"Harlem, New York! Harlem, Detroit! Harlem, Birmingham!"

Liberator Magazine and the Chronicling of Translocal Activism

by Christopher M. Tinson

Introduction

THE LIBERATOR MAGAZINE (not to be confused with the well-known abolitionist newspaper published by William Lloyd Garrison) was on the cutting edge of radical print culture in the 1960s. It was formed in direct response to the assassination of Congolese prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, in 1961. Though a relatively small organ, it attracted important writers and readers from a broad political landscape stretching from anti-colonial struggles in Africa and Asia, to militant Civil Rights struggle in the US. This radical black nationalist magazine lasted from 1961 to 1971, and the years between 1963 and 1967 were a period of significant growth for the publication. It can be said that these were Liberator's peak years. Dan Watts's generous editorial policy allowed the journal to attract a new cadre of staff writers such as Askia Touré and Larry Neal to bolster the magazine's circulation of black radical perspectives, which supplemented the writings of Harold Cruse, Carlos Russell, Selma Sparks and others.

This essay argues 1) that the Liberator served as a critical space of translocal political activity, and 2) that its language/political rhetoric functioned dialogically, that is: the way Liberator communicated was as important as the ideological positions it expressed. Its translocality was demonstrated through formal and informal distribution networks connecting local struggles in New York to those in Birmingham, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Accra, Ghana, expanding the circles of activism it grew out of and establishing new connections of its own. In this way, Liberator's translocalism facilitated its transnationalism. In addition to the numerous articles of political, social and aesthetic commentary by activists and artists published during its ten-year life, Liberator also frequently opened its pages to readers and subscribers from around the country, expanding political debate beyond core activists and writers on its editorial staff. In this way, the magazine's format and its welcoming publishing policy gave voice to and participated in the building of community networks of criticism and activism. The magazine allowed a consistent level of fluid, on-going communication. Readers were introduced to newsworthy events as well as cutting edge political and cultural analysis. Liberator was one of several important publications alongside Freedomways, Correspondence, and Negro Digest/Black World disseminating radical black thought in a political context dominated by American liberalism.

Drawing on published and unpublished sources and interviews this essay offers the Liberator magazine as a critical example in the shaping of a radical print culture in the 1960s. Rather than focus explicitly on the magazine's contents, I am concerned here with how the periodical served and reflected the interests of a translocal political community in multiple political and social contexts. Indeed, how the Liberator communicated was as important as what they communicated. In this sense, I think of the physical space of the urban communities in which this publication was circulated as interwoven with its strategic use of language, which shaped Liberator's radicalism in important ways.
How should we think about the literary activism of the *Liberator* magazine and its peer publications? Though they serve an immediate archival function, we might also think about these journals as sites of translocality. As chroniclers of translocal radical politics of the Left, they force a rethinking of the mobility of ideas. Through these outlets we are able to discern the way activists, grassroots intellectuals, and the general public perceived linkages between local movements spread out across the country and often across the globe. *Liberator* gives us a sense of the local character of black urban radicalism, and the assorted-but-linked sites of justice seeking activity, forming what we might think of as an archipelago of struggle.

*Liberator* contributed to a community-based discourse of liberation. As a monthly publication it represented a radical diasporic media outlet built to counter mainstream media practices that marginalized black radical thought. And as a local product of New York City the magazine formed an indigenous institution whose charge was to facilitate networks of solidarity, connecting multiple localities of struggle. *Liberator*'s dissemination of radical thinking was also an effort to redefine black diasporic political culture. Though most activists of the black left sought to link struggles across the US based African diaspora, activists in respective localities were challenged to respond to local conditions as well as national policies affecting black life.

**Defining Translocality**

The notion of translocality finds its most common application in geographical, architectural, religious, post-colonial, and globalization studies where the term is often coupled with transnationalism and local-to-global relationships. Increasingly, social movement scholars who analyze how movement networks function have also been helpful in identifying translocal practices. Translocality is also tied to overlapping networks of individual activists, community members, and organizations. Essentially, the term is one that connotes mobility. In this sense, I am concerned with the mobility of radical ideals and practices, and the shaping of community that results. The *Liberator* facilitates at least three different usages of this term. The first is a spatial definition. The dissemination of the magazine throughout and beyond the activist landscape of the US allowed it to be read by a number of organizers connected to social justice efforts. The second is an ideological definition. *Liberator* was committed to spreading a particular form of black radical thought that embraced a radical black nationalist tendency at its core. It associated itself with the tide of socialism sweeping throughout the anticolonial movements beyond the borders of the US, and it situated US based radicalism within a broader anticapitalist, anti-imperialist frame. The third definition of translocality is concerned with strategy. Building sustainable linkages across locales was critical to advancing movement goals and the gap *Liberator* sought to fill.

I am foremost interested in how networks are extended; how groups form coalitions even when they have different ideological points of view; how activists have supported the efforts of different groups while not joining one in particular; or how activists belonged to several different local communities in the same period. In other words, translocal, as I employ the term here, is concerned with how local communities of struggle consciously linked themselves to one another in the black liberation period of the 1960s.

Connected to community struggles locally and nationally, *Liberator* offered a counter-public—an alternative space for critique, imagination, reflection and debate, in dialogue with and in dialogue beyond mainstream information sources. In this way, community voices and grassroots perspectives were rendered a core aspect of liberatory discourses instead of pushed to the periphery. They formed a community-based discourse of liberation through radical diasporic media practices.

**Liberator's Translocal Language**

Utilizing a language that appealed to a diverse, politically engaged community was significant to *Liberator*'s translocal expression. Here we might take a cue from the 20th
century Russian theorist Mikhail M. Bakhtin, who in the early 20th century wrote: "We are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a maximum of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life." In other words, for Liberator, a particular vocabulary, nomenclature, and shared meaning was critical to political struggle. The communication between activists and artists and their communities represented "the exclusive mode for apprehending and interpreting the world and all of its objects." In the minds of Liberator activists and artists, a parallel sentiment could be found in Larry Neal's assertion that "the writer's role is to articulate, not only his (or her) perceptions, but those of [the] people." Liberator's ability to convey the meaning of radical alternative politics afforded the magazine a unique position within the black liberation movement.

Considering the magazine's penchant for direct and open communication with activists, theorists, artists, and the general public, the Liberator can also be said to have a dialogic function. Activists did not speak exclusively to other activists, but used the language of the community to communicate its messages of criticism and its vision of social justice. The language used and the meanings derived from the language were produced in and through the context of political organizing. Its pages were full of criticism, argument and debate. Liberator's editorial page was its bully pulpit, where its editors leveled criticism at the US government, local New York City politicians, or the Civil Rights establishment. Importantly, they also provided the framework through which its political journalism should be read. "Liberator is dedicated to uncompromising participation in the liberation struggle both in America and in Africa," began the editorial from the first issue of 1963, continuing: "thus serving as a bridge for unity between the two movements which must eventually become one."

To achieve this goal Liberator summoned a range of voices, all of them committed to some form of black liberation, and all of them working on behalf of African descendants in the US, though often from different ideological orientations. This first issue of what would be the start of its peak years included pieces by James Baldwin, Selma V. Sparks, Len Holt, Carlos E. Russell, Dan Watts, Pete Beveridge, and Rose Finkenstaedt. Later, Liberator staff would include Askia Touré, Larry Neal, C.E. Wilson, Clayton Riley and Charlie Russell, among others. Touré, who published seminal pieces in Liberator beginning in 1963, considered Liberator a "great intellectual training ground," and an independent "university" of sorts, where lectures and classes were offered by pioneering activist-editors, including John Henrik Clarke, John Oliver Killens and Dan Watts, who mentored, guided, and published the writings of a host of young writers.

**Chronicling Local Struggles**

For the most part, these writers formed the loosely knit staff that carried forward the Liberator vision of being the dissident, critical voice of black politics emanating from New York City in this period. Liberator, which considered itself a critical organ of the protest movement, sought not only to represent the voice and perception of black people, but sought to provide an assertively radical voice connected to local movements for liberation throughout the nation. As urban black people experienced rapid ghettoization, disenfranchisement, increasing poverty, and police brutality in cities across the country, it was expected that comparisons to similar conditions occurring elsewhere would be made. As an example, in September 1964, when Liberator activist-journalists Len Holt and Bill Mahoney shouted "Harlem—New York, Harlem—Philadelphia! Harlem—Detroit!" in reference to police brutality nationwide, readers understood the sense of shared, collective experience and struggle, not in an effort to collapse the distinctions between north and south, east and west, but to emphasize a problem that was clearly national and global in scope. Readers knew exactly what was being evoked even if they did not share in the taxonomy of radical vocabularies or join radical organizations at the time. At once readers were able to perceive themselves as part of a larger movement, albeit rendered on local terrain.
Like many African American migrants, Holt was born in the South but was raised in the Midwest. His family moved to Chicago while he was a child. As he approached adulthood, he enlisted in the US Navy, serving two years following World War II. He went on to attend college in California, which was followed by law school at Howard University, from which he graduated in 1956. Shortly after establishing his law career he joined CORE and became a field secretary, though his firm initially assigned him to provide legal support to those engaged in lunch counter sit-ins, which started in 1960. According to Pete Beveridge, Holt was Liberator's main connection to the movement in the South.10 Holt began publishing articles in Liberator as early as 1962, contributing over a dozen articles and commentaries from 1962-1965, most of which were focused on Southern struggles.

The Liberator staff worked to balance its coverage of local struggles with the struggles being waged nationally. In turn, the magazine displayed national events in the contexts of sweeping changes occurring internationally. Each issue consisted of at least three main components: coverage of the local initiatives and events happening locally, events of note occurring nationally, and politically significant international event. Part of this emphasis was ideological, but it was also partly the result of the backgrounds of many of its staff writers in addition to their ideological viewpoints. However, radical black nationalists, or Africa-conscious cultural nationalists were not the only organizing forces available to black people in NYG. Mainstream civil rights groups such as CORE, NAACP and the Urban League also had considerable followings throughout New York. Because of their position as "respectable" and recognized organizations, they could draw hundreds to a given demonstration. Liberator documented such activity, but consistently stressed that militant protest was a strategy rather than an end in itself, and routinely criticized the acceptability of these organizations. Since the government was more willing to talk with the leaders of these organizations, Liberator's logic suggested that they must have been working against the interests and political desires of black people. In this way its staff maintained a consistent oppositional stance toward mainstream politics.

As a periodical functioning within a black liberation movement context, Liberator frequently supported the notion of a united front. Operating on a local level, the magazine promoted strategic alliances that often stretched beyond its own ideological positioning. Though it pushed for a radical black nationalist politics, Liberator supported such efforts as the Unity Council of Harlem, a temporary coalition of activists and organizations that included Negro American Labor Council members, Christians, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) members, African nationalists, parent-teacher organizers, and tenant association members who came together after Harlem residents exploded in the wake of the shooting death of 15-year-old James Powell at the hands of off-duty NYPD officer Thomas Gilligan in July, 1964. The strategic alliance shaped by these organizations and advocated by Liberator writers demonstrated a widespread demand for police accountability. After all, promotion of alliances was nothing new for Liberator, since it grew out of a key alliance of activists and artists protesting in the wake of Patrice Lumumba's assassination three years prior.

In critical ways, the Liberator's translocal activity directly contributed to its transnational politics. Indeed, it has been said that New York City was itself a global city. For black people, Harlem was the epicenter of the black world.11 The vast number of African Americans, West Indians, and continental Africans living there at the turn of the twentieth century ensured a reading of this section of New York City through an international lens. As for Liberator, its transnational ties ran deep. Its editor, Dan Watts, and several of its key staff writers and advisors, including Carlos E. Russell, Richard B. Moore, and C.E. Wilson, were of Caribbean ancestry. As Africa-conscious Caribbean radicals living and working in the US, these individuals enlisted themselves in a struggle for

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liberation of black people around the world. As such, the magazine’s radical black internationalism was evident from its inception.

Aside from personal relationships, political ties to the African world influenced the Liberator’s transnationalism. Many in the African American expatriate community that had relocated to Ghana upon its independence in 1957, had emerged from the same Five Borough background as had Liberator staff writers. Though none of the magazine’s writers participated in that particular exodus, many of them were close associates of those that did, and had worked together on an array of local cultural, educational, and political initiatives including the famed Harlem Writer’s Guild, a critical site of literary tutelage headed by John Oliver Killens. Informal spaces such as celebratory events and commemorative gatherings were also crucial sources of connection. These spaces were central to the efforts of Liberator editor Dan Watts, for example, who made as many political connections at soirees for African diplomats as he did in organizational meetings, rallies, and conferences.

Liberator contributed to and benefited from the vast Harlem black nationalist landscape. Richard B. Moore’s Frederick Douglass bookstore and Louis Micheaux’s National Memorial Bookstore on 125th Street and Lenox Avenue were instrumental in shaping the radical print culture of which Liberator was a part. Through these connections Liberator solidified its ties to an array of activists, street speakers, organizers, educators, enthusiasts, and artists. Micheaux’s shop was also known as the House of Commonsense and Proper Propaganda. And he considered his store the Harlem headquarters of the Back-to-Africa movement. For Moore’s part, his involvement with the periodical was more direct as he contributed several essays, letters to the editor, and other commentary to Liberator, and also served on its advisory board for a time. Both men were bibliophiles and archivists in the vein of Arturo Schomburg with long ties to political and cultural movements in the African diaspora.

Liberator proved to be a meeting ground for a wide range of activists, writers, and artists. Yet, it also expressed its support for those elected officials it deemed worthy of attention. One official who obtained such support was Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Harlem was drawn to Powell’s bombastic style of public leadership. Such appreciation could also be observed in Liberator’s coverage of the charismatic politician. On at least one occasion Liberator writers expressed pleasure at Powell’s willingness to share a Harlem rally platform with Attorney Percy Sutton, Dick Gregory, and Malcolm X, in the spring of 1963. In its description of the event, Liberator was quick to distinguish him from other widely recognized political figures and celebrities: “When Roy Wilkins gets into trouble he takes off his hat and goes to Walter Reuther; when Jackie Robinson gets into trouble, he takes off his hat and goes to Gov. Rockefeller; when Rev. King gets into trouble, he puts on his hat and goes to Harlem Square, where the source of his power lies.” The embattled Powell wielded much social capital as an elected official, but was ultimately unable to sustain it.

The support shown to Powell in the pages of Liberator extended to less formal ad-hoc groups such as the Harlem Anti-Colonial Committee. This group initiated a series of protest demonstrations throughout New York City beginning in the fall of 1962 and was led by Selma Sparks, Bill Jones, William Worthy, Pernella Wattley, and Sylvester Leaks. Each of these figures brought their own movement experiences with them, which drew from time with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, the Harlem Writer’s Guild, or in local front organizations of the Communist Party. Their demonstration at Harlem Square in June 1963 drew close to five hundred supporters who marched to the United Nations to protest the disenfranchisement of black people throughout the country. As its name suggested, the Harlem Anti-Colonial Committee placed the plight of African descendants in the US in a colonial context. For her part, Selma Sparks asserted “the impossibility of America posing as the friend of emerging African countries while continuing the colonization of black Ameri-
cans. The Harlem Anti-Colonial Committee is yet another example of the translocal activism of the period highlighted by *Liberator*. Formed to address the plight of black people in the US, it was foremost an anti-war coalition which came together in protest of the US blockade of Cuba.

*Liberator*’s role as chronicler was again on display in its January 1964 issue where it provided a recap of the previous year. Taking a partial cue from William Patterson’s “We Charge Genocide” campaign in the 1950s, the magazine provided a month-to-month review of significant events from the previous year. According to its tally there were over forty tragic events mostly befalling black people in the US, making 1963 the “Year of Violence.” Instead of isolated events, these episodes seemed to be a constant stream of violence that included: a police attack on a Muslim Mosque in Rochester; a DC-based reverend beaten by police while protesting in Connecticut; a white mob attack on the brother of an Arkansas NAACP leader; an 18-year-old sentenced to the electric chair in Lynchburg, Virginia after being accused of raping a 50-year-old white woman; a fatal beating of a 51-year-old mother of ten children by a young white male Maryland socialite; and the shooting of one of Chicago’s six black Aldermen.

There were also direct attacks on individuals involved in the freedom struggle. Examples include the beating of Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) members Max Stanford and Stanley Daniels, at a Philadelphia demonstration; the assassination of NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi; and the home bombing of attorney Arthur B. Shores in Birmingham, Alabama. Shores angered the white establishment to the point that his house was bombed twice, on August 20th, and again on September 4th of that year. Though nearly all of these entries documented white attacks on black individuals and families, the *Liberator* tally also included the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. It even contextualized the assault on black life as the “racist reign of terror background of Kennedy’s death.”

Although it was consistently critical, *Liberator*’s radicalism included aspects of mainstream political organizing and, as with the magazine’s support for Adam Clayton Powell, staff writers expressed hope in candidates and organizations that valued political assertiveness, autonomy, and independence. Such was the case with the magazine’s endorsement of the Freedom Now Party (FNP) and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). In February 1964, *Liberator* published a draft of the national platform of the FNP, which sought to offer “a totally new premise” on which to form a widespread black political movement. The FNP platform emphasized that its new approach “is not and cannot be either a purely separatist party or a purely integrationist party. The Freedom Now Party must be a new political synthesis of economic, cultural and ethnic ideas from a Negro point of view.” This effort to blend core aspects of black political struggle was akin to the calls for a united front that would draw from the black community’s ideological diversity while working toward achieving fundamental changes in American society. Although a campaign was afoot to establish party offices nationwide, the FNP experienced its most success in the Midwest, specifically in Detroit where and James and Grace Lee Boggs, Reverend Albert Cleage, and others were able to garner strong grassroots support.

While FNP pushed for greater autonomy, the MFDP demanded political representation for black people through inclusion in the Democratic Party apparatus. For some *Liberator* commentators, the rebuff at the 1964 Democratic National Convention was a lesson in American-style democracy, which proclaimed inclusiveness and morality, but was ultimately bereft of both. Still, the stance taken by the MFDP, led by Fannie Lou Hamer, was worthy of respect. *Liberator*’s coverage of black politics was consistent throughout the remainder of the decade. It closely monitored any political effort that opposed the mainstream. It expressed a firm distrust in the American government’s willingness to make fundamental changes to improve black life, and supported black people’s rights to fight disenfranchisement and oppression at every turn.
Letters to the Editor

One of the important if often ignored areas of exploration when gauging the impact of a publication of any kind is its Letters to the Editor section. Aside from accepting and publishing writing from its community of readers, the Letters to the Editor provides a reflexive understanding of the magazine’s impact. Although Liberator relied on informal distribution networks, which limited its full potential, its impact inside and outside of movement circles was significant. Throughout each year of the publication’s history it picked up additional readers. This was especially so during its 1963-1967 period. Each month Liberator readers submitted their own perspectives, points of disagreement, and expressions of appreciation. Letters came in most frequently from the Tri-State region, but increasingly letters poured in from other parts of the country. Readers’ addresses included cities as far and wide as: Cleveland; Des Moines; Philadelphia; Los Angeles; Chicago; Boston; Oakland; San Francisco; Severna Park, Maryland; Lemont, Illinois; Dedham, Massachusetts; Silver Spring, Maryland; Indianapolis; Detroit; Memphis; and Lake Charles, Louisiana. A husband and wife in Gary, Indiana wrote: “We urge your continued forthright conscience pricking, hard hitting, news articles and editorials.” And a man in East Orange, New Jersey who identified himself as a Moorish-American wrote: “What I like about your articles, the little that I have seen, is the opinions of all groups with no special feelings for just one. Again I thank you for the fine reading material unmatched by any other magazine of its kind.”

The perceptiveness of this reader’s comments point to the broad-based, multifaceted radicalism displayed in the magazine, highlighting the diverse positions of its staff writers. Some believed in coalition politics, whereas others called for nothing short of social revolution. Some believed that African American children should be educated solely in African centered schools, while others pushed for a more efficient delivery of educational services through existing public schools. However, amidst the diversity there was coherence around four key points: the refusal to blindly accept mainstream leadership, black or white; a steadfast denunciation of colonialism, neocolonialism and US militarism; a fierce opposition to American liberalism; and a consistent advocacy of the formation of autonomous black political organizations. The publication was also an unequivocal advocate of liberation struggles waged by people of color throughout the world. Finally, it promoted African consciousness and black cultural awareness without laying claim to Cultural Nationalism. It sought ties with newly independent African nations, promoted African political consciousness in the US, and supported struggles in the South, but stood against an adherence to nonviolence as a philosophical position. Though its readership was targeted to a Northern audience primarily, Liberator editors and writers utilized a vast network of activists, organizations, bookstores, writers’ symposia, and street demonstrations to present as wide a translocal political scope as possible.

Conclusion

This essay has been concerned with Liberator’s functioning as an organ of black political and cultural thought within a vast and overlapping radical network. As a political movement outlet, Liberator functioned as a journalistic multi-spatial mapping of oppositional praxis. More importantly, it represented what can be called the translocality of radical praxis in an effort to “rearticulate community power relations.” In this way, the magazine’s staff writers represented multi-vocal critiques of US political power exerted in myriad forms throughout urban community spaces in and beyond the US. Its pages sought to display, reproduce, and reflect multiple sites of struggle, forming a loose-knit national community of dissident voices eschewing the global white supremacist, US imperialist status quo.
Endnotes


7. According to Britannica online, dialogic is understood as the mutual effect of language and culture; meaning emergent from and reinforced by and through the culture producing it: “language evolves dynamically and is affected by and affects the culture that produces and uses it.”


10. Correspondence with the author, July 12, 2010.


12. See Keith Gilyard, John Oliver Killens: A Life of Black Literary Activism (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).


17. Ibid.


