “We feel that with strong moral leadership, the average American will adopt the true spirit of democracy.”¹³³ The moral leadership Harrington was appealing to faltered, and by the end of the month, the sit-ins escalated to fast-ins. During a 48-hour fast in late July, both Harrington and Bronx CORE member Tina Lawrence collapsed in the Mayor’s office.¹³⁴

¹³¹ “The Time Is Now,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 29, 1963.

¹³² Purnell, *Fighting Jim Crow*, 212.

¹³³ “Sit-Ins Maintain Two Vigils Here,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1963.

¹³⁴ “General Roundup Of ‘Revolution,’” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 27, 1963.

While Harrington's moral appeal failed, other CORE chapters throughout the Northeast region used the momentum generated by the Birmingham campaign and the Harlem Hospital demonstrations to launch direct action protests against other construction sites. CORE chapters led similar confrontational protests at the construction sites of housing developments including the Rutgers Houses on the Lower East Side and Rochdale Village in Queens. In nearby Newark, New Jersey, Newark-Essex CORE and the New Frontier Democrats, led by Robert Curvin and George Richardson respectively, coordinated a major protest campaign against employment discrimination at the construction site of a public high school that spurred the emergence of sustained civil rights activity in that city. In early July, Brooklyn CORE began picketing the construction site of the Downstate Medical Center, drawing thousands of protestors to the site and into the Movement. Emerging in the wake of the Harlem Hospital protests, Purnell argues, Brooklyn CORE's involvement in the Downstate demonstrations "signaled a newer, more confrontational approach to civil rights activism." Furthermore, the campaign "attracted many young people and first-time activists," including Sonny Carson, Frances Crayton, and Yuri Kochiyama, who were drawn to the militancy and dramatic actions of the protests.¹³⁵

The Downstate protests also drew the attention of Malcolm X, who again kept a watchful eye on the demonstrations as a heavy police presence became increasingly repressive and confrontational. Though members of the NOI did not

¹³⁵ For a more detailed account of the Downstate protests, see Purnell, *Fighting Jim Crow*, 210-235.

participate in the protests due to their professed rejection of nonviolent resistance, a BOSS detective reported, Malcolm X “made it clear that if at any time the non-violent pickets are in need of Muslim aid they would be present to heed their call.”¹³⁶ Even from the sidelines, Malcolm’s conversations with demonstrators would have profound impacts on the political development of protestors like Sonny Carson, a former gang member and future leader of Brooklyn CORE, who thereafter “began to direct his energies and leadership abilities toward black nationalist politics and community activism.”¹³⁷ This influx of militant action inspired by the Harlem Hospital protests marked the emergence of widespread direct action protests throughout New York City that would coalesce into a powerful social force in the months to come.

Despite such dramatic protests throughout the city that summer, the building and construction trades unions proved resilient in their efforts to maintain their lily-white membership while city and state officials provided little more than lip service to challenge this obvious racial inequality. Though over 2,000 Black and Puerto Rican workers had submitted applications for union membership to the City Labor Department by the end of the summer, only ten Black workers had been accepted into construction unions by October.¹³⁸ This paltry number was at sharp odds with

¹³⁶ Memo from John L. Kinsella to Chief Inspector, July 29, 1963, BOSS Records.

¹³⁷ Purnell, *Fighting Jim Crow*, 224.

¹³⁸ “Only 100 Names Go To Labor Unions,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 21, 1963; Malcolm Nash, “Big Six Pickets Building Unions,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 9, 1963.

predictions made by the city's Labor Commissioner weeks earlier that at least 600 Black and Puerto Rican workers would be admitted during this time.¹³⁹ Denouncing such dismal progress as "tokenism at its very worst," Gladys Harrington called for "a renewed attack on this shameful situation" as NY CORE began protests at the construction site of a new federal office building in Foley Square that fall.¹⁴⁰

The Foley Square demonstrations, just blocks from City Hall, marked an escalation of protest tactics as well as police repression. In mid-October, Harrington and two other NY CORE members were arrested for climbing atop a crane to halt work on the construction site, just days after police brought out their mounted unit to forcefully suppress protests there.¹⁴¹ After over a week of protests at the site, Harrington led a 200-person march from NY CORE's headquarters on 125th Street to City Hall to protest continued inaction from the Mayor and Governor in addressing discrimination in the construction industry. Joined by 100 marchers from Brooklyn, the eight-mile march culminated in a rally at City Hall, where 700 protestors listened to speeches by Percy Sutton, James Peck, Mark Lane, Lincoln Lynch, and SNCC chairman John Lewis, who called for the "mass nonviolent overthrow of

¹³⁹ "City Aide Confident Unions Will Accept 600 Negroes Soon," *New York Times*, September 2, 1963.

¹⁴⁰ Malcolm Nash, "Harlem Hospital Site Costing City \$500 A Day," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 19, 1963.

¹⁴¹ "NYC Losing \$1400 A Day In Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 26, 1963; "CORE Assails Mayor on Mounted Police," *New York Times*, October 17, 1963.

segregation and racial discrimination.”¹⁴² The march and rally at City Hall represented an impressive convergence of national and local civil rights leaders in New York City and marked an apex of sorts for the four months of dramatic protests against the construction industry in the city. Such impressive mass action, however, failed to bring about the kinds of tangible changes in employment discrimination that Harrington and the Joint Committee demanded.

When Mayor Wagner ordered work to resume on the Harlem Hospital project two weeks later, eleven of the sixteen workers on site were African American, but neither City Hall nor the Building and Construction Trades Council had agreed to any meaningful change in employment policies or practices. Again haranguing these limited gains as “tokenism,” the Joint Committee objected to the resumption of work without a more systemic commitment to racial equality from labor leaders and city and state officials.¹⁴³ Though the four-month wave of militant protests that the Harlem Hospital demonstrations inspired failed to rectify racial discrimination in the building and construction trades, they nonetheless had profound impacts on Black freedom struggles in New York City. By the time work resumed on the Harlem Hospital site, the 151-day shut down had cost the city over \$500 per day for maintenance and security at the site, demonstrating to city and

¹⁴² “500 March Here For Job Equality,” *New York Times*, October 21, 1963; Jo Holly, “Long Island, Inside Out,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 26, 1963.

¹⁴³ Theodore Jones, “Negroes Denounce Resumption of Hospital Job,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1963.

state officials the economic costs that continued racial inequality could incur.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, the confrontational tactics used at the construction sites represented an escalation of protest activities throughout the city. Whereas national CORE leaders had counseled local pickets during the “sympathy strikes” of 1960 to remain peaceful, orderly, and to not obstruct businesses, by 1963 local people had pushed CORE leaders to adopt more assertive tactics, including civil disobedience, to force physical confrontations and demand concessions from various levels of the white power structure. NY CORE and their allies served notice that if Blacks and Puerto Ricans were not given seats at the table, nobody would sit.

This escalation in tactics coincided with a fundamental shift in CORE’s demands in the early 1960s. Whereas previous protests had sought to integrate public accommodations or break the color barrier in employment or housing on a case-by-case basis, CORE’s swelling grassroots base was pushing its leaders to demand more systemic changes in employment, housing, and police reform. Like Malcolm X, whose insistence on governmental reparations for enslavement had won the support of many in Harlem and beyond, by 1963 CORE leaders were demanding that employers and city officials rectify their complicity in past employment discrimination through preferential hiring and training programs for Black and Puerto Rican workers. Inherent within this organizational evolution was a growing identification with the analyses and demands of poor and working-class Black communities in New York City. “What would have been big gains a year ago no

¹⁴⁴ “Work Starts Again At Harlem Hospital Site,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 16, 1963.

longer are regarded by the rank and file,” Velma Hill said in early 1964. “The result is a problem, restiveness among the members. They want to demonstrate if we do not get even bigger victories.”¹⁴⁵

While CORE’s organizational thrust in 1960-1961 was characterized by struggles for an “open society,” by 1963 NY CORE and other local chapters were forcing the national organization to adopt programs that focused on community development and empowerment within predominantly Black neighborhoods. Described by program director Norman Hill as a “ghetto thrust,” NY CORE’s evolution during this period set the stage for a major conflict in the chapter by the year’s end. At the same time, NY CORE’s growing grassroots base brought the interracial organization into the fold of militant, vanguard struggles for human rights, self-determination, and political power—the radical hallmarks of Black nationalism and later the Black Power Movement.

Toward Community Organizing and Black Power at the Grassroots

The surging involvement of poor and working-class Black communities that was pushing NY CORE in more radical directions was part of a broader evolution of Black Freedom Struggles in New York City by the end of 1963. The naked brutality of white racism inflicted upon the Birmingham campaign had enraged and enlivened individuals and communities across the nation, spurring an influx of new activists and organizers in local movements throughout that summer. Though this groundswell of working-class activists in CORE had largely begun two years earlier

¹⁴⁵ Norman and Velma Hill interview with August Meier, February 1964, Box 56, Folder 8, Meier Papers.

in the wake of the Freedom Rides, the militant responses of the Black community in Birmingham to racial terrorism that spring had inspired more confrontational action far beyond the Mason-Dixon Line. Considered by some observers to be the first urban rebellion of the 1960s, the clashes between Black protestors and white police in Birmingham expedited the radical evolution of northern civil rights organizations whose growing grassroots base had less tolerance for gradualism, nonviolence, and negotiating for freedom than their middle-class counterparts. Though Meier and Rudwick trace this evolution of CORE's ideologies and praxis in New York City to the Freedom Rides in 1961,¹⁴⁶ as noted above, the radical political milieu nurtured by Black nationalists, radical intellectuals, and grassroots community leaders in Harlem during this same period played a substantial role in shaping the political consciousness and actions of this groundswell of activism embodied in CORE and NSM alike.

With racial violence continuing unabated in the South and seemingly basic demands for equality being met with dogged resistance, official indifference, and police repression in Harlem that summer, the militant rhetoric and analysis of Malcolm X became increasingly attractive to would-be activists and seasoned veterans of interracial organizations alike. By the end of the summer, Gladys Harrington was appearing on stage with Malcolm X at street rallies in Harlem. At an August rally amidst the construction protests, Harrington shared a stage with Dan Watts, Bessie Phillips, and Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali), where she echoed Malcolm's calls for a Black united front and criticized President Kennedy's co-

¹⁴⁶ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 145.

optation of the March on Washington in front of a crowd of 2,000.¹⁴⁷ The previous summer, New Haven CORE leader Blyden Jackson, who by 1963 would join NY CORE before forming a rival chapter by the year's end, began speaking at street rallies sponsored by the Harlem Anti-Colonial Committee.¹⁴⁸ Led by Bill Jones and Selma Sparks, the small radical group included John Henrik Clarke, Sylvester Leaks, William Worthy, and Pernella Wattley, each of whom had played an active role in supporting the Monroe defendants and African liberation struggles in the early 1960s.¹⁴⁹

Like NY CORE, which drew many of its members during these formative years from the same grassroots base that Malcolm X reached so effectively, members of the NSM became increasingly involved in Harlem's radical milieu. Carl Anthony, who recalled hearing Malcolm X speak on dozens of occasions in Harlem, spent countless hours in Louis Michaux's bookstore where he immersed himself in the works of Carter G. Woodson, J.A. Rogers, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), and Harold Cruse.¹⁵⁰ Marilyn Lowen, a Jewish college student from Detroit who was drawn to the NSM after hearing Anthony speak in

¹⁴⁷ Memo from John Kinsella to Chief Inspector, August 13, 1963, BOSS Records.

¹⁴⁸ Profile of Blyden Jackson, BOSS Records.

¹⁴⁹ Christopher M. Tinson, *Radical Intellect: Liberator Magazine and Black Activism in the 1960s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 61. It is worth noting that Wattley had also been an active member of FPCC, and, alongside Mae Mallory, was one of the Harlem Nine.

¹⁵⁰ Carl Anthony, *The Earth, the City, and the Hidden Narrative of Race* (New York: New Village Press, 2017), 57-71.

New Haven in the fall of 1962, began working with the Harlem Anti-Colonial Committee and the Freedom Now Party before joining HEP full time in the summer of 1963. In Harlem, Lowen and her boyfriend Bob Fletcher also became associated with members of the radical Black literary group Umbra, high school activist Sherron Jackson (Amina Rahman), and Stokely Carmichael.¹⁵¹ Having grown up in the Bronx, Carmichael came by the HEP offices from time to time that summer while on respite from his work with SNCC in the South, even participating in a HEP tutor orientation program in June 1963, where he spoke about “Direct Action” on a panel with NSM staffers Carl Anthony, Bob Knight, Roger Siegel, and Kathie Rogers.¹⁵²

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the radicalization of NSM members during this period was Sherron Jackson (Amina Rahman), a student at the High School of Music and Art, who had been involved with SNCC and CORE protests in the South, volunteered for HARYOU, and was a correspondent of NSM’s student newspaper, *Harlem Voice*. Though only a teenager at the time, Jackson was deeply involved in interracial, nonviolent struggles for Black equality and empowerment. A meeting with Malcolm X at the Harlem Hospital protests that summer, however, had transformative impacts on the young activist’s political consciousness and involvement in struggles for Black liberation. As the demonstrations got underway in June, Jackson walked the picket lines for a couple hours before getting on the bus

¹⁵¹ Marilyn Lowen, “I Knew I Wasn’t White, but in America What Was I?,” in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts By Women in SNCC*, ed. Faith S. Holsaert et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 546-47.

¹⁵² The Harlem Education Project, “Tutor Orientation,” June 28-29, 1963, Box 8, Folder 10, NSM Records.

to head to school. When protestors fought to block cement trucks from entering the construction site on the second day, Jackson was among those lying down in the street when she realized that Malcolm X was looking on from across the way. Moments later, Malcolm sent word through James 67X that the minister wanted to have a word with her.

Though Jackson initially refused citing her protest duties, she eventually ventured across the street to speak to Malcolm X when her shift was finished. “We had quite an argument that morning,” then 14-year-old Jackson later said. As he had with Maya Angelou and Rosa Guy in the wake of the UN demonstrations two years earlier, Malcolm explained to Jackson that her participation in nonviolent demonstrations was misguided. “I was trying to convince him of the rightness of what I was doing and how fearless I was about that construction truck and the workers, I was putting my body on the line for the cause,” she later recalled. “I talked about what we were doing in appealing to the moral conscience of the truckdriver by laying our bodies on the line in front of that truck.” Malcolm, however, challenged the young activist to question the fundamental assumptions that guided her actions that day. Rahman’s recollection of the encounter is worth quoting at length for the formative impact that it had on her political thought:

Malcolm said, ‘but that’s because you think he has a moral conscience, something that you ought to question given the history of what white people in this country have done to Black people. If these are people who could lynch Black people, murder Black children, burn down churches, starve people, enslave people, why couldn’t they run over somebody with the truck? Oh, they’d say it was an accident. He’d say ‘oops! My foot slipped,’ but you’d be just as dead from an accident as you would be had it been done on purpose.’ It was quite a conversation and admittedly I’d never thought about that kind of thing. I’d never put two and two together in the context of Black

people and white people at that point in time. And when he left and I turned around to go back across the street to the demonstration, I went back and I got on the picket line but I never laid down in the street in front of a truck again.¹⁵³

Though she retained her affiliations with HARYOU and NSM, Rahman became a regular visitor of Mosque No. 7 in the weeks following this encounter with Malcolm X. By early September, Rahman was sharing a stage with Malcolm X at rallies in Harlem, where she routinely criticized her prior participation in nonviolent demonstrations to achieve integration and called for immediate liberation and self-determination by any means necessary.

Speaking at a mass rally at 114th Street and Lenox Avenue that month, Rahman told the crowd of 700 that Black Americans “will never gain anything until they see the light and place their faith in a god who will represent them. When this is done black people will then be united in the world wide black revolution and will then stop turning the other cheek and fight force with force.”¹⁵⁴ Though a dramatic example, Rahman’s introduction to Malcolm X that summer is illustrative of the ways in which Harlem’s radical milieu was shaping the direction of mainstream civil rights organizations and challenging popular perceptions of integration and nonviolence as a panacea in Black Freedom Struggles.

While Malcolm’s radical analysis and rhetoric inspired greater militancy at the grassroots, Jesse Gray’s emphasis on the revolutionary potential of grassroots

¹⁵³ Interview with Amina Rahman, 1992, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries, 9-11.

¹⁵⁴ Memo from Frederick Jenoure to Commanding Officer, September 14, 1963, BOSS Records.

community organizing came to define the thrust of CORE and NSM by the fall of 1963. Whereas NY CORE's earlier housing activism campaigns had focused primarily on desegregation and open housing legislation, by 1963 chapters throughout the city began to focus on their efforts on improving housing conditions in predominantly Black communities. More than just a tactical shift in advocating for better housing conditions, CORE's emphasis on tenant organizing by 1963 represented the organization's continued movement toward an operational advocacy of self-determination, grassroots empowerment, and community organizing among poor and working-class Black New Yorkers.

By the end of the year, these trends would cause a rift in the organization as Blyden Jackson, Norman and Velma Hill, and a group of NY CORE members split from the chapter to form the more militant East River CORE. In NSM, the rising tide of grassroots militancy and Black nationalism in Harlem led the organization to reconsider education as its primary focus in the neighborhood as community members pushed for greater involvement in direct action and community organizing. Like NY CORE, such trends and budding relationships with other community leaders like Jesse Gray would also spur the emergence of a new wing of the NSM, known as the Harlem Action Group (HAG), by the year's end. With the emergence of Gray's widespread rent strikes in Harlem and throughout the city in the early fall of 1963, both CORE and NSM embraced the surging grassroots militancy and shifted their organizing actions to keep pace with Black grassroots demands for immediate rights and power in New York City.

As this groundswell was pushing the NSM to reconsider its operational analyses and directions, historian Matthew Countryman notes, “there was a growing feeling that NSM should have a black director.” Despite the ongoing interracial struggles in the South, the continuing rise of Black militancy and nationalist politics in NSM’s project cities, including Harlem, Detroit, and Philadelphia, made having a white director untenable. Echoing the call for Black self-determination inherent in the surging militancy of the time, Joan Countryman later recalled the “need for black leadership for an organization that [focused] on black issues.”¹⁵⁵ In September 1963, Peter Countryman stepped down from his post as national director to return to Yale, and was succeeded by Bill Strickland, a Black Harvard graduate, Marine Corps veteran, and old friend of Malcolm X.¹⁵⁶

Coinciding with HEP’s immersion in more radical grassroots organizing initiatives in Harlem, Strickland’s arrival on the scene ushered in a new era for the NSM in New York and the nation. “It is becoming increasingly evident that ‘civil rights’ is no longer either an adequate term or an accurate description of the quest for full freedom which is now challenging our society,” Strickland told a crowded conference at Columbia that October. “It is also evident that an institutionalized system of disadvantage provokes just as dangerous a reaction in the overcrowded and under-resourced northern ghetto as in the more publicized and tragic south.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Tobierre, “Black Power Does Not Come Out of the Sky,” 52.

¹⁵⁶ Countryman, *Up South*, 189.

¹⁵⁷ William Strickland, Speech at College Conference at Columbia, October 25, 1963, unmarked clipping, Box 76, Folder 24, Meier Papers.

Strickland's stirring speech at Columbia illustrated a new operational analysis of the systemic nature of northern racism that both NSM and NY CORE members alike had developed through their experiences in Harlem and elsewhere. Confronting this system through a grassroots struggle for human rights would require a new organizational framework, and would bring NSM and NY CORE to the front of Harlem's flowering radical political milieu as the city bounded into what would be the most explosive year of an already turbulent decade.

CHAPTER 7

“SOMETHING’S GOTTA BE WRONG”: RENT STRIKES, REPRESSION, AND

REBELLION IN HARLEM, 1963-1964

People ask me why I spend all my time on heat and hot water and I say heat and hot water is the biggest organizing tool we have; it may even kick off the revolution in the ghetto. –Jesse Gray (1964)¹

Heretofore Harlem has been nonviolent. I think the leadership of Harlem would prefer that we remain nonviolent. As long as we can press for equality with a nonviolent technique then this is a good one. The problem isn't the leadership, the problem isn't even the masses of people, the problem is how long can you keep denying a people freedom and expect them to remain nonviolent. Turning your cheek once is fine, turning it twice is alright, but the third time you get a little bit sick of being slapped down. And you know if you don't hit back you're in trouble. I'm not advocating hitting back. I'm only saying that if we don't break through, somebody is going to get violent. –Thelma Johnson (1963)²

In early December 1963, millions of Americans tuned in to their local CBS station to watch a special report on the state of the Black Freedom Struggle in Harlem and the conditions caused by racial oppression there. For months, reporters brought their cameras through the streets of Harlem, filming street scenes and interviews with a cross-section of community leaders as part of an “examination of the Negro Revolution as it exists in Harlem.” While the dramatic protests and violent backlash that surged throughout the South that summer commanded the attention of most national media outlets, the rising grassroots militancy in Harlem demonstrated through confrontational protests at construction sites and the uncompromising rhetoric of nationalist street rallies that summer had drawn the

¹ “Jesse Gray Tells Plans In New York: The rent-strike season is on,” *National Guardian*, November 11, 1964.

² CBS, “The Harlem Temper,” December 11, 1963, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf9RDF6T4AY&t=350s/>.

gaze of the nation to its most famous Black community. "Instead of focusing on the Southern race problem," executive producer Fred W. Friendly stated in a press release, "The Harlem Temper" was intended to depict struggles for rights and power in Harlem "as a microcosm of the Negro in the North."³

As the televised report opened with scenes of Black people moving about the sidewalks of a bustling 125th Street and gathering around stoops on residential blocks, white reporter Harry Reasoner described the "invisible barriers of prejudice" that created "some of the worst of city slums." While most Americans were undoubtedly familiar with the explicit conditions of racial oppression in the South, having seen on the news "whites only" signs, police dogs set upon peaceful protestors, and the destruction of Black churches, far fewer truly understood the problems of northern "ghettoes" as part of a national system of institutional racism that knew no geographic bounds. If racial injustices existed in a northern community where "full legal equality...ostensibly already exists," Reasoner posited, then the question begging to be answered was, "how do we achieve real equality?"

From footage of Malcolm X, Louis Michaux, and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. speaking forcefully at street rallies to formal interviews with Jesse Gray, Gladys Harrington, Paul Zuber, Thelma Johnson, and many others, the hour-long program explored this question through the voices of those who had spent years in search of its answer. The diversity of analyses and programs that these prominent leaders explained during the course of the program was representative of the range of

³ "CBS Will Report on 'The Harlem Temper,'" *Cleveland Call and Post*, November 30, 1963.

competing ideologies at play in Harlem's charged political milieu. Though the timing and tone of the report suggested that Harlem was in its infancy of organized political action, struggling to grapple with the complexities of racism in the urban north, the program aired amidst a high point in struggles for rights and power in Harlem.

James Haughton, chairman of the NAACP's Labor and Industry Committee, made this point clear when questioned about the "new militancy" in Harlem. "I don't think there's anything new about the militancy and the dignity and the strength and the pride and the courage of the Negro people," Haughton bluntly told Reasoner.

Despite this deep tradition of militancy, however, Haughton conceded that Harlem remained a "sleeping giant," yearning for organized action that would engage the grassroots and awaken the Black Mecca's dormant power.

While "The Harlem Temper" aptly presented the breadth of political thought and action in Harlem through the community leaders it featured, its producers and reviewers were critically mistaken in their conclusions that such a convoluted political milieu precluded collective action. "The kaleidoscope of opinions and impressions was so diverse as to create a canvas of total negation," a *Boston Globe* reporter noted.⁴ With seemingly irreconcilable debates around nonviolence, integration, nationalism, and self-defense predominating in the program, it is easy to understand how observers could make such assumptions. In many ways, these debates and disagreements had characterized the movement in Harlem over the past decade as organizations searched for ways to effectively build mass movements

⁴ Percy Shain, "Portrait of Disunity In Northern Negroes," *Boston Globe*, December 12, 1963.

to achieve Black equality and empowerment. For years, activists and intellectuals who recognized the limitations of a Balkanized movement had called for a Black united front to uproot northern racism and transform their society.

Though conflicting visions of the means and ends of this social transformation routinely hamstrung the development of such a united front at the dawn of the 1960s, by the time the CBS report aired, inter-organizational coalitions had emerged around various protest campaigns with much greater frequency. At the insistence of local people and indigenous leaders, relatively moderate middle-class organizations like CORE and the NAACP had embraced an ethos of working-class community action and entered the fold of militant grassroots organizing. The Northern Student Movement had begun to move from service-oriented tutorial programs to community organizing for political empowerment. And by that summer, Malcolm X was sharing the stage with leaders from along the spectrum of Black political thought in Harlem, from staunch integrationist Gladys Harrington to radical anti-colonial editor-activist Dan Watts, as he escalated his calls for united action for Black liberation.

Though the programs and analyses embraced by these organizations may have differed, they shared a common overarching goal: the immediate liberation of Black communities in the United States. To James Haughton, this nascent unity reflected a common recognition that the demands of the people must be reflected in the organizations who claimed to represent their interests. "It's a matter of what the Negro people are demanding," Haughton said, dismissing questions about the supposed dichotomy between integration and separation in the Black Freedom

Struggle. “It’s my understanding that they’re neither demanding total separation, which is Malcolm’s position, nor are they demanding total integration. They’re demanding total equality.”

By the fall of 1963 these demands for total equality became manifest in a citywide rent strike which had emerged from the grassroots in Harlem and galvanized local people, community groups, political leaders, and civil rights organizations throughout the city and across the nation. For Jesse Gray, whose radical activism in Harlem bridged the Left-led movements of the post-World War II Era with the radical insurgencies of the Civil Rights Movement, the rent strikes served as a great unifying force in the community’s struggles for Black liberation. “Everybody in the community was around the basic struggle,” Gray later said, “struggle unifies the community.”⁵ By centering the needs of the most economically and politically marginalized communities in New York City, the rent strike movement of 1963-64 drew into the fold of Harlem’s radical political milieu the poor and working-class masses that Haughton, Harrington, and Johnson had described in “The Harlem Temper” as the key to building a mass movement in Harlem. Furthermore, through their involvement in organized struggle, this previously untapped well of political power came to realize its collective strength while also developing a more radical analysis of the many facets of the white power structure in New York City.

⁵ Jesse Gray interview with Katherine M. Shannon, July 26, 1967, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

For the past decade, poor and working-class Harlem residents had fueled the escalation of protest activity and demands for human rights and self-determination that pushed local and national civil rights organizations in more assertive, imaginative, and radical directions. Inspired by Harlem's deeply-rooted Black radical tradition, along with national and global liberation struggles, local people had begun to develop a revolutionary consciousness, which through the rent strikes in the fall of 1963, had stimulated the makings of a promising, if shaky, Black united front in Harlem. Forged through school boycotts, rent strikes, economic picket lines, and protests against police brutality over the previous decade, this popular consciousness and political action reflected frustrations over the limitations of racial liberalism in New York City and was mobilized to fight for self-determination and a more progressive form of urban governance. Through participation in local organizing efforts to improve living conditions and combat institutional racism, some of the most marginalized communities in New York City had developed a radical critique of urban power structures that challenged the legitimacy of an inherently oppressive society.

This chapter examines the emergence, evolution, and impacts of the Harlem rent strikes of 1963-64 within the context of escalating demands for immediate rights and power in New York's Black and Puerto Rican communities. Through active engagement in the rent strikes, thousands of Black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers forged an urban "movement center" that mobilized the masses in struggles for racial justice in the city's economic, political, and social institutions. Consequently, as many activists and intellectuals observed, the emergence of this

movement center in Harlem was met with increasingly hostile and repressive actions and policies from the city government and its police force. This dogged resistance to Black empowerment, in turn, spurred grassroots organizers to adopt more militant analyses and tactics as they fought to secure human rights and self-determination for Black communities in Harlem and throughout the city. This chapter thus frames the outbreak of the 1964 Harlem Rebellion as the result of a collective disillusionment with the repressive limitations of liberal governance to meaningfully address systemic racial oppression. Though a spontaneous act of police brutality provided the impetus for the uprising, this fatal shooting occurred within a volatile political climate charged by increasingly repressive state violence that was employed to maintain the racial status quo as radical and revolutionary analyses were inspiring mass mobilization in Harlem and beyond.



If the March on Washington had provided a sense of optimism and hope for many African Americans who looked forward to the promise of federal civil rights legislation, the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church just two weeks later tempered any sense of elation. Describing the racist attack as “one of the American answers to the march,” James Baldwin and MOW organizer Bayard Rustin swiftly announced plans for mass demonstrations nationwide to protest the seemingly endless violence in the South. “It is not enough to mourn the dead children,” Baldwin declared from Harlem, “what we must do is oppose and immobilize the power that

put them to death.”⁶ Joined by Blyden Jackson of NY CORE, Baldwin and Rustin mobilized the collective anger throughout New York City into a protest of 10,000 New Yorkers at the federal courthouse in Foley Square one week after the deadly terrorist attack in Birmingham.⁷

As 200 police officers looked on, including mounted units and members of the notorious Tactical Patrol Force, Rustin called for a nonviolent “uprising” in 100 cities “where we will sit and stand and stand and sit and go to jail and jail again, until there are no color barriers.” Rustin’s careful insistence on nonviolent action served as a rebuttal of sorts to comments made by John O. Killens and Louis Lomax in support of armed self-defense at a mid-town memorial service two nights prior.⁸ With justice still in short supply amidst wholesale racist violence, Rustin was

⁶ Albin Krebs, “Day of Mourning For Bomb Victims,” *Boston Globe*, September 19, 1963.

⁷ Terry Smith, “Nationwide Throngs Mourn Child Bomb Victims,” *Boston Globe*, September 23, 1963; Peter Kihss, “Rallies In Nation Protest Killing Of 6 In Alabama,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1963.

⁸ According to the *New York Amsterdam News*, Killens told the crowd gathered at Town Hall on West 43rd Street, “as a tactic, nonviolence has been successful, but as a philosophy we need to get rid of it.” Following Killens, Lomax warned that “the time is coming when the American Negro must arm himself to defend his home.” Malcolm Nash, “Bomb Victims Mourned,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 28, 1963. Interestingly, though Lomax took a militant stance on armed self-defense that weekend, he took a hard line on integration as the main objective of such efforts. At a rally in Harlem the same day as the Foley Square demonstration, where 900 gathered for another demonstration organized by James Lawson’s United African Nationalist Movement, Lomax was booed off the stage when he “advocated a moderate course,” telling the crowd “to fight for an integrated place in American democracy.” See “Thousands Rally, Demonstrate, Pray As City Mourns Birmingham Children,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 28, 1963.

fighting an uphill battle in trying to check the growing influence of those who advocated armed self-defense to protect Black communities.

While Rustin called for a national campaign against the naked brutality of southern racism that afternoon, Baldwin ensured that the less visible, yet interrelated evils of northern Jim Crow went neither unspoken nor unchallenged. Calling New York a “segregated city,” the celebrated writer called for a “mass campaign of civil disobedience” to expose and oppose the many faces of racial violence in the city. “We have got to bring the cat out of hiding,” Baldwin declared, pointing to the veiled, institutional nature of northern inequality.⁹

In his widely published essays of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Baldwin had demonstrated a deep concern for explaining and analyzing the human impacts of racial discrimination in education, employment, policing, and housing in Harlem. Now, with the grisly murder of four young Black girls in Birmingham as a backdrop, Baldwin urged New Yorkers to confront these local manifestations of the same violent, national system through direct action. “What would happen,” Baldwin pointedly asked the crowd that Sunday afternoon, “if Harlem refused to pay the rents for a month?” Unbeknownst to Baldwin, a small group of tenants nine miles uptown had begun doing just that.

The Rebirth of the Rent Strike

The notion was not a new one in Harlem, where rent strikes had been a staple of Left-led tenant movements during the Great Depression before reemerging

⁹ Peter Kihss, “Rallies In Nation Protest Killing Of 6 In Alabama,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1963.

with Jesse Gray's strikes in 1959. By the summer of 1963, rent strikes were once again creeping into the minds of many in Harlem as City Hall proved unwilling to enforce hard-won housing policies secured through tenant organizing over the past several years.¹⁰ Weeks before the March on Washington, Gray had threatened a strike at a rally on 117th Street when he urged the residents of the block's crumbling tenements to march on City Hall and tell the Mayor "we are not going to pay any more rent on these blocks until the violations in our homes are corrected."¹¹ Called under the banner of "Civil Rights and Tenants Rights," the rally was one of three that Gray and the Community Council on Housing (CCH) organized in lower Harlem that month, drawing the likes of Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Hulan Jack, attorney Cora Walker, Assemblyman José Ramos-Lopez, and Malcolm X. Sharing the stage with these formidable Harlem leaders, the CCH called for "stiff fines and long jail terms for landlords who refuse to obey the law."¹² With the March on Washington looming large in public consciousness, the rallies attempted to draw tenants out of their buildings and into the fold of organized political action by explicitly linking tenants rights with civil rights.

While Gray continued to tirelessly organize tenants in his lower Harlem neighborhood, members of the Northern Student Movement (NSM) had also begun

¹⁰ See Chapter Four.

¹¹ "Harlem Housing Ills Laid to Landlords and Mayor," *New York Times*, August 4, 1963.

¹² Community Council on Housing, "The Tenants News," August 1963, Box 5, Folder 9, James Haughton Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library (henceforth referred to as Haughton Papers).

moving into the field of tenant organizing that summer. Dissatisfied with the limited scope of their Harlem Education Project's (HEP) tutorial programs, organizers wanted to work on programs, like the Neighborhood Commons, which would develop indigenous leadership and spur autonomous community action.¹³ Inspired by the successes of SNCC in working with local people to build community-led movements, NSM members moved into the ripe field of tenant organizing in Harlem. "Fannie Lou Hamer, activist share croppers, people who emerged out of the community, who became the voice of that community," NSM's city field secretary Danny Schechter later said, "that's what we believed in, bottom-up."¹⁴ Like Jesse Gray and Jack O'Dell, whose analysis of radical grassroots struggle informed their move into tenant organizing years earlier, Schechter and other NSM members saw Harlem tenements as the next frontier of the Civil Rights Movement.

By early July, HEP workers had begun conducting housing surveys in the neighborhood near their office on 8th Avenue between 136th and 137th Streets. While canvassing the neighborhood, HEP staff met Granville Cherry, an unemployed shipping clerk who lived in a railroad apartment at 2560 8th Avenue, just a few doors from the HEP office.¹⁵ The apartment that Cherry shared with his pregnant

¹³ "Northern Student Movement Prospectus, September 1963- June 1964," Box 4, Folder 2, Northern Student Movement Records, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library (henceforth referred to as NSM Records).

¹⁴ Roberta Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City: The Struggle For Citizenship in New York City Housing* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 120.

¹⁵ "Successful Rent Strike Rocks Harlem," *NSM News*, December 1, 1963, Box 76, August Meier Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

wife and six children was riddled with code violations, including broken windows, a broken toilet, crumbling walls, a leaking ceiling, and a horrible rat infestation.¹⁶ To Cherry and the other tenants, these conditions were not isolated, but rather symptomatic of the racial oppression inherent within northern Black communities. “They believe,” the *New York Times* wrote of the tenants, “that their troubles arise directly from the opportunities for exploitation that a racial ghetto affords white owners.”¹⁷

Frustrated by the unchecked exploitation of their landlord, Daniel Fardella, an Italian-American Bronx resident who charged \$34.70 a month for the apartment, yet provided no services or repairs, Cherry formed a tenants council with the assistance and encouragement of the HEP staffers. While Cherry organized his neighbors, Bob Fletcher and the HEP staff served as liaison between the tenants and landlord in an attempt to negotiate repairs of the building.¹⁸ After two meetings with Fardella failed to bring any improvements to their apartments, however, the newly-formed tenants council decided to withhold their rents and make the repairs themselves. When Fardella objected to the tenants making improvements upon his building, the tenants council, after months of fighting for repairs with the landlord

(henceforth referred to as Meier Papers); “HEP Program Report,” August 7, 1963, Box 8, Folder 12, NSM Records.

¹⁶ McClandish Phillips, “Harlem Tenants Open Rent Strike,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1963.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “HEP Program Report,” August 7, 1963, Box 8, Folder 12, NSM Records.

and city agencies, officially began a rent strike.¹⁹ Garnering front-page coverage in the *New York Times* by the end of September, the tenants of 2560 8th Avenue cranked up the heat on a simmering tenant movement and answered Baldwin's challenge in a resounding way.

The Rent Strike Spreads

Within a matter of weeks, the rent strike had scored immediate victories for the tenants and launched grassroots tenant struggles into the forefront of civil rights activity in the city. After Fardella failed to evict the tenants through court proceedings for nonpayment of rent, the city's Rent and Rehabilitation Administration ordered a rent reduction in mid-October until the landlord resolved the violations in the building. Cherry and his neighbors had their rents reduced from \$34 to \$1 per month, thereby slashing the landlord's monthly revenue from the nine apartments in the building from \$969.43 to \$9.²⁰ While the tenants claimed victory against their landlord, believing the rent reductions would compel Fardella to make the necessary repairs, the city patted itself on the back for resolving the issue and curbing the rent strike. Informing the *New York Times* that the rent strike had been made "academic," the RRA pushed the narrative that tenants need only work through the prescribed channels of governmental agencies to solve their housing issues.²¹

¹⁹ "Rent Strikes Rocks Harlem: The People Take The Lead," January 28, 1964, Box 76, Meier Papers.

²⁰ "Harlem Rents Cut To \$1 After Strike," *New York Times*, October 12, 1963.

If the RRA thought they had dodged a bullet with the rent reductions, any sense of relief was short-lived. Once the story of Cherry's rent strike made the front page of the *Times*, there was no putting the cat back in the bag. In a sermon at Abyssinian Baptist Church just days after the *Times* article was published, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. celebrated the reemergence of the rent strikes and other economic protests in Harlem. "The way to make a man holler is to withhold his dollar," Powell declared from the altar. Speaking at a press conference after the service, Powell announced that he would meet with James Baldwin that week to discuss plans for a national rent strike. Drawing upon his own experience of leading a rent strike in Harlem in the early 1930s, Powell suggested that such a movement "is a good method of getting Northerners into the black revolution."²²

While Powell used his pulpit and bombast to call for a national movement, "rent strike fever" was spreading rapidly throughout New York City. As word of Cherry's successful rent strike got out, other renters in that neighborhood began organizing their own buildings to join the tenants council. Just days after the RRA ordered the rent reductions, Mary King and Rita Jackson approached Cherry with a list of tenants in their buildings on the other side of 8th Avenue who were interested in joining the council. Like Cherry, the two Black women complained of gaping holes in the walls and ceilings, broken toilets, leaking pipes, fire hazards, and rats for

²¹ Ibid; Michael Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics: Rent Strikes, Housing and the Power of the Poor* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1970), 58-59.

²² "Rep. Powell Preaches Anti-Santa Claus Sermon," *The Hartford Courant*, September 30, 1963; Martin Arnold, "City Aide Chides Building Unions," *New York Times*, September 30, 1963; "Adam Powell Joins List of Boycott Supporters," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 5, 1963.

roommates. “I wish I was the judge, I’d send the landlord to the electric chair,” the superintendent of Jackson’s building at 2577 8th Avenue told a reporter from the *Daily Worker*. “I’d do worse than that,” Jackson said, “I’d let him live here.”²³ Inspired by Cherry’s success, the two women worked diligently in the next several months to organize their buildings and expand the nascent rent strike.

While the *Worker* heralded the organizing efforts of King and Jackson as evidence that “a fuse has been lit...by the rent strike victory,” the “spark” was also spreading to other sections of the city. In early October, Brooklyn CORE chair Oliver Leeds threatened a rent strike in Bedford-Stuyvesant if tenants’ demands for repairs were not met. “No one expects people to buy stale bread or rotten meat,” Leeds said, “housing should be provided on the same basis. It should be decent, or it shouldn’t exist at all.”²⁴ In the Lower East Side, NYU CORE and Mobilization For Youth, a social agency formed two years earlier to combat juvenile delinquency and organize poor and working-class Black and Puerto Rican communities, both shifted their focus from service-based housing clinics to organizing tenants for collective action.²⁵ Uptown at NY CORE, where the chapter had established a housing clinic in

²³ Fred Gilman, “Harlem Strike Makes City Act On a Slumlord,” *Daily Worker*, October 15, 1963; Fred Gilman, “Victory in Harlem Spreads Struggle Against Slumlords,” *Daily Worker*, October 22, 1963.

²⁴ Fred Halstead, et al., *Harlem Stirs* (New York: Marzani & Munsell Publishers, Inc., 1966), 50.

²⁵ Joel Schwartz, “Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1943-1971,” in *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984*, ed. Ronald Lawson and Mark Naison (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 173-176; For more on MFY, see Tamar W. Carroll, *Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Antipoverty, and Feminist Activism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

December 1962, the housing committee moved away from conducting independent building investigations and toward organizing tenants associations “to confront landlords with ‘direct action,’ including pickets and rent strikes.”²⁶

Though these organizations had yet to organize or join a rent strike up to this point, their collective attention to the housing concerns of poor and working-class tenants in the months leading up to Cherry’s opening salvo was significant for two primary reasons. First, this emphasis on tenant organizing over open-housing campaigns was reflective of a broader trend in the city’s Black Freedom Struggles toward grassroots organizing, community empowerment, and self-determination in Black and Puerto Rican communities. Second, that housing was seen as the primary vehicle through which this type of community power could be developed was a direct recognition and outgrowth of Jesse Gray’s decade of radical grassroots organizing in Harlem. Though Gray may not have organized the first rent strike of 1963, he had meticulously tilled the soil from which it grew.

In addition to sparking a mass mobilization around tenants’ rights in the city, the birth of the rent strike on 8th Avenue proved an immediate boon for the NSM in Harlem. In Cherry, NSM found the indigenous leader they were looking for to jump-start a local movement around housing. “He was articulate, he was committed, he was a hard worker, he was willing to take initiative, and distribute leaflets and talk to people,” Schechter later recalled.²⁷ Although HEP organizers had earlier proven

²⁶ Joel Schwartz, “The New York Rent Strikes of 1963-1964,” *Social Science Review* 57, no. 4 (December 1983): 548-49.

²⁷ Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 120.

successful in fostering productive relationships with community leaders like Chick Bradley on the Neighborhood Commons project, they saw in Cherry's tenant council the potential for building a much broader social movement. "The real significance of this project," the *NSM News* reported that fall, "is that it indicates that the NSM philosophy of community action, community-led, is workable."²⁸ Toward this goal of expanding their involvement in community-led struggle, Cherry's emergence as an indigenous leader gave the NSM "a kind of legitimacy," Schechter said, "somebody in the neighborhood."²⁹ While the tutorial programs had earned HEP a reputation for their community-service in Harlem, their involvement with the burgeoning rent strike movement provided stronger social capital in the context of Harlem's surging grassroots militancy by the summer of 1963.

With this more formidable neighborhood presence, Cherry and NSM staff moved quickly to establish a new group dedicated to the grassroots community action that the rent strikes exemplified. Within a few short weeks, the ranks of Cherry's tenant council had grown to include a volunteer secretary and fieldworker, with plans to recruit greater involvement in the neighborhood. In mid-October, Cherry announced that the council would be opening an office at 307 W. 147th Street "to continue and broaden the fight."³⁰ Located near the Neighborhood Commons, the storefront office would become the home of the Harlem Action Group (HAG), an

²⁸ "Successful Rent Strike Rocks Harlem," *NSM News*, December 1, 1963, Box 76, Meier Papers.

²⁹ Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 120.

³⁰ Fred Gilman, "Harlem Strike Makes City Act On a Slumlord," *Daily Worker*, October 15, 1963.

organization under the umbrella of the Northern Student Movement dedicated to community organization and political action.

In the following weeks, HAG staffers, including Bob Knight, QR Hand, Jim Finch, and Julian Houston, used the momentum generated by Cherry's strike to expand their grassroots organizing efforts and bring more tenants into the fold of the rent strike. Going door-to-door in the neighborhoods surrounding the HEP and HAG offices, HAG workers distributed hundreds of leaflets to inform tenants of Cherry's recent victory against his landlord. Featuring newspaper coverage of Cherry's success alongside a photograph of a Black woman holding her young daughter in a crumbling apartment—a familiar scene for residents in many of the buildings they canvassed—the HAG flyers read, "2560 8th pays \$1 a month rent so can you."³¹ By the end of the month, HAG workers had helped Mary King and Rita Jackson to organize their buildings to formally join the rent strike.

"What we want is action": The CCH Joins the Strikes

While HAG, CORE chapters, and other community organizations in New York began to focus their energies on tenant organizing, Gray and the CCH worked feverishly to capitalize on the sudden widespread attention on housing that their ten years of groundwork had finally wrought. Though the CCH had not yet declared a rent strike, Gray and his small but committed group of organizers used the momentum from Cherry's strike to organize more buildings in their Lower Harlem neighborhood. At the same time, the CCH leveraged this increased attention to make

³¹ Harlem Action Group Flyer, 1963, Box 31, Folder 17, Metropolitan Council on Housing Records, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University Libraries (henceforth referred to as MCH Records).

more expansive and immediate demands upon the city's power structure. As the rent strike on 8th Avenue was underway in mid-September, Gray escalated his plans for a mass march on City Hall the following month to demand that the Mayor "either order the courts to mete out stiffer penalties or invoke the receivership law" to rectify the rampant abuses of Harlem slumlords.³²

To drum up support for the march, the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported, members of the CCH conducted a month-long "house-to-house canvas of every building from 110th to 118th Streets from Park Avenue to Morningside Avenue to discuss with tenants the problems they face as a result of the neglect of landlords."³³ This diligent organizing work was necessary to not only mobilize support for the march, but also to help tenants overcome apprehensions about taking action against their landlords. In a city with a housing vacancy rate around 1%, many tenants had good reason to be wary of crossing their landlords and risking eviction.

Although some tenants were hesitant to get involved, others were anxious to take action. At a meeting of the CCH in early October, the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported, tenants of buildings on 116th Street and 146th Street "voted not to pay rent to the landlords until all violations were removed."³⁴ Gray, however, remained focused on coordinating that month's march and claimed that tenants in over 100 buildings had been organized to take their complaints to City Hall. That Gray was

³² "Tenants Picket Landlord," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 19, 1963.

³³ "March Protesting Slum Conditions Will Be Staged By Tenants," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 12, 1963.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

hesitant to launch a rent strike in early October despite calls from CCH members and the tempting press coverage received by Granville Cherry is indicative of his larger strategy at the time. Rather than attempting to force slumlords to repair their buildings in piecemeal fashion, Gray sought to coordinate a mass tenant movement to compel the City to undertake a mass rehabilitation of Black and Puerto Rican communities.

Through his decade of experience in tenant organizing, Gray understood the inherently limited scope of targeting individual landlords for building repairs. These fights required long, diligent organizing efforts to wrangle shiftless landlords and apathetic city agencies and seldom achieved tangible victories, let alone systemic change. For a radical organizer with visions of broader societal transformation, systemic problems required systemic solutions. Thus, by the fall of 1963 Gray increasingly focused his rhetoric and organizing on City Hall, rather than slumlords. “The Harlem tenants,” Gray told reporters in mid-October, “hold Mayor Wagner primarily responsible for the court’s asserted coddling of slum owners.”³⁵ By targeting the Mayor, Gray effectively challenged tenants in Harlem to develop a more systemic critique of the broader power structure in New York City by personifying a complex system.

In addition to promoting a more radical popular consciousness, Gray’s systemic critique also brought some action from City Hall. A week before the planned march, Mayor Wagner issued an alarming, if unsurprising, report on a recent wave of housing inspections conducted by the Department of Buildings.

³⁵ “Tenants Picket Landlord,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 19, 1963.

During what Commissioner Harold Birns described as the first “cellar-to-roof inspections in which every building on a block was visited,” the Department found 40,000 violations in 2,647 buildings Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and the South Bronx. Of these buildings, 833 were referred for court action, 357 were recommended for rent reductions, and 50 were referred to the city’s receivership process.³⁶ Whereas previous inspections in these same neighborhoods had only found 4,000 violations, the dramatic increase in this new report revealed the severity of the housing crisis, along with the insufficiency of city resources dedicated to inspections and code enforcement. Furthermore, the report gave greater leverage to tenant organizers in these predominantly Black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods who understood that inspections alone would not bring about any immediate improvements as winter neared.

With the housing crisis as a matter of political fact, Gray and the CCH demanded that the Mayor “cut rents on buildings where there are violations, take over those buildings immediately and make repairs of the violations,” all while bringing stiffer punishments upon recalcitrant landlords. Additionally, Gray told reporters that the CCH would ask the Mayor to establish a “non-biased, three-man arbitration board” to handle tenants’ cases and to enforce the 1962 receivership law to order the takeover of slum buildings “for rehabilitation at once.”³⁷ Although the mass inspections marked a partial fulfillment of Gray’s demands years earlier for a

³⁶ “Tenants Unimpressed By Mayor’s Housing Report; Still Plan March,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 26, 1963.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

housing and code enforcement program that operated not on a reactive complaint basis, but rather on proactive inspection basis, by this point he and the CCH understood that inspections did not translate into repairs. For Gray, the expansion and swift enforcement of the receivership law was key to expediting repairs and improvements, as well as bringing about the systemic transformation of housing policy in the long-run through collective ownership of low and middle-income housing. While working toward this longer-range program, Gray also told reporters after the Mayor issued his inspection report that “what we want is action. Now.”³⁸

Unimpressed by the Mayor’s inspection report, Gray led the planned march on City Hall a week later. Though for the past two months he had predicted 2,000 tenants would join in the protest, only 200 tenants showed up on a rainy Monday afternoon. The protestors who braved the weather spent three hours outside City Hall, where they distributed leaflets listing the 110 buildings in lower Harlem that they demanded action on. More specifically, the tenants called upon the city to take over every single building on 117th Street from Fifth Avenue to Madison Avenue.³⁹

Despite the relatively weak turnout, the protest served notice to City Hall that tenants in Harlem made no distinction between tenants rights and political power in the city. While Gray met with the Mayor’s Executive Assistant inside City Hall to present their demands, protestors outside chanted “No action in ’63, no votes in ’64,” sounding the call to Mayor Wagner that they were prepared to take their

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ “150 Harlem Tenants Picket City Hall in Slum Protest,” *New York Times*, October 29, 1963.

protests to the polls in the upcoming election year.⁴⁰ Returning to the ranks after his meeting, Gray made the point more explicit. "The Wagner Administration has proved that it is unable to handle the housing problem and we don't want him to come to Harlem next year to ask for votes."⁴¹ Later that week, Gray announced plans for another demonstration at the City Housing and Redevelopment Board to continue pushing the CCH's demands for the city takeover of all buildings on 117th Street, as well as the formation of an arbitration board. "We're tired of inspections. That's all they do in Harlem," Gray said at a meeting at the Dunlevy-Milbank Community Center on W. 118th Street. "We don't want inspectors. We want action!"⁴²

As City Hall floundered, tenants took action just days later when November rents were due. On the first of the month, HAG organizers announced that 36 tenants in the two buildings Mary King and Rita Jackson organized across the street from Granville Cherry's apartment had gone on strike.⁴³ Further downtown in the Lower East Side, NYU CORE announced that 110 tenants in six buildings had gone on strike after months of fighting for repairs through city agencies and the courts.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 58-59; "Only 200 At City Hall Rally," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 2, 1963.

⁴¹ "Only 200 At City Hall Rally," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 2, 1963.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ "110 Tenants Begin Rent Strike Here," *New York Times*, November 2, 1963.

⁴⁴ "Harlem Boycott On Rents Spreads," *New York Times*, November 5, 1963; "110 Tenants Begin Rent Strike Here," *New York Times*, November 2, 1963. Though

Three days later, 45 tenants in three buildings that neighbored the CCH storefront on E. 117th Street announced that they too had gone on strike.

Though the CCH-backed rent strikes began with meager numbers, Gray predicted rapid growth. By the following weekend, Gray claimed, 12 more buildings would be on strike and by December the total number of buildings participating in the rent strike would eclipse 100.⁴⁵ The basis for these claims rested upon the years of groundwork that the CCH had already laid in these buildings, along with the extensive organizing campaign for the march that summer. Furthermore, Gray had his finger on the pulse of the community and felt that the people were ready to move. According to Mark Naison, it was the “growing militancy” of the CCH’s rank-and-file at meetings and protests over the previous weeks and months, which prompted Gray to finally launch the strike in early November.⁴⁶

The Emergence of the Rent Strike Movement

Bolstered by the participation and leadership of the CCH, the rent strikes quickly evolved from scattered tenant revolts to a coordinated movement by the beginning of December. Though more buildings had been on strike in the Lower East Side in early November, the organizational strength of the CCH and the rousing

the RRA had already cut rents in the Eldridge Street buildings by 33 to 50% that July, the landlord failed to undertake any major repairs on the 410 violations and demonstrations continued throughout the summer. After a court appearance on November 1st to bring charges against the landlord, the predominantly Puerto Rican tenants announced that they would be giving their rentals to NYU CORE for deposit in an escrow account.

⁴⁵ “Harlem Boycott On Rents Spreads,” *New York Times*, November 5, 1963.

⁴⁶ Mark Naison, “The Rent Strikes in New York,” *Radical America* 1, no. 3 (November-December 1967): 18-19.

rhetoric of its leader quickly established Harlem as the epicenter of the rent strikes as tenants there joined the strike in droves. Inspired by these Harlem tenants, civil rights organizations, housing advocates, and civic groups throughout the city moved to organize their own communities to engage in rent strikes. Flyers distributed by the Metropolitan Council on Housing were illustrative of this rent strike fever that was spreading throughout the city: "IT'S TIME FOR US TO STRIKE BACK! Harlem tenants organized rent strikes and are getting results. WE CAN DO THE SAME."⁴⁷

Within a week of the CCH's involvement, the rent strikes had also drawn the support of CORE's national office. "The rent strike has proven an effective weapon," James Farmer told the *Amsterdam News* in early November, urging that "more of them should be employed by tenants having problems with indifferent slumlords."⁴⁸ Uptown, NY CORE's new chairman Marshall England threw his chapter's support behind the strikes. "We have talked with landlords, begged landlords and have met with a number of city agencies," England said in early December, "so far the result has been nil." Calling for "massive rent strikes" in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, England argued that only "when the landlord is faced with no rents, then we get some action."⁴⁹

Heralding the emergence of "a new and major weapon in the civil rights fight," the *New York Times* reported on December 1st that 16 buildings were on

⁴⁷ "Fed Up Tenants Say To Slumlords: 'No Repairs?' No Rent!," Box 31, Folder 17, MCH Records.

⁴⁸ Naison, "The Rent Strikes in New York," 18.

⁴⁹ Martin Arnold, "Rents Withheld By Slum Tenants," *New York Times*, December 1, 1963.

strike in Harlem. At a community meeting called by the CCH at the Milbank Center later that day, tenants in 36 more buildings announced they would be joining the strike, bringing the total number of striking tenants in Harlem up to 585 in over 50 buildings, according to Gray.⁵⁰

One of the tenants in these newly organized buildings was Mrs. Elizabeth Evans, a mother of eight who spent her nights guarding the crib of her three-month old daughter from rat attacks in their W. 118th Street apartment.⁵¹ Mrs. May Robinson, building leader of the rent strikers at 54 W. 117th Street, also announced the participation of the tenants in her building at the meeting. The tenants in Robinson's building, including her next-door neighbor Elise McGee, complained of a terrible rat infestation amongst myriad other health and safety violations. "There are more rats in this building than people," Miss McGee said. "I'm here having tea and there they sit, looking me straight in the face." Other buildings on the street, like 15 E. 117th Street, had no lock on the front door and had been without heat and hot water for months. Tenants of the building, like Muriel Jackson and building leader Doris Roper, had resorted to gathering their children around their gas stoves to keep warm at night, and heating up gallons of water on the stove each morning so that their children could bathe before school.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Homer Bigart, "Rent Strike Gains Momentum Here," *New York Times*, December 18, 1963.

⁵² Ibid.

At the meeting, Jesse Gray's right-hand-man, Major Williams, announced that 3,000 more tenants were ready to join the strike. "We should move those landlords out of Harlem," Williams told the 130 tenant representatives in attendance. "It's up to the younger people to keep up the fight for good living conditions." While calling upon the civil rights generation to join in the fight, Williams also spoke directly to the daily tribulations women like Elizabeth Evans suffered through. "Every week we have some child bitten by a rat," Williams decried, "this must stop."⁵³

After Williams addressed the meeting, Gray laid out the program for the rent strikes in the following weeks. First, the CCH would urge the chief justice of the Civil Court to refuse to grant "slumlords the right to dispossess tenants when there are violations." With such a meager vacancy rate in the city, Gray sought to ensure legal safeguards for tenants against the possibility of landlords evicting them in lieu of completing repairs. Second, to dramatize the realities of their living conditions in these tenements and solicit sympathy through the courts, tenants would show up to all future court cases with rubber rats tied around their necks. Lastly, Gray announced plans to picket the Department of Buildings to again demand cellar-to-roof inspections throughout lower Harlem.⁵⁴

While laying out the legal side of the CCH's rent strike organizing program, Gray, Williams, and the building leaders were also working out their strategies for dealing with landlords and city housing policies. Two days later, the CCH held a

⁵³ Martin Gansberg, "Tenants in 34 Tenements Join Growing Rent Strike in Harlem," *New York Times*, December 2, 1963.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

landlord-tenant meeting on West 116th Street, where thirty tenants directed their demands, as well as their frustrations, at the two landlords who accepted the invitation to attend. Tenants seized upon the opportunity to lambast their intransigent landlords, but the two bold enough to attend passed the blame for building conditions along to drug addicts in the neighborhood, a lack of capable superintendents, and the tenants themselves.

It is doubtful that an organizer of Gray's experience had any illusions about landlords willingly making repairs upon their buildings. If anything, by inviting slumlords to meet with their tenants face-to-face, Gray helped to empower and embolden striking tenants by providing a forum to directly confront their oppressors. In essence, the meeting served notice to evasive landlords that their tenants were learning their identities and would no longer allow them to remain in the shadows. Recognizing the futility of relying upon slumlords to hold themselves accountable, however, Gray also redoubled his calls for the city to take over the striking buildings en masse under the receivership law as a first step toward "a mass rehabilitation of this ghetto." In essence, the meeting evinced to both the city and the landlords that tenants would be waging their fight on two fronts. While pressuring the city to act swiftly and programmatically upon the receivership law, Gray made it clear that they would take their fight to the landlords to demand immediate repairs in the meantime.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Fred Gilman, "Rent Strike Spreading in Harlem," *The Worker*, December 8, 1963.

In such a multifaceted struggle, coalition building was imperative to meeting the organizational demands of dealing with city and state officials, city agencies, and landlords, while also growing the rent strike. With tenants in more buildings represented by HAG and the CCH engaging in rent strikes throughout November, the two organizations joined forces to form a working coalition in Harlem. The coalition was brokered by Danny Schechter, who was introduced to Gray through a mutual connection in the old-Left circles he had become familiar with as a high school student in New York. “I went over there, and we said, ‘Look, we’re doing these rent strikes, we want to help organize and help you,” Schechter later recalled. “He said, ‘Great.’...and suddenly the thing started taking off in the winter.”⁵⁶ By December, HAG and CCH had developed a working relationship, sharing resources, organizers, and a common vision for grassroots political empowerment in Harlem.

The experience and expertise of Gray and the CCH was a boon for HAG organizers who were still green in the fields of community organizing and tenants rights. “I thought everybody should be behind something like rent strikes,” HEP and HAG organizer QR Hand said. “I didn’t come into this with a really, what you call, radical orientation, I just figured that there were problems that had to be met and there oughta be people out there taking care of the problems.”⁵⁷ NSM organizers like

⁵⁶ According to Roberta Gold, as a student at DeWitt Clinton High School, Schechter became friends with Paul Yergan, son of the well-known Black Communist and close associate of Paul Robeson, Max Yergan. “Through Yergan,” Gold notes, “Schechter met other black leftists, and when he found himself organizing rent strikes in Harlem in 1963, an acquaintance from that network invited him to meet with union-activist-turned-tenant leader Jesse Gray.” Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 121.

Hand, Schechter, and Bob Knight, as well as national director Bill Strickland, who had been inspired by the organizing ethos of SNCC in the South, quickly developed strong ties and a close identification with the grassroots organizing tradition that Gray and the CCH embodied. “I learned something very important from Jesse and the rent strikes,” Strickland later recalled, “which was that the secret to real organizing is to get people to organize themselves.”⁵⁸

Other NSM staffers, however, were skeptical of Gray and his motives for organizing tenants. At a community organizing training session, NSM mentor Stanley Aronowitz suggested the Gray may be using the rent strikes as a means to build a base for his personal political ambitions. “Is he really concerned about developing leadership among the tenants,” Aronowitz queried, “or is he interested in building a large following?”⁵⁹ Though Aronowitz’s concerns were primarily with Gray’s penchant for waging campaigns for political office, his recognition of Gray’s broader ambitions to build a grassroots political movement were perceptive. The concern was rational, given Gray’s well-crafted public image, flair for dramatic—if half-baked—campaign announcements, and proximity to politicians over the years. Aronowitz’s skepticism, however, did little to sway the formative influence that Gray’s brand of grassroots organizing had upon aspiring organizers and civil rights

⁵⁷ Militant Labor Forum, “The Harlem Hate-Gang Scare,” May 29, 1964, Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁵⁸ Bill Strickland interview with author, October 20, 2017.

⁵⁹ “Outline- Talk by Stanley Aronowitz For Community Organizing Training Session,” January 13, 1964, Box 27, Meier Papers.

workers in New York City as the rent strikes coalesced into a movement by mid-December.

On December 15th, the CCH called a mass rent strike rally at the Milbank Center to demonstrate surging popular support and to encourage more tenants in Harlem to withhold their rents when the New Year came. Leaflets for the rally distributed throughout Harlem exhorted tenants to take action against their landlords by joining the ranks of the 58-building rent strike. “We are not going to pay rent for rats to eat our children, no heat and no hot water, stopped-up toilets, leaking ceilings, or any other violation,” the leaflet read. Demonstrating an effort to build a broad political coalition around the rent strikes, the speakers invited to the rally included politicians, clergy, civil rights, and labor leaders, including former Borough President Hulan Jack, State Assemblyman Lloyd Dickens, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., President of the NY branch of the NAACP Rev. Richard Hildebrand, and Local 338 leader L. Joseph Overton.⁶⁰

While tenants were drawn to the rally by leaflets that targeted their landlords, the speakers at the rally laid the blame for the city’s housing crisis squarely upon City Hall, demonstrating a growing frustration with the slow-pace of meaningful housing reform. At a meeting earlier that month, 35 city and state officials agreed to expand efforts for building inspections on 117th and 118th Streets and asked the Mayor to dedicate more personnel and resources to expediting

⁶⁰ “Mass Rent Strike Rally,” December 15, 1963, Box 31, Folder 17, MCH Records.

receivership proceedings in the city.⁶¹ Angered by the Mayor's knack for excluding grassroots community leadership from such meetings, Gray fired off a letter to Wagner the following week criticizing what he saw as weak, piecemeal responses to a dire systemic problem. Criticizing the Mayor's vow to expedite rent reductions where buildings were found to be in violation of code, Gray argued "this does not put heat and hot water in a cold building." In his analysis, the City had the legal power to rectify the housing crisis, yet lacked the courage and sense of duty to act meaningfully on behalf of its most marginalized residents. "The rent strikers will not accept tokenism," Gray explained to reporters. "They are determined and prepared to continue the rent strike as long as it is necessary to rid the homes of rats, to achieve elementary services dictated by law and to eliminate all violations in existence on the buildings."⁶² To both Gray and the *New York Times* alike, such limited, status quo responses from City Hall were little more than "a move to...stop the rent strike from spreading."⁶³

As City Hall continued to offer token reforms to the systemic housing problem facing Black and Puerto Rican residents, a rent strike movement began to take shape inside the crowded basement of the Milbank Center on December 15th.

⁶¹ According to an official in the Department of Buildings, since mid-July only 39 buildings had been under investigation in the vicinity of 117th and 118th Streets, and only 14 of these were in receivership proceedings. Martin Gansberg, "City To Reinspect Slum Tenements," *New York Times*, December 6, 1963.

⁶² "Harlem Rent Strike Tenants Push Early City Hall Action," *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 14, 1963.

⁶³ "Powell Urges City Hall March To Support Harlem Rent Strike," *New York Times*, December 16, 1963.

With a bare cinder block wall as his backdrop, Adam Clayton Powell spoke fervently and nostalgically to the 200 tenants who gathered just down the block from the CCH office. “If the City of New York doesn’t take over the buildings, then I say we should have a march on City Hall,” Powell declared. “Let’s give Harlem the old spirit it used to have!”⁶⁴

After informing those in attendance that tenants in 35 more buildings had pledged to join the strike by New Year’s Day, Gray doubled-down on Powell’s targeting of City Hall by calling for a boycott of the Democratic Party writ-large if the city failed to immediately cut rents and take receivership of the buildings. In an exciting bit of political theatre, Powell seconded Gray’s calls, declaring that he would “dump the Democratic Party” if no action was immediately taken to improve housing conditions in Harlem.⁶⁵ The mood was electric and the various invited leaders in attendance quickly fell in line to back the surging rent strikes. Hulan Jack, along with Assemblymen Lloyd Dickens and José Ramos-Lopez all pledged their support for the rent strike and Rev. Hildebrand pledged legal support from the NAACP.⁶⁶ At the end of the meeting, Gray announced that a representative committee would soon be established to coordinate the expansion of the strike.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Though certainly bluffing, this type of political rhetoric from Powell was golden material for publicizing the strike. George Todd, “Blame City Hall,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 21, 1963.

⁶⁶ “Powell Urges City Hall March To Support Harlem Rent Strike,” *New York Times*, December 16, 1963.

⁶⁷ Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 62.

The convergence of political, labor, religious, and civil rights leadership at the Milbank rally was momentous for not only the rent strikes, but for grassroots Black Freedom Struggles in Harlem as well. The fervor stirred up by the rent strikes by mid-December led the *Hartford Courant* to conclude two days after the rally that there was “a storm gathering in Harlem.”⁶⁸ The *Courant* proved perceptive, and by the end of that week, the Rent Strike Coordinating Committee had brought together a coalition of representatives from the CCH, HAG, NAACP, CORE, HARYOU-ACT, several block clubs and community groups, and several Harlem Assemblymen and Democratic district leaders.⁶⁹

Formed under the premise of coordinating a city-wide rent strike to force “a mass rehabilitation of the ghettos,”⁷⁰ the coalition marked the emergence of the rent strikes at the vanguard of Black Freedom Struggles in the city. “The great power blocs of the Harlem Community, the ministers and the politicians, were lining up behind the strike,” Mark Naison noted, “and CORE groups in Brooklyn and the Lower East Side were already beginning to organize their locales.”⁷¹ Joining NYU CORE in the Lower East Side was Mobilization For Youth (MFY), which retooled its housing clinics into tenants’ councils to foster tenant leadership while converting

⁶⁸ “There Is a Storm Gathering in Harlem,” *The Hartford Courant*, December 17, 1963.

⁶⁹ Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 62; Homer Bigart, “Rent Strike Gains Momentum Here,” *New York Times*, December 18, 1963; “Rent Strike Plan Pushed In Harlem,” *New York Times*, December 23, 1963.

⁷⁰ Homer Bigart, “Rent Strike Gains Momentum Here,” *New York Times*, December 18, 1963.

⁷¹ Naison, “The Rent Strikes In New York,” 21.

“the service role as quickly as possible into direct action techniques, rent strikes, et cetera.”⁷² Additionally, the nascent movement was also beginning to spread across the nation, with groups of tenants in Providence, Chicago, and Cleveland, all engaged in rent strikes by mid-December.⁷³ The decade of grassroots tenant organizing that Gray and the CCH had undertaken in Harlem was finally showing the makings of a mass movement in New York City.

“Power is something that one must organize”

At the inaugural meeting of the Rent Strike Coordinating Committee on December 22nd at the Mount Morris Presbyterian Church on 122nd Street, the group laid out plans to recruit tenants in hundreds of other buildings in Harlem with a goal of expanding the rent strike to 1,000 buildings by early January. Representatives from seven organizations pledged field staff to distribute 50,000 leaflets throughout Harlem in a door-to-door campaign to instruct tenants how to organize their buildings and join the strike.⁷⁴ The goal was ambitious, but the campaign was illustrative of the extensive organizing efforts necessary for building a grassroots movement. Despite the promise the fledgling coalition held, however, few of the participating organizations had much experience with grassroots tenant organizing. Thus, at its inception, as one student organizer noted, the Committee “is at present

⁷² Carroll, *Mobilizing New York*, 53.

⁷³ “R.I. Slum Dwellers Plan Rent Strike,” *Chicago Defender*, October 17, 1963; “Westsiders Wage Rent Strike, Picket Bldg,” *Chicago Defender*, December 7, 1963; Allen Howard, “Hough Citizens Blast City’s Housing Policy,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, December 21, 1963.

⁷⁴ “Rent Strike Plan Pushed In Harlem,” *New York Times*, December 23, 1963.

little more than a list of supporters.”⁷⁵ Though the NSM’s national office brought in ten field secretaries to work as full-time organizers with HAG on the rent strikes, the bulk of the organizing work fell upon Gray and the CCH.⁷⁶

The grassroots organizing that the CCH undertook to build the rent strikes, as well as the analyses and ideologies guiding their actions, are worth examining in detail for the insights they offer to the inner-workings of a grassroots social movement. While the strikes that had emerged from the militancy of the grassroots, Gray’s decade of organizing in his lower Harlem neighborhood had primed tenants there for organized action. “The Community Council had regular meetings every Wednesday to discuss the problems, organize demonstrations, and so on,” Major Williams said. “At these meetings the people come out with their problems,” ranging from issues with landlords to the sanitation department, and beyond.⁷⁷

Through his tireless advocacy for some of the most marginalized communities in New York City, Gray had earned his reputation in the community as the man people went to when they had problems with city agencies. “There were buildings in Central Harlem,” Naison noted, “where the name ‘Jesse Gray’ would open any door.”⁷⁸ The impacts of this groundwork was evident in how rapidly the

⁷⁵ Joel Edelstein, “Rent Strike: What, When, How,” January 1964, Box 76, Meier Papers.

⁷⁶ “Rent Strikes Rocks Harlem: The People Take The Lead,” January 28, 1964, Box 76, Meier Papers.

⁷⁷ Halstead, et al., *Harlem Stirs*, 52.

rent strikes spread within its first weeks. In the six weeks since the CCH announced their participation in the rent strike, the number of CCH-organized buildings on strike had grown from three to a reported 58 by December 15th.⁷⁹ “The only limit on the speed of organization,” Naison noted, “seemed to be the time that was required to explain the mechanics of the strike.”⁸⁰

Though hardly bureaucratic, the “mechanics of the strike” did include a process for organizing buildings that required extensive human and material resources for mobilizing and organizing community power. “I think power is something that...the Black community must organize,” Gray later explained, “block-by-block, house-by-house, apartment-by-apartment.”⁸¹ For a rent strike to be successful in changing housing policies and practices, Gray believed the Black community would need to be organized into a united front capable of exerting power over slumlords and the various levels of city government. As a local, grassroots organization of poor and working-class tenants, however, the resources necessary for such expansive organization were often in short supply. When the strikes began, as Naison notes, the CCH “teetered on the edge of bankruptcy” and depended on membership dues and private donations from “wealthy radicals” to cover operating costs. The Council’s leadership consisted of four men, including Gray and his “lieutenant,” Major Williams, who were the only two full-time

⁷⁸ Naison, “The Rent Strikes in New York,” 19.

⁷⁹ Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 62.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Jesse Gray interview with Katherine M. Shannon, July 26, 1967.

organizers on staff and drew meager subsistence salaries from the organization.⁸² With such paltry resources at their disposal to build an organization and a movement, fostering indigenous leadership was not only a guiding philosophy, but also an organizational imperative.

The membership structure of the CCH reflected its dedication to empowering grassroots involvement and leadership in social movements. “Each member, upon joining, is required to be active in his own behalf,” *Ebony* reported in 1964. Unlike the tedious, bureaucratic membership policies of many CORE chapters, the requirements for CCH membership were primarily action-based. “This is one group where just signing up won’t do a bit of good,” one member said, “you’ve got to pull your own weight if you want to get out of this mess.” Members were also required to pay monthly dues of \$1, which guaranteed legal advice and representation during rent strikes. Though the dues were laxly enforced in a neighborhood where economic means were extremely limited, one of the intangible benefits of membership, as *Ebony* reported, was the “sense of security that springs from the knowledge that they are no longer alone in their fight against negligent landlords and rats.”⁸³

Pulling one’s own weight in the CCH meant the refusal to pay rent, the forming of house meetings, and active participation in weekly strategy meetings. To bring new members into the fold, the CCH placed a heavy emphasis on leafleting neighborhood blocks, building-by-building, door-by-door. “I went around to houses

⁸² Naison, “The Rent Strikes in New York,” 19.

⁸³ “Rent Strike in Harlem,” *Ebony*, April 1964.

trying to get people to participate in the rent strikes,” organizer Peter Bailey recalled, “trying to get people to understand the rent strike, how the effective use of the rent strike could really...bring about changes.”⁸⁴ When tenants expressed interest, they were instructed to hold a building meeting where a building captain would be elected to serve as their representative in the CCH. “The organizers are all volunteers,” Major Williams said, “they live in the slums and know what the people are up against. They know what it’s like to go to the bathroom with an umbrella because the plumbing leaks.”⁸⁵

The building captain was then responsible for attending weekly strategy meetings, where plans for the upcoming week would be formulated in a participatory manner.⁸⁶ “He would have a weekly or nightly meetings—either emergency ones or ones planning what he was going to do the following week—where maybe one or 200 people could sit and talk and discuss it,” Gloria Richardson Dandridge recalled.⁸⁷ An occasional visitor to Harlem while engaged in her own militant struggles in Cambridge, Maryland, Dandridge became a close comrade of Gray and a regular around the CCH office and meetings in 1964. “He was very good as a speaker,” Dandridge said of Gray’s leadership style at these meetings of CCH

⁸⁴ Peter Bailey interview with Robert Martin, September 4, 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

⁸⁵ Halsted, et al., *Harlem Stirs*, 52.

⁸⁶ Joel Edelstein, “Rent Strike: What, When, How,” January 1964, Box 76, Meier Papers.

⁸⁷ Gloria Richardson Dandridge interview with author, April 19, 2018.

building captains. “You listened and you understood that he was going to act or he was asking you, did you agree to join him and act on it? Whether it was a demonstration or whether it was some fight with the city government...and what he intended to do about that and what may or may not happen.”⁸⁸ Through these meetings, tenant leaders not only received a political education from veteran organizers like Gray and Richardson, but also took active part in shaping organizational policies and actions.

Black Women Leadership in the Rent Strike Movement

While the central leadership of the CCH consisted exclusively of men, however, Black women carried out the bulk of the organizing work. According to scholars Ronald Lawson, Stephen Barton, and Jenna Weissman Joselit, “the strike in Harlem was run on a day-to-day basis by two women—Florence Rice and Anne Bradshaw—and women were numerically predominant on the city-wide strike coordinating committee.”⁸⁹ Though little information has come to light about Bradshaw’s background prior to working with the CCH, as Roberta Gold notes, she was responsible for bringing her friend Florence Rice into the organization. After working in defense manufacturing during World War II, Rice found work in a unionized garment shop and became a staunch advocate for Black and Latinx women laborers in the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU). “That’s when I began to understand how economics works,” Rice later recalled, “And

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ronald Lawson, Stephen Barton, and Jenna Weissman Joselit, “From Kitchen to Storefront: Women in the Tenant Movement,” in *New Space for Women*, ed. Gerda R. Wekerle, et al. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980), 263.

once I began to understand economics, that's when I realized that I'd have to fight about it."⁹⁰

It was through this background in labor organizing that Rice entered the fold of radical labor movements in Harlem. In the fall of 1961, Rice was part of A. Philip Randolph's Emergency Committee For Unity On Social And Economic Problems which was organized in the wake of another "near riot" to demand a broad platform of policy initiatives to rectify racial inequality in employment, housing, education, and policing in Harlem. After working alongside the likes of Bayard Rustin, Malcolm X, James Haughton, Bill Epton, Selma Sparks, and Calvin Hicks on the Emergency Committee, Rice joined Haughton, Epton, and NMU veteran Josh Lawrence in a struggle for control of the Negro American Labor Council (NALC) to build a more militant, "fighting" labor organization.⁹¹

By the time the rent strikes were underway that fall, many of these same connections were throwing their support behind the nascent movement. In mid-December, Haughton pushed the militant Labor and Industry Committee of the NAACP's NY branch to organize regular fundraising events for the CCH. Lawrence, a comrade of Gray's from the NMU, had been working with Gray in tenant organizing over the years while also being active in labor organizing through his Carpenters Union #2162. By early 1964, Malcolm X would also lend his support to the rent

⁹⁰ Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 132-33. For more on Florence Rice see Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women In White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 275-288.

⁹¹ For more on the Emergency Committee and Rice's involvement in the "Fighting NALC" struggle, see Box 2, Folder 5 and Box 3, Folder 10, Haughton Papers.

strikes and forge a close relationship with Gray and Gloria Richardson to form the radical organization ACT, as well as his Organization of Afro-American Unity that spring.

While it is unclear if Rice knew Gray personally prior to her involvement in the rent strikes, there was extensive overlap in the radical political circles that the two veteran labor organizers occupied. Furthermore, the political thought of both Rice and Gray emphasized the importance of independent grassroots leadership for radical movement building. “I find myself fighting many of the leaders who are supposedly representing us,” Rice said in an interview for “The Harlem Temper” in the fall of 1963. “I would also like to see our leaders speak more accurate[ly] what the Black people in the community feel and not what the white power structure sets up—to speak for us.”⁹²

While Rice, Bradshaw, and Gray’s close associate Maxine Green handled most of the day-to-day operations of the rent strikes, the Black and Puerto Rican women who comprised most of the building leaders were in the streets ensuring that “what the Black people in the community feel” was translating into organized action. Building leaders like Mary King, Rita Jackson, May Robinson, Doris Roper, Marjory Cruz, and Inocencia Flores were primarily responsible for mobilizing and organizing tenants to participate in the rent strike in Harlem. While Gray received the majority of the media spotlight during the strikes and scholarly attention thereafter, these women building leaders have gone underappreciated for the impacts that their labor had upon the emergence and evolution of the rent strikes. By Gray’s standards,

⁹² CBS, “The Harlem Temper,” December 11, 1963.

at least 75 percent of tenants in a building had to be on board before any collective action could be taken. With 58 buildings on strike by mid-December with an average of 15 tenants per building, according to Gray's calculations, this meant that the cadre of building leaders primarily comprised of Black and Puerto Rican women were responsible for organizing over 650 families to engage in the rent strikes.⁹³

As the cold of winter set in and the Christmas holiday approached, these women leaders found unlikely allies in the city's major newspapers. Aided by Gray's widely publicized, yet unsuccessful calls for the Red Cross to declare lower Harlem a disaster area in late-December, reporters jumped at the chance to cover the heart-wrenching stories of families without heat and hot water on Christmas Day. While the city floundered in its enforcement of the rampant housing violations, the *New York Times* carried stories of families in Harlem huddled around their gas stoves to stay warm on Christmas Day.⁹⁴ "This is the worst Christmas we've had here," Mrs. Harrison Nelson told a reporter, "no heat or hot water, but plenty of roaches and rats." The only source of heat in the apartment Mrs. Nelson shared with her husband and two daughters at 18 E. 117th Street was the kitchen stove. "We got a Christmas tree set up in the front room but we can't enjoy it 'cause it's colder than the North Pole in here," Mrs. Nelson told reporters. Across the street, rent strike leader Doris Roper said that her building had gone months without heat, hot water, and a superintendent. Additionally, the building that Mrs. Roper lived in with her four

⁹³ Community Council on Housing, "Rent Strike!!," December 1963, Box 5, Folder 9, Haughton Papers.

⁹⁴ Homer Bigart, "Rent Striker Bids For Red Cross Aid," *New York Times*, December 25, 1963.

children had broken windows on every floor and hallways cluttered with debris and fallen plaster. “I’ve had this oven on for the last two nights,” Mrs. Roper said, “and I guess it will stay on until someone decides to do something about this building.”⁹⁵

Though not often considered as such, these kinds of media exposés represented additional labor and contributions to the rent strike movement from its women leaders who routinely opened their homes to reporters and inspectors. Focused almost exclusively on Black and Puerto Rican mothers, these stories that frequently occupied the front pages of several New York newspapers throughout December, elicited popular empathy and support for the burgeoning movement through its gendered coverage of the tenants who made up the strike. Homer Bigart, a Pulitzer Prize winning reporter for the *New York Times* who covered many of these stories, was said to have come out of one of the buildings on E. 117th Street “quivering with anger” over the conditions he witnessed inside. “This is the worst thing I’ve seen in all my years of reporting,” he told a publicity manager for the CCH that month, “I’ll write anything you want.”⁹⁶ Aided by this type of press coverage, which also included regular television and radio appearances for Gray, and fueled in large part by poor and working-class Black and Latinx women, the rent strike movement became the premier political issue in New York City and “the cause celebre of the civil rights movement in the North” by the end of 1963.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Theodore Jones, “Bleak Day Spent By Rent Strikers,” *New York Times*, December 26, 1963.

⁹⁶ Naison, “The Rent Strikes in New York,” 22.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

The City Responds to the Rent Strike Movement

As pressures mounted from the Rent Strike Coordinating Committee and the news media throughout December, token responses from City Hall were becoming increasingly untenable. According to Mark Naison, a “leading housing attorney” claimed that the rent strikes had driven City Hall into “a state of complete and utter panic” by the year’s end.⁹⁸ Recognizing the potential political force of a city-wide rent strike movement in an election year amidst evolving national Black Freedom Struggles, city agencies scrambled to churn out proposals to address housing ills and therefore curb the anger undergirding the strikes.

Earlier that month, three city agencies announced joint plans to develop 350 units of low-income housing through a massive slum clearance project on 117th and 118th Streets. “The ancient rat-ridden tenements to be cleared under this proposal make up one of the worst slum blocks in the city,” Borough President Edward Dudley declared. While quality, low-income housing was certainly needed in Harlem and throughout the city, the proposed development would have only exacerbated the housing shortage by displacing 500 families to build 350 units.⁹⁹ Furthermore, such proposals flew in the face of the demands of the CCH and many of the striking tenants who favored rehabilitation over renewal. Reflecting a broader vision of community empowerment, rent strike leaders like Inocencia Flores balked at the

⁹⁸ Ibid, 23.

⁹⁹ Lawrence O’Kane, “Housing Proposed Above 2 Schools,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1963.

idea of being relocated, asserting she would rather “stay here and change the system.”

At the same time, city agencies also sought to defang increasingly potent critiques of the systemic nature of housing inequality in the city by shifting the blame to the offending landlords in lower Harlem. Just days after Harlem tenants spent the Christmas holiday huddled around their kitchen stoves for heat, Health Department officials released the names of six landlords who they had been unable to serve with summonses for building code violations. Despite the condemnatory rhetoric used in describing such landlords as “determined to bleed these buildings and spend their time trying to avoid prosecution,” the public shaming of landlords did little to instill any confidence in the traditional inspection-summons procedures.¹⁰⁰ Such maneuverings evidenced the influence that the rent strikes were having upon city power structures, but remained merely piecemeal responses to increasingly systemic critiques.

While city officials floated this hodgepodge of housing reform initiatives, thirteen striking tenants from 16 and 18 E. 117th Street were preparing for an appearance in Civil Court for nonpayment of rent. Though rarely analyzed as such, the rent strikes to this point had represented a mass display of civil disobedience in that the withholding of rent was a punishable offense in Civil Court. The risk of eviction or monetary penalties inherent in rent strikes, therefore, had served as a prohibitive factor for many who may have otherwise felt compelled to join the

¹⁰⁰ “City Seeks 6 Owners Of Strike Buildings,” *New York Times*, December 27, 1963.

strike. The court hearing of these thirteen striking members of the CCH, scheduled for December 30th, represented the first legal test for the burgeoning movement.

As the striking tenants were preparing for their court appearance, the Wagner administration was working feverishly to develop a comprehensive plan to head off the strikes, which Gray predicted would expand to upwards of 200 buildings by the first of the year. The night before the court date, Rent Administrator Hortense Gabel announced that City Hall would soon present a “bold plan to deal with the Harlem problem.”¹⁰¹ Reporting on the announcement the next day, the *New York Times* declared that Mayor Wagner was “forging new weapons to combat the slum conditions that have prompted Harlem’s spreading rent strikes.” Though details were scarce, the *Times* reported that these “new weapons” would likely include stiffer penalties for offending landlords, greater expediency of the city’s receivership program, more frequent inspections, broader outreach efforts to inform tenants of their rights and duties, and a housing program to present to the State Legislature.

Although the rent strikes had forced the city to acknowledge and formulate plans to act upon the housing crisis in Harlem, city officials continued to defend their present course of action. After Gray criticized the Wagner administration on live television the night before the trial for “its failure to intervene effectively to correct slum conditions,” Buildings Commissioner Harold Birns praised the rash of inspections that his department had undertaken over the previous weeks and months. The 37,000 violations that the inspections turned up, Birns argued,

¹⁰¹ Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 63.

indicated due diligence on behalf of the city to correct its housing problems.¹⁰² For Gray and the striking tenants in Harlem, however, the inspections were too little and too late. “We’re the most investigated and inspected people in the world,” Gray said, “but it seems the only reason they send inspectors up here is to find out if we’re still black.”¹⁰³ To the CCH and the hundreds of striking tenants, counting violations was one thing, but acting upon them was another entirely.

On the day of the trial, tenants were prepared to take their mounting protests against horrid living conditions in Harlem into the courtroom. Having previously found little recourse through the courts, which many tenant leaders harangued as being controlled by the interests of landlords, the CCH sought to use the platform provided by the trial to wage a dramatic demonstration. Beginning the previous week, Gray and the CCH had urged the thirteen tenants to save every rat they killed in their apartments to bring into the courtroom as evidence against their landlords. Though officers confiscated some of the dead rodents outside the courtroom after learning of the plan through the newspapers, the tenants managed to smuggle in five rats under their coats.¹⁰⁴

The stunt received widespread media coverage in the following days, but the rats were never submitted as evidence, as the attorney for the landlords conceded

¹⁰² Laymond Robinson, “Intensified Attack On Harlem Slums Is Planned by City,” *New York Times*, December 30, 1963.

¹⁰³ Halstead, et al., *Harlem Stirs*, 47.

¹⁰⁴ George Todd, “Tenants Planning Rat Exhibition,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 28, 1963; Samuel Kaplan, “Slum Rent Strike Upheld By Judge,” *New York Times*, December 31, 1963.

the conditions in the buildings. While the rats provided spectacular imagery for the proceedings and marked the emergence of the rat as a potent protest symbol for the rent strikes, the major significance of the court proceedings lay in the ruling of Judge Guy Ribaud. Basing his decision on a 1930 law that permitted tenants in seriously neglected units to deposit their rents with the court, Ribaud ruled that the tenants were within their rights in withholding rent for units where such “shocking” conditions existed.¹⁰⁵ According to Roberta Gold and Michael Lipsky, Ribaud was alerted to the seldom-used law by Columbia University law professors allied with MFY. After deliberating with Gray, the tenants’ legal team (including Attorney Bruce Gould), and the landlord’s attorney, Ribaud declared that landlords could withdraw the court-deposited rent money to make repairs “only after the tenants’ representative had approved.”¹⁰⁶ As Gold perceptively notes, the Ribaud decision essentially established “a *de facto* receivership—court-controlled spending of rent money for repairs,” which could achieve more immediate repairs than the sluggish process of the city’s receivership law.¹⁰⁷

Though Ribaud announced in court that he did not condone the rent strikes, his decision nonetheless granted legal sanction that empowered the rent strike movement. Outside the courtroom, Gray declared the ruling a victory for the rent strikers and reiterated his pronouncement that the movement would grow to 300

¹⁰⁵ Samuel Kaplan, “Slum Rent Strike Upheld By Judge,” *New York Times*, December 31, 1963; Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 124-25; Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 63-64.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 124-25.

buildings within the next two days. “This gives us the push our campaign needs,” Gray told reporters, “the tenants now know they don’t have to pay rent to landlords who do nothing for them. No services, no payment.”¹⁰⁸ Seizing quickly upon the opportunity presented by the legal victory, Gray led a march of a dozen tenants and organizers to the nearby offices of Hortense Gabel. Joined by Danny Schechter, Anne Bradshaw, and Bruce Gould, Gray requested that Gabel reduce rents to \$1 in the buildings Ribaudó ruled upon, arguing that tenants should not pay full rent while awaiting repairs—regardless of where the rent was paid to. Though Gabel was hesitant to reduce rent on the two buildings in question, she did agree to immediately reduce rents on seven other CCH-organized buildings, demonstrating the heightened political leverage that the CCH wielded following the Ribaudó ruling.¹⁰⁹

Just days after the landmark decision, Mayor Wagner formally announced his action plan for addressing the city’s housing problems. As part of a platform he described as a “pocketbook attack on the slumlord,” Wagner urged the creation of special housing courts, increased building inspections, higher fines and jail sentences for landlords, a more streamlined process for verifying violations, and city support for a state bill to legalize rent strikes.¹¹⁰ Later that week, Wagner followed

¹⁰⁸ Samuel Kaplan, “Slum Rent Strike Upheld By Judge,” *New York Times*, December 31, 1963.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Martin Arnold, “Reaction Is Mixed To City Slum Plan,” *New York Times*, January 7, 1964; Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 125; Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 65-66.

up on his initial statement by announcing additional plans for a \$1 million “anti-rat” program, which would be carried out by 148 new employees of the Health Department and reimbursed in part by billing landlords for the services.¹¹¹

As Lipsky points out, this barrage of new city initiatives served two clear political purposes. First, the programs were “distinct responses to basic tenant complaints,” which the city finally felt compelled to act upon after years of pressure from the grassroots had reached a point where political action was unavoidable. As one City Commissioner explained to Lipsky, “the feeling was—we have to do something...we felt it was real political power at the grass roots. And we even talked about the revolutionary impact” of the strikes.¹¹² As the Commissioner attested to, the radical fervor fostered by the city’s increasingly militant Black Freedom Struggle made the Mayor’s actions less a matter of political obligation or goodwill than a conscious attempt to curb radical political movements in the city through addressing the most visible struggle at that time.

The second function of these “highly dramatic programs,” as Lipsky argues, was the “manipulation in the communications media to influence public opinion in ways favorable to city departments.”¹¹³ The editorial board of the *New York Times* proved a ready ally in promoting such a friendly narrative, having just weeks earlier taken the position that “the answer to better housing conditions is not the anarchy and lawlessness implied in a rent strike but the strict enforcement of the Building

¹¹¹ Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 66.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 90-91.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 89.

Code.”¹¹⁴ As the *Times* editorial suggested, the narrative that the Wagner Administration pushed in this regard was that tenants ought to place their faith in City Hall to address their housing complaints rather than resorting to independent grassroots action which had the undesirable potential to flow into broader struggles for rights and power.

The Mayor’s proposed broadside attack on slum conditions was met with decidedly mixed reactions from city officials, tenant organizers, and some members of the press. Though many city officials were concerned about the potential power the rent strike movement wielded, many also embraced the impetus they provided for prioritizing housing reform. “Part of it was fear, part of it was relief,” one member of the Mayor’s Housing Executive Committee said, “finally it’s out in the open—now we can do something.”¹¹⁵ Jesse Gray also cautiously welcomed the influx of political attention finally being paid to the city’s housing crisis. “We are impressed with the Mayor’s talk,” the CCH leader announced in a press release, “however talk does not give heat and hot water.”¹¹⁶

While Gray offered lukewarm support, other housing advocates were less reserved in their response to the proposed actions. R. Peter Straus, the head of radio station WMCA who had spearheaded the women-led “Call to Action” call-in tenant advocacy service, called the Mayor’s proposal “a lot of hot air” and argued that the

¹¹⁴ “Rent and Rookeries: I,” *New York Times*, December 26, 1963.

¹¹⁵ Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 90.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 66.

city already had “plenty of authority to make improvements under present laws.”¹¹⁷ As if to prove Straus’s point the following day, New York *Telegram and Sun* reporter Woody Klein called attention to the Mayor’s dismal track record of promises made and routinely broken regarding housing reform. After describing 15 proposals for housing reform during the Mayor’s decade in office, Klein described the January 1964 program as “nothing more than a warmed-over version of past promises, with the possible exception of legalizing rent strikes.” To further illustrate his point, Klein concluded the article with a quote from a conversation he had with the Mayor six years prior that shed light upon the Mayor’s personal views on housing reform. “There’s nothing you can do about the slums, you know that,” Wagner explained to Klein. “They’re always going to be that way.”¹¹⁸ Despite the bombast and tepid support that accompanied the Mayor’s most recent declaration of war on slumlords, his track record did little to instill confidence in Harlem tenants that City Hall would take meaningful action to address the city’s rampant housing crisis without sustained pressure from tenants and civil rights organizations.

Local Struggle, National Movement

Buoyed by the Ribaldo decision and another ruling in Brooklyn in early January, the rent strike movement gained the kind of momentum necessary for applying sustained pressure upon the city’s power structures. Just days after the Mayor unveiled his legislative program, Judge Fred Moritt ruled that five tenants in

¹¹⁷ Naison, “The Rent Strikes in New York,” 24; Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 66.

¹¹⁸ Woody Klein, “Through The Years: How Not To Fight Slumlords,” *New York Telegram and Sun*, January 8, 1964.

Red Hook represented by Brooklyn CORE “could live rent-free for as long as landlords failed to correct housing evils that menaced health and safety.” Taking Ribaudó’s earlier ruling a step further, and echoing the CCH’s demands for sweeping rent reductions pending repairs, Moritt declared from the bench “that the landlord in extreme cases is not entitled to any rent until the conditions are remedied.” Whereas Ribaudó had refused to condone the rent strikes, Moritt was less reserved in his rebuke of slumlords and the sluggish enforcement of building violations and repairs. “Some of the buildings are not fit for pigs to live in,” Moritt told the court, adding “if it takes the landlord two years to make the repairs, he gets no rent for two years. Period.”¹¹⁹ With the backing of the city’s judiciary, the rent strike movement spread rapidly throughout the city.

Just days after the Moritt ruling, MFY brought together a broad coalition of tenants, civil rights, and labor organizations in the Lower East Side to establish the Lower East Side Rent Strike Committee.¹²⁰ “Harlem led the strikes,” an MFY newsletter that month declared, “Now a Lower East Side Rent Strike organization has alerted our area! The strike is growing.”¹²¹ To help coordinate and energize the committee, the MFY staff invited Jesse Gray to participate in one of its initial meetings. “It was a very exciting coalition,” Lower East Side activist Frances Goldin

¹¹⁹ Charles Grutzner, “Court Halts Rent For ‘Unfit’ Slums,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1964. For more on the Moritt decision, see Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 126-127; Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 66-68.

¹²⁰ Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 126-127; Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 67; Carroll, *Mobilizing New York*, 53-54.

¹²¹ Carroll, *Mobilizing New York*, 53.

said of Gray's convergence with the committee, which also included NYU and Downtown CORE, Puertorriqueños Unidos, the Metropolitan Council on Housing, and several other groups. "He brought a kind of a gutsiness to the struggle [that] I don't think we would have had otherwise."¹²² With Gray's guidance and inspiration, the LES Rent Strike Committee quickly organized tenants in 60 LES buildings to join the city-wide rent strike, which also spread to 90 more buildings in the Bronx and Bedford-Stuyvesant by February 1st.¹²³ In the following weeks, Gray would collaborate with LES activists, including Jose Fuentes and Genoveva Clemente, to lead a torchlight parade of 200 tenants downtown and a mass demonstration at hotly contested rent-control hearings at City Hall.¹²⁴

Meanwhile, organizations uptown were actively discussing the potentials that the rent strike movement had for igniting the type of broader mass movement that Gray had envisioned all along. When the NSM City-Congress met that month, the rent strikes were the predominant topic of conversation in the confab attended by Bayard Rustin, QR Hand, Peter and Joan Countryman, and Bill Strickland. After Rustin spoke about the broader meanings of the rent strikes for the national Civil Rights Movement, as Elizabeth Tobierre notes, Hand explained to the group that

¹²² Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 127.

¹²³ Carroll, *Mobilizing New York*, 54.

¹²⁴ Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 127; Halstead, et al., *Harlem Stirs*, 80-88.

there was a “possibility that the [rent strikes] were the first movement in the North that is not all middle-class.”¹²⁵

Hand’s appraisal of the surging grassroots movement closely resembled the class analysis that guided Gray’s organizing in poor and working-class Black communities. “I’m one that believes that there can be an all-class unity in the Black people’s movement,” Gray later said, “I believe that once the black masses from the back streets start to move, they’ve forced the black middle class to go, whether they want to go, or not.”¹²⁶ To Strickland, the recent successes of the rent strike had the profound impact of awakening these Black masses to the power that they held in their communities. This power, in turn, could be mobilized for a more expansive political and social movement. “The radical change in the mental attitude of the people,” Strickland suggested, could provide the impetus for a “multi-issue, cross-racial, and cross-class lines movement.”¹²⁷ Over the next several weeks and months, organizers from NSM, CCH, CORE, and several labor and nationalist organizations would work fervently to translate this grassroots power revealed through the rent strikes into a radical movement center in Harlem.

As the rent strikes emerged at the vanguard of Black Freedom Struggles in New York City, a new generation of young organizers was drawn into the zeitgeist of the movement. One such organizer was Peter Bailey, an Army veteran and Howard

¹²⁵ Elizabeth Tobierre, “Black Power Does Not Come Out of the Sky’: The Emergence of Black Power Politics in the Northern Student Movement, 1961-1968,” (BA thesis, Duke University, 2014), 65.

¹²⁶ Jesse Gray interview with Katherine M. Shannon, July 26, 1967.

¹²⁷ Tobierre, “Black Power Does Not Come Out of the Sky,” 65.

University student from Tuskegee, Alabama, who had taken a leave from college to join in the Black Freedom Struggle in Harlem. Once in Harlem, Bailey became a regular at Malcolm X's street rallies at 116th Street and Lenox Ave. and participated in the Harlem Hospital and Downstate Medical Center protests in the summer of 1963 as a member of NY CORE. When the rent strike movement took off, however, Bailey quickly joined the ranks of the Rent Strike Coordinating Committee. "I went from CORE to Jesse Gray because I thought that he was doing something more immediate to the people," Bailey recalled.¹²⁸

For Bailey and many others of his generation who had grown increasingly disillusioned with the goal of integration that guided the efforts of most civil rights organizations to this point, the rent strikes provided a bridge between integration-oriented civil rights and the radical nationalism that was coming to characterize the Black Freedom Struggle in Harlem. Through tenant organizing, such activists gained experience in building a movement not for integration, but for community power and self-determination—central tenets of Black Nationalist thought which would later define the Black Power movement. The "rent strike fever" that sparked this new direction in political activism, as Naison explained, instilled in young activists "an extraordinary sense of exhilaration and even of historic destiny that drew people to the movement as the initiator of a new stage in the civil rights movement."¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Peter Bailey interview with Robert Martin, September 4, 1968.

¹²⁹ Naison, "The Rent Strikes in New York," 28.

The peak of this excitement over the transformative potential the rent strikes were believed to hold came January 12th at a major rally called by the Rent Strike Coordinating Committee. Coming the day after the LES Rent Strike Committee announced its formation, “rent strike fever” was in the air in the crowded gymnasium of the Milbank Center. As 600 Harlem residents, civil rights workers, and representatives from tenants organizations throughout the city filed into the room, Jesse Gray sat alongside a broad array of influential Harlem leaders, including John O. Killens, James Baldwin, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Hulan Jack, Bill Strickland, SNCC Chairman John Lewis, Congressman William Fitts Ryan, Councilman Paul O’Dwyer, Assemblyman José Ramos-Lopez, and union leaders Leon Davis and Cleveland Robinson.

Addressing the crowd from behind a table clad with posters sardonically depicting the Republican and Democratic Party mascots as rats, the speakers took turns declaring their support for the rent strike and denouncing the racism that undergirded housing inequality in Harlem.¹³⁰ After once again taking aim at city officials like Hortense Gabel, who he declared, “acts just like any other slumlord and has got to go,” Gray took the opportunity to announce another march on City Hall at the end of month to demand the extension of rent-control protections that were set to expire, as well as “to demand that he City jail all slumlords.”¹³¹ Gray also

¹³⁰ Halstead, et al., *Harlem Stirs*, 60-64; Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 67; Harlem Action Group, “Attention All Tenants,” January 1964, Box 67, Meier Papers.

¹³¹ “Jim Baldwin Sparks Harlem Rent Strike,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 18, 1964; Emanuel Perlmutter, “March Is Planned By Rent Strikers,” *New York Times*, January 13, 1964.

announced that plans were in place to form a city-wide rent strike coalition to bring the full weight of Black and Puerto Rican renters upon City Hall.

While Gray laid out the program for the rent strikes in the weeks to follow, the most rousing speeches of the evening came from John Lewis and James Baldwin.¹³² Rising from his seat, Baldwin spoke “as a witness” to the intrinsic relations between housing inequality in Harlem and institutional racism in the United States. “This is a revolution,” Baldwin explained to the attentive crowd, “it is going to be harder and harder and harder because the revolution has got to revise the entire system in order for us, as Negroes, to live and in order for the country to survive.” In this assessment, Baldwin gave voice to the revolutionary analysis that informed Gray’s housing activism, yet was often muted in public addresses that were consumed by the daily rigors of tenant organizing and dealing with various levels of city government. Broadening his analysis to challenge Harlem residents to locate their rent strikes within the context of global struggles for Black liberation, Baldwin went on to declare that this revolution “connects with the condition of black and dark people all over the world. One must be bold enough to see and say this.” As his address came to a climax, Baldwin urged Harlem residents to bring this analysis into their daily organizing work with the rent strikes to build a broader movement for confronting and overthrowing Jim Crow society in America. “Things *can* be corrected but only if we force them to act,” Baldwin charged, “we know that

¹³² Baldwin’s participation in the rent strike rally had been secured by Bill Strickland, who visited Baldwin’s home at the request of Jesse Gray to ask the internationally-renowned writer to attend and speak. Bill Strickland interview with the author, May 31, 2018.

the situation in the South was precipitated by the Negro people in the streets...it is because the people couldn't wait for Mr. Charley to give them their freedom."¹³³

While Baldwin issued an inspirational and forceful challenge to Harlem residents to engage in revolutionary struggle, John Lewis focused his remarks on the impacts that the rent strikes were having upon national Black Freedom Struggles. Lewis began his address by telling the crowd he had spent the previous night in a jail cell in Atlanta, Georgia, but bucked the usual trend of refusing bail in order to make it to Harlem that morning. The rent strikes represented to Lewis "something very new and meaningful," not only to New York, but also to the national Movement. "Those of us who live and work in the Deep South have been following the struggle here in Harlem with great interest," Lewis explained, flipping the popular perceptions of northern movements following in the wake of those in the South. "Some of us have been saying all along," he continued, "that when the masses get moving in Harlem, the masses in the whole nation will move."

With the landmark March on Washington well in the rearview mirror and the promise of a Civil Rights Act looming just over the horizon, Lewis acknowledged that new directions must be found and implemented to realize the fundamental goal of Black liberation. "If all over this nation, if during the next two weeks and February there is born a general rent strike you will see something very beautiful," Lewis predicted. "You will make 1963 look very petty and 1964 will be the year of the civil

¹³³ A transcript of Baldwin's address can be found in Halstead, et al., *Harlem Stirs*, 62.

rights revolution.”¹³⁴ The weight of Lewis’s prophetic speech was not missed by the 600 residents and activists in attendance, who cheered his remarks with a standing ovation and stirring rendition of “We Shall Overcome.”¹³⁵ After nearly a decade of active grassroots struggle in Harlem, Black and Puerto Rican residents and activists were finally made to feel as though they were in the vanguard of the Black Freedom Struggle, rather than playing second fiddle to the highly-visible struggles raging in the South. “At this meeting,” one CORE leader expressed, “everyone caught the fever—Rent Strike...it seemed like the thing to do.”¹³⁶

Lewis was hardly filling the room with hot air when he told the crowd that “the whole nation will move” once the Black masses in Harlem were in motion. By the time Lewis made these remarks, rent strikes were already underway in Providence, Chicago, and Cleveland, with others in the works in Los Angeles, New Orleans, Milwaukee, New Haven, Pittsburgh, Hartford, and Washington, D.C., where SNCC launched its first rent strike later that month.¹³⁷

Although the hyper-visibility provided by constant national news coverage helped to introduce the concept of rent strikes to Black communities across the

¹³⁴ A transcript of Lewis’s address can be found in Halstead, et al., *Harlem Stirs*, 64.

¹³⁵ “Jim Baldwin Sparks Harlem Rent Strike,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 18, 1964.

¹³⁶ Naison, “The Rent Strikes in New York,” 28.

¹³⁷ “Harlem Rent Strike Seeks ‘Push’ From Rights Groups,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 18, 1964; “NECAP Is Considering Harlem Type Rent Strike,” *The Hartford Courant*, January 6, 1964; Dan Day, “Capitol Spotlight: Rent Strike Is New Civil Rights Weapon,” *Atlanta Daily World*, January 7, 1964; Rasa Gustaitis, “Tenants Start First ‘Rent Strike’ In District,” *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, January 25, 1964.

United States, Jesse Gray was also actively assisting various groups in coordinating and launching strikes in their own cities. “Jesse was frequently a resource person,” Howard University student Phil Hutchings recalled. As a member of the SNCC-affiliated Nonviolent Action Group (NAG), which nurtured the political development of widely-influential leaders including Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, Ed Brown, and Courtland Cox, Hutchings regularly made contact with Gray in both Harlem and Washington, D.C. “We were playing with this idea of housing strikes, and thought who better to tell us and has experiences with housing strikes than Jesse Gray?,” Hutchings said, “you just shot up the turnpike and you’re in New York, or bring him down to interact and get [his] message.”¹³⁸

Furthermore, the grassroots militancy the rent strikes had helped to cultivate was now flowering in other struggles in New York City and beyond. In the years since the school boycott led by Mae Mallory and the Harlem Nine, little meaningful change had been brought to bear upon the racial inequalities entrenched within the city’s public school system. As civil rights groups struggled to eke out any concessions from the Board of Education or City Hall over those years, frustrations mounted and plans for action escalated. By the winter of 1963, a massive city-wide school boycott was in the works, with the efforts spearheaded by the militant Brooklyn clergyman Rev. Milton Galamison who had been at the frontlines of major civil rights struggles in New York City for over a decade. Drawing from the same grassroots base as the rent strikes (Inocencia Flores was also an active supporter of

¹³⁸ Phil Hutchings interview with the author, January 26, 2017.

the school boycott), the planned boycott reflected the same impatience with racial liberalism that fueled the rent strike movement.¹³⁹

This grassroots militancy embodied in the rent strikes and looming school boycott in New York City converged in the hours before the rally at the Milbank Center, when a group of radical leaders from across the country convened in Harlem to discuss plans for coordinating similar direct action campaigns on a national level. Having learned of the rent strikes and planned school boycott through the *Chicago Defender*, Chicago Friends of SNCC leader Lawrence Landry set up a meeting with Galamison to discuss the possibility of launching a nationwide school boycott. Joining the two civil rights leaders and education activists that day were Noel Day, Boston civil rights leader and husband of Harlem-native and activist Peggy Trotter Dammond; Ruth Turner, leader of Cleveland CORE who had actively supported Mae Mallory during her extradition fight and coordinated rent strikes in the city; Stanley Branche, chairman of the Committee For Freedom Now in Chester, PA; James Bevel, a leader of the Nashville Student Movement, SNCC, and the SCLC; John Lewis, and Jesse Gray.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Gold, *When Tenants Claimed the City*, 135-36. For more on the 1964 school boycotts in New York City, see Clarence Taylor, *Knocking At Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

¹⁴⁰ Lawrence Landry interview with John H. Britton, September 7, 1967, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Allen Howard, "Ruth Turner Quits Comfy School Post to Battle Bias," *Call and Post*, January 25, 1964; "James Bevel," SNCC Digital Gateway, accessed April 27, 2018, <https://snccdigital.org/people/james-bevel/>.

During the day-long session, this impressive collective of leading grassroots organizers hammered out plans for the nationwide school boycott, which resulted in over one million students boycotting schools in 32 cities the following month. Though unbeknownst at the time, this summit also marked the first meeting of a new radical grassroots coalition known as ACT (not an acronym), which in the following months would grow to include Harlem Parents Committee leader Isaiah Robinson, comedian and activist Dick Gregory, Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee co-chair Gloria Richardson Dandridge, Washington, D.C. CORE leader Julius Hobson, Negro American Labor Council secretary Nahaz Rogers, and a newly-independent Malcolm X.

By February, it was becoming clear that the grassroots base of poor and working-class Black and Puerto Rican Harlemites mobilized through the rent strike movement was making far greater contributions to the evolution of the Black Freedom Struggle than many could have imagined when they took the first step of withholding their rent. Jesse Gray's vision for building a radical political movement through tenant organizing appeared on the verge of becoming a reality.

The Landlords and City Fight Back

As the winter stretched on in January and February, the rent strike movement expanded in size and scope. Bolstered by the addition of scores of buildings in the Lower East Side, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and the Bronx joining the rent strike by February, the CCH boldly declared that 450 buildings were now on strike

across the city.¹⁴¹ Though the numbers were likely inflated, the rent strike's continued growth demonstrated that the city's Black and Puerto Rican tenants had little faith in the Mayor's January vow to "step up" the city's "pocketbook attack on the slumlord."¹⁴²

In addition to their swelling ranks, the tenor and tactics of the rent strikers evinced a grave disillusionment with the continued impotence of City Hall to restore heat and hot water and make repairs in their buildings. On January 23rd, Gray and the CCH led tenants from Harlem and the Lower East Side in demonstrations at City Hall to demand the extension of rent control legislation. While 300 picketing women, men, and children circled the building wearing rubber rats pinned to their lapels and carrying signs reading "Wagner Stop Talking Start Acting," Gray led a contingency of tenants inside to make their voices heard in the hearing taking place.¹⁴³ The scene inside the City Council Chamber was bedlam, with landlords and tenants alike removed from the room by police after waging disruptive protests. Gray himself was ejected from the hearing after grabbing for the microphone, before later storming back into the Chamber to declare the proceedings "a rigged hearing" and leading the remaining tenants in a walk-out. While Gray was outside, another woman tenant squared up with a landlord who had assaulted an elderly tenant

¹⁴¹ "Rent Strike Due To Double In Size," *New York Times*, February 1, 1964.

¹⁴² Robert F. Wagner, Press Release, January 6, 1964, CORE Papers.

¹⁴³ Halstead et al., *Harlem Stirs*, 80-87.

when he rose to address the Council, forcing a recess to be called.¹⁴⁴ These confrontations at City Hall, Fred Halstead wrote, “convinced tenants that they must resist the landlords by all means.”¹⁴⁵ At the same time, that the City Council voted to extend rent control for another two years showed tenants that their protests were capable of winning tangible victories.

The militancy displayed at City Hall escalated uptown just days after the hearing, when Harlem tenants clashed with the city marshal over the eviction of a rent striker for nonpayment. Although Gray and the CCH had secured a stay on the 24-hour eviction notice presented to Elizabeth Brown, the city marshal entered the apartment she shared with her 16-year-old son and moved all of their belongings onto the sidewalk. When Mrs. Brown found her things on the sidewalk and her apartment padlocked, she called Jesse Gray, who quickly assembled ten members of the CCH to break the lock and move the belongings back into the apartment.¹⁴⁶ The anti-eviction struggle resulted in a confrontation with the marshal, Reginald Thorpe, who Gray charged “roughed me up and one of his men punched me in the mouth” while a police officer on the scene “turned his head.”¹⁴⁷ After the patrolman refused

¹⁴⁴ Lipsky, *Rent Strikes In City Politics*, 68; Lawrence O’Kane, “City Hall Crowds Disrupt Hearing On Rent Control,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1964.

¹⁴⁵ Halstead et al., *Harlem Stirs*, 87.

¹⁴⁶ “Eviction Causes Harlem Scuffle,” *New York Times*, January 30, 1964.

¹⁴⁷ “Jesse Gray Charges He Was Roughed Up,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 1, 1964.

to arrest Thorpe for assault, Gray led a small protest at the nearby precinct with demonstrators chanting, “The police must go” and “Brutality must go.”¹⁴⁸

Like the dramatic anti-eviction campaigns waged in Harlem by the Communist Party and community leaders like Queen Mother Audley Moore during the Great Depression, Gray’s confrontation with the city marshal aroused the ire of Harlem tenants against slumlords and the police alike. For the next two weeks, the anti-eviction campaigns would continue, with members of the CCH and HAG battling city marshals and the NYPD to prevent entry to apartments for carrying out evictions.

Just days after the first confrontation at Elizabeth Brown’s apartment, members of the NYPD attempted to aid the city marshal in once again entering her apartment despite an order staying the eviction. After returning home from renewing the stay at Civil Court, 16-year-old Christopher Brown found police “trying to break through the back wall of the apartment” while members of the CCH barricaded the door from the inside. “There is no law for the people up here, the police work only for the landlords,” Gray told reporters on the scene. Announcing a series of pickets at police headquarters to protest the NYPD’s complicity with slumlords, Gray predicted, “Blood is going to flow if something isn’t done.”¹⁴⁹

If this initial clash between rent strikers and the police failed to mobilize the anger of tenants to oppose the NYPD, another anti-eviction confrontation the following week tipped the scales. On February 7th, the city marshal showed up at the

¹⁴⁸ “Eviction Causes Harlem Scuffle,” *New York Times*, January 30, 1964.

¹⁴⁹ “Rent Strike Due To Double In Size,” *New York Times*, February 1, 1964.

apartment of rent striker Luther Brown (no relation to Elizabeth Brown), accompanied by police and a crew of laborers to carry out an eviction order. Over the past months, Brown had frequently complained to his landlord about violations in the apartment he shared with his sister and her five children on W. 118th Street with no avail. While CCH members scrambled to get a judge to issue a stay of the eviction ordered the previous night, Gray, Major Williams, QR Hand, and others from the CCH and HAG joined Brown in physically barricading the apartment until the stay of eviction could be obtained.

While *Ebony* photographer Don Hogan Charles snapped pictures, the police “chopped down the door of the apartment and broke down the barricade” to enter the apartment and arrest everyone inside. “You should’ve seen all the cops, man,” HAG leader QR Hand said, “they came just out of nowhere, they had big paddy wagons out there, four or five patrol cars.”¹⁵⁰ This time, rather than putting the Browns’ possessions in the street, the marshal loaded their belongings into a moving van to prevent the CCH and HAG from moving them back in. The move was calculated, with the marshal and NYPD having learned from the previous week’s confrontations with the CCH. The rent strikers learned from the experience too, and adjusted their analyses and strategies accordingly. From a jail cell, Gray, Williams, Hand, and the other rent strikers worked out plans for protests that would “turn the tables on the police and expose them as the slumlords’ tools.”¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Militant Labor Forum, “The Harlem Hate-Gang Scare,” May 29, 1964.

¹⁵¹ Halstead, et al., *Harlem Stirs*, 88-100.

The following day, the CCH and HAG led picketers in demonstrations outside the 28th Precinct in Harlem and police headquarters downtown. From their jail cell, the rent strikers had drafted up a leaflet for the rally with a damning indictment of the NYPD that surely resonated with Black and Puerto Rican communities throughout the city. “When the slumlords are guilty of no heat, no hot water, and the rats biting our children, the police department does nothing,” the leaflet read.

When tenants are being robbed, or when apartments are broken into, where are the police? Somewhere drunk? In some woman’s apartment? In a garage asleep? Collecting graft and payoffs from prostitutes? Payoffs from number men or dope peddlers? But when it is time to illegally evict a tenant for a slumlord, the whole police department acts with great speed.¹⁵²

Each of these scenarios represented a common complaint lobbied against the NYPD by Harlem residents over the years and revealed a sharp contrast with the forceful police presence in Luther Brown’s apartment just hours after an eviction notice was issued. Furthermore, the racial undertones of the leaflet were impossible to ignore, with the majority of landlords and police officers being white and the majority of Harlem tenants Black or Puerto Rican. Calling for the dismissal of the officers who arrested the rent strikers inside Luther Brown’s apartment, members of the CCH, HAG, and their community supporters walked the picket lines with signs reading, “Slumlord Cops Must Go” and “Arrest City Marshal Thorpe and his Slumlord-Supporting Goons.” Later that evening, Gray and the house leaders of the CCH

¹⁵² Ibid, 99.

convened at the Mount Morris Presbyterian Church to discuss plans for increasing pressure upon the NYPD, as well as strategies for continuing the rent strike.¹⁵³

“The cops are all over the place”: Police Repression and the Rent Strikes

Though the protests outside the 28th Precinct and police headquarters achieved little in terms of concessions from the NYPD, the anti-eviction confrontations revealed more fully to many tenants the repressive role of the police within the city’s power structure. While much of Gray’s organizing and rhetoric to this point had been dedicated to promoting a more systemic critique of housing inequality in the city, he had spent relatively little time confronting the role of the police within this analysis he was propagating at the grassroots. Certainly, few Harlem residents had any illusions about the NYPD, an overwhelmingly white department that many saw as a corrupt, often abusive, occupying force in Harlem. “Rare, indeed, is the Harlem citizen...who does not have a long tale to tell of police incompetence, injustice, or brutality,” James Baldwin wrote in a 1960 essay. “They represent the force of the white world, and that world’s real intentions are, simply, for that world’s criminal profit and ease, to keep the black man corralled up here, in his place.”¹⁵⁴ Coming at a period of heightened political consciousness and action, the anti-eviction confrontations brought the true role of the NYPD into sharp relief for many Harlem residents who were rapidly coming to see the police as the enforcement arm of white supremacy in the city.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 88-100; Bernard Stengren, “Police Are Picketed Over Slum Eviction,” *New York Times*, February 9, 1964.

¹⁵⁴ James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Delta, 1962), 65-66.

For QR Hand, coming face to face with the NYPD that day after several months of witnessing police harassment and intimidation of rent strikers radicalized his political perspective. “I didn’t come into this with a really...radical orientation,” Hand said that spring, “but all of a sudden, you get out there and you’re trying to do something and the cat’s on your back.” Hand had carefully observed the increasingly repressive measures meted out to Harlem tenants by the NYPD as the rent strikes progressed since the fall. Speaking alongside Malcolm X at the Militant Labor Forum later that spring, Hand recalled a run-in with the police at Granville Cherry’s apartment building that illustrated his point.

One day that fall when Cherry was leaving his building, he was visited by the King Cole Trio—a notorious group of Black officers known for their heavy-handed administration of “law and order.”¹⁵⁵ “These are the cats who go into one of the corner bars...and they get their cut and they don’t say anything at all,” Hand said of the group’s penchant for graft and extortion, “but all of a sudden, this cat who wasn’t doing nothing, they decided to rough him up.” As Cherry descended the stairs, Hand recounted, one of the plainclothes officers grabbed him while the other two kept lookout. “The guy worked Cherry over a little bit, [and the officer] says, ‘why don’t you cut this stuff out, we don’t want any trouble.’” The aggressive thinly veiled threat against Cherry, a “happy-go-lucky, good cat,” who was merely trying to improve his

¹⁵⁵ For more on the King Cole Trio, see Michael Flamm, *In The Heat of the Summer: The New York Riots of 1964 and the War on Crime* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 61-62.

family's housing situation, signaled to Hand that the problems they were dealing with extended far beyond housing policies.¹⁵⁶

The increasingly repressive involvement of the NYPD in the rent strikes was part of the one-two punch that characterized liberal governance under the Wagner Administration in New York City. With his left hand, the Mayor promised to investigate and deliver legislative reforms to address demands for equality and justice in the city. By dressing up minor concessions as major policy advancements, the Mayor sought to appease protestors and subvert demands for systemic change. With his right hand, the Mayor dispatched the NYPD to curb protest and civil unrest through the surveillance, criminalization, and physical repression of activists and organizers.

The position of the NYPD in this regard was made clear in early March, when Police Commissioner Michael Murphy declared at a meeting of 6,000 officers that he would not allow civil rights leaders to “turn New York City into a battleground.” Singling out Jesse Gray, Malcolm X, and Bronx CORE leader Herbert Callender, Murphy charged that these “extremist” leaders “see the struggle for [civil rights] only as a means to a personal end or as the weapon to create chaos in our community and weaken the structure of government.”¹⁵⁷ Interestingly, it was these three Black leaders who had been among the most vocal about police corruption,

¹⁵⁶ Militant Labor Forum, “The Harlem Hate-Gang Scare,” May 29, 1964, Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

¹⁵⁷ Emanuel Perlmutter, “Murphy Says City Will Not Permit Rights Violence,” *New York Times*, March 16, 1964; Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 71-72.

brutality, and political repression in the several weeks prior. Thus, not only did the Police Commissioner rally his rank-and-file against leaders of the Black Freedom Struggle—he also attempted to delegitimize these leaders along with their legitimate claims against NYPD and City Hall.

Coming after several months of confrontations between police and activists throughout the city, Murphy's remarks did little to dispel increasingly common perceptions that the NYPD was waging a war against Black and Puerto Rican freedom fighters. As the rent strikes were getting underway that fall, clashes between the NYPD and peaceful protestors from NYC CORE chapters raised the specter of police repression of civil rights activists in the city. While protesting the appearance of the segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace and President Kennedy in midtown Manhattan on two consecutive days in early November, CORE members charged that police officers "waded into the picket lines on horseback wielding nightsticks and stomping defenseless people."¹⁵⁸ During the two protests, NY CORE leader Marshall England and eight other CORE members were injured, including a pregnant woman who was struck in the stomach and a 16-year-old girl who was trampled by a police horse.¹⁵⁹ Demanding that police horses be kept in stables "where they belong" and "that the police department be reminded that their responsibility...is to enforce the laws and not to break up demonstrations that they

¹⁵⁸ "Copy of Telegram Sent to Mayor Robert F. Wagner City Hall NYC," November 1963, BOSS Records.

¹⁵⁹ New York CORE Newsletter, December 1963, BOSS Records.

don't like," CORE leaders threatened a program of civil disobedience that would "put to shame everything that CORE has done up to now in NYC."¹⁶⁰

Coming in the wake of that summer's confrontational direct action protests at construction sites throughout the city, CORE leaders read this type of police behavior as clear repression of civil rights activity. In a letter to Deputy Police Commissioner Walter Arm, attorney and CORE supporter Mark Lane charged the NYPD with having carried out an "unprovoked and organized attack by police officers against persons who had peacefully assembled to demonstrate for civil rights."¹⁶¹ To Lane and other CORE leaders, these police actions in early November were hardly an anomaly. "The fact of the matter is," NY CORE's December newsletter contended, "that virtually every CORE picket line during the past few weeks has been the object of either outright brutality or unnecessary harassment by the police."¹⁶² In response, leaders of CORE chapters throughout the city filed legal complaints against the NYPD and launched a series of direct action protests throughout the month of November.

On November 19th, nearly 100 members of various CORE chapters picketed police headquarters to protest police brutality and political suppression. Led by Blyden Jackson, Gladys Harrington, Jim Peck, Mark Lane, Tina Lawrence, and CCH member Leroy McRae, protestors carried signs that read, "Convict the Attackers"

¹⁶⁰ "Copy of Telegram Sent to Mayor Robert F. Wagner City Hall NYC," November 1963, BOSS Records.

¹⁶¹ Letter from Mark Lane to Walter Arm, November 18, 1963, BOSS Records.

¹⁶² New York CORE Newsletter, December 1963, BOSS Records.

and “Protect Us, Not Attack Us.”¹⁶³ Though CORE’s campaign against police brutality was subsumed by the burgeoning rent strike movement that fall, the organization sounded the alarm about police repression that would be heard more clearly by the spring.

The responses from City Hall and the NYPD to CORE’s allegations of police brutality and repression that fall were indicative of the Wagner Administration’s brand of racial liberalism. The City not only failed to engage in meaningful discussions with CORE leaders to resolve their complaints, but also made use of the myriad resources available to the NYPD in its battle against the Black Freedom Struggle in New York City to discredit and criminalize the civil rights activists. Calling CORE’s allegations “blind assertions [that] constitute hypocrisy and hate-rousing of the lowest-type,” Murphy explained in a press release that such criticisms of the NYPD were “aimed at destroying respect for law and order and are in effect calculated mass libel of police.”¹⁶⁴

While fighting to control the narrative and stoke public fear of civil disorder, Murphy also tasked the department’s counterintelligence agency—the Bureau of Special Services (BOSS)—with conducting surveillance and investigations of the CORE members involved.¹⁶⁵ The day after CORE’s demonstration at police

¹⁶³ Memo from Edwin B. Cooper to Commanding Officer, BOSS, November 19, 1963, BOSS Records.

¹⁶⁴ New York Police Department Press Release, November 19, 1963, BOSS Records.

¹⁶⁵ Mayor Wagner was an avid supporter of the BOSS unit. Having been involved with combat intelligence during his military service in World War II,

headquarters, BOSS ordered an “Investigation of C.P. [Communist Party] Affiliations Within CORE and of Potential ‘Trouble Makers’ Within CORE.” A BOSS lieutenant was asked to report on a perceived faction within CORE that “advocates dropping the ‘non-violent’ approach and adopting instead ‘an eye for an eye-a tooth for a tooth’ approach.” Named in the report as members of a “militant group” in CORE were Blyden Jackson, Tina Lawrence, Velma Hill, and Arthur Johnson, whom a Lieutenant Mulligan claimed were being “pushed by Bayard Rustin.”¹⁶⁶ It was hardly a coincidence that Jackson and Lawrence were among those leading protests against the police just days before the investigation was opened.

Over the next several months, BOSS detectives used surveillance techniques and informants within CORE to compile profiles of each of these individuals and others who were attacked by police at the November protests. When the case came before the Civilian Complaint Review Board in early January, BOSS detective Henry Taylor sent a memo to the police oversight board with detailed information about each of these activists, including Mark Lane and Arnold Goldwag, to cast doubt upon the allegations of brutality. Using rhetoric characteristic of Cold War era political repression, the memo detailed the “radical views” held by the activists, along with

Wagner developed a keen interest in “what the police did here” in terms of surveillance and counterintelligence. Speaking of BOSS surveillance of the Nation of Islam and other civil rights organizations during an oral history interview in 1979, Wagner described BOSS as “a very key part of the department, they keep check on all sorts of different groups and infiltrate...they keep in touch with some of the radical movements—all of them, the Communist movement.” See “Reminiscences of Robert Ferdinand Wagner, 1979,” Columbia Center for Oral History, Columbia University Libraries.

¹⁶⁶ Memo from Anton Weidinger to Lt. Mulligan, November 20, 1963, BOSS Records.

their alleged links to “ultra-liberal” groups and the Communist Party, as evidence of “the degree of responsibility” they held in the confrontation with police.¹⁶⁷

Amounting to a calculated character assassination, such BOSS involvement demonstrated the depths of police power in the city that could be used to subvert any movement to check or reform their abusive and repressive practices.

“Nowhere...have we so closely approached a police state”

Coupled with CORE’s November demonstrations, the NYPD’s complicity in repressing rent strike activities had helped to sharpen popular understandings of the police as the enforcement arm of white supremacy in the city. Building upon decades of protests against police brutality in Harlem, CORE’s campaign that fall laid the groundwork for a broader struggle against police brutality and repression that emerged in March 1964 in the wake of Gray’s arrest. The analyses of Gray, Lane, Baldwin, and Hand in this regard exemplified the three “interrelated grievances” that Black and Puerto Rican communities had with the NYPD: corruption and inefficiency, repression of activists, and mistreatment and brutality.¹⁶⁸

Compounding these highly combustible issues, state legislators moved in early 1964 to expand police powers by pushing two highly controversial bills through the legislature as part of a major anticrime package. With the active support of Mayor Wagner, the “no-knock” and “stop-and-frisk” bills were signed into law on

¹⁶⁷ Memo from Henry Taylor to Civilian Complaint Review Board, January 16, 1964, BOSS Records.

¹⁶⁸ Themis Chronopoulos, “Police Misconduct, Community Opposition, and Urban Governance in New York City, 1945-1965,” *Journal of Urban History* (April 2015): 16.

March 3rd over the vocal opposition of Black democrats, civil rights organizations, and bar associations.¹⁶⁹ Under the “no-knock” bill, a police officer in possession of a search warrant was granted the power to break into a home without knocking or announcing him or herself as police. The now infamous “stop-and-frisk” bill went even further, empowering officers to stop, question, and search any individual on the grounds of “reasonable suspicion.” Spurred in large part by a dramatic increase in crime rates reported by the NYPD since June 1963,¹⁷⁰ the two bills represented an effort to take the gloves off of the city’s police officers in their war on crime and suspected “criminals.”

Despite rosy descriptions of the bills in the *New York Times* as having been designed to “protect policemen from surprise attack,”¹⁷¹ most Harlem leaders understood this expansion of police powers as a direct attack on the city’s Black communities. Pointing out the blatant racial disparities in police treatment in the city, *Amsterdam News* editor James Hicks condemned the new legislation as giving a “green light” to “abuse by bigoted or sadistic police.”¹⁷² Echoing another rebuke of the legislation from the State Bar Association, Harlem Congressman William Fitts Ryan warned that the bills would create “a police state” and likened their passage to

¹⁶⁹ Douglas Dales, “Rockefeller Signs Bills Increasing Powers Of Police,” *New York Times*, March 4, 1964.

¹⁷⁰ Flamm, *In the Heat of the Summer*, 56-57.

¹⁷¹ Laymond Robinson, “Assembly Votes Anticrime Bill,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1964.

¹⁷² “A Bad Law,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 7, 1964.

the act of a “demagogue or dictator.”¹⁷³ More concerning for *Liberator* columnist Robert Arnold, was the opportunity that these new laws presented for law enforcement to suppress radical political activity. “The experience of the Rent Strike and the reaction of officialdom to militant grass roots protest in New York has again demonstrated,” Arnold contended, “that when push comes to shove the police are on the side of the slumlords and others who seek to exploit minorities and not the people and their legitimate protests.” Giving voice to the concerns of most Harlem residents and activists, Arnold predicted that “what we can expect to see is a series of unprovoked raids, similar to the attack on the Muslim Temple in Los Angeles, which will further inflame the already tense racial situation.”¹⁷⁴ With demands for police reform and oversight in New York City having been ignored for nearly a decade, it now appeared as though the police abuse and repression of Black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers had won an official endorsement from the Mayor and the State.

With the masses already in motion in Harlem, civil rights organizations and community leaders were quick to mobilize opposition to the legislation. Just days before Rockefeller signed the bills into law, representatives from twenty Harlem

¹⁷³ “New Police Laws Scored At Rally,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1964. Shortly before Rockefeller signed the anticrime laws, a unit of the State Bar Association issued a statement declaring, “Nowhere in the history of Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence have we so closely approached a police state as in this proposal to require citizens to identify themselves to police officers and ‘explain their actions’ on such a meager showing.” Laymond Robinson, “Bar Group Urges Crime-Bill Veto,” *New York Times*, February 26, 1964.

¹⁷⁴ Robert Arnold, “Rockefeller’s Police State,” *Liberator* 4, no. 6 (June 1964): 4-5.

organizations, including the NAACP, CORE, and CCH formed the Ad Hoc Committee for Fair Police Practice to coordinate a direct action campaign to compel a veto or repeal of the two bills. After pickets outside the Governor's Manhattan apartment failed to sway his opinion on the anticrime package, the Ad Hoc Committee organized a mass rally at Speakers Corner to publicly denounce the new legislation. Speaking to the crowd of 300 gathered at 125th St. and 7th Ave. on March 7th, William Fitts Ryan described the legislation as "clearly unconstitutional," while State Senator Jerome Wilson declared "a man must be free to walk down the street and not be subject to arrest and detention on mere suspicion." In explaining these new laws to the crowd, Attorney Paul Zuber derisively pointed out, "a lot of us folks in Harlem thought that was the law already because they've been doing it that way for years."¹⁷⁵

The most impassioned address delivered at the rally came from Jesse Gray, who channeled the frustrations and anger of the poor and working-class Black and Puerto Rican Harlem residents who were likely to be the most deeply impacted by expanded police power. Furthermore, that these bills made it through the State Legislature that winter while code-enforcement bills to aid Harlem tenants were shot down was a particularly egregious offense to Gray.¹⁷⁶ Charging the NYPD with

¹⁷⁵ Martin Arnold, "NAACP and CORE to Fight Bills Increasing Police Powers," *New York Times*, February 29, 1964; "Governor Picketed by Foes Of Search and Seizure Bills," *New York Times*, March 2, 1964; Douglas Dales, "Rockefeller Signs Bills Increasing Powers Of Police," *New York Times*, March 4, 1964; "NAACP Pickets Rocky," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 7, 1964.

¹⁷⁶ As Roberta Gold notes, "Most code-enforcement bills introduced in Albany that winter went down in defeat." Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 128.

being “rotten, corrupt, and degenerate,” Gray directed much of his fury at the 25 uniformed officers assigned to the rally, before calling for the creation of a civilian review board as a check on police power and abuses in Harlem.¹⁷⁷

Though the new laws to expand police powers had passed through the State Legislature with relative ease, the swift organizational responses to what amounted to a direct attack on Black and Puerto Rican communities ensured that such legislation would not be implemented in New York City without a fight. In the weeks and months before the new laws went into effect, police corruption, brutality, and repression would become the most pressing—and explosive—issues for the Black Freedom Struggle in Harlem.

The Decline and Impacts of the Rent Strike Movement

While school boycotts and struggles against police abuses gained traction in Harlem that February, the rent strike movement began to lose steam. Jesse Gray and the CCH continued the rent strikes throughout the spring, but as the weather warmed the problems of heat and hot water became less acute and the newspapers began to lose interest. The last major initiative of the rent strike movement came in early March, when Gray and the CCH joined a coalition of civil rights, labor, and tenant leaders, including James Farmer, Bayard Rustin, and Dorothy Height, for a march on the state capitol in Albany.

Joining forces with A. Philip Randolph’s Committee for a \$1.50 Minimum Wage and the National Association for Puerto Rican Civil Rights, the coalition chartered buses from New York City to demand a legislative program that reflected

¹⁷⁷ “New Police Laws Scored At Rally,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1964.

the joint economic and housing concerns of many of New York's Black and Puerto Rican residents. These demands included: the establishment of a \$1.50 minimum wage; a massive construction program for low-rent public housing; passage of emergency legislation to compel proper building code enforcement; legislation legalizing rent strikes; and substantial state aid for educational equality and school desegregation.¹⁷⁸ Though 3,000 demonstrators from across the state braved snow and sleet to march on the state capitol, the Governor was largely unmoved by the protest and its leaders left disappointed. Speaking at a rally following the march, CORE leader Norman Hill told the thousands gathered that "only if we light fires all over the state, only if we disrupt and dislocate in a creative way, will we get what we want."¹⁷⁹

The disappointment of the March on Albany served as an inglorious conclusion of the rent strike movement's prominence in New York City politics. By that point, as Mark Naison notes, "the aura of the cataclysmic power that had surrounded the rent strike in its early days had largely faded away."¹⁸⁰ Several factors contributed to the decline of the movement's meteoric run in New York City. First, despite the media spotlight and strong grassroots support Gray and the CCH had garnered for the rent strikes, the movement was unable to win the active

¹⁷⁸ "March on Albany—March 10th, 1964," Box 25, Folder 27, MCH Records; Fred Powledge, "Civil Rights and Labor Groups Join for March on Albany Today," *New York Times*, March 10, 1964.

¹⁷⁹ Fred Powledge, "3,000 in Rights Protest March on Albany in Snow," *New York Times*, March 11, 1964.

¹⁸⁰ Naison, "The Rent Strikes in New York," 32.

support of other civil rights and community organizations. Though the fifteen organizations that comprised the Rent Strike Coordinating Committee provided some funding, publicity, and legal assistance for the movement, the bulk of the extensive organizing work needed to build a mass movement fell upon the limited staff of the CCH and NSM.¹⁸¹ Such lack of support frustrated Gray, who blamed the rent strike movement's failure to reach his projected building totals on a lack of "adequate support from local civil rights organizations."¹⁸²

Even when the local branches of national civil rights organizations, most notably CORE, were actively involved in organizing the rent strike movement, they received scant support from the national office. Although James Farmer had advocated for rent strikes when they emerged in November, the national CORE leader distanced himself from the strikes completely once the movement became identified with Jesse Gray. In a likely attempt to create separation between national CORE and the Communist background of Gray, Farmer refused to make any public comment regarding the strikes and lent little if any institutional support.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 26.

¹⁸² "Harlem Rent Strike Seeks 'Push' From Rights Groups," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 18, 1964.

¹⁸³ Naison, "The Rent Strikes in New York," 26-27. Like Farmer, NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins essentially shunned the rent strike movement. Though the NY branch under the leadership of Rev. Richard Hildebrand did provide some legal support for the strike, the main contributions of the NY branch came through minor donations that its more militant Labor and Industry Committee contributed from fundraising events. For documentation on the Labor and Industry Committee's involvement with the rent strikes, see James Haughton Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

With such meager staffing, financial resources, and organizational support, the CCH lacked the institutional strength necessary to keep up with the rigors of tenant organizing while concurrently navigating and applying pressure upon landlords and the vast network of city and state agencies involved in housing policy. Though the CCH had for a short while collaborated with larger tenant organizations in the city, including the Metropolitan Council on Housing, fundamental differences between the organizations' visions for tenant organizing hampered any long-term coalition. While Gray and the CCH were attempting to "build a tenant movement that is trying to empower itself," as Gray's comrade Jack O'Dell later explained, the CCH viewed the Met Council as more of "a social service thing."¹⁸⁴

Without the backing of such tenant or civil rights organizations, the CCH was dependent upon a small office staff, a handful of volunteer attorneys, and its network of building leaders to wage a fight against powerful public entities and private landlords. While organizers were busy dealing with the courts, city agencies, and politicians, as Naison notes, little time was left for street rallies, leafleting, and organizing buildings, which had provided the genesis for the movement by "shak[ing] the slum population out of its apathy."¹⁸⁵ Even when the CCH scored a major victory with the Ribaud decision that December, the legal procedure established by the ruling was "difficult to employ, time consuming, and involved constant attention of volunteer or unpaid lawyers," thereby limiting its impacts for a

¹⁸⁴ Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*, 130.

¹⁸⁵ Naison, "The Rent Strikes In Harlem," 40-41.

cash and resource-strapped grassroots organization.¹⁸⁶ Though some progress had been made by March, frustrations largely remained over slum conditions in Harlem as City Hall had made only minor concessions to piecemeal, rather than systemic demands for housing reform.

Though scholars have aptly pointed out how the rent strike movement became so bogged down in dealing with city agencies and the courts that the CCH more closely resembled a housing clinic than a radical social movement by the spring of 1964, the impacts of the rent strike stretched far beyond the realm of housing.¹⁸⁷ When compared to Gray's professed mission of forcing a mass rehabilitation of Black and Puerto Rican communities by transferring residential buildings from private to public ownership, the successes of the strikes in forcing housing repairs, rent deductions, and new legal and judicial policies must be considered marginal gains. However, while falling short of its lofty ambitions for housing reform, the contributions of the rent strike movement to the Black Freedom Struggle were profound. NSM rent strike organizer Danny Schechter's appraisal of these impacts are worth quoting at length:

For the first time, [the rent strikes] have involved deprived slum dwellers in a movement for substantive change. They have also expanded the political consciousness of the ghetto community and channeled frustrations into a socially effective response. By involving the 'welfare poor' in a movement for change, rent strikes have given thousands new dignity, self-respect, and a sense of empowerment...As an organizing technique the rent strikes help

¹⁸⁶ Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 64.

¹⁸⁷ See Naison, "The Rent Strikes In New York"; Schwartz, "Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1943-1971"; Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*; Gold, *When Tenants Claimed The City*.

nurture indigenous leadership and build organizations that can get involved in other activities (school boycotts, selective patronage, etc.).”¹⁸⁸

By the spring of 1964, the model of grassroots organizing that Jesse Gray had developed over more than a decade had pushed local and national civil rights organizations to embrace a militant grassroots approach to building Black community power in Harlem and beyond. The involvement of NYC CORE chapters in the rent strikes marked the culmination of a move away from a middle-class integrationist focus and toward the empowerment of poor and working-class Black communities. “We really have to step up our militancy,” NY CORE rent strike coordinator William Reed said that spring. “We have to step it up...in organizing the Black people because our struggle is there for the Black people in the community.”¹⁸⁹

For the NSM, participation in the rent strikes prompted a major shift from the social service basis of the earlier tutorial projects to the transformative possibilities of community organizing. “The people who were administering the tutorials realized...there would be change only if the community organized itself to create change of its own,” national NSM staffer Chuck Turner pointed out that spring. “We started looking for ways the people in the community could be brought together. In New York, we did this through rent strikes.” Furthermore, Turner noted that the rent strikes served as an important vehicle for political education, as NSM

¹⁸⁸ Danny Schechter, *News Dissector: Passions, Pieces, and Polemics, 1960-2000* (New York: Akashic Books, 2001), 40.

¹⁸⁹ Militant Labor Forum, “The Harlem Hate-Gang Scare,” May 29, 1964, Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

was able to “bring people together with different problems and the people see that those problems are interrelated.”¹⁹⁰ For both CORE and the NSM, the radical grassroots ethos of the rent strikes would serve as a model for their own campaigns for Black empowerment and self-determination in New York City and beyond.

And this, precisely, was the fundamental goal of Gray’s tenant organizing—to organize the basis for a revolutionary grassroots movement for Black liberation and Black power in the nation’s cities. “People ask me why I spend all my time on heat and hot water,” Gray explained later that year, “and I say heat and hot water is the biggest organizing tool we have; it may even kick off the revolution in the ghetto.”¹⁹¹ In early March, when Malcolm X split with the Nation of Islam after a three-month suspension, the revolutionary groundswell fostered by the rent strikes began to coalesce into a radical grassroots movement center in Harlem.

Jesse Gray, Malcolm X, and the Birth of a National Radical Grassroots Movement

On March 9th, the *New York Times* broke the news that Malcolm X was leaving the Nation of Islam. In the months since Malcolm made his infamous remarks about the Kennedy assassination as a case of “chickens coming home to roost,” it had become increasingly clear that Elijah Muhammad had no intention of reinstating his top minister. Malcolm’s national celebrity and mounting insistence on political action, alongside his knowledge of Muhammad’s extramarital affairs, had put him on

¹⁹⁰ Fred Powledge, “Rights Activists Expanding Goals,” *New York Times*, March 28, 1964.

¹⁹¹ “Jesse Gray Tells Plans In New York: The rent-strike season is on,” *National Guardian*, November 11, 1964.

the wrong side of the Nation's leadership in Chicago and made his departure all but certain that winter. In an interview with reporter M.S. Handler, Malcolm explained that he could no longer be constrained by the Nation's restrictions on political action and engagement with the Black Freedom Struggle. "It is going to be different now," Malcolm X declared, "I'm going to join in the fight wherever Negroes ask for my help, and I suspect my activities will be on a greater scale than in the past." The immediate activities that Malcolm had planned included the formation of a "black nationalist party" in New York that promoted self-defense and emphasized "black nationalism as a political concept and form of social action against oppressors."¹⁹²

After having been silenced by Muhammad for three months, Malcolm X had much to say and Harlem was anxious to learn of his plans. At a press conference at the Park Sheraton Hotel three days after the story broke, Malcolm officially announced the formation of his new organization, Muslim Mosque, Inc. While the MMI was a religious organization, Malcolm explained that the group's political, economic, and social programs would encourage the active participation of non-Muslim Blacks. As an organization with a political, economic, social, and cultural emphasis on "black nationalism," the MMI was designed to promote indigenous Black leadership in the service of achieving self-determination in Black communities.

While speaking to the long-range plans of building independent Black political power, Malcolm also asserted the right to self-defense to protect Black

¹⁹² M.S. Handler, "Malcolm X Splits With Muhammad," *New York Times*, March 9, 1964.

communities in the meantime. “In areas where our people are the constant victims of brutality,” he explained, “we should form rifle clubs that can be used to defend our lives and our property in times of emergency.”¹⁹³ Taken as a whole, the new organization that Malcolm explained in his address resembled a synthesis of the major trends of grassroots Black freedom struggles in Harlem over the past decade. By extending an olive branch in his address to other leaders he had disparaged in the past, Malcolm hoped to bring together the array of individuals and organizations involved in these radical struggles—locally and nationally—into a Black united front.

Just two days after the press conference, such a united front appeared to be in the making when Malcolm X attended a conference in Chester, PA called by the leaders of the fledgling organization ACT. Malcolm’s introduction to the leaders of the national grassroots organization came through an interesting convergence of local strands of the national Black Freedom Struggle with Harlem as a fulcrum. Malcolm was invited to join the organization by Gloria Richardson, leader of the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee, who first met Malcolm X in Detroit after he delivered his landmark “Message to the Grass Roots” address the previous fall.¹⁹⁴ Malcolm X, in turn, was highly impressed by the militant armed struggle that Richardson and the SNCC-affiliated CNAC had been waging for over two years in the coastal Maryland town. Stanley Branche, ACT member and chairman of the Chester

¹⁹³ George Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 18-22.

¹⁹⁴ Gloria Richardson Dandridge interview with author, April 19, 2018.

Committee For Freedom Now, had also been impressed by the Cambridge Movement, and had spent time there supporting the struggle. Providing an introduction between Malcolm X and fellow ACT member Jesse Gray was Bill Strickland, national director of the NSM, who had grown up around Malcolm in Roxbury and knew Gray through their active cooperation in the rent strike movement.¹⁹⁵ To bring things full circle, Gray had called Richardson shortly after an armed confrontation broke out in Cambridge and she then became involved in the rent strike movement that spring after moving to New York City.¹⁹⁶ Through these connections, the groundwork was laid for a dynamic national network of radical grassroots leaders beyond the South.

The impetus for the March 14th meeting in Chester was to evaluate the national school boycotts the collective had coordinated the month prior, the most notable being the one led by Milton Galamison in New York City. Joining Stanley Branche in his hometown just south of Philadelphia were 60 representatives from various northern organizations, including Lawrence Landry, Gloria Richardson, Malcolm X, Nahaz Rogers, and Dick Gregory. As the *Chicago Defender* reported, it was there in Chester that a “third force” in the Black Freedom Struggle was formed, “composed of the most militant leaders in the Negro Revolution.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 114.

¹⁹⁶ Gloria Richardson Dandridge interview with author, April 19, 2018.

¹⁹⁷ M. Wilson Lewis, “Civil Rights Leaders Form New, Militant ‘3rd Force’,” *Chicago Defender*, March 21, 1964.

Landry, who was elected chairman of ACT at the conference, explained that “the sole qualification for membership” in the new organization was that “one must act or utilize direct action to resolve civil rights disputes.”¹⁹⁸ The purpose for the formation of this coalition was to provide a national network of active support between local struggles for Black rights and power. In many ways, this loose federation was organized as a direct response to one of the problems that limited the successes of the rent strike movement—the abandonment of militant local struggles by national civil rights organizations. “The national organizations, you know, they were just nothing,” Gloria Richardson Dandridge recalls, “so five or six of us decided we were going to carry on, right or wrong, the way we thought, and that’s what ACT came out of.”¹⁹⁹ Coming out of this meeting, ACT resolved to establish an “all-for-one and one-for-all type of national support” to the otherwise independent local struggles being waged in Black communities throughout the North and Midwest.

The Chester conference was held just two days before a second school boycott organized by Milton Galamison in New York City, which would provide the fledgling organization’s first test. After the major civil rights supporters of the February boycott, including the NAACP, CORE, Urban League, and the National Association for Puerto Rican Rights, all shunned its second iteration, ACT took the lead in coordinating and drumming up support for the protest. Calling the desertion

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Gloria Richardson Dandridge interview with author, April 19, 2018.

of the mainstream civil rights organizations an act of “sabotage,” Galamison declared on the eve of the boycott that “the people have been failed by some of their leaders.”

While the mainstream leadership faltered, however, grassroots leadership in Harlem helped take the reins. The day before the boycott, Jesse Gray called a mass rally at the Milbank Center with Malcolm X to encourage their large collective base to support the school boycotts. Exercising his newfound freedom to engage in organized direct action, Malcolm explained to the crowd that he was “aligned with everyone who will take some action to end this criminal situation in the schools. I don’t care what kind of action it is.”²⁰⁰ The following day, Malcolm X, Jesse Gray, Lawrence Landry, Stanley Branche, and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. were all on site at Galamison’s Siloam Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn to coordinate protest actions the day of the boycott.

In spite of its abandonment by mainstream civil rights leadership, the school boycott succeeded in organizing nearly 275,000 students to stay out of school, including 50% of students in predominantly Black and Puerto Rican communities and 92% of students in Harlem.²⁰¹ Though an impressive total, this number represented only half of those students citywide who had stayed out during the first boycott. While the president of the Board of Education took this as a sign that school boycotts were “regarded with markedly diminishing favor,” Galamison described

²⁰⁰ Martin Arnold, “Galamison Sees Boycott Success,” *New York Times*, March 16, 1964.

²⁰¹ Leonard Buder, “School Boycott Is Half As Large As The First One,” *New York Times*, March 17, 1964; “Boycott: Split Down Middle—In Leadership and Support,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 21, 1964.

the protest as “formidable” and threatened to takeover the Board of Education building the next time if their demands weren’t met.²⁰²

More significantly, however, ACT’s success in supporting a major protest campaign in opposition to the civil rights mainstream signaled to the organization’s leaders that a long-awaited shift had finally taken place in the national movement. “This day marks the end of the big-name civil rights leaders,” Powell declared, “they boycotted us today, and we’re going to boycott them tomorrow.”²⁰³ Riding the wave of the boycott, Gray predicted that these leaders would eventually fall in line with their grassroots insurgency, “because we are organizing the people below the top leaders, and when the people from down below are organized, those on top will get with it.” With such a groundswell pushing the national organizations to embrace more militant action, Gray predicted that their leaders would “either join the bandwagon or it will roll over them.”²⁰⁴

The school boycott created a showdown between national civil rights organizations and the groundswell of militant grassroots organizations in New York City that were now part of their own national coalition. With several CORE chapters, including Brooklyn and newly-formed East River CORE openly defying the national

²⁰² Leonard Buder, “School Boycott Is Half As Large As The First One,” *New York Times*, March 17, 1964.

²⁰³ “Boycott: Split Down Middle—In Leadership and Support,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 21, 1964.

²⁰⁴ Martin Arnold, “Galamison Sees Boycott Success,” *New York Times*, March 16, 1964.

organization by joining the protest, the boycott revealed that the winds were changing in New York's Black Freedom Struggle.

The Struggle for Police Reform and the Emergence of a Radical Grassroots Movement Center

In the wake of the school boycott, Gray returned to the lingering rent strike movement and swelling struggles against police brutality with the added support of Malcolm X and a national network of militant leaders ready to aid in the struggle. While the rent strikes waned, the organizing efforts of its primary leadership, the CCH and NSM, began to show an embrace of what Bayard Rustin described that winter as "the package deal."²⁰⁵ Reflecting a collective analysis that racial inequality in housing, education, employment, and policing were all interrelated within a larger system of racial oppression, Harlem organizers in the spring of 1964 moved away from single-issue organizing in an effort to coordinate a collective attack on systemic racism in New York City.

Consequently, such a systemic analysis revealed the insufficiency of the popularly accepted lexicon and strategies that previously characterized the Black Freedom Struggle in Harlem. "It is becoming increasingly evident that 'civil rights' is no longer either an adequate term or an accurate description of the quest for full freedom which is now challenging our society," Bill Strickland asserted. "It is also evident that an institutionalized system of disadvantage provokes just as dangerous a reaction in the overcrowded and under-resourced northern ghetto as it does in the

²⁰⁵ Bayard Rustin, "From Protest To Politics: The Future Of The Civil Rights Movement," *Commentary* 39, no. 2 (February 1965).

more publicized and tragic South.”²⁰⁶ Through their active struggles over the past months and years, local people in Harlem had reached similar conclusions, and by the spring of 1964, they set their sights on the most visible indicator of this systemic racial oppression—the police.

Throughout the months of March and April, Malcolm X and Jesse Gray appeared together at a number of mass meetings and rallies to organize resistance to police brutality and repression as part of a broader effort to build a radical grassroots movement center in Harlem. At a series of rallies in Harlem in the days following Police Commissioner Murphy’s target attack upon Gray, Malcolm X, and Herbert Callendar in March, the leaders redoubled their demands for the Commissioner’s ouster, asserted the rights of Black communities to defend themselves, and demanded the creation of a civilian review board.

At the same time, Gray and Malcolm X were couching their campaign against police brutality and repression within a broader analysis of Black liberation and self-determination. At a rent strike rally at the Milbank Center on March 22nd, Gray issued demands for Murphy’s dismissal alongside a call for all Harlem residents to stop paying rent “until we get better education for our children.” Gray also denounced Governor Rockefeller for not supporting the \$1.50 minimum wage demanded by the March on Albany weeks earlier. In his address, Malcolm affirmed his support for Gray’s demands while re-asserting the rights of Black communities to practice self-defense when the government proved unable or unwilling to protect

²⁰⁶ “Speech given by NSM Executive Director—William Strickland at a College Conference at Columbia, October 25, 1963,” Box 76, Meier Papers.

their interests. “I am indicting the government for not defending us,” Malcolm proclaimed, “if the government can’t do it then let us do it ourselves.” Malcolm hardly needed to make any specific reference to the recent police legislation and uptick in police brutality and repression for the 250 Harlem residents in attendance to understand the premise of his comments.²⁰⁷

That same night, Malcolm X held a mass rally at the Rockland Palace at 115th Street and 8th Ave to protest the Southern filibuster of the pending Civil Rights Act. At the outset of the rally, Malcolm introduced Jesse Gray and Rev. Nelson C. Dukes of the Fountain Springs Baptist Church as “strong Black Nationalists,” and promised to hold rallies every Sunday night. In the course of this speech, which many described as among the best he ever gave, Malcolm laid the ideological groundwork for his nascent nationalist movement.²⁰⁸ In this resounding address, Malcolm X urged the nearly 22 million “so-called Negroes” across the country to join any Black Nationalist organization that taught people to “take over their own communities, politically and economically.”²⁰⁹ It was here that Malcolm also elucidated what would become one of his most iconic political analyses—the ballot or the bullet. “We had 3,000 people at that rally,” Malcolm told reporters afterward, “and they all

²⁰⁷ George Todd, “Malcolm X Explains His Rifle Statement,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 28, 1964.

²⁰⁸ George Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 23. As Breitman notes, the central tenets of the speech Malcolm gave at this rally, along with three others held that month, provided the basis for an early April talk in Cleveland, titled “The Ballot Or The Bullet,” which is remembered as one of his most iconic public addresses.

²⁰⁹ Edward Murrain, “Angry At Filibuster in Senate: Malcolm X Launches Drive ‘Boycott Democratic Party,’” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 28, 1964.

supported my call for ballots or bullets, as the only way of emphasizing to the government that we mean business.”²¹⁰ Though Malcolm had coupled his call for “ballots or bullets” with plans for a massive voter registration drive in the urban North “to determine who will sit in the White House, and who will sit in the dog house,” the true significance of “ballots or bullets” stretched beyond the confines of electoral politics. Malcolm presented the looming threat of armed insurrection in the United States as a logical consequence of the continued resistance of an oppressive government that refused to concede the demands of 22 million Black Americans for human rights.

Though Malcolm located this analysis within national and global contexts, it was particularly well-received in Harlem in light of the city’s repressive responses to the recent rent strikes, school boycotts, and protests at construction sites. For over a decade, grassroots activists had grown dangerously disillusioned with the repressive limitations of racial liberalism in New York City amidst rising demands for self-determination and Black power. To Malcolm X, it was this collective disillusionment that made “ballots or bullets” an inevitable conclusion in Harlem and beyond.

After several more weeks of mass rallies and direct action protests against police brutality, corruption, and repression, which drew the cooperation of a cross-section of civil rights, religious, labor, and community organizations, these issues came to a head in Harlem on April 17th. That afternoon, police stormed onto Lenox Avenue between 128th and 129th Street where a group of children had been

²¹⁰ Ibid.

throwing fruit from an upturned stand at each other. As the four patrolman chased after the children, they were met with jeers from the crowd that had begun to gather, prompting the officers to call for reinforcements. The backups soon flooded the block, swinging their clubs indiscriminately and drawing their guns upon people on the sidewalks and on the rooftops of overlooking buildings.

In the bedlam, police mauled and arrested a group of three teenagers and two adults who had dared to intervene, or even question, the callous beatings of Black children. Of those beaten and arrested was Frank Stafford, a 31-year-old father and salesman in Harlem, who had asked why two officers were beating a child. The beatings continued inside the 28th Precinct, where for hours 35 officers brutally beat the five who remained in handcuffs. As a result of these beatings, which the officers carried out while calling the men “niggers, dogs, animals,” Stafford spent over a month in the hospital and lost his right eye.²¹¹ To literally add insult to injury, Stafford and the others were charged with assaulting the police officers, among other charges.

In addition to being callous, this brutal police treatment was also partially calculated. The arrests of Daniel Hamm and Wallace Baker, James Baldwin explained in a 1966 report on the case, were in retaliation for an earlier run-in with the police, when the two teenagers stood their ground against a group of officers who tried to unlawfully search and detain them. “Their exhibition of the spirit of ’76 marked

²¹¹ Themis Chronopoulos, “Police Misconduct, Community Opposition, and Urban Governance in New York City, 1945-1965,” *Journal of Urban History* 1, no. 26 (April 2015): 16; James Baldwin, “A Report From Occupied Territory,” *The Nation*, July 11, 1966.

them as dangerous,” Baldwin wrote of the precarious position the teenagers were placed in because they had asserted their rights in the face of the type of oppressive policing that was set to become legally sanctioned in July. The retribution escalated ten days later, when Hamm, Baker, and four other teenagers beaten by police during the so-called “Fruit Stand Riot,” were arrested for the murder of a white storeowner in Harlem—an act they almost certainly had nothing to do with.²¹²

The first-degree murder charges brought against the group of teenagers, who came to be known as The Harlem Six, were severe, and at that time, meant the possibility of death in the electric chair. Again, the teenagers were brutally beaten by police while in custody, in an apparent attempt to coerce confessions for a crime that there was no real evidence they had committed. In the court of public opinion, such brutality and blatant suppression of civil rights experienced by these teenagers was evidence that Harlem was suffering under the rule of an occupying force. “It is axiomatic, in occupied territory,” Baldwin contended, “that any act of resistance, even though it be executed by a child, be answered at once, and with the full weight of the occupying forces.”

With swelling opposition to police power in Harlem as a backdrop, the brutality of the “Fruit Stand Riot” and the persecution of The Harlem Six fueled opposition to police power in Harlem and spurred a wave of organized action to check police abuses and reform the department. The mothers of The Harlem Six quickly organized a committee to fight what many saw as an attempt at the legal

²¹² James Baldwin, “A Report From Occupied Territory,” *The Nation*, July 11, 1966.

lynching of their sons. “We mothers stopped feeling sorry for ourselves when we saw that our children were being railroaded,” Mildred Thomas wrote. “We decided to join together and fight back, even though none of the rich organizations came to their aid or defense.”²¹³ Though mainstream civil rights organizations were unwilling to put their reputations on the line for a seemingly unwinnable murder case, the Mothers’ Defense Committee enlisted the support of radical civil rights attorneys William Kunstler and Conrad Lynn, who had been actively involved in the legal efforts to aid the Monroe Defendants over the past three years.

The Mother’s Defense Committee also drew the support of Mae Mallory, who had recently returned to Harlem. After a nearly three-year legal battle against the kidnapping charges she faced in Monroe, NC, Mallory had been convicted in late February and sentenced to 16-20 years in prison.²¹⁴ With bond having been posted by the Monroe Defense Committee pending an appeal,²¹⁵ Mallory returned to Harlem and resumed organizing in the community. Just days after being released from a Monroe jail, Mallory shared the stage with Malcolm X at an evening forum at the Audubon Ballroom. During this homecoming of sorts, attended by a crowd of 500, Malcolm cited the type of rampant racist violence throughout the country that Mallory had fought against as evidence in accusing the United States government of

²¹³ Mildred Thomas, “Harlem Mothers Organize to Save Their Sons,” *Liberator* 4, no. 8 (August 1964): 10.

²¹⁴ “Mae Mallory, Monroe N.C. Four To Appeal Lengthy Jail Sentences,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 3, 1964. For more on Mallory and the Monroe Defendants, see Chapter Five.

²¹⁵ “Release N.C. Kidnap Prisoners On Bail,” *Chicago Defender*, March 23, 1964.

genocide. Echoing Mallory's own analysis of systemic racism cultivated during her years of organizing in Harlem, Malcolm insisted that the Black Freedom Struggle now needed to shift its demands from "civil rights" to "human rights."²¹⁶ Although Mallory kept a low profile following this forum, she played an active, if quiet, role in supporting the Mother's Defense Committee.²¹⁷ In the following months, Mallory would continue her fight for The Harlem Six with her Organization of Militant Black Women as part of a radical, multi-issue platform "to be free by any means necessary."²¹⁸

While mainstream civil rights leadership had abandoned The Harlem Six in their legal defense, the gross brutality of the police melee during the "Fruit Stand

²¹⁶ Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking, 2011), 305.

²¹⁷ Though scant documentation exists regarding Mallory's involvement, her personal archives located at the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University include literature on the case of The Harlem Six. Additionally, the very name of the Mother's Defense Committee bears an unmistakable likeness to the Monroe Defense Committee, in which Mallory played a formative role. Lastly, the rhetoric and analysis presented in a letter written by one of the mother's of the Harlem Six, Mildred Thomas, and published in the *Liberator*, is suggestive of Mallory's involvement in coordinating the mothers' opposition. "We mothers stopped feeling sorry for ourselves when we saw that our children were being railroaded. *We decided to join together and fight back, even though none of the rich organizations came to their aid or defense.* We knew that if we were to save our children that we had to go out and work at it. We formed the Mothers' Defense Committee and began telling our side of the story. We want to tell our side of the story *about the frame-up of our children* and the slander that is being committed against our community [emphasis added]." Mildred Thomas, "Harlem Mothers Organize to Save Their Sons," *Liberator* 4, no. 8 (August 1964): 10. It is also worth noting that Conrad Lynn, who was actively involved in the legal efforts to aid the Monroe Defendants, served as legal counsel to the Harlem Six, along with William Kunstler.

²¹⁸ Letter from Mae Mallory to Sister, September 1964, Box 2, Folder 20, Mae Mallory Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

Riot” spurred local and national organizations to greater action in the fight for police reform in New York. This outrage was only compounded the following week when police “pulled out all stops” against CORE-led protests to block vehicular and subway traffic to the opening of the World’s Fair in Flushing, Queens.²¹⁹ In a telegram sent to Mayor Wagner earlier that month, Brooklyn CORE had threatened a “stall-in” on the bridges and subways leading to Queens unless the Mayor developed and implemented a plan to “end police brutality, abolish slum housing, integrate the construction and brewery industries, and provide integrated, quality education for all.” Citing the recent arrest of Jesse Gray and Police Commissioner Murphy’s targeted attacks on radical Black leaders, the telegram pointed out the contradictions of City Hall’s active persecution of civil rights demonstrators while perpetrators of discrimination were treated with kid gloves.²²⁰ As if to prove this point, the Mayor ignored CORE’s demands and the NYPD arrested dozens of motorists on the bridges leading to Queens, while giving “merciless beatings” to even more during protests in the subways.²²¹

The Fair became a symbol of the contradictions of white opulence in the face of Black oppression that spring, particularly as the city claimed economic hardship when it came to exercising its receivership law, yet managed to extend a \$40 million loan to the World’s Fair Corporation which would provide few lasting economic

²¹⁹ Harlem Progressive Labor Movement, “Harlem Unite: Let Us Defend Ourselves!,” May 1964, BOSS Records.

²²⁰ Halstead, et al., *Harlem Stirs*, 112.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

benefits. As James Farmer pointed out in a stern rebuke of the City's Real Estate Commissioner, who had earlier argued that the receivership law was fiscally irresponsible, the cost of removing violations from 1,000 buildings at \$20,000 per building would have been \$20 million—half of the amount provided to the World's Fair and a fraction of a percent of the city's budget.²²² In a press release on the opening day of the Fair, Jesse Gray charged the Mayor "with practicing a double standard of justice against Negroes" for his swift recriminations meted out against protestors involved in the stall-in. Gray argued that the same laws that the city used to prosecute the stall-in protestors, which prohibited "acts injurious to the public health, or the commission of a public nuisance," should have instead been used to arrest slumlords and brutal police officers.²²³

The following month, ACT would also utilize the platform of the World's Fair to call attention to these same contradictions through a public exposé of the socio-economic conditions that existed in Harlem compared to the lavish Fair taking place across the Triborough Bridge. Sardonicly advertising their walking tours of Harlem as the "World's Worst Fair," Gray, Gregory, Richardson, and Branche—with the support of James Baldwin, Abbey Lincoln, Max Roach, and A. Philip Randolph—emphatically declared, "We Don't Need a World's Fair, We Need a Fair World!"²²⁴

²²² Lipsky, *Protest In City Politics*, 70.

²²³ Community Council on Housing Press Release, April 22, 1964, Box 30, Folder 1, MCH Records.

²²⁴ Halstead, et al., *Harlem Stirs*, 112-113; "Big Opening: World's Worse Fair," May 1964, Box 31, Folder 17, MCH Records.

Resistance and Repression: The Struggle for a Civilian Review Board

By May, the contradictions between the rhetoric of racial liberalism and the brutal realities of racial oppression in Harlem had become too clear to ignore. The uptick in police brutality and repression that spring had tipped the hand of City Hall and demonstrated to Harlem residents the two sides of the Wagner Administration's liberal governance. As James Baldwin pointed out in his later report on the "Fruit Stand Riot," the seemingly endless and escalating atrocities committed against Harlem residents under a liberal democratic administration had put people "in the impossible position of being unable to believe a word one's countrymen say."²²⁵ Fueled by oppression and channeled by radical grassroots organizers, this analysis led many Harlem residents to challenge the very legitimacy of the city's government and to search for alternative means of achieving redress for their grievances.

Community campaigns against police brutality found a central rallying point that month, when formal debate began on a bill introduced by City Councilman Theodore Weiss to create a civilian review board. If signed into law, the Weiss Bill would have established a police review board, comprised entirely of civilians, to investigate allegations of police brutality and misconduct and recommend punishments. The bill was designed to replace the existing civilian complaint review board, an internal body of the NYPD in operation since 1953, which simply reviewed

²²⁵ James Baldwin, "A Report From Occupied Territory," *The Nation*, July 11, 1966.

reports from commanding officers and recommended actions to the Police Commissioner on the basis of the reports they received.²²⁶

The Weiss Bill was a direct response from a “reform Democrat” to the rising demands of Black leaders throughout the city that spring for police oversight and an independent review board. In their demands for such police reform, local and national leaders alike made it clear to the Wagner Administration that much was riding on this particular issue. In a meeting with Michael Murphy at the end of April, James Farmer warned the Police Commissioner that he was “concerned about the summer, and that one of the key issues will be police brutality.”²²⁷ For the remainder of the spring, police reform and the civilian review board became the central issue for the city’s major civil rights organizations and generated wide support throughout Harlem. In early May, the Ad Hoc Committee For Fair Police Practice expanded its program to repeal the “no-knock” and “stop-and-frisk” laws—which would go into effect July 1st—to include demands for the passage of the Weiss Bill.

In an attempt to coerce support for the bill in the City Council, the Ad Hoc Committee established an independent community review board that would serve as a model and hear complaints of police brutality submitted to CORE. The board was comprised of ten representatives of various community, religious, labor, and civil rights organizations, including Farmer, ACLU founder Roger Baldwin, former

²²⁶ James R. Hudson, “Police Review Boards and Police Accountability,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 36, no.4 (1971): 523.

²²⁷ Fred Powledge, “Farmer and Murphy Discuss Complaints Board,” *New York Times*, April 28, 1964.

judge and educational activist Hubert Delany, and NSM national director Bill Strickland.²²⁸ After hearing several cases of police brutality during a simulated courtroom session in early June, the community review board ruled “the time has come for the Police Department to cease being its own prosecutor, its own judge and its own jury.”²²⁹ Coupled with a series of direct action protests at City Hall and police headquarters that month to demand the passage of the Weiss Bill, these proceedings demonstrated to Harlem residents what a more just system of police oversight could look like and spurred greater involvement in protest action.

At the same time this cross-section of Harlem organizations were fighting for police reform through the Ad Hoc Committee, Malcolm X was working to build a revolutionary movement with a campaign against police brutality as its opening salvo. After returning to Harlem from his hajj to Mecca, which lasted from April 13th through May 21st, Malcolm began meeting in secretive sessions with a close-knit group of intellectuals and activists to develop a new organization. In a motel at 153rd Street and 8th Avenue, Malcolm met with Lynn Shifflet, John Henrik Clarke, Peter Bailey, John O. Killens, Muriel Gray, and members of the MMI to develop ideological positions and programs in response to crucial areas of concern in the community, including policing, housing, education, and self-defense.²³⁰

²²⁸ Thomas Buckley, “Unofficial Citizen Panel to Study Accusations of Police Brutality,” *New York Times*, May 23, 1964.

²²⁹ Martin Gansberg, “CORE Sets Up Panel to Hear Police Charged With Brutality,” *New York Times*, June 5, 1964.

²³⁰ William W. Sales, Jr. *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 104-05.

While working out a long-range program of Pan-African revolutionary nationalism, the initial meetings of the fledgling organization emphasized the need “to find the one issue, housing, jobs, police brutality—whatever it may be, that the community is concerned with most and wage a resolute struggle around it in order to galvanize the masses.”²³¹ By early June, this impressive collective of veteran thinkers and organizers in Harlem had concluded that “immediate action is necessary in Harlem. The ‘No Knock’ law and police brutality are prime issues.” As the group worked through its program that spring, it attracted the following of other local radical intellectuals and organizers, including Jesse Gray, Jack O’Dell, Gloria Richardson Dandridge, Bill Epton, Conrad Lynn, William Worthy, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Bill Strickland, Abbey Lincoln, and Ora Mobley, all of whom had played formative roles in shaping the emergence and evolution of radical grassroots freedom struggles in Harlem over the past decade or more.²³² At the end of June, Malcolm X would officially announce the formation of this new force in the Black Freedom Struggle as the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU).

“The time has come”: Harlem Confronts the Limits of Racial Liberalism

With such an array of individuals and organizations involved in the Black Freedom Struggle in Harlem converging upon the issue of police reform, Police Commissioner Murphy and the NYPD characteristically dug in their heels and

²³¹ Garrett Felber, “Harlem Is The Black World’: The Organization of Afro-American Unity At The Grassroots,” *The Journal of African American History* 100, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 203.

²³² Sales, *From Civil Rights To Black Liberation*, 99-132; Felber, “Harlem Is The Black World,” 199-225.

prepared for a fight. In his dogged resistance to any modicum of police reform, Murphy waged a battle on two fronts. In the wake of the “Fruit Stand Riot,” the NYPD escalated its presence in Harlem as a show of force to fasten down the lid on any further unrest. For the remainder of the spring, as Michael Flamm notes, the NYPD dispatched members of its highly militarized Tactical Patrol Force (TPF) to patrol Central Harlem in pairs.²³³ Known pejoratively in Harlem as the “riot squad,” the TPF had been established under the orders of Mayor Wagner nearly five years earlier as a response to the 1959 “near riot” in Harlem.²³⁴ With the possibility of massive racial unrest looming large that summer, Wagner had moved quickly to ensure that the NYPD would be prepared and empowered to contain and suppress any political uprising.

Comprised of physically imposing officers with special training in martial arts and riot suppression, the TPF in Harlem provided a highly-visible reminder of the will of the city administration to violently curb any unrest. In addition to patrolling the streets, as one officer recalled, the TPF “went into the alleyways, the basements, onto the rooftops, through the tenement hallways,” in an ever-present, aggressive occupation of Harlem. “They saw it as an invasion of their neighborhood,” TPF officer Robert Leuci recalled, “back then, I didn’t understand the rage I saw in their faces, the contempt.” While Leuci claimed in his memoir that he thought the TPF was “there to help,” other officers were more candid in appraising their motives for joining the squad. In expressing his excitement over

²³³ Flamm, *In the Heat of the Summer*, 77.

²³⁴ See Chapter Three and Four.

being selected to join the TPF, officer Jim O'Neil remembered that he "couldn't wait to get started" as a member of "an elite, ass-kicking, crime-fighting, gut-busting squad."²³⁵ With such an escalation of aggressive, militarized police presence came the predictable result of increased claims of mistreatment and abuse. In the three months immediately following the "Fruit Stand Riot," Bill Epton's Harlem Defense Council reported that their organization had recorded 300 cases of police brutality in Harlem alone.²³⁶

At the same time, Murphy continued his campaign to control the popular narrative about demands for police reform, routinely misrepresenting legitimate demands for reform as calculated, baseless attacks on the NYPD and upon "law and order" in the city. "Charges that the people of this city fear and hate the police are without substance," Murphy declared that spring. "We must not let false cries of propaganda merchants split the people from their police force." While the ridiculous irony of Murphy's attack on civil rights organizations as "propaganda merchants" was obvious to Black communities in the city, such rhetoric resonated with white New Yorkers across the political spectrum who had grown tired of the constant agitation of a decade-long struggle for human rights waged by Black communities throughout the city and across the nation.

Bronxville resident Rita C. Tlamsa gave voice to this white backlash in the city in a letter to Michael Murphy that spring supporting his vocal opposition to

²³⁵ Flamm, *In the Heat of the Summer*, 61-63.

²³⁶ Black Liberation Commission of the Progressive Labor Party, "The Plot Against Black America," (Harlem: American Press, 1966), 2, in author's possession.

rising demands for a civilian review board. “The [civilian review] boards are intended to scare our policemen out of doing their duty,” Tlamsa declared, “and thus leave the Communists unhindered in promoting virulent lawlessness.”²³⁷ By routinely presenting legitimate demands for police reform as calculated attacks on police authority waged by outside agitators, Murphy not only sought to delegitimize the broader aims of the Black Freedom Struggle, but also helped to foment a racist backlash in the city that would drive support from white voters for heightened police power.

In this battle for control of the popular narrative around police brutality and reform, the Wagner Administration and NYPD were given ammunition from an explosive story by *New York Times* reporter Junius Griffin at the end of May. In his highly contested article, Griffin reported that a new gang had emerged in Harlem known as the “Blood Brothers,” which was responsible for a wave of violent crimes that spring and had expressed plans to target whites and law enforcement for retributive violence. In this shocking report, Griffin quoted from alleged interviews with members of this “hate gang” who he claimed were influenced in large part by the rhetoric and ideologies of Malcolm X.²³⁸ While the story was widely refuted from a cross-section of Black leaders and organizations in Harlem and beyond, the story

²³⁷ Letter from Rita C. Tlamsa to Michael Murphy, March 1964, BOSS Records.

²³⁸ Junius Griffin, “Whites Are Target Of Harlem Gang,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1964.

raised the specter of retributive Black violence in the city and put the NYPD on high alert for the next several months.²³⁹

At a panel discussion on the “Harlem Hate-Gang Scare” hosted by the Militant Labor Forum at the end of May, Malcolm X explained the dangers of any further escalation of police presence and repression in Harlem resulting from the “Blood Brothers” story. “Police Commissioner Murphy is a dangerous man,” Malcolm explained, “because what he’s doing is creating a situation that can lead to nothing but bloodshed.”²⁴⁰ Joining Malcolm X on the panel was QR Hand, who cited his experiences with police repression during the rent strikes as evidence that systemic forces were at work to violently prevent Black liberation in Harlem. “There’s a particular reason uptown why the cops have to get their special tactical force up there,” Hand asserted. “It comes down to the fact that there are an awful lot of groups, not together as of yet, who are deciding, well we can’t take this any longer. We can’t take the bad housing, the rats, the roaches, the inferior schools...we can’t take this any longer.” Hand may as well have been speaking for the masses in Harlem when he argued that the increasingly repressive presence of the NYPD and its TPF in Harlem that spring was a direct response to the recognition of a looming political insurgency in Harlem. “You wanna start talking about hate-gangs in the

²³⁹ For more on the controversy surrounding the “Blood Brothers” report, see Flamm, *In the Heat of the Summer*, 70-73.

²⁴⁰ Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 67.

city,” said in conclusion, “let’s talk about the police department, the real hate gang.”²⁴¹

Each panelist at the forum, including Malcolm X, QR Hand, SWP presidential candidate Clifton DeBerry, and NY CORE rent strike leader William Reed, predicted that violence would soon erupt in Harlem if City Hall continued on its present course of violently suppressing Black demands for human rights and self-determination. Rather than lamenting these predictions as a foregone conclusion, however, each panelist encouraged Harlem residents to take action to defend themselves and secure their liberation from an illegitimate government by any means necessary. “I think the time has come when the community must organize itself to be prepared that when something happens to any individual in the community they should turn out and be prepared to defend it...to demand that the law enforcement officers enforce the law instead of breaking it,” DeBerry charged. “We would call it self-defense, but Commissioner Murphy and Mayor Wagner would call it ‘hate-gang.” While Malcolm X had avoided explicitly calling for self-defense against police violence in his numerous addresses that spring, DeBerry made plain what many Harlem residents had already deduced from Malcolm’s rhetoric.

In this two-hour forum, this cross-section of Black political thought in Harlem painted a stark picture of an impending crisis that had been over a decade in the making. By the time summer arrived, the contradictions between the rhetoric of racial liberalism and practice of racial oppression in New York City had become too

²⁴¹ Militant Labor Forum, “The Harlem Hate-Gang Scare,” May 29, 1964, Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

clear to ignore in Harlem, setting the stage for a dramatic confrontation over Black demands for human rights, self-determination, and a more progressive form of urban governance. Fueled by years of hostile and violent resistance to such demands from city, state, and federal levels of government, this widely-predicted looming confrontation represented a collective rejection of liberal governance in New York City as incapable and unwilling to guarantee the human rights of its Black and Puerto Rican residents. Nurtured for over a decade by radical organizers and intellectuals in Harlem, this popular analysis that was flowering at the grassroots made a confrontation with the enforcement arm of the white status quo nearly inevitable by the summer of 1964.

In concluding his address at the Militant Labor Forum, Malcolm X offered a dire warning to those in the audience. Comparing the violent conditions of racial oppression in Harlem to those that spawned an armed revolutionary struggle in Algeria, Malcolm predicted that America would soon witness the same type of guerilla revolt in Harlem that transpired in Algeria. "People will realize that it's impossible for a chicken to produce a duck egg...it can only produce according to what that particular system was constructed to produce," Malcolm allegorized. "The system in this country cannot produce freedom for an Afro-American...it's impossible for this system, as it stands, to produce freedom right now for the black man in this country."²⁴² It was with this kind of analysis in mind that Harlem residents took to the streets less than two months later when a white, off-duty NYPD lieutenant fatally shot 15-year-old James Powell in broad daylight. After more than a

²⁴² Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 66-69.

decade of active grassroots struggle for rights and power, the Black and Puerto Rican residents of Harlem sent a resounding message to the City of New York and the nation that July: “America, we have found you out.”



As day broke upon New York City on July 20, 1964, the Monday morning sun reflected off shattered glass coating the sidewalks of Central Harlem. In the days following the police killing of James Powell, the heavy-handed presence of the NYPD at nonviolent demonstrations against police brutality prompted Harlem residents to unleash their collective fury upon the myriad individuals, businesses, and institutions that represented the systemic forces of oppression the community had fought against for over a decade. Amidst the flurry of articles and photographs on the so-called “riots” that lined the pages of the *New York Times* that morning was another particularly jarring article written by Junius Griffin. Under the headline, “Guerilla War’ Urged In Harlem,” Griffin reported on a Saturday night rally at the Mount Morris Presbyterian Church where Jesse Gray had allegedly called for “100 skilled black revolutionaries who are ready to die” in the fight against police brutality in Harlem.²⁴³

Months later, after rebellions had erupted throughout the Northeast in Harlem’s wake, Gray revisited these remarks during a speech in Rochester, NY. When the Black community there had rebelled against police violence and systemic racial oppression just days after Harlem had done the same, the masses in the

²⁴³ Junius Griffin, “Guerilla Warfare’ Urged In Harlem,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1964.

streets of western New York had cried out, "Don't give us [Martin Luther] King, give us Jesse Gray."²⁴⁴ Having spent weeks clarifying his remarks in New York City to avoid criminal prosecution, Gray took the opportunity in Rochester to set the record straight. After reiterating claims that he was exhorting Black communities to fight back against racist terrorism in Mississippi rather than New York, Gray explained the revolutionary analysis that undergirded his calls for armed self-defense. "I said in New York City that revolution is an art...and therefore, if revolution is an art, then the revolutionaries must go into the community and organize that community for change."²⁴⁵

Revolution was a common theme in Gray's addresses that fall and winter, but it was not purely for the sake of protecting himself from legal persecution. The Harlem rebellion had provided Gray with an elevated platform that he then utilized to explain the revolutionary analysis he had developed over nearly two decades of radical organizing. "Real revolutionaries are out in the streets organizing people around their day-to-day problems," Gray explained at a conference that fall. "Those who are revolutionist in theory must go down to the streets and organize the people, if they are to be revolutionaries. Only if we do this can we organize the masses toward independent political struggle."²⁴⁶ Far from inflammatory rhetoric,

²⁴⁴ Flamm, *In the Heat of the Summer*, 220.

²⁴⁵ "Excerpts from a speech made by Jesse Gray at the University of Rochester on the riots last summer," undated, Box 5, Folder 9, Haughton Papers.

²⁴⁶ Jesse Gray, "The Black Revolution—A Struggle For Political Power," Keynote Address at the Federation For Independent Political Action Conference, December 19, 1964, Box 15, Folder 6, Haughton Papers.

Gray's analysis of a grassroots revolutionary movement had been forged in the same crucible of Black radical thought that had shaped the development of some of the leading intellectuals and organizers of the Black Freedom Struggle, including Ella Baker, Mae Mallory, and Malcolm X, amongst many others.

By the summer of 1964, this emphasis on radical grassroots organizing had come to characterize struggles for Black liberation and empowerment in Harlem and beyond. Weaving together the various strands of radical political thought and action over the past decade in Harlem, the rent strike movement that winter provided a blueprint for engaging poor and working-class Black and Puerto Rican communities in a radical social movement. Furthermore, through participation in the rent strikes, thousands of New Yorkers developed a more radical analysis of the city's power structures by coming face to face with the very agencies charged with maintaining the racial status quo in the city.

Though the revolution that Jesse Gray, Malcolm X, and Mae Mallory envisioned had not yet come to pass, this radical grassroots milieu in Harlem had effectively demonstrated the ways in which the latent political power of poor and working-class Black communities in the urban north could be mobilized and organized for social transformation. While the spontaneous rebellion that summer should not be confused with organized revolutionary action, it nonetheless signaled to the city and to the nation that any further attempts to suppress the demands of Black communities for human rights and self-determination would be met with dire consequences. From the streets of Harlem came the rainbow sign, and the long, hot summers of the 1960s had officially begun.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

As the smoke began to clear in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, newspapers across the country carried article after article covering the “riots” spreading throughout the northeast. Alongside dramatic photographs of broken windows and people running from the police ran columns in which reporters, politicians, police, and civil rights leaders offered their explanations of the recent unrest in the nation’s cities. Ranging from condemnations of “looters” and “rioters” who had no regard for “law and order,” to explanations of the “hopelessness” and “despair” that created a powder keg in the ghetto, scarce was the person who did not have an opinion on the cause of the uprisings. Despite the range of explanations or characterizations, there was general agreement that action needed to be taken in Harlem and elsewhere to address the demonstrably explosive symptoms of systemic racial oppression. The disagreement lay in what was to be done about the situation.

In many ways, the disagreements that emerged between City Hall and Harlem residents in the wake of the rebellion were characteristic of the Wagner Administration’s general position toward the Black Freedom Struggle over the previous decade. In a televised address delivered as the uprising began to ebb, Wagner stuck close to the well-worn script defined by his one-two punch of liberal governance. With his left hand, the Mayor explained to Harlem residents that he empathized with their “needs and problems in regard to housing and jobs and discrimination and the education of your children” and promised to “go all out to remedy injustice” and “reduce inequality.” On the other hand, Wagner declared “the

mandate to maintain law and order is absolute, unconditional and unqualified,” while casting blame for the unrest upon the “tough young ones” who were “ready for violence...and full of resentment and hate.” Furthermore, the Mayor warned that “illegal acts, including defiance of or attacks upon the police” would not be tolerated and that the city would not be “browbeaten by prophets of despair, or by peddlers of hate.”¹

To Harlem residents, the message was abundantly clear—the Mayor was once again providing lip service and promises of minor concessions to Black communities while misrepresenting and criminalizing their legitimate demands for equality and empowerment in order to maintain the racial status quo. “There was nothing new in Wagner’s statement,” NY NAACP president Rev. Richard Hildebrand observed, while reiterating demands for a civilian review board over the Mayor’s expressed objections.² “We have just gone through a summer where the New York City administration has completely overlooked some basic demands of the people,” Jesse Gray concurred in an address later that year.³

To Gray, this continued rejection and suppression of demands for human rights and self-determination in Harlem, even in the wake of a major urban rebellion, was a clear sign that new directions had to be sought in the Black

¹ “Text of Wagner’s Radio-TV Appeal for Restoration of Law and Order in City,” *New York Times*, July 23, 1964, 12.

² Michael Flamm, *In the Heat of the Summer: The New York Riots of 1964 and the War on Crime* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 180.

³ Jesse Gray, “The Black Revolution—A Struggle For Political Power,” Keynote Address at the Federation For Independent Political Action Conference, December 19, 1964, Box 15, Folder 6, Haughton Papers.

Freedom Struggle. Explaining that the “sit-ins, wade-ins, walk-in, sleep-ins” had failed to “move the black masses,” Gray argued that any leader interested in truly confronting the power structures of the city and the nation needed to establish a base in poor and working-class Black communities of the urban North. “Wagner will never truly respect the ghetto,” Gray proclaimed, “unless we are able to organize— independent of any outside force—our politics, our culture, and our education, so that our community organization develops and its impact is felt throughout this city.”⁴ What Gray was describing, Black community control over the social, political, cultural, and economic institutions within Black communities, would later become a hallmark of the Black Power Movement.

While profound, the ideas that Gray was talking about that fall were hardly novel. In fact, they comprised much of the ideological basis for the powerful grassroots struggles for human rights and self-determination in Harlem over the past ten years or more. To be certain, the roots of this political milieu were firmly planted in the political soil tilled by Marcus Garvey, Queen Mother Moore, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Ella Baker, Jack O’Dell, and countless others in the early 20th Century through the post-World War II era. However, it was through the political thought and organizing of Jesse Gray, Malcolm X, Mae Mallory, the Northern Student Movement, NY CORE, and the rank-and-file in Harlem from 1954-1964 that this grassroots Black Power began to blossom throughout the city, state, and nation. By focusing their political analysis and praxis on developing indigenous leadership and community empowerment in service of achieving Black self-determination, these

⁴ Ibid.

leading activists and organizations brought local people and national leaders alike to the realization that any radical or revolutionary movement must be able to mobilize and organize the “mass reservoir of black power” in Harlem and elsewhere.⁵

Beyond a general disillusionment with the limitations of liberal governance for delivering economic, social, and political justice for Black communities, there were several defining characteristics of this emergent grassroots Black radicalism, which Gray referred to as “black power.” Through this decade of grassroots activism, radical leaders in Harlem had nurtured a popular political consciousness that centered on Black self-determination, community control of political, social, and economic institutions, a broader focus on human rights over civil rights, Black indigenous leadership of organizations, cultural nationalism, an identification with Pan-African freedom struggles, and a disavowal of nonviolence as an ideology. When analyzed within this dynamic ten-year period, the evolution of this radical political milieu offers profound insights into the emergence of grassroots Black Power in the urban north and its ideological and tactical components at the advent of the long, hot summers.

In many ways, the threads that comprised the tapestry of grassroots Black Power in Harlem during this era were woven together in the Organization of Afro-American Unity shortly before rebellions broke out that summer. With a broad membership that included some of the most influential radical thinkers and grassroots organizers in Harlem over the past decade or more, including Malcolm X,

⁵ Ibid.

Jesse Gray, Jack O'Dell, Gloria Richardson Dandridge, John Henrik Clarke, John O. Killens, Bill Epton, Conrad Lynn, William Worthy, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Bill Strickland, Abbey Lincoln, and Ora Mobley, the OAAU's formation on June 28, 1964 held the promise of a long-awaited Black radical united front in Harlem and beyond.⁶

By the summer of 1964, however, this proliferation of radical grassroots action marked the Black Freedom Struggle in Harlem for heightened governmental repression through the New York Police Department. As the NYPD responded to Black demands for rights and power in increasingly repressive ways as the spring progressed, greater numbers of Harlem residents came to embrace Malcolm X's indictment of the city government for not only failing to protect the interests of its Black citizens, but for actively subverting their demands for equality and justice. If the government was morally bankrupt and politically corrupt, as Malcolm contended, then there was no reason for its Black residents to operate through its prescribed channels in seeking redress for their grievances. By July 1964, many felt that the ballots hadn't worked, and that it was time for the bullets.

For all the ink spilled by city officials in scrambling to counter the proliferation of this radical analysis with flowery rhetoric and liberal promises, the active presence of grassroots intellectuals and organizers in Harlem from 1954-1964 had pulled back the curtain and brought forth a popular analysis in Harlem that delegitimized City Hall and made a confrontation with the white-dominated

⁶ Sales, *From Civil Rights To Black Liberation*, 99-132; Felber, "Harlem Is The Black World," 199-225.

power structure all but inevitable by the summer of 1964. This is not to suggest that violent conflict was unavoidable, predetermined, or calculated, however. Had the Wagner Administration prioritized the demands of its Black and Puerto Rican constituents for equality and justice over the heavy-handed maintenance of the racial status quo during its decade in power, the popular critique of City Hall and liberal governance that emerged by that summer would have gained far less traction. Though it was a spontaneous act of police brutality provided the impetus for the 1964 Harlem Rebellion, the radical and revolutionary analyses that were inspiring mass mobilization in Harlem and throughout the city compelled thousands to take to the streets, in recognition of this police violence as a symptom of the systemic oppression entrenched in the political, social, and economic structures of the city, state, and nation, and with the knowledge that justice was surely not forthcoming for yet another Black victim of white State violence.

The fatal shooting of James Powell on July 16th, then, served as a singular example of the force of the white world pressing down upon a rising Black nation. Through rebelling against the white power structure and its many faces in the days following the killing of James Powell, Harlem residents professed their allegiance to a challenge that Mae Mallory had thrown down three years prior: “the task of unleashing this Black power until the world is rid of White domination and exploitation.”⁷ As city after city exploded in the weeks, months, and years that followed, it was clear that Harlem residents were not alone in their task.

⁷ Letter from Mae Mallory to Sir, February 1961, Box 2, Folder 10, Mallory Papers.

The importance of documenting and analyzing these histories of grassroots struggles for rights and power in Harlem and elsewhere during this formative era stretches beyond challenging meta-narratives that have either marginalized or distorted the histories of northern Black Freedom Struggles. These local struggles against institutional racism in the urban North offer vital lessons for present and future generations of activists and organizers in the ongoing fight against institutional racism and for human rights, economic justice, political power, and social transformation. In her perceptive and powerful historical analysis of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor suggests that “today’s activists are grappling with questions similar to those Black radicals confronted in the Black Power era, questions bound up with the systemic nature of Black oppression in American capitalism and how that shapes the approach to organizing.”⁸ In our collective efforts to resolve these questions while building effective organizational structures, analyses, and strategies, many lessons can be derived from the struggles waged by poor and working class Black communities in Harlem in the decade preceding the 1964 Rebellion.

By analyzing school boycotts, rent strikes, campaigns for affirmative action in hiring, and protests over police brutality in Harlem within their proper context of a broader struggle for radical social transformation, activists and organizers can evaluate the successes and shortcomings of past strategies, tactics, and analyses to not only develop effective organizing praxis, but to envision and implement more

⁸ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 167.

assertive, imaginative, and radical political analyses and praxis. For pressing questions that remain in current struggles over interracial organizing, single-issue and intersectional organizing, class analyses in racial justice campaigns, the roles and relationships of local people and national organizations, gender roles in social movements, promoting personal and collective political consciousness, internationalism and global solidarity, and the dynamic relationships between reformist and revolutionary analyses and demands, there is much to be learned from the histories of Mae Mallory, Malcolm X, Jesse Gray, the Northern Student Movement, NY CORE, and the broader radical grassroots political milieu in Harlem from 1954-1964. For within these recent histories lie powerful and transformative narratives and lessons of how some of the most marginalized communities in New York City, through participation in local organizing efforts to improve living conditions and combat institutional racism, developed a radical critique of urban and national power structures that challenged the very legitimacy of an inherently oppressive society.

In addition to providing powerful lessons for current organization and movement building, an analysis of this decade of grassroots Black radicalism is essential for explaining the outbreak of urban uprisings in the 1960s not as “race riots,” but as rebellions against American Apartheid in the nation’s cities. To challenge these entrenched perceptions of civil unrest in response to State violence in the 1960s is to provide vital space for developing a more critical framework for understanding their recurrence in the 21st Century. As Taylor poignantly notes in her analysis of the 2014 police murder of 18-year-old Mike Brown and the resultant

uprising in Ferguson, Missouri, a new generation of young activists and organizers are “beginning to politically generalize from the multiple cases of police brutality and develop a systemic analysis of policing.” Furthermore, Taylor notes that many in this new generation of freedom fighters have begun to “articulate a much broader critique that situated policing within a matrix of racism and inequality in the United States and beyond.”⁹ Taylor’s assessment of the political analysis generated by grassroots activists in 2014 bears a striking resemblance to those generated by radical organizers and local people in Harlem in the early 1960s and demonstrates the continued need for a more critical analysis of the relationships between institutional racism, political consciousness and action, and urban rebellions in the United States.

To honestly reckon with the outbreak of rebellions in Harlem and elsewhere in the mid-to-late 1960s requires a thorough analysis of the preceding periods of organized grassroots resistance to the white State violence that begat such civil unrest. Such an analysis is an historical imperative to supplant the problematic, yet popularly accepted narrative that explains urban rebellions as consequences of an oppressive societal “powder keg” with a framework that centers the conscious political agency to Black communities which sought to resist oppression and reform government in the years, months, and days leading up to these uprisings. This former type of popular analysis has historically served to delegitimize the inherently political nature of urban rebellions by obscuring the causal relationships between grassroots Black radicalism, popular disillusionment with the repressive

⁹ Ibid, 162.

manifestations of racial liberalism, and the outbreak of urban rebellions. When urban rebellions are delegitimized and depoliticized as senseless acts of lawlessness and violence, history has shown that these narratives have given rise to even greater physical and political repression, as evidenced by the devastating national legacies of the War on Crime and the bloody wake left by the FBI's COINTELPRO.

Furthermore, by denying conscious political agency to those who engaged in righteous rebellion against American Apartheid, this type of narrative has effectively resulted in a popular backlash against legitimate demands for equality and justice, the retrenchment of the more repressive elements of racial liberalism, and the reification of a State monopoly on "violence." While changing the narrative of urban freedom struggles and rebellions will certainly not be sufficient in and of itself for fomenting systemic change in the nation's oppressive social, economic, and political structures, it is an imperative aspect of this multifaceted and expansive ongoing struggle for human rights, self-determination, and radical social transformation.

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