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**“Ours Too Was a Struggle for a Better World”: Activist Intellectuals and the
Radical Promise of the Black Power Movement, 1962-1972**

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Radical Promise of the Black Power Movement, 1962-1972**

by

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Dissertation

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For my parents, Cheryl June Ward and Michael Harold Ward,
who each in their own special way,
taught me the value and joy of learning

and

To the memory of my Grandmothers,
June Ellen Springs Ward, Mary Howe Granberry, and June Fisher White,
who did so much—more, in fact, than I will ever know—to make sure that I received
a good education, in school as well as in life.

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There is a pleasant irony in writing this acknowledgement page: though it is a formality which seemingly bears no relation to the researching and writing of the dissertation, I find it to be, in a profound sense, the most rewarding part of this project. This is the case, in part, because this page is one of the final tasks which mark the completion of the dissertation writing process. Most importantly, however, writing the acknowledgements is especially satisfying and rewarding because it is an opportunity to extend thanks and to express my deep gratitude to people who are dear to me. Furthermore, it is an opportunity to acknowledge debts that were incurred well before the first page was written, as well as those acquired along the way.

Accordingly, I have chosen to break with the convention of “saving the best for last.” While it is customary to reserve the author’s most heartfelt words for the end, thanking the people most dear to her or him at the conclusion of the acknowledgement, I trust that the reader will forgive me as I reverse the order.

I offer the sincerest thanks to than my grandmothers and my parents, to whom this work is dedicated, for their unwavering love, support, and guidance. Though they are not hear to see the end result, the love and labor of my grandmothers has, in a very real sense, made this work possible. Long before I knew what a dissertation was, they laid the foundation for this endeavor by instilling in me a sense of justice and a respect for knowledge. My parents, too, are responsible for sparking in me a

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I would like to also acknowledge a few people who I met towards the very end of my graduate school journey. During the last trying months of writing the dissertation, Cedric Johnson and Fanon Wilkins offered encouragement and advice at opportune moments. Fanon's generous sharing of his research material proved to be invaluable to this project, and his timely words of encouragement helped me more than he will know. In sharing his dissertation and his experiences with me, Cedric too helped me to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Sekai K. Mutunhu, in her own way, lifted my spirits and provided inspiration and encouragement at just the right time. I am grateful to have met her when I did.

I will end with a return to convention: I again offer my deepest gratitude to my family, and in particular to my parents. They have been my beacon and my

salvation, my strongest supporters and my greatest inspiration, my alpha and my omega. All that I am and might aspire to be is because of them. They gave me the strength to spread my wings, and if I should ever learn to fly, it will because they are the wind beneath my wings.

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Chapter 1

TOWARDS A RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE BLACK POWER

MOVEMENT: AN INTRODUCTION IN THREE PARTS

Because we all must struggle we all must try
Because somewhere in the future we ALL...must die!
But to leave a legacy that will long unfurl,
That ours too was struggle for a BETTER...World!

--Umar Bin Hassan

This is a study of ideas and the people who developed them within the context of the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The study focuses on activist intellectuals in three distinct organizational and political settings and presents an account and analysis of their writings, organizational forms, and other efforts to advance radical visions of political struggle and social change during this period. They operated largely outside of the news headlines but were nonetheless part of a community of activists, theorists, and artists whose efforts coalesced during the Black Power era. Within their different contexts, the individuals and organizations under review all fashioned bodies of oppositional thought and developed unique modes of political practice. Thus, this is both an intellectual history of key radical thinkers of

the Black Power movement and an institutional history of the organizations through which they worked. The central objective of the study is to broaden the lens through which the movement is viewed by highlighting obscured but important expressions of Black Power-era radicalism and thereby helping to provide a fuller appreciation of the nature and depth of Black Power thought.

The title of the dissertation is meant to highlight a central theme of the study. Borrowed from a poem by Umar Bin Hassan,¹ the phrase “Ours too was a struggle for a better world,” is used here to capture an emotive quality of Black Power activism. Like many in this era, the people in this study lived and worked with a profound sense of purpose founded in the belief that revolutionary social change was truly possible. As intellectuals they created oppositional ideas and beliefs; as activists they distributed and acted upon these ideas by forming organizations, raising political consciousness, and engaging in political confrontations. Their efforts were imbued with the combined sense of moral imperative, political responsibility, and social vision which animated the post-war African American freedom struggle. As the title suggests, the dissertation seeks to capture this quality of their activism. This study, then, aims to convey not only the substance but also the spirit of their efforts.

The title is also meant to highlight the historical connection between (and shared political objective of) Black Power thinkers and activists and those of earlier periods. While the actors of different periods and movements did not, of course,

¹ Umar Bin Hassan, “Personal Things,” from the Album, “Be Bop or Be Dead,” (Island Records, Inc., 1993). Hassan was a member of the Black Power-era spoken-word group The Last Poets.

share identical objectives or develop the same ideas, they do stand in an important historical relationship to each other. In the simplest sense, the people in this study were informed by, built upon, and in some cases extended the insights and political forms of earlier generations of activists and previous movements. This study does not directly examine this historical relationship, but it does aim to help clarify and elucidate the varying lines of ideological development in black political thought by showing how the idea that a more just society is possible, an idea that has been evidenced in many times and places before, once again animated black activists and intellectuals during the Black Power movement. In particular, they developed political analyses leading to the conclusions that black liberation could only be affected through the complete reorganization of American society. Thus, the title is meant to signify the broadest aspirations and political motivations of their efforts; it is a declaration announcing their collaborative political project guided by the vision and promise of a more just society.

The following review briefly contextualizes and situates the present study within the scholarship of the Black Power movement and provides the framework for the ensuing analysis.

I. Black Power as an Historical Problem

The Black Power movement stands as a pivotal period of African American political, cultural, and intellectual activity. Deriving not only from its powerful expressions of political dissent, but also from its temporal location, this period presents itself as a particularly insightful and rewarding object of historical study. Spanning the decade 1965-1975, the movement was a constituent part of an era of massive social upheaval and political confrontations that either initiated or intensified several fundamental crises in the American social order. Not only was the movement instrumental in helping to change the way Americans think about race, but for a brief time, the various organizational and ideological expressions of Black Power collectively mounted a challenge to virtually all institutions of American life. Additionally, the Black Power movement was itself part of a larger global experience of postwar liberation movements among people of color, and as such it represents a defining historical moment in the evolving drama of resistance to racial oppression in the postwar era.

Despite its historical significance, however, the Black Power Movement remains a relatively understudied and misunderstood period of recent American history.² In the absence of systematic scholarship on the movement, popular media-

² For a succinct and insightful overview, see Peniel E. Joseph, "Black Liberation Without Apology: Reconceptualizing the Black Power Movement," *The Black Scholar* vol. 31, no. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 2001): 3-20.

generated images--for example, urban “riots” and violence, militant Black “separatists,” and confrontations between police and the Black Panther Party--often represent the period in our collective historical memory. Furthermore, the importance of the movement tends to be shrouded by the much more celebrated Civil Rights Movement. In both scholarly and popular treatments of post-war Black political mobilizations, there is a tendency to present the Civil Rights struggle against segregation and the denial of African American citizenship rights in much more laudable and praiseworthy terms than the Black Power movement. This has set the terms upon which we understand and conceptualize the movement and reflects a general lack of understanding of what it was about. Even sympathetic accounts often reduce Black Power to a resurgent Black consciousness. This in effect reduces the whole to one of its parts, for Black Power not only challenged the nation’s racist apparatus of cultural practices and institutions that denigrated Black identity, but also confronted the production and reproduction of racism throughout American social, economic, and political institutions. This dissertation aims to help write this dimension of the movement into the historical record.

II. The State of Research on the Black Power Movement

Despite some recent scholarly interest in the subject, there remains a need for historical research into the Black Power movement.³ Academic study of the subject began with an explosion of works published almost simultaneously with the emergence of the movement itself in the mid 1960s. This initial scholarly interest, however, has not been matched in subsequent years. In particular, there has been very little historical research into the subject. Thus, the extant body of literature concerning the Black Power Movement is glaringly incomplete, having yet to produce an historiography that substantially outlines the key historical questions, interpretive stances, and methodological issues that confront historians concerned with this era.⁴

As early as 1967, journalists and scholars from a variety of disciplines published studies seeking to explain the seemingly sudden eruption of Black militancy in the second half of the 1960s. Many of the resulting studies accepted the

³ Recent dissertations which deal with some aspect of the Black Power movement include: Fanon Che Wilkins, "In the Belly of the Beast: Black Power, Anti-Imperialism, and African Liberation Solidarity Movement, 1968-1975," (PhD Dissertation, New York University, 2001); Cedric Kwesi Johnson, "Dilemmas of Black Power Politics: The National Black Assembly, Race Leaders and Radicalism in the Post Segregation Era" (PhD Dissertation, University of Maryland, 2001); Peniel E. Joseph, "Waiting till the Midnight Hour: Black Political and Intellectual Radicalism, 1960-1970" (PhD Dissertation, Temple University, 2000); Winston A. Grady-Willis, "A Changing Tide: Black Politics and Activism in Atlanta, Georgia, 1960-1977" (Emory University, 1998); Matthew J. Countryman, "Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia, 1940-1971" (Duke University, 1999); Kimberly Springer, "'Our Politics Was Black Women': Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980," (Emory University, 1999); Benita Roth, "On Their Own and For Their Own: African American, Chicana, and White Feminists Movements in the 1960s and the 1970s (Unpublished Dissertation); and Scot D. Brown, "The US Organization: African American Cultural Nationalism in the Era of Black Power, 1965 to the 1970s" (Cornell University, 1999). Recently published work will be discussed below.

⁴ The scholarship cited above is beginning to do this.

parameters established by mainstream journalistic coverage, which tended towards a sensationalized and narrow picture of Black Power.⁵ Other works sought to place Black Power's militant rhetoric and nationalistic posture in an historical perspective, either by documenting its intellectual background,⁶ or by placing it along a historical continuum of Black political dissent.⁷ The most sympathetic studies generally focused on the era's expressions of racial pride, unity, and cultural affirmation, or dealt with the mechanics of racial oppression to which Black Power was presented as a just and reasonable response.⁸ Emblematic of the latter category is Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Charles Hamilton's Black Power: The Politics of Liberation.

The early 1970s brought increasingly more publications by scholars who were sympathetic to, and at times participants in, Black Power politics. Many of these were edited volumes and collections of writings concerned with advancing what was

⁵ Representative of such work is, Fred Powledge, Black Power, White Resistance: Notes on the New Civil War (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1967).

⁶ See Bradford Chambers (ed.), Chronicles of Negro Protest: A Background Book Documenting the History of Black Power (New York: Parent's Magazine Press, 1968); Robert L. Scott and Wayne Brockriede (eds.), The Rhetoric of Black Power (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); Thomas Wagstaff (ed), Black Power: The Radical Response to White America (Beverly Hills: Glencoe Press, 1969), and Theodore Draper, The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism, (New York: The Viking Press, 1969). Draper's work has been submitted to criticism and challenged by subsequent scholars of Black Nationalism, including historian Wilson Jeremiah Moses. See, for example his, The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), especially pages 5, 32, and 278-279.

⁷ Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership (New York: Quill, 1984 [1967]); Robert L. Allen, Black Awakening in Capitalist America (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990 [1969]).

⁸ See, for example, Janet Harris and Julius Hobson, Black Pride: A People's Struggle (New York: McGraw Hill, 1969); William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, Black Rage (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, Black Power: The Politics of Liberation (New York: Vintage Book, 1992 [1967]); Floyd B. Barbour (ed.), The Black Power Revolt (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1968).

then the very real perception of an impending revolutionary struggle among African Americans. Black nationalism, for instance, was studied by many scholars, both in its contemporary and historical manifestations. They were concerned less with explaining why Black Power emerged than with investigating its potential as a movement for social change. In these works the ideas, leaders, and actions of the movement were justified, if not celebrated.⁹ Complementing these early works in the literature on Black Power are the several autobiographical accounts of participants in the movement.¹⁰

Another source of scholarship on Black Power is the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement. Within the vast Civil Rights literature, some studies have addressed Black Power, but few have offered illuminating assessments of the era or

⁹ Floyd B. Barbour (ed.), The Black Seventies (Boston: Porter Sargent Publisher, 1970) ; John Bracey, Jr. August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick (eds.), Black Nationalism in America (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1970); Ebony Magazine, The Black Revolution: An Ebony Special Issue (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1970); Edward Greer (ed.), Black Liberation Politics: A Reader (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1971); John Bracey, Jr. August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick (eds.), Conflict and Competition: Studies in the Recent Black Protest Movement (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1971). An important anthology of Black Women writings, which signals the emergent Black radical feminism of the Black Power period, is Toni Cade (ed.), The Black Woman: An Anthology (New York: Signet Books, 1970).

¹⁰ Two of the earliest and also most celebrated include: Eldrige Cleaver, Soul On Ice (New York: Dell Publishing, 1968), and George L. Jackson, Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970). Other autobiographical accounts during this period are: James Forman, The Making of Black Revolutionaries (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972); Huey P. Newton, Revolutionary Suicide (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1973); Angela Davis, Angela Davis: An Autobiography (New York: International Publishers, 1974 [1988]), Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973). Two important memoirs that were published after the movement and challenge, to varying degrees, male-dominated representations of the Black Panther Party and the era in genera are: Assata Shakur, Assata Shakur: An Autobiography (London: Zed Books, 1987), and Elaine Brown, A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992). For an analysis of the narratives of Shakur, Brown, and Davis, see Margo V. Perkins, Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000). For a discussion of the autobiographical accounts of the Black Panther Party see Charles E. Jones (ed.), The Black Panther Party Reconsidered (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), ch. 1.

its relationship to the Civil Rights Movement.¹¹ Such studies tend to portray Black Power as an unfortunate and ill-conceived turn for the Civil Rights Movement.¹² In this view, Black Power is reduced to a slogan of black anger, “race riots,” and militant rhetoric, and the late 1960s and early 1970s is characterized as a period of decline in Black political activity. These works simplistically conceive of the two movements as progressing in opposing or contradictory directions. Rather than presenting Civil Rights and Black Power as being locked in an antagonistic relation, this dissertation argues that the two movements, while certainly reflecting divergent political sensibilities, were constituent parts of a larger social struggle in which one movement followed the other in logical and not completely antagonistic ways.

William L. Van Deburg’s New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975 is a path-breaking work that surveys the movement’s various ideological, cultural, and organizational forms.¹³ Van Deburg focuses on the imaginative, intellectual, and folk expressions of the period, arguing

¹¹ Peniel E. Joseph offers a useful corrective to such scholarship, arguing that “Recognition of the fluid and contingent nature of history necessitates a more searing examination of the complex and confusing relationship between the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements (p. 14).” (“Waiting till the Midnight Hour: Reconceptualizing the Heroic Period of the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1965,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, volume 2, number 2 (Spring 2000), p 6-17.

¹² See, for example, Harvard Sitkoff, The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993 [1981]); and Clayborne Carson, “Rethinking African-American Political Thought in the Post-Revolutionary Era,” in Brian Ward and Tony Badger (eds.), The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement (London: Macmillan Press, 1996). Exceptions to this include, Richard H. King, Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Robert Weisbrot, Freedom Bound: A History of America’s Civil Rights Movement (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990). A study that does a particularly good job of analyzing the entire post-war period of Black political struggle is Manning Marable, Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990 (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1991 [1984]).

¹³ William Van Deburg, New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

that Black Power was essentially a cultural concept. With this shift in analytical frame, Van Deburg departs from the treatments of Black Power within Civil Rights scholarship that construct narratives of decline and minimize the movement's impact. Published in 1992, A New Day in Babylon remains the only scholarly monograph devoted specifically to an historical analysis of the movement as a whole.¹⁴ The work's strength lies in its recognition of the many cultural expressions and types of activism that constituted the Black Power Movement. This study, however, has little to say concerning Black Power as a political movement. Van Deburg in fact suggests that Black Power had no enduring political impact, choosing instead to argue that the movement's most important impact was on the psychological well being of Black Americans. While recognizing the cultural and psychological import of the movement, the evidence presented in this dissertation refutes the claim that the Black Power movement had little political importance.

This dissertation is part of an emerging body of scholarship devoted to substantive exploration of the movement's ideas, organizations, and activities.¹⁵ To

¹⁴ Another book about the Black Power Movement, also published in 1992, is John T. McCartney, Black Power Ideologies: An Essay in African-American Political Thought (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992). However, while this study "is an effort to examine systematically the ideologies of Black Power and to place them in their historical context (p. x)," it fails to present an historical explanation of the movement. The work is burdened by factual errors and interpretive flaws and does not offer a strong framework for understanding the movement.

¹⁵ This scholarship includes: Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (ed.), Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002); Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas (eds.), Komozi Woodard, A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) and Black Power Politics (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and their Legacy (New York: Routledge, 2001); Charled E. Jones (ed.), The Black Panther Party Reconsidered (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998); Ruth Reitan, The Rise and Fall of an Alliance: Cuba and African American Leaders in the 1960s (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999);

allow for a synthesis and greater understanding of the movement's social, political, and historical significance, scholars are beginning to investigate specific organizations, ideological constructs, and political activities of the period.¹⁶ The most important work in this direction thus far is Komozi Woodard's, A Nation Within A Nation: Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) and Black Power Politics.¹⁷ The book is both a political biography of Amiri Baraka, one of the most celebrated and influential cultural and political figures of the period, as well as a case study of Black Power activism in Newark, New Jersey during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

A Nation Within A Nation asks important questions that speak to fundamental issues concerning the dynamics and contours of African American political culture in this period. For instance, the book pays close attention to the implications of local

Timothy Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999); and Rod Bush, We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and the Class Struggle in the American Century (New York: New York University Press, 1999). The two volumes on the Black Panther Party, perhaps the most well recognized, though not well understood, organization of the Black Power Movement, are significant contributions to our understanding of the organization and its place in the history of the period. While these texts does not cover all aspects of the organization and its important place in the movement, thier various essays together present a strong basis for future work on the party. For a local study of the Panthers, see Yohuru Williams, Black Politics/White Power: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Black Panthers in New Haven (St. James, New York: Brandywine Press, 2000). Reitan's study addresses an interesting and vitally important area—the relationship between Cuba (and the revolution) and the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements--however it falls well short of its potential. While focusing on key individuals, the study fails to illuminate Cuba's broader historical and political significance to the development of Black American politics in the 1950s, '60, and early '70s. The Glaude, Woodward, Tyson, and Bush texts will be discussed below.

¹⁶ Special mention should be made of two studies from the mid 1970s which tell the history of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, one of the most important thought not well known Black Power organizations: Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, Detroit: I Do Mind Dying (Boston: South End Press, 1998 [1975], revised edition); and James A. Geschwender, Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency (New York: Cambridge University, 1977). Clayborne Carson, In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), details SNCC's radicalization and its place in the emergent Black Power Movement.

¹⁷ Woodard, A Nation Within a Nation.

initiatives for national dynamics, and underscores the relationship between the two. Informed by primary documents, interviews, and the author's personal observation, the study gives a detailed account of the daily activities and organizational dynamics of a series of organizations that eventually became the Newark Congress of African People (CAP). As an exposition of broader, national ideological and programmatic developments, the work explores what Woodard calls the "Modern Black Convention Movement"—the 1966, '67, and '68 Black Power Conferences, the 1970 and '72 CAP Conventions, and the 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana. By heightening our understanding of CAP, one of the most important Black nationalist organizations of the 1970s, and by highlighting the place of these national political meetings in the development of Black Power politics, Woodard's text makes an invaluable contribution to Black Power scholarship.

Two other recent monographs, one by sociologist Rod Bush and the other by historian Timothy Tyson, have investigated Black Power to some degree. Bush's We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century surveys dimensions of racial and class struggle among African Americans in the twentieth century. Tyson reconstructs the political life of Robert Williams, including his dramatic confrontation with white supremacy in North Carolina and his impact on the African American freedom struggle of the 1950s and '60s, in Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power. While neither of these

is a study specifically of the Black Power Movement, each makes some analysis of its historical significance.

Tyson's study deserves a brief comment because it speaks to one of the historical questions that this dissertation addresses: how to conceptualize and understand the relationship between the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The work's central argument concerning Black Power is that the distinction between it and the Civil Rights movement is largely a scholarly endorsed fiction. The argument runs as follows: the central elements of Black Power ideology—anti-colonial internationalism, racial pride, armed self-defense, and economic nationalism—can be found in the political work and thought of Robert Williams and in the traditions of Southern black culture from which his activism arose. Tyson thus argues that the received wisdom, namely that these elements were novel in the late 1960s, is inaccurate. The study makes an important contribution by highlighting an overlooked and profoundly influential figure in the post-war Black freedom struggle. However Tyson's argument concerning the relationship between the Civil Rights and Black Power movements overstates its case. Effectively obscuring the historical import of the Black Power movement, such an argument renders the movement void of unique ideological and political impulses. The present study offers a competing interpretation, seeking to uncover and assess the ideological imperatives of the movement.

The most recently published work on the Black Power movement is a collection of essays edited by Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. titled Is it Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism. This volume combines new essays which provide a sampling of recent scholarship with reprints of essays on various aspects of the period. In the latter category are three classic essays of black political thought: Cornell West's "The Paradox of the African American Rebellion;" Adolph Reed's "Black Particularity Reconsidered;" and E. Frances White's "Africa On My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse, and African American Nationalism." The new essays address diverse topics, some of which are only tangentially related to the Black Power movement. Thus, the volume does not present a thoroughgoing analysis of the movement, but taken together the essays are a useful and important addition to the study and understanding of the period. Two essays in particular make needed contributions to elements of Black Power thought and activity. Farah Jasmine Griffin's essay, "Conflict and Chorus: Reconsidering Toni Cade's *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, provides an insightful analysis of an often overlooked text and its relationship to both Black Power-era and contemporary black feminism. Robin D. G. Kelley similarly sheds light on the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), an obscured Black Power organization in his "Stormy Weather: Reconstructing Black (Inter)Nationalism in the Cold War Era." Glaude's introduction is also noteworthy as it highlights the relationship between the Black

Power movement, its cultural and historical legacies, and contemporary thinking and cultural politics.

The current study aims to help facilitate the illumination of this relationship by apprehending and elucidating the movement's intellectual legacies. In this regard, another recently published monograph should be mentioned. Though it is not specifically concerned with the Black Power movement, Robin D. G. Kelley's Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination narrates some of the strands of political thought of the period (specifically, Black Power-era feminism and an elaboration of RAM and its ideological milieu) and situates them in a broad context of black radical thought.¹⁸

III. Towards an Intellectual History of the Black Power Movement

This study offers a reassessment of the movement through a close analysis of the era's ideological and political dynamics, including obscured expressions of radical political activity. Challenging existing interpretations, this study moves beyond the iconic images of Black Power to present a reconceptualization of Black Power as a multifarious confrontation with and challenge to American institutional life. Specifically, the dissertation reorients and broadens the lens through which we

¹⁸ Robin D. G. Kelley, Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

see the Black Power movement by documenting the ways in which black activist-intellectuals constructed a radical politics of social transformation imbued with creative visions of a new world. Ultimately, the study seeks to foster a fuller appreciation of the varieties and depth of Black Power thought, contributing to an analysis of the movement's wider historical import.

When the slogan "Black Power" emerged from a civil rights march in Mississippi in June of 1966, it did not represent a fully articulated political program, but the outlines of a movement had already been drawn. The slogan gave voice to ascendant political ideals and cultural sensibilities that drew inspiration from a wide variety of sources. This included the theories of revolutionary intellectuals within and beyond the borders of the United States, most notably the nationalism and internationalism of Malcolm X and the revolutionary anticolonialism of Frantz Fanon. So too was Black Power borne of the experiential knowledge of Black life, both in the rural South and urban areas, including lessons learned from previous struggles as well as contemporary battles.

Thus, the ideological constructs of the movement were deeper than simply a rejection of integration or impatience with the moderation of mainstream civil rights organizations, as is often suggested. Rather, the Black Power Movement emerged from a constellation of ideas and experiences that translated into a series of fundamental political commitments. These were manifested, among other ways, in the development of independent black politics, the affirmation of an autonomous

cultural identity, analyses of the relationship between economic exploitation and racial oppression, and a theoretically-infused reassessment of the role of violence in social struggles. In addition, a fundamental aspect of Black Power ideology was the re-consideration and re-ordering of social relationships. Of course the most obvious example is that between black and white Americans. But the movement also saw the theoretical and political contributions of radical black feminism that sought to affect a new consciousness of gender oppression and new conceptions of the social relationships between men and women. Furthermore, the Black Power era was characterized by a decidedly international consciousness often exhibited through declarations of solidarity with Third World anti-colonialism as well as through symbolic expressions of cultural affinity to Africa. In these and other ways, Black Power activists sought to articulate new cultural and political identities that would forge international alliances between Black Americans (as an oppressed national minority) and the many other communities of people locked in battle with global white supremacy.

This dissertation explores the history and meaning of the Black Power Movement through the stories of James and Grace Lee Boggs; Frances Beal and the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA); and Vincent Harding and the Institute of the Black World (IBW). They have been chosen because their stories are at once representative of Black Power activism and singularly unique. They are representative because in their writings and political activity they articulated and

acted upon central ideological and political commitments of the Black Power era. They are unique because each operated in a particular setting, and in examining their stories we have a window into previously obscured expressions of Black Power-era radicalism.

James and Grace Lee Boggs were already seasoned political activists by the time that Black Power emerged. An autodidactic Marxist theoretician as well as long-time worker in a Detroit auto plant, James Boggs developed his political practice in the labor movement, socialist organizations, and the emerging black movement in Detroit in the 1940s and 50s. He served in both direct and indirect ways as a political mentor to numerous young activists of the Black Power period including members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM). Historian Manning Marable suggests that James Boggs made “perhaps the most radical interpretation of Black Power,”¹⁹ concurring with one movement participants’ view that Boggs was “the most important organic intellectual of the sixties.”²⁰ Grace Lee Boggs’ entry into radical politics began with her participation in the March on Washington Movement during World War II and through her membership in the South Side Chicago Branch of the Workers Party. This led to her collaboration with C.L.R. James, Raya Dunayevska, and others in the group of Marxist intellectuals known as the Johnston-Forrest Tendency in the 1940s

¹⁹ Manning Marable, Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990 (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1991 [1984]), p. 97.

²⁰ This statement was made by Muhammed Ahmed (Maxwell Stanford), founding member of RAM, author’s conversation with Ahmed, 4 October 2000.

and 50s. As a Chinese American who earned a PhD in Philosophy from Bryn Mawr College, Grace Lee Boggs may seem an unlikely candidate for Black Power activist, yet she became a central figure in the development of black Detroit politics.

Their political paths crossed in 1952, and Grace Lee and James Boggs were married the following year, beginning a remarkable personal and political partnership. Through their collaborative intellectual and political work, they produced a generative body of ideas concerning the meaning and direction of the Black struggle and the Black Power Movement in particular. This dissertation will document and analyze their efforts, illuminating the temporal and ideological origins of “Black Power” as an organizing slogan and as a theoretical construct. Furthermore, the examination of the Boggs’ activity during the Black Power movement will bring in to focus their creative application (and critique) of Marxism to the conditions and struggles of Black Americans.

Frances Beal’s Black Power activism began with her membership in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Beal spent the first half of the 1960s in Paris, France where she had gone to study French history following her graduation from the University of Wisconsin in 1960. Upon her return to the United States in 1966, Beal began working with SNCC, eventually becoming a member of the organization’s national staff. She also worked with the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) performing many duties including the editing of the organization’s publication, *The Black Woman’s Voice*. In 1969 Beal published a widely influential

essay, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," which articulated some of the analyses and ideas upon which she, Gwen Patton and others formed the Black Women's Liberation Committee (BWLC) of SNCC in December of 1968. Concentrating on the triple oppression of Black women as blacks, workers, and women, this small group was an organizational expression of an emergent radical Black feminist consciousness, both within SNCC and beyond. The BWLC soon expanded its scope to include all Black women (not just those in SNCC). The BWLC was transformed into the Black Women's Alliance (BWA), with a wide range of Black women in its membership, including single mothers, students, and community activists. Reflecting their anti-capitalist and internationalist perspective, and their commitment to Third World solidarity, the women of BWA soon expanded the organization to include all Third World women (Asians, Puerto Ricans, Chicanas, Native Americans, and African Americans), taking the name Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) during the summer of 1970.

This analysis of Frances Beal and the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) offers a reassessment of Black radical feminism of this period. Black radical feminism emerged largely from (and in response to) the Black Power movement, and it should be seen as part of the movement's ideological legacy. This is not meant to ignore or argue away the sexism of the movement; to the contrary, this analysis recognizes black male sexism as a constituent part not only of the Black Power movement, but of African American social relations more generally. This is

not to deny the rich history of Black feminist thought. Indeed, the radical Black feminism of this period drew from this legacy, and this investigation will seek to highlight how Beal and the TWWA, whose work incorporated critiques of capitalism and imperialism in their work, extended feminist insights within the context of Black Power.²¹ Thus, the intellectual work and political activity of Beal and others was not only an intellectual, organizational, cultural, as well as political response to sexism in the movement (and in the black community more generally). It also represented an attempt to identify the conditions necessary to eliminate multiple and interrelated forms of oppression and social injustice.

As a University-trained scholar, Vincent Harding (and his collaborators at the Institute of the Black World) is perhaps the closest to a traditional intellectual of the activist-intellectuals in this study.²² Yet, his political activism presupposed and informed his scholarship. During the late 1950s, while studying for a Ph.D. in History at the University of Chicago, Harding worked with an interracial

²¹ It should be emphasized that Beal and the TWWA were not the first historic example of radical black feminist consciousness, but rather represent a continuation of a tradition of black feminism. The argument pursued here is that the form and content of Black Power-era feminism was unique and novel as an expression of this tradition to the extent that reflected ideas developed within the context of this period. As Beverly Guy-Sheftall writes: “The struggle for black women’s liberation that began to emerge in the mid-1960s is a continuation of both intellectual and activists traditions whose seeds were sown during slavery and flowered during the antislavery fervor of the 1830s.” She cites the emergence of African American feminism with the “feminist-abolitionists” of the antebellum North. Thus, early expressions of radical black feminist consciousness and activity can be found in the writings and activism of Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Frances E. W. Harper. The tradition to which Beal and her comrades were heirs was subsequently developed by, among others, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Anna Julia Cooper, and Claudia Jones. See, Beverly Guy-Sheftall (ed.), Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

²² Grace Lee Boggs earned a PhD in Philosophy but never held a University teaching position. Frances Beal briefly held a position as an Instructor at Richmond College of the City University of New York in 1973.

congregation of the pacifist Mennonite Church on Chicago's predominantly Black south side. He was part of a small group from the congregation who took an "exploratory trip" through the South in 1958 seeking ways to become involved with the civil rights struggle. In 1961 Harding and his wife Rosemarie went to Atlanta as representatives of the Mennonite Central Committee to establish Mennonite House, which served as a center of movement activity and coordination. From this base, the Hardings traveled throughout the South working with movement organizations and community groups as negotiators, mediators, and teachers. The Hardings lived near Martin and Coretta King and the two families became friends. King regularly asked the Hardings to be a part of his organizing efforts, and from 1961 to 1964 the Hardings were involved in desegregation campaigns in Birmingham, Alabama, in Albany and other parts of Georgia, in the Mississippi delta, and elsewhere.

In 1965, after completing his dissertation, Harding assumed the position of Chair of the Department of History and Sociology at Spelman College. Harding arrived at Spelman with a reputation as an activist, and in the mid 1960s he creatively and effectively combined his academic scholarship with his activism. In 1969 this combination took a new form as the founding director of the Institute of the Black World (IBW), an independent research center formed in Atlanta, Georgia in 1969.

This dissertation reconstructs the founding and history of IBW, explicating the political and cultural dynamics of which it was a part. The Institute emerged out of the movement to establish Black Studies programs in the second half of the 1960s,

which was a facet of the larger movement. By challenging the racism embedded in and reproduced through U.S. educational institutions, Black Studies was an embodiment of Black Power politics—community empowerment, confrontation with institutional racism, and the attempted transformation of those institutions. As a means to collective self-definition and reclamation of Black people’s historical identity, Black Studies was an expression of the era’s cultural sensibilities—self-determination, racial consciousness, and celebration of an authentic cultural identity. IBW embodied the fusion of intellectual work and political action that lay behind the call for Black Studies. It represented an attempt to engage these issues outside of the academy and was in effect a site of struggle over the cultural meaning of the Black experience and struggle. The politically engaged scholars of IBW committed themselves to the proposition that their knowledge and skills of analysis could and should be used in the cause of Black liberation. IBW eventually directed its efforts beyond Black Studies, committing itself to articulating strategies to transform not just American education but the entire society.

Through these case studies, the dissertation looks beyond Black Power’s most public expressions and iconic representations, refocusing our vision on the movement’s intellectual foundations, ideological impulses, and formative political ideas. The historical insights drawn from these case studies suggest a revision of our historical understanding of the period, calling for a reconceptualization of the Black Power Movement. This dissertation, then, challenges the interpretations of the

movement as destructive, narrow, or politically futile. It argues instead that the Black Power Movement represented a coherent if variegated examination of the mechanisms of American racial oppression and an attempt to theorize the directions of the future struggle. The movement constituted a multifarious confrontation with and challenge to American institutional life, during which black radicals engaged in a struggle not only to change the place of Black people in American society, but to change the very structure of that society, to re-imagine it, reshape it, and re-map its future. That is, at its best, Black Power represented an independent and newly constituted vision of America. This is the radical promise of the Black Power movement.

Chapter 2

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME: JAMES AND GRACE LEE BOGGS, RADICAL POLITICS, AND THE ROOTS OF THE BLACK POWER MOVEMENT, 1962-1964

Too many people see Black Power and its advocates as some sort of portent, a sudden apparition, as some racist eruption from the depths of black oppression and black backwardness. It is nothing of its kind. It represents the high peak of thought on the Negro question which has been going on for over half a century.¹

--C. L. R. James, 1967

The dramatic introduction of the “Black Power” slogan onto the American political landscape during the mid 1960s signaled a transformation in black political consciousness that had been developing through the first half of the decade. By June of 1966, when the slogan erupted from the Meredith March through Mississippi,² it was fast becoming clear to observers and commentators across the spectrum of political opinion that a new vision of black political struggle was emerging from the struggle for civil rights. Though they disagreed on its merits, all generally recognized

¹ From a speech titled, “Black Power: Its Past, Today and the Way Ahead,” delivered in London in August 1967. The speech is reproduced as “Black Power,” in Anna Grimshaw (ed.), The C. L. R. James Reader (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993) p. 362-374. The passage quoted here is from p. 367.

² For an account of the march, see John Dittmer, Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), chapter 11; and Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 30-32.

that the call for Black Power reflected a rising nationalist sentiment within black political discourse and signaled a break with the politics and ideology of the Civil Rights movement. The slogan did not represent a coherent political program, but the ideas, activists, and organizations which cohered under its banner collectively gave rise to a movement embracing (among other things) black self-determination, racial pride and cultural affirmation, independent political action, the principle of self-defense, and close identification with the peoples and struggles of the Third World.³ C. L. R. James, the radical West Indian political theorist, scholar, and activist, was one of those who saw great political potential in this militant movement. As we see in the epigraph, James challenged those who saw Black Power as little more than violence, separatism, or racial chauvinism. Rather, he heralded the emerging Black Power movement, with its emphasis on political and cultural autonomy and its rejection of American society and its values, as an accretion of ideas and an important innovation in black political thought.⁴

James' appraisal of Black Power cited here was part of a speech that he delivered in London in August of 1967, just one year after the Meredith March and

³ For discussion of the various expressions and interpretations of Black Power, see William L. Van Deburg, New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); Manning Marable, Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), chapter 5; John T. McCartney, Black Power Ideologies: An Essay in African-American Political Thought (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

⁴ There is a voluminous body of literature on James. In addition to the anthology cited above, see, for example: Paul Buhle (ed.), C. L. R. James: His Life and His Work (New York: Allison Busby, 1986); Paul Buhle, C. L. R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary (New York: Verso, 1988); Kent Worcester, C. L. R. James: A Political Biography (Albany: State University of New York, 1996); and Selwyn R. Cudjoe and William E. Cain (eds.), C. L. R. James: His Intellectual Legacies (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

the ascendancy of the Black Power slogan. Addressing the topic, "Black Power: Its Past, Today, and the Way Ahead," James sought to interpret the meaning of this slogan and emerging movement, highlighting for his London audience the historical continuity and ideological depth of the young movement. His speech placed the recent explosion of Black Power insurgency in a broad historical context, arguing that the ideological formulations of Black Power theorists were logical extensions of the historical development of black political thought. Asserting that "the advocates of Black Power stand on the shoulders of all that had gone before," James suggested that the "origin and ancestry" of the Black Power movement can be located in the ideas of previous black political theorists, namely: Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, and Frantz Fanon. Each of these thinkers, James argues, made distinct contributions to black political thought, and together they constitute an intellectual legacy which is the ideological foundation of the Black Power movement.⁵

James' speech provided a useful framework for understanding and interpreting the monumental political developments ushered in by black Americans during this period. By situating thinkers with such diverse orientations as Washington, Du Bois, and Garvey within a single tradition of black oppositional thought, James placed the proponents of Black Power in an organic relationship to previous black thinkers and protest movements. Furthermore, by including in this

⁵ James, "Black Power," p. 365-367.

line of ideological development Padmore and Fanon-- Caribbean intellectuals whose primary political activities were connected to African anti-colonial struggles⁶--James highlighted the international connections and influences inherent in the Black Power movement. Fanon in particular, he noted, had been a central influence on Black Power's identification with Third World struggles. Finally, and most importantly, he insisted that Black Power reflected more than just militant rhetoric, but was in fact the product of thoughtful reflection and analysis. Thus, in the midst of growing controversy (and at times confusion) regarding the meaning Black Power, James called on his British audience to see past the facile and derisive characterizations of Black Power and urged them to recognize the revolutionary potential in this movement across the Atlantic Ocean.

James' assessment of Black Power, however, did not shed much light on the specific character or unique sources of Black Power thought. An experienced political activist and astute observer of black movements, James perceptively reported Black Power's historical roots, diasporic scope, and political import, but he offered less insight into the substance of the ideas being developed and how they advanced black political activity. James focused much of his remarks on the leadership and political personality of Stokely Carmichael, who was at this time widely recognized

⁶ Like James, Padmore was from Trinidad. Through his London based anti-colonial agitation and organizing Padmore was, in James' words, "the originator of the movement to achieve the political independence of the African countries and people of African descent." (p. 367) Fanon was Martiniquan and lived and worked in Algeria, fighting in that country's war of independence from French colonial rule. Garvey, too was from the Caribbean (Jamaica) but is distinct from Padmore and Fanon in that his principal political activities, while concerned with African emancipation, were based in the United States.

as the primary spokesperson of Black Power. Through Carmichael's public pronouncements, James saw revolutionary potential for the Black Power movement. Beyond this, however, James did not engage or assess the ideas which Black Power advocates had developed. Perhaps because he was too far removed from the movement, James seems to have been unable to convey the dynamic development of Black Power thought. Thus, James' recognition and even championing of Black Power as an ideological advancement in black political thought placed him well in advance of most commentators of the Black Power phenomenon; yet, like less charitable analysts, James placed more emphasis on the most visible representations of the Black Power slogan than on the broader range of individuals and ideas that animated the movement.

Ironically, James had previously shared a close political and personal relationship with two such individuals, a relationship that ended in 1962 just in advance of the ideological and political developments that signaled the emergence of Black Power. During the period 1938-1953, when he lived in New York and was a leading figure in radical politics, James' circle of collaborators included James and Grace Lee Boggs. When James was forced to leave the country in 1953, the Boggs maintained their collaborative work with James, who continued in his leadership role of their U.S.-based organization from his new base in London. In 1962, ideological differences led to a break between James and the Boggs. As we will see, their split was directly related to their divergent visions of the black struggle, and in the half

decade immediately following the split, the Boggs developed their vision into a political analysis that anticipated, nurtured, and advanced the ideological development of the Black Power movement.

By the time of the split, the Boggs were well-known Detroit-based activists and soon-to-be theoreticians of the emerging Black Power movement. A review of their intellectual and political trajectories up to that point will explain their break with James, and more importantly, will provide the context for understanding the ideological leadership that they provided during the Black Power movement.

Grace Lee Boggs: Becoming a Marxist Intellectual

Grace Lee Boggs traveled what may appear to be an unlikely path to becoming a theoretician and activist in the Black Power movement.⁷ She was born Grace Chin Lee in 1915 to Chinese immigrant parents in Providence, Rhode Island where she was raised until the age of eight, when her family moved to New York City. At the age of sixteen, Boggs received a scholarship to attend Barnard College, where from 1931-35 she was one of three students of color. Upon graduation, she

⁷ The following biographical information is drawn from the author's interview with Grace Lee Boggs, 17 November, 2001, Detroit, MI (hereafter cited as Boggs interview) and the following sources: Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Grace Lee Boggs, "Coming Full Circle," Unpublished paper presented to the North American Labor History Conference, Wayne State University, October 19, 2001 (in author's possession); L. Todd Duncan and Kathryne V. Lindberg, "The Continuity of Living for Change: An Interview with Grace Lee Boggs," *Social Text* 19.2 (2001), p. 43-73; Grace Lee Boggs, "My Philosophical Journey," (1998) Unpublished paper (in author's possession).

was awarded a Chinese Graduate Scholarship to Bryn Mawr College. Studying for a Ph.D. in Philosophy Boggs was introduced to the works of Kant and Hegel, which opened her mind to the power of ideas and led her to an examination of the concept of freedom and the struggle for meaning in human experience. From this foundation, she moved to the American pragmatists John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, in whose work she found “a body of ideas that challenged and empowered me to move from a life of contemplation to a life of action.”⁸ Completing her dissertation on “George Herbert Mead: The Philosopher of the Social Individual,” Boggs received the Ph.D. in June of 1940.⁹

Through her studies and life experiences Boggs began to develop a conception of the role that knowledge might play in the process of social change, but it remained for Boggs to find her own place as a politically engaged intellectual. “Having been born female and Chinese American,” she explains, “I knew from early on that changes were needed in our society, but not until I left the university...did it occur to me that I might be involved in making those changes.”¹⁰ The end of Boggs’ formal education coincided with the social and political upheavals being unleashed by the Second World War, and in this environment she gained an experience-based political education which would inform her political activism and philosophical orientation in the subsequent decades. In the fall of 1940 Boggs moved to Chicago where she took

⁸ Boggs, Living for Change, p. 33.

⁹ Ibid. The dissertation was published as, Grace Chin Lee, George Herbert Mead: The Philosopher of the Social Individual (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1945).

¹⁰ Boggs, “Coming Full Circle,” p. 2

a job in the Philosophy Library at the University of Chicago and sought an avenue for political activity.¹¹ Her encounter with two political movements in this period played a central part in Boggs' radicalization and opened up avenues for her political activism: the emerging struggle of black Americans, and the international socialist movement.

Soon after arriving in Chicago, Boggs became involved with the South Side Tenants Organization, a tenants' advocacy group which had been organized by a small Trotskyist organization, the Workers Party. This experience was "an eye-opener" for Boggs at an important point in her political development. "For the first time I was talking with people in the black community, getting a sense of what segregation and discrimination meant in people's lives, learning how to organize protest demonstrations and meetings. Up to that point I had had practically no contact with black people."¹² In addition to this experience with local community organizing, Boggs observed the massive organizing effort for the March on Washington movement in 1941. Boggs witnessing the overwhelming response to black labor leader A. Philip Randolph's call for thousands of blacks to march on Washington to demand access to defense industry jobs, and she took note of the pressure that this mass activity placed on President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his war effort. Planned for 1 July 1941, the march was called off just a week in advance of

¹¹ In her autobiography, Boggs explains that a university faculty position was not an option: "It would have been a waste of time for me, a Chinese woman with a Ph.D. in philosophy to apply to a university for a teaching job. In any case, I hadn't studied philosophy in order to teach it...What I wanted to do was become active." (p. 34)

¹² Boggs, Living for Change, p. 36.

that date when Roosevelt issued executive order 8802, banning racial discrimination in the defense industry and establishing the Fair Employment Practices Committee.¹³

A powerful illustration of the force of national black political action, the March on Washington movement had a profound impact on Boggs' understanding of political struggle. "From the March on Washington movement I learned that a movement begins when large numbers of people, having reached the point where they feel they can't take the way things are any longer, find hope for improving their daily lives in an action that they can take together." Furthermore, the March on Washington movement had a direct influence on the path of her political engagement. "I also discovered the power that the black community has within itself to change this country when it begins to move. As a result, I decided that what I wanted to do with the rest of my life was to become a movement activist in the black community."¹⁴ Towards this end, Boggs became a member of the Workers Party, and in so doing made her entry into the organizational and ideological milieu of radical politics.

She made the decision to join primarily because it was through the party's South Side Tenants Organization that she first came into contact with Chicago's black community. In addition, Boggs felt that membership in the Workers Party would provide her with the political education that she needed to develop as a radical activist. However, she had little in common with her comrades in the Chicago branch, and she found herself relatively uninspired by their discussions about current

¹³ Philip S. Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1981 (New York: International Publishers, 1974), p. 239-241.

¹⁴ Boggs, Living for Change, p. 39.

events and internal political debates. Rather, Boggs was drawn to the ideas and individuals in a small collective in the Workers Party called Johnson-Forest Tendency, which was led by C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, a Russian born, self-taught Marxist intellectual who had been a secretary to Leon Trotsky.¹⁵

The Johnson-Forest Tendency had formed earlier that year when James put forward the theory of state capitalism to describe the Soviet Union, thereby breaking with traditional Trotskyism and the majority of the Workers Party on the issue of the nature of the Soviet Union.¹⁶ The so-called “Russian Question” was a fundamental issue within the international socialist movement, and the theory of state capitalism—that the Soviet Union was neither a workers’ state nor a form of “bureaucratic collectivism,” but a form of capitalism where the state operated within the laws of capitalist accumulation—marked a departure from party orthodoxy.¹⁷ Not particularly interested in the debates concerning the Soviet Union, Boggs found the state capitalist idea compelling more for its method than its claim to ideological purity. “I was attracted to the state capitalist position because its proponents, tracing Marx’s views back to their roots in Hegelianism, viewed socialist revolution as the

¹⁵ The group was named for the pseudonyms which James and Dunayevskaya took: J. R. Johnson and F. Forrest, respectively.

¹⁶ Martin Glaberman (ed.), Marxism for Our Times: C. L. R. James on Revolutionary Organization (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), p. xii.

¹⁷ See C. L. R. James (written in collaboration with Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee), State Capitalism and World Revolution (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1986).

release of the ‘natural and acquired powers’ of workers rather than in terms of property relations.”¹⁸

Boggs was introduced to the Johnson-Forest Tendency in 1941 when she met James in Chicago. He had been a prominent figure in American Trotskyism since his arrival in 1938, and was coming to meet with members of the Chicago branch on his way back from organizing sharecroppers in southeast Missouri. Recalling their first meeting, Boggs explains that she and James had an immediate connection because of their mutual intellectual interests.

When together with another comrade I met him at the train station, he was carrying two thick books, volume 1 of Marx’s *Capital* and Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, both heavily underlined. When he learned that I had studied Hegel and knew German, we withdrew to my basement room where we spent hours sitting on my old red couch comparing passages in Marx and Hegel, checking English against the original German. It was the beginning of a theoretical and practical collaboration that lasted twenty years.¹⁹

The following year, Boggs moved back to New York to work with James as a member of the Johnson-Forest Tendency.²⁰

Over the next decade, Boggs found that radical politics in New York, and especially working with the Johnsonites, as members of the Tendency were called, “opened me up to a whole new world of people, ideas, and activity.”²¹ In particular, Boggs’ experiences reinforced and deepened her understanding of and commitment to

¹⁸ Boggs, *Living for Change*, p. 50.

¹⁹ Boggs, *Living for Change*, p. 43.

²⁰ For an account of James and the Johnson-Forest Tendency, see Grace Lee Boggs, “C. L. R. James: Organizing in the U.S.A., 1938-1953,” in Cudjoe and Cain, *C. L. R. James*.

²¹ Boggs, *Living for Change*, p. 52.

the black struggle. In Harlem, she visited the Schomburg Collection (where she excitedly read about Marcus Garvey and the inspiration that he drew from Lenin and the Russian Revolution), participated in regular forums at the Workers Party's Interracial Club on 125th Street, and visited black cultural landmarks such as the Apollo Theatre, the Savoy, and Small's Paradise. She associated with luminaries of black arts and letters such as dancer Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, and moved in circles with others including James Baldwin and Richard Wright. Boggs supported herself with various jobs, including working in a Brooklyn defense plant wiring and soldering electrical parts where, during coffee breaks she helped to conduct black history study groups. On the weekends she socialized with the young black women who were her co-workers in the plant. Also during this period, Boggs studied the writings of Marx and Lenin, initiating what would become her intense and sustained engagement with Marxism.²²

“Discovering Marxism,” Boggs recalled, “was as empowering and liberating as my discovery of Kant and Hegel had been.” Working with James and other Johnsonites, as members of the group were called, proved to be a catalyst to Boggs' intellectual and political development because they developed a Marxism that “was based on celebrating and encouraging the self-activity and self-organization of the masses. It was a very humanistic approach, sharply different from the economic determinism of most Marxist, and I identified with it immediately.” With her

²² Boggs, Living for Change, p. 52-53.

colleagues in the group Boggs “spent hours studying and discussing each of the great revolutions of the past.” Their focus was “not so much on the oppression suffered by people at the bottom of the society but on how they organized themselves and in the process advanced the whole society. The important thing, for us, was to view the oppressed not mainly as victims or objects, but as creative subjects.”²³ Under the pen name Ria Stone, Boggs contributed to the group’s prodigious output of writing in which they developed and articulated these ideas.

After a decade of working within the Workers Party (and for a time the Socialist Workers Party) in New York, the Johnson-Forest Tendency broke ideologically and organizationally with Trotskyism and moved its base to Detroit, Michigan. Taking the name Committees of Correspondence (later shortened to Correspondence), the newly independent organization focused its efforts on developing and articulating its theoretical proposition that African Americans, youth, women, and rank-and-file workers constituted the new revolutionary social forces in

²³ Boggs interview; Boggs, “My Philosophical Journey,” p. 4. In a recently published interview, Boggs twice noted that the specific character and focus with which James and the Tendency approached and used Marxism was of fundamental importance in her intellectual and political development. Asked to assess how the Tendency was a catalyst to her intellectual and political development, Boggs explained: “I was very fortunate that I came to Marxism by way of C. L. R. James and the Johnson-Forest Tendency. I sometimes wonder how differently my life would have been had I been introduced to Marxism by the Communist Party. Actually, that would have been impossible because I was radicalized through involvement in the black struggle in 1941. And at that time the Communist Party, because of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, was collaborating with the U.S. government and downplaying the black struggle. I point this out because I find that few students of Marxism understand that one’s Marxism depends very much on the concrete circumstances at the time you become a Marxist.” (Duncan and Lindberg, “The Continuity of Living for Change,” p. 45) Later in the interview she makes the same point, this time in relation to the significance of Detroit as the site of her political activity. “As I look back on my life, I realize that it was my good fortune to be introduced to Marxism first by C. L. R. James, and then ten years later to be reintroduced to it through living and working with Jimmy and his friends and co-workers in a real black community.” (Duncan and Lindberg, “The Continuity of Living for Change,” p. 53)]

American society. The group decided to start an independent newspaper to project the views and activities of these the social groups and to demonstrate the significance of their position as the new social forces. The paper, named *Correspondence*, was to be written and edited by representatives of these groups. In preparation for publishing the newspaper, the group organized a “Third Layer School” based on Lenin’s articulation of three layers of the Russian Revolutionary struggle.²⁴ It was held in New York during the fall of 1952, with members of the four groups identified as the new social forces serving as the teachers (the third layer), and the group’s leaders and intellectuals (the first and second layers) were the students.²⁵ One of the third layer comrades was James Boggs.

James Boggs as Organic Intellectual

“Jimmy,” as most people called him,²⁶ came to the third layer school with over a decade of experience in the labor movement and local Detroit black politics. Born and raised in the small town of Marion Junction in Dallas County, Alabama, Boggs came to Detroit at the age of eighteen in 1937. Like his uncle and two brothers who were already living there, and like thousands of African Americans migrants

²⁴ The three groups were the Bolshevik leaders, trade union activists, and the rank-and-file.

²⁵ Glaberman, *Marxism for Our Times*, p xviii; Boggs, “Coming Full Circle,” p 2-3; Boggs, *Living for Change*, p. 67.

²⁶ Boggs interview.

form the south in this period, Boggs came to Detroit seeking employment in the auto industry. However, he found that job opportunities were limited, and he set out “hoboing” his on freight train through the western and Midwestern parts of the country. After several months he returned to Detroit where he worked odd jobs until he found employment with the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Then in 1940, with an expansion in war-time jobs, he was hired at Chrysler where he worked for the next 28 years.²⁷

Living in Detroit and working in the Chrysler plant, Boggs was quickly initiated into the dynamics—and intersections—of labor and racial politics.²⁸ Against the background of the war, the March on Washington Movement, and the rise of the industrial unionism in the form of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), he became active in the struggles of black workers to fight discrimination as well as the general struggle of workers against management. He joined the United Automobile Workers (UAW) union as a member of the primarily white Chrysler-Jefferson Local 7. He also worked with the UAW’s Fair Practices Department which was established

²⁷ Transcript of an oral history taken of James Boggs, Detroit Urban League Oral History Project, n.d., p. 1-6, James and Grace Lee Boggs Collection, Box 16, Folder 9, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University (Hereafter cited as James Boggs oral history). Portions of this interview were published in Elaine Latzman Moon (ed.), Untold Tales, Unsung Heroes: An Oral History of Detroit’s African American Community, 1918-1967 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994). On the opening up of industrial jobs to blacks, see Thomas J. Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p 26-27.

²⁸ See, Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Lost and Found: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” in *The Journal of American History*, vol. 75, no. 3 (December 1988), p. 786-811; and August Meier and Elliot Rudwick (eds.), Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

in 1946 to achieve greater racial equality within the union by handling discrimination grievances and serving as a clearinghouse for civil rights education.²⁹

Participation in the labor movement gave Boggs a solid experiential base of political organizing and helped to shape his ideological and political perspectives. He developed his organizing skills through his work in the union, including recruiting and helping other locals to organize, strikes, and pickets.³⁰ During World War II, for example, he participated in sit-down strikes with black members of the Communist Party to protest racial discrimination.³¹ As a part of the left wing of the UAW led by R. J. Thomas and George Addes, Boggs worked and organized with activists from a variety of radical groups. Through these associations and experiences he developed an understanding of the fundamental concepts of Marxism and socialism³² and “learned a deep sense of what I would call at that time class struggle, which meant that I recognized that it wasn’t just a black struggle.”³³ Furthermore, these experiences radicalized Boggs and informed his sense of what makes a movement, the need for fundamental social change, and the responsibility for leadership: “I always knew that the world could only be made better if a lot of other people was involved in it, that I was not going to change the world by myself and therefore it was

²⁹ James Boggs oral history, p. 9-10.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

³¹ Boggs, Living for Change, p. 96.

³² Boggs, “Coming Full Circle,” p. 3.

³³ James Boggs oral history, p. 21.

my responsibility to work with others to try to give some leadership to others for both of us to participate.”³⁴

This sense of collective purpose and action was directly informed by the combination and interconnections of racial and labor struggles in the labor movement. While the focus of black workers generally was on challenging discrimination and mistreatment by employers, they also had to contend with the political battles over race within the union and with white workers on the shop floor. Boggs saw these racial conflicts play themselves out within the plant in terms of the fundamental issue of how people relate to each other. Reflecting on racial dynamics in the plant, he explained:

For the first time, whites were confronted directly with many of the contradictions which they had been evading because of their position of privilege and isolation from blacks. White men and women were forced to confront questions which they had never dreamed of—and which at the time seemed monumental. Would they or would they not sit on the same toilet stool as blacks? Would they or would they not eat in the same restaurant or cafeteria? Would they work side by side with blacks?³⁵

Such circumstances, of course, presented black workers with unique political challenges and opportunities. As Boggs told an interviewer, “black workers began to create a new social milieu and an arena of struggle inside the plant.”³⁶ Indeed, labor activism was not only a matter of economic survival, but was also a critical

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Xavier Nicholas, “Questions of the American Revolution: Conversations with James Boggs,” in *IBW Black-World-View* vol. 1, no. 1 (March 1976), p. 16.

³⁶ Ibid.

component of black Detroit's political development. Citing the confluence in this period of a period of rising working-class consciousness among blacks and the UAW's organizing and recruitment of black workers, historian Richard W. Thomas argues that black trade unionism supplanted Ford paternalism as the "dominant expression of black community building" in Detroit by the end of the war.³⁷ It was in this context, as a black industrial worker in post-war Detroit, that Boggs developed into a radical theoretician and activist.

With the ascendancy of Walter Reuther and a more conservative leadership in 1947, the UAW took a decidedly rightward turn, including the purging of radicals. Recognizing that they could not depend on the union in their struggle against racism, Boggs and other black workers began looking for an alternative to the union that would offer a more revolutionary outlet for their political activism and energies. It was in this period that Boggs heard a speech by C. L. R. James, "The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Question," and was drawn to the Johnson-Forest Tendency.³⁸

Originally delivered to the Socialist Workers Party convention in July 1948, the speech was a statement of James' thinking regarding "the Negro Question," that is, a Marxist analysis of black racial oppression and the relationship of the black

³⁷ Richard W. Thomas, Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 304.

³⁸ Duncan and Lindberg, "The Continuity of Living for Change," p. 52-53; Boggs, Living for Change, p. 77). James' speech has been reprinted in several anthologies. See Scott McLemee (ed.), C.L. R. James on the 'Negro Question' (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996).

struggle to socialist revolution.³⁹ Asserting that the independent black struggle was a viable threat to the U.S. power structure, James directly challenged the theoretical position generally held among socialists that the black struggle must be subordinated to the class struggle because it held little value in and of itself and may actually hinder the development of organized labor. While he affirmed the place of the proletariat in socialist revolution--“The proletariat, as we know, must lead the struggles of all the oppressed and all those who are persecuted by capitalism.”⁴⁰—James sought to revise the Marxist understanding of the relationship between the proletariat and the black movement.

To make his case, James made three points about the nature and significance of the black struggle. First, he said that it had a “vitality and validity of its own,” with “deep historic roots” and its own “organic political perspective.” Secondly, it had the ability to impact the social and political life of the nation (even though it is fighting for democratic rights and is not led by organized labor or the Marxist party). Finally, and most importantly, James said that the black struggle can exert a powerful influence on the proletariat—it can contribute to the development of the proletariat and thus is a constituent part of the struggle for socialism. Thus, he was trying to show that the idea of an independent black struggle was completely consistent with Marxism and especially its visions of the proletariat, the organized labor movement,

³⁹ For a brief explanation of the background and meaning of the phrase “the Negro question” see, McLemee, C. L. R. James on the Negro Question, p. xvi. On the Negro Question in the context of the Workers Party, see Boggs, Living for Change, p. 55-56.

⁴⁰ McLemee, C. L. R. James on the Negro Question, p. 139.

the Marxist party, and socialist revolution. To further illustrate the compatibility between the black struggle and Marxism, he argued that, on the basis of their experiences and relationship to American society (that is, the nature of their struggle), black people “approach the conclusions of Marxism” on the following issues: opposition to imperialist wars; rejection of the notion that the state serves the needs of all people (and not simply vested class interests); and recognition of the need to organize political action to challenge the American two-party system.⁴¹

Boggs heard James deliver the speech in Detroit, where James had been sent to attract black workers such as Boggs to the SWP. Drawn to the orator’s insistence on the independence of the black struggle as well as his broad conception of revolution, Boggs was impressed by the speech and the political perspective that it represented. He did not join the SWP, but he attended several public meetings, and when the Johnsonites split from the SWP in 1951 he became a member of the new organization.⁴²

Radical Politics in Post-War Detroit

In June 1953 Grace Lee moved to Detroit to work on *Correspondence* where she worked closely with Jimmy Boggs, who was on the editorial board of the

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 139-140.

⁴² Boggs, *Living for Change*, p. 77.

newspaper. They soon were married and began their remarkably productive personal and political collaboration. Through the 1950s the Boggs immersed themselves in political work and community organizing in Detroit. Remaining active in the labor movement, Jimmy was a leader of in a rank-and-file caucus of his local working to stop speed-up on the assembly line. At the same time, he was active in local black politics and community organizing, including protests of police brutality.⁴³ Black protest also took the form of boycotts and pickets, both of local establishments and national chains, reflecting the support among northerners for the southern Civil Rights movement. Recalling the type of activity he was involved in during the late 1950s, Boggs explains: “We’d go in different big restaurants [in downtown Detroit] and raise hell because if it was a national chain, down south they didn’t let blacks in so we’d picket them up here.”⁴⁴ In addition, his activism took the form of writing. In her recollection of this period, Grace Lee Boggs provides an informative picture of this dimension of Jimmy’s political work:

I never ceased to envy and marvel at the fluency with which Jimmy wrote and the speed with which his pen would travel from the left side of the page to the right. When he came home from work, he would lie down on his stomach on the living room floor with a yellow pad and start writing. He would wake up in the morning and dash off letters to the editor before breakfast. In the course of a meeting he would start writing and by the end of the meeting be ready with a draft of a leaflet or letter. When he was asked where he acquired these skills, he would

⁴³ Jimmy Boggs oral history, p. 17; Boggs, Living for Change, p.91. Historian Heather Ann Thompson reports that “Between 1950 and 1960, the abominable state of police-community relations is what most encouraged Detroiters to participate in the civil rights movement.” [Heather Thompson, Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 21.]

⁴⁴ Jimmy Boggs oral history, p. 19.

say that it came from writing letters for the mostly illiterate people in the little town where he grew up. Like other blacks who developed into writers, he began as the community scribe. Just as his childhood writing served his community, every speech he made, every article he wrote as an adult came out of his experiences in the ongoing struggle and was produced in order to advance the struggle.⁴⁵

As for Grace Lee Boggs, living and working in Detroit's black community in the 1950s helped her to see "the relationship between ideas and historical reality in a completely different light." In this period she was primarily a political observer rather than organizer, allowing her to "listen and learn from being with Jimmy in the many meetings he held with workers from his plant and people in the community."⁴⁶ While this placed her somewhat in Jimmy's shadow, it gave Grace the foundation to assert herself and her ideas in the next decade when she assumed a prominent role as organizer and eventually theoretician of black revolutionary struggle.⁴⁷

The Boggesses' main political activity in the 1950s was publishing *Correspondence*.⁴⁸ As a rank-and-file auto worker, community activist, and astute political observer, Jimmy Boggs was exactly the type of person for who the newspaper was being created. He wrote a column titled "The Half That Hasn't Been Told" under the pen name Al Whitney. Grace Lee Boggs contributed news stories and editorials covering various political events and concerns, and after Dunayevskaya

⁴⁵ Boggs, *Living for Change*, p.92.

⁴⁶ Boggs, "Coming Full Circle," p. 3.

⁴⁷ She explains in her memoir: "I did follow Jimmy at first, consciously and openly, because he was so rooted in reality and in his community and knew so many things about politics that you can't get out of books. After ten years I began to struggle more with him because I had begun to feel more rooted myself and also because I was concerned that the young people around us would get the wrong idea about how women should relate to men (Boggs, *Living for Change*, p. 79-80).

⁴⁸ Boggs, *Living for Change*, p.99.

left the organization in 1955, Grace Boggs assumed editorship of the paper. In the early and mid fifties, the paper covered a variety of political issues of both domestic and international scope, including commentaries on the black struggle. Towards the end of the decade and especially into the early 1960s, analysis of the Civil Rights movement became an increasingly prominent feature of the paper. By this time, Jimmy had begun writing a column titled “What It Means” in which he presented his ideas concerning the labor movement and the black struggle as they were developing in the context of his life experiences.

An Ending and a Beginning: James Boggs’ The American Revolution

Boggs presented a coherent statement of these ideas in a document titled “State of the Organization, State of the Nation,” written in the fall of 1962. In his role as chairperson of Correspondence, Boggs had prepared the annual document for internal discussion. When he sent it to C. L. R. James in London, however, it sparked an organization crisis. Taking exception to Boggs’ analysis, and especially to its departure from Marxist conceptions of the working class and the process of socialist revolution, James’ response was to “denounce the document.” Bringing latent organizational and ideological differences to the fore, this conflict resulted in a break in organizational and personal ties between C. L. R. James and Jimmy and Grace Lee

Boggs.⁴⁹ The document, however, earned a much better reception from others in and outside of the organization. It was published by Monthly Review Press, first as the July-August 1963 issue of MONTHLY REVIEW, and then as a book under the title, The American Revolution: Pages From a Negro Worker's Notebook.⁵⁰ The work represents Boggs' thinking in this period and foreshadows the directions that he and Grace would take in the years to come. At the heart of the book is the Boggs' contention that African Americans had replaced workers as the revolutionary social force, and a vision of society beyond capitalism was inherent in the black struggle.

Reflecting Boggs' experiences as an autoworker as well as his and Grace Lee Boggs' activity in the labor movement, Marxist organizations, and the growing Black movement in Detroit, the book calls for and begins to articulate a "new theory" for the reorganization of society. The opening chapter of the book describes the failure of the labor unions, the United Auto Workers (UAW) in particular, to adequately respond to the technological changes causing transformations in the post-war American economic order. Specifically, Boggs pointed to the introduction of automation and cybernation into industrial production which diminished the need for industrial workers. The book goes on to suggest that the material abundance produced by the rapid expansion of capitalist production and the obsolescence of workers challenges us to look beyond the working class or organized labor to find a progressive social and political force able to mount a more potent movement for

⁴⁹ Boggs, Living for Change, p. 107-109.

⁵⁰ James Boggs, The American Revolution: Pages From a Negro Worker's Notebook (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1963).

social change. “[A]t this point in American history,” he explained, “when the labor movement is on the decline, the Negro movement is on the upsurge.” Calling Black Americans “Rebels with a cause,” Boggs surveyed the key developments of the Civil Rights Movement, coming to the conclusion that, “The fact has to be faced that since 1955 the development and momentum of the Negro struggle have made the Negroes the one revolutionary force dominating the American scene.”⁵¹

In identifying black Americans, as opposed to the (white) working class, as the segment of society best positioned and most able to lead a social movement to transform the nation, Boggs was both challenging the American left and making a statement about the nature and meaning of the Black American struggle. Boggs criticized Marxists for their uncritical and ahistorical adherence to the Marxist notion that the industrial working class will lead the masses of exploited and oppressed people in a revolt against the capitalist system to seize power. This, he said, led to their inability to see blacks as a revolutionary social force.

The Negroes have more economic grievances than any other section of American society. But in a country with the material abundance of the United States, economic grievances alone could not impart to their struggles all their revolutionary impact. The strength of the Negro cause and its power to shake up the social structure of the nation comes from the fact that in the Negro struggle all the questions of human rights and human relationships are posed.⁵²

This, Boggs believed, was the deeper meaning of the black struggle. Out of its own historical development and internal logic, Boggs argued, the struggle to end

⁵¹ Boggs, The American Revolution, p. 83-84.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

the racial oppression of African Americans called into question all the institutions of American society, thereby challenging the very legitimacy of the nation's social and political structures. "The assumption that Negroes can achieve their rights inside *this* society or without shaking up and revolutionizing the whole structure," Boggs believed, was being proven "false and obsolete" by the development of the post-war black freedom movement.⁵³ Here we see Boggs' recognition that the struggle for civil rights moving to a new phase, a new level of development. In other words, he saw the Civil Rights movement calling for new ideas to advance the struggle.

These ideas were, in some ways, quite compatible with those that C. L. R. James had put forward in 1948 as well as with James' thinking in this period. Both men affirmed the principle of an independent black movement, arguing that black people must make their own liberation. And both foresaw a role for the black struggle in affecting a broader social revolution and advancing humanity.⁵⁴ Yet, there are important ideological distinctions which emerge from a comparison of their analyses. In the context of the immediate post-war world, in which the Civil Rights movement was only beginning to emerge, James advanced the unique notion that the autonomous black movement, independent of the Marxist party, could serve as a *catalyst* to the working class-led socialist revolution. Boggs, however, writing in the shadow of student sit-ins, freedom rides, and a full-blown Civil Rights movement,

⁵³ Ibid., p. 84.

⁵⁴ James and Grace Lee Boggs, "A Critical Reminiscence," in Buhle, C. L. R. James.

articulated the principle of an independent black struggle differently. In his analysis, the black struggle would *supplant* the working class as the revolutionary agent.

The difference can be seen in how each conceptualized the relationship between the black struggle and the working class (and organized labor). In James' analysis, there was a unity of purpose between the independent black movement and the proletariat, and thus the strength or direction of the former did not lessen the theoretical significance and position (of revolutionary leadership) of the latter. Boggs, however, argued that the decline of the labor movement and the persistent racism of white American workers proved that the proletariat was receding in revolutionary potential. Thus, for Boggs, the political objectives and relative social positions of the working class and the black struggle were in opposition to each other.

Though many of his ideas challenged Marxist orthodoxy, James nonetheless took strong exception to the way that Boggs called into question fundamental Marxist ideas about the working class and the process of socialist revolution. Upon reading Boggs' document in the fall of 1962, James expressed his disagreement with the analysis by asserting that Boggs and the other members of Correspondence required further education in Marxism. Boggs, in response, suggested that the organization did not need "a reaffirmation or education in Marxism but a serious study of the development of American capitalism, the most advanced capitalism in the world."⁵⁵ As ideological differences developed into organizational crisis, Jimmy and Grace Lee

⁵⁵ Boggs, *Living for Change*, p. 109.

Boggs ended their collaboration with C. L. R. James. While they retained the rights to *Correspondence*, which they continued to publish for the next two years, the Boggs left the organization headed by James and set out to continue developing their political analysis American capitalism, the black struggle, and the prospects for an American revolution. Thus, ideologically and organizationally, the Boggs began, in 1962, down the path of developing a movement for Black Power.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, the publication of *The American Revolution* brought the ideas of James Boggs to a wider audience and community of activists, and, though few knew it at the time, it announced his importance as a theoretician of Black Power.⁵⁷ In particular, three interrelated ideas presented in the book presage major ideological components of the Black Power Movement: a critique of capitalism that articulates an integral and organic link between economic exploitation through capitalism and racial oppression; the need for Black Americans to create and exercise political power; and a concept of social revolution. While the Civil Rights Movement certainly confronted and challenged the social status quo, its political agenda did not fundamentally challenge American liberalism. Furthermore, in its attempt to force the nation to deliver on its promise of full citizenship to black Americans, the Civil Rights movement sought not to fundamentally change the nation, but to include African Americans into it as currently constituted. However, by the mid and late

⁵⁶ For different explanations of the differences which caused the split, see: Grace Lee Boggs, "Thinking and Acting Dialectically," *Monthly Review*, October 1993; "Letters on Organization" in Glaberman, *Marxism for Our Time*.

⁵⁷ For an example of James' influence, especially through *The American Revolution*, see Dan Georgakas, "Young Detroit Radicals, 1955-1965," In Buhle, *C. L.R. James*, p. 186.

1960s, many African Americans came to the conclusion that the only way to include Black people as full and equal participants in American society was indeed to change the whole structure of society. Such people, James and Grace Lee Boggs among them, took the position that black oppression was embedded in the social structure and fabric of society, and to end that oppression was, by definition, to change the society at a fundamental level. In his book and in the couple's activities in this period, James and Grace Lee Boggs were working through the political implications of these ideas.

While their work achieved a national and international scope, the Boggses' ideas were always rooted in their experiences as citizens and activists of Detroit. They were organic intellectuals who worked with others in Detroit and elsewhere in a wide range of efforts to organize, theorize, and build a movement to change their city and their world. Therefore, to apprehend the texture and spirit of their work, it will be instructive to review the context from which it emerged. In particular, we turn to the year 1963, when Jimmy Boggs' book was published, and to Detroit, the base of their political and intellectual work.

Detroit, 1963: Prologue to Black Power

Nineteen-sixty three marks a critical juncture in the history and evolution of the post-war Black freedom struggle. The year began with centennial celebrations of the emancipation proclamation, a symbolic representation of Black freedom and the triumph of American democracy. Yet, the promise of that freedom remained unrealized, and the growing movement for Black civil rights increasingly called into question fundamental assumptions concerning the practice of American democracy.

A cursory review of some of year's dramatic events gives witness to the power and force of the movement. A mass action campaign to desegregate Birmingham, Alabama during the spring of 1963 brought a direct challenge to the racial caste system of that city, one of the most entrenched areas of southern segregation, and exposed the brutal face of white supremacy to a national and international television audience.⁵⁸ On the night of June 11, just hours after President Kennedy made a television address in which he issued his first endorsement of federal civil rights legislation, Mississippi NAACP leader Medgar Evers was assassinated in the driveway of his Jackson, Mississippi home.⁵⁹ The summer of 1963 ended with the monumental March on Washington, where 250,000 people

⁵⁸ There are many studies of the civil rights movement which give an account of the Birmingham campaign. For an insightful account, see Robin D. G. Kelley and Earl Lewis (eds.) To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 505-514. For an insider's account, see Martin Luther King, Jr., Why We can't Wait (New York: Signet Books, 1963).

⁵⁹ John Dittmer, Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 165-166.

gathered in the nation's capital on August 28 to make a collective stand for the fulfillment of the objectives of full integration and citizenship rights for African Americans. Two and a half weeks after the march, on 15 September, the brutal face of southern reaction was again exposed when Ku Klux Klan members bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. The blast killed four young Black girls: Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, all fourteen years old, and eleven-year-old Denise McNair. These and other developments throughout the year shook the nation and increasingly escalated the political and social tensions inherent in the struggle to achieve full citizenship for Black Americans.

As the struggle to overturn the southern racial order escalated, participants and observers alike declared the year a watershed in the Black struggle. "As the Negro left 1963 behind," Martin Luther King, Jr. believed, African Americans "had taken the longest and fastest leap forward in a century." So powerful were the events of 1963 that King labeled it the year of "the Negro Revolution."⁶⁰ Historian Lerone Bennett, Jr. also used the theme of revolution in his recounting of the year's developments. Drawing on the imagery and emotions of these events, including the Birmingham campaign--during which civil rights marchers of all ages were beaten, jailed, and attacked with water hoses and police dogs—as well as the year's bombings and assassinations, Bennett summarized the year as such:

It was a year of funerals and births, a year of endings and a year of beginnings, a year of hate, a year of love. It was a year of water hoses and

⁶⁰ King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 115; p. 26.

high-powered rifles, of struggles in the streets and screams in the night, of homemade bombs and gasoline torches, of snarling dogs and widows in black. It was a year of passion, a year of despair, a year of desperate hope. It was 1963, the 100th year of black emancipation and the first year of the Black Revolution.⁶¹

If 1963 was the first year of the black revolution, then the South was its battlefield. Yet, while the nation's attention was fixed on the South, the "revolution" was fast making its way to the Motor City. Though at times less dramatic, the events taking place in Detroit were no less expressive of rising black political force; furthermore, they were also an indication of things to come.

On November 10, 1963, Malcolm X delivered his "Message to the Grassroots" speech to a crowd of over three thousand people at Detroit's King Solomon Baptist Church. The title of his speech was significant not only because it indicated Malcolm's target audience--the Black masses--but also because it drew attention to the larger gathering of which his speech was a part. Malcolm was speaking at a mass rally that was the culminating event of the Northern Negro Grassroots Leadership Conference, a gathering of activists devoted to discussing future directions of the Black Freedom Movement in northern Black communities. The Grassroots Conference was created as an alternative to another conference, the Negro Summit Leadership Conference, which was conceived early in the summer. When the shape of the Summit took a conservative turn late in the planning process,

⁶¹ Lerone Bennett, Jr., Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America, sixth ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1988(1962)), p. 386.

militant activists quickly organized the Grassroots Conference to be held on the same weekend.

The two conferences pursued different and conflicting agendas, betraying different ideological perspectives on the Black struggle. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was among those who addressed the Negro Summit Leadership Conference, which promoted a moderate mainstream civil rights agenda. Malcolm's incisive critiques of integration and nonviolence directly challenged that agenda. His militant message for "the Grassroots," which identified the African American masses--as opposed to the status-quo-sanctioned Negro "leadership"--as the real heart of the Black movement, articulated the alternative vision that the conference represented.

With such divergent agendas, these two meetings may seem to have nothing to do with each other, yet they are part of the same history of local Black political organizing, and they are illustrative of broader political dynamics. Investigating this history provides a window into those dynamics, which in turn will help us to have a clearer picture of the development of Black Power. Furthermore, an investigation into the shared history of these two conferences helps to bring a greater understanding of this period, for it connects seemingly disparate components of the story, north and south, national and local: the desegregation campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, and Detroit's "Great March to Freedom"; Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X; the national Civil Rights Movement and the local activism and organizing of Detroit's activist community, James and Grace Lee Boggs notably among them.

Like communities throughout the country, Black Detroiters were moved to action after watching national television broadcasts of law enforcement officials mercilessly using police dogs and fire hoses against Black demonstrators, young and old alike in Birmingham, Alabama during the spring of 1963. In May, a small groups of Detroit activists began meeting to plan a protest march, leading to the formation of a new organization, the Detroit Council for Human Rights (DCHR), which issued a call for a large march to be held on 23 June.⁶² The organization was led by Rev. Albert B. Cleage and Rev. C. L. Franklin, two of Detroit's most prominent Black religious leaders. The light-skinned, blue-eyed Cleage was the charismatic pastor of the Central United Church of Christ, widely recognized as an outspoken and articulate advocate for Detroit's Black community.⁶³ Franklin was the well-dressed and engaging pastor of the New Bethel Baptist Church, whose congregation had grown into the thousands under his direction in the 1950s. By 1963, Franklin, father of singer Aretha, a local celebrity whose voice and rise to national fame in a few years would earn her the title, "Queen of Soul," had achieved national celebrity for his powerful and entertaining sermons, performed on records and before live audiences during national gospel road shows.⁶⁴

⁶² Boggs, Living for Change, p. 124. Sidney Fine reports that the DCHR was formed on May 17, 1963 at a meeting of 800. Sidney Fine, Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), p. 27.

⁶³ Boggs, Living for Change, p. 119.

⁶⁴ Suzanne E. Smith, Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 40-45.

Cleage and others organized throughout the city, holding weekly meetings in various churches to build momentum for the event. Many churches held pre-march rallies and other Michigan cities sent delegations. According to official estimates, 250,000 people participated in the march, which the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the nation's largest Black newspapers, called "the biggest civil rights demonstrations America has ever witnessed."⁶⁵ Thousands of marchers made their way down Woodward Avenue carrying signs that succinctly indicated what the march was about: "We Shall Be Free," "Evers Did Not Die in Vain!," "Stop Jim Crow-ism!," "Black Peoples' Revolt," "White Man Listen. We Will Take Our Rights!." Thousands more lined the streets, cheering the marchers on as they made their way to Cobo Hall where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who led the march, delivered "a thunderous, dramatic, climax to" the march. During his speech, which included an early version of his famous "I Have a Dream" oration, King brought the crowd to its feet when he asserted: "We want Freedom...and we want it now!" Other speakers included Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh, Representative Charles C. Diggs, and several local ministers—including Cleage—with Franklin serving as Master of Ceremonies.⁶⁶

Although the Great March has since been eclipsed by the much more celebrated March on Washington which was held two months later, the Detroit march

⁶⁵ *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 29, 1963, p. 1. While estimates of the crowd varied, 250,000 is the number given in most accounts. This newspaper reported that there were 125,000 marchers and 125,000 people along the streets.

⁶⁶ *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 29, 1963, p. 4. On King, see Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, p. 21; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: American in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p. 843.

was a major event when it happened in the summer of 1963. Its importance can be gauged both in terms of its size—King himself said that “it is emphatically the largest civil rights rally ever to take place in America”-- and in terms of its place in the evolving political dynamics. With broad participation from Detroit’s Black community, labor unions, and civic groups, the march raised thousands of dollars for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and gave an indication of the extent to which the efforts of Southern freedom fighters had widespread support in other parts of the country. Furthermore, the energy and activism which the march embodied evidences the emerging political sensibilities and drive toward political action in Detroit (and the north generally) during the early 1960s. In the weeks prior to the march, Franklin declared that the march would be “a warning to the city that what has transpired in the past is no longer acceptable to the Negro community. We want complete amelioration of all injustices.”⁶⁷ In his speech at the march, Cleage made a powerful appeal for reinvigorated activism, calling on Detroit’s black community to boycott supermarkets until they hired Black managers and department heads.⁶⁸ Thus, the march represented both a demonstration of solidarity with the southern struggle and a demonstration of Black Detroiters’ own determination to change the racial status quo at home. As such, it illustrates the crucial but under-explored dynamic between Black activism in the south and the urban north during this period.

⁶⁷ *Detroit News*, June 8, 1963.

⁶⁸ Boggs, *Living for Change*, p. 124.

The Boggs saw the march as a turning point, reflecting as well as catalyzing the political energies that would lead to a new stage of the movement. “Up until the big March here in 1963,” James Boggs explained, “most black folk up north was doing things to support folks down south.” After 1963, however, “the movement began ot shift” and black people in the North “[began] to recognize ‘Hell, we need to do something about here.’ Then the movement became both North and South.”⁶⁹ Speaking specifically of Detroit, Grace Lee Boggs, who was part of the small group of activists who initially met to conceive of and organize the Great March, describes 1963 as “the turning point” in the movement, “the year when Detroit became conscious of itself as the spearhead of the Northern black movement and the rest of the country began to become aware of the movement emerging in Detroit.”⁷⁰

Indeed, in the months and years following the Great March, Detroit developed a prominent profile on the national scene of race relations, reaching its apex with the city’s massive urban rebellion in the summer of 1967 (which was labeled a “race riot” by the mainstream press, but dubbed “The Great Rebellion” by many in Black and progressive circles in Detroit).⁷¹ In the wake the march, local developments further heightened the political resolve of the Black community. On the day after the march, *The Illustrated News*, a community newspaper edited by Cleage, ran an announcement calling for “selective patronage campaigns” against two local supermarket chains.

⁶⁹ James Boggs oral history, p. 19-20.

⁷⁰ Boggs, *Living for Change*, p. 124.

⁷¹ For a discussion of the coverage of Detroit’s race relations before and after the 1967 uprising, see Fine, *Violence in the Model City*.

Telling readers, “Do Not Buy Where You Cannot Work,” the campaigns were organized to protest discriminatory hiring and promotion practices.⁷² In the days to follow, local civil rights activists took action on Cleage’s call. Grace Lee Boggs was among a broad range of Detroit activists who participated in a boycott of Kroger Supermarkets. The protesters included members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which sponsored the boycott, the DCHR, and UHURU, an organization of radical Wayne State University students, some of whom would form the League of Revolutionary Workers in 1967, one of the most important Black Power organizations. Within two weeks the pressure of the boycott compelled the chain to enter into an agreement whereby the company implemented a nondiscriminatory employment policy and agreed to immediately hire two Black management trainees. A week later, A&P Grocery Store chain agreed to increase minority hiring in response to a boycott organized by the Negro Preachers of Detroit and Vicinity.⁷³

These successful selective buying campaigns not only represented civil rights activism in Detroit, but were also consistent with the type of activism that was emerging in urban centers across the country. The focus on employment patterns highlighted the economic dimensions of American racism as experienced in the north, where overt Jim Crow was not at issue. Another focus of northern activism was combating police brutality, a particular focus of younger activists--such as the

⁷² *Illustrated News*, June 24, 1963, p.5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, Boggs, Living for Change, p. 124.

members of UHURU and the Revolutionary Action Movement, led by Maxwell Stanford (Muhammed Ahmed).

The case of Cynthia Scott illustrates this. Just thirteen days after the Great March, Black citizens of Detroit launched a major protest of the Detroit Police Department in response to Scott's murder by a white officer. Scott, who was a sex worker, was enjoying after-hours Fourth of July celebrations with an acquaintance, Charles Marshall, when she was shot early on the morning of 5 July by patrol officer Theodore Spicher. According to police reports, Scott attempted to stab officers who were trying to apprehend her and then ran to escape, at which point Spicher shot her. Marshall, however, disputed the official version of events. He reported that Scott did not attack the officers with a knife, nor did she run to escape. Rather, she told the officers that they had no basis to arrest her and then walked away, at which point the officer began shooting. She was shot twice in the back and then once in the stomach after she had collapsed.⁷⁴

Word of the shooting quickly spread throughout Detroit's Black neighborhoods, and within nine hours a crowd of protestors gathered at police headquarters. Numbering as many as five thousand the crowd marched around the building chanting "Stop Killer Cops! Stop Killer Cops!" When city prosecutor Samuel H. Olson later declared that the officer's actions were justified, frustration

⁷⁴ Smith, p. 52-53.

and anger was widespread throughout the Black community, and various organizations took action. The NAACP demanded a full and immediate investigation into the shooting, UHURU held street rallies and sit-ins, and a community organization called the Group on Advanced Leadership (GOAL) organized a picket line at police headquarters. GOAL had been formed less than a year earlier by community activists Richard Henry, who was the organization's president, and his brother Milton Henry, who served as the attorney for the Scott family.⁷⁵

This was the context and community spirit out of which the idea for the Summit Conference was conceived. While the DCHR had actually made the call for the meeting before the Great March, the success of the 23 June event further galvanized the political energies of the (activist) community. As historian Suzanne Smith explains, the march inspired the DCHR "to organize the city's civil rights groups into a formal network—the Northern Negro Leadership Council" which was to be based on the structure and principles of SCLC. It "sought to create a coalition among Detroit's civil rights organizations and with activists from urban communities throughout the Northeast and Midwest."⁷⁶ To put their program into action, they decided to hold a Northern Negro Leadership Conference, also known as the Negro Summit Leadership Conference. The first mass meeting to plan the event was held at Franklin's New Bethel Baptist Church on 27 September.

⁷⁵ Ibid., Boggs, *Living for Change*, p.126.

⁷⁶ Smith, p. 56-57.

Within a month of this initial meeting, it was clear that there were ideological differences among DCHR members. These conflicts revolved around the organization's relationship to an emerging Black nationalist sentiment and involved questions concerning the efficacy of integration as an objective and the strategy of nonviolence for the black freedom movement. Smith reports that the organizers were divided almost from the beginning over the group's agenda. Grace Lee Boggs suggests that the tension within the DCHR did not exist initially, but developed later as escalating confrontations in the civil rights movement called forth new and more militant strategies. Whether the ideological tensions were there at the outset or developed later, they proved to be decisive for these Detroit activists, just as they would for the entire movement, and would be central to the emergence of Black Power in the years to come.

The conflict in the DCHR came to a head on October 21 during a meeting of the organization's executive board. In what amounted to a recanting and reversal of the original conference plans, Franklin suddenly imposed restrictions on the event, seeking to limit the range of potential delegates and issues to be discussed at the conference. An article in the *Illustrated News* a week later reported that Franklin, who was DCHR's Chair, had expressed his opposition to "black nationalist and other radical groups" who might infiltrate the Leadership Conference. Although the Board had approved the plans for a conference open to all Black organizations in all northern urban centers, Franklin insisted that the participation of such people "must

be prevented at all costs,” saying that such groups would hold positions counter to his own. One such position was a critique of nonviolence. Cleage responded by saying that many Black people had begun to question the philosophy of nonviolence and were beginning to embrace the principle of self-defense.⁷⁷

In her memoir, Grace Lee Boggs explains the situation with an insightful and critical analysis:

Franklin’s turnabout was the result of national developments and national pressure. All summer long the Kennedy administration had been moving heaven and earth to contain the escalating black movement. In the wake of the mass demonstrations and arrests in Birmingham in the spring, spontaneous demonstrations all over the South were becoming increasingly violent. The youth activists of SNCC were growing impatient with the administration’s policy of compromising with local whites and its failures to protect black militants, and some were beginning to question King’s nonviolent strategy...Meanwhile, conscious of the tensions that were developing around preparations for the march on Washington and in order to provide a national rallying point for the independent black movement, Conrad Lynn and William Worthy, veterans in the struggle and old friends of ours, issued a call on the day of the march for an all-black Freedom Now Party.”⁷⁸

Indeed, the Freedom Now Party was of particular concern to Franklin. Earlier in the summer, Worthy and Lynn had begun to publicly discuss the idea of an all-Black political party which could move beyond the limiting politics represented by the March on Washington. As Lynn later explained, there in Washington D.C, “The radicals repaired to the Park Sheraton Hotel [after the march] to prepare our

⁷⁷ *Illustrated News*, October 28, 1963.

⁷⁸ Boggs, *Living for Change*, p. 126-127.

manifesto for a Freedom Now party.”⁷⁹ Thus, the Freedom Now Party (FNP) was launched, with its founders issuing a declaration stating: “We are the political expression of the mighty black crusade for freedom that nobody can halt or suppress.”⁸⁰ In the two months to follow, Cleage had become a member of the FNP and had invited Worthy and Lynn to speak at the Grassroots Leadership Conference (with the approval of the DCHR’s Board).

Franklin, however, insisted that the conference must not endorse the party. He found himself at odds with the political perspective of the FNP, which “repudiates and breaks with the established party system which serves only to sustain the enslavement of Afro-Americans!” Franklin, unwilling to stray far beyond the integrationist ethic of mainstream civil rights agitation, wanted to avoid association with the FNP’s “desire to achieve our own destiny through our own efforts,” or its recognition that “our struggle for freedom and equality can issue, meaningfully, only from our own leadership and candidates.” As the DCHR’s Chair, Franklin explained to his fellow Board members, he “could not afford to be labeled a black nationalist.”⁸¹

In response to Franklin’s ideological impositions, Cleage resigned from the DCHR. Explaining his decision, Cleage said: “In renouncing the independent black political action represented by the FREEDOM NOW PARTY and the new Negro image which is called ‘black nationalism,’ the DCHR has renounced any reason for

⁷⁹ Conrad Lynn, There is a Fountain: The Autobiography of A Civil Rights Lawyer (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1979), p. 184.

⁸⁰ *Illustrated News*, September 28, 1964, p. 7.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, *Illustrated News*, October 28, 1963, p.3.

its existence.”⁸² Grace Lee Boggs’ recollection of Cleage’s resignation brings us directly to the immediate origins of the Grassroots Leadership Conference:

I have a very vivid recollection of the split. That evening Milton Henry and I were in someone’s basement working on a preamble to an all-black International Trade Unions Council when Cleage burst in with the news of Franklin’s ultimatum and his own refusal to accept Franklin’s conditions for continuing collaboration. Milton’s immediate response was typical: ‘If that’s the way they want to play, who cares? We’ll have our own Conference that same weekend, and we’ll get Malcolm to speak. So that is what we did.’⁸³

In selecting Malcolm X as a speaker, the organizers of the Grassroots Leadership Conference clearly and consciously distinguished the ideological orientation and political agenda of their meeting from that of the Summit Conference, which convened during the same weekend across town at Cobo Hall. By the fall of 1963, Malcolm X was not only a recognized champion of Black pride and militance, but was also perhaps the most recognized (and vilified) voice of dissent from mainstream civil rights leadership. With his presence and his words, Malcolm helped the Grassroots Conference to take a serious look at the implications of northern activism and plotting this emerging movement in the north.

The conference opened on Saturday, 9 November, with workshops held at Mr. Kelley’s Lounge and Recreation Center, a popular night club owned by George Kelley, a prominent member of Detroit’s Black business community. Over a hundred and fifty people from several northern and western states registered for the conference

⁸² *Illustrated News*, October 28, 1963, p. 6.

⁸³ Boggs, *Living for Change*, p. 128.

and participated in the workshops, which ran from early Saturday morning until late Saturday night. The conferees discussed several political and economic issues arising out of the conditions of Black northern communities, including some of the areas of concern which had initially been selected for discussion during the Summit Conference. One of these was an evaluation of the Freedom Now Party, which of course the Summit Conference avoided under Franklin's leadership, but was enthusiastically embraced by the delegates of the Grassroots conference. In the economic realm, there was discussion of a proposed selective buying campaign against General Motors as well as a Christmas Boycott, whereby boycotters would refrain from the season's consumer activity in protest of the September 1963 church bombing which killed four young girls in Birmingham, Alabama. Other topics for discussion included de facto segregation in northern schools and housing discrimination.⁸⁴

Sunday morning the conference participants drafted a set of resolutions for the conference. At the plenary session all of the proposed actions were adopted, and Grace Lee Boggs was elected as the secretary and James Boggs as the chairperson of the conference continuations committee.

The final resolutions read:

1. To express and implement solidarity with the oppressed colored peoples of the world;

⁸⁴ *Michigan Chronicle*, November 9, 1963, p.1; *Michigan Chronicle*, November 16, 1963, p. 1; *Correspondence*, November 1963, p 1; *Illustrated News*, November 2, 1963, p. 4; Smith, p. 79.

2. To support the Christmas boycott, the principle of self-defense, the Freedom Now Party, the newly-formed International All-Trades Union of the World;
3. To organize a nation-wide of GM [General Motors] and plan a nation-wide boycott of schools;
4. to put pressure on Negro School board members to engage actively in the fight for equal education;
5. To demand asylum for Mae Mallory in Ohio and the return of Robert Williams from his Cuban exile.⁸⁵

These resolutions demonstrate some of the ideological concerns that would soon characterize Black Power: the issue of nonviolence v. self-defense; internationalism and solidarity with other oppressed people; economic activism; independent black politics.

The conference closed with a mass rally Sunday night. A crowd numbering several hundred, and perhaps as many three thousand, gathered at King Solomon's church to hear speeches by Cleage, William Worthy, and Malcolm X. Each articulated some dimension of the need for unified and independent action among African Americans. Worthy's focus was on Black American's solidarity with oppressed people throughout the world, while Cleage spoke of the need to support and build the FNP as an attempt build unified and independent political action.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ *Correspondence*, November 1963.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Malcolm's discussion of Black unity centered on the need for African Americans to close ranks and to unite around the basis of their shared struggle. "What you and I need to do is learn to forget our differences" he explained. "We have a common oppressor, a common exploiter, and a common discriminator. But once we all realize that we have a common enemy we unite—on the basis of what we have in common. And what we have foremost in common is that enemy—the white man. He's an enemy to all of us." As a model for African Americans, Malcolm offered the example of Third World solidarity exhibited at the Bandung Conference in 1955, when African and Asian nations convened in Bandung, Indonesia to discuss, plan, and propel the process of decolonization on the two continents. "At Bandung all the nations came together, the dark nations of Africa and Asia," he said. "Despite their religious differences they came together... despite their economic and political differences, they came together." They came together around their common experiences and plights as colonized or formally colonized people, and—importantly for Malcolm—"the number one thing that was not allowed to attend the Bandung conference was the white man."⁸⁷

Malcolm then moved to an analysis and critique of the current direction of the Black movement by addressing the difference between what he called a "black revolution" and a "Negro revolution." First, he said, it is necessary to make clear what a revolution is. "Sometimes I'm inclined to believe that many of our people are

⁸⁷ Geroge Breitman (ed), Malcolm X Speaks (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 4-5.

using this word ‘revolution’ too loosely, without taking careful consideration of what this word actually means.” It was important, he said, to apprehend the motive, objective, methods, and results of a revolution. Citing the American, Russian, and Chinese revolutions as historical examples, Malcolm argued that revolutions are fundamentally about land—that is, access to the resources from which a subjugated people obtain an independent existence and build a nation. Furthermore, he asserted that revolution is a necessarily bloody experience, as the dispossessed must fight to gain land and independence. “There’s been a revolution, a black revolution, going on in Africa,” Malcolm said, referring to the anti-colonial movements that swept the continent during the 1950s and 1960s. He offered in particular Kenya and Algeria, where the anti-colonial movements developed into armed conflict, as examples of the inevitability and necessity of organized violence in a struggle for liberation.⁸⁸

Malcolm was drawing lessons from these historical and contemporary examples, and the implications for the Black American struggle were clear.

So I cite these revolutions, brothers and sisters, to show you that you don’t have a -peaceful revolution. You don’t have a turn-the-other cheek revolution. There’s no such thing as a nonviolent revolution. The only kind of revolution that is nonviolent is the Negro revolution. The only revolution in which the goal is loving your enemy is the Negro revolution.⁸⁹

Embedded in Malcolm’s denouncement of the “Negro revolution” was his critique of civil rights leadership. In his characteristic style, Malcolm brought his

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 6-10.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

point home with satire and rhetorical flair, using his famous (if not altogether historically accurate) taxonomy of slave society. “There were two kinds of slaves,” Malcolm asserted, “the house Negro and the field Negro.” The former lived in or near the slave-owner’s house and was materially better off than the latter, whose burden was considerably greater. The house Negroes “dressed pretty good [and] ate good because they ate his food—what he left,” while the field Negro “was beaten from morning to night; he lived in a shack, in a hut; he wore old, cast-off clothes.” The house Negro identified with the master, would protect the master’s interests as his own, and was reluctant to run away from the plantation. The field Negro, on the other hand, hated the slave master, plotted and prayed for his demise, and would jump at the opportunity to escape.⁹⁰

For Malcolm, this situation closely approximated the current situation among African Americans. Just as different members of the slave society devised responses to their oppression according to their relative positions within that society, Malcolm argued, African Americans in the early 1960s fashioned their responses to the racism of the day, depending on their class position and proximity to whites. “This modern house Negro loves his master,” Malcolm insisted, describing--and chastising--African Americans who sought integration into American life. In terms of Black leadership, the house Negro promoted the “Negro revolution” and its integrationist ethic. “He wants to live near [white people]. He’ll pay three times as much as the house is worth

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 10-11.

just to live near his master.” In contrast, Blacks who rejected the goal of integration, preferring separation from white society, stood in the tradition of the field Negro, who “was intelligent” because “he hated his master.” “If someone came to the field Negro and said, ‘Let’s separate, let’s run,’ he didn’t say ‘Where we goin?’ He’d say, ‘Any place is better than here.’ You’ve got field Negroes in America today. I’m a field Negro. The masses are the field Negroes.”⁹¹

Malcolm’s construct subtly drew historical parallels meant to bolster his arguments concerning the appropriate path for the Black movement. On the one hand, he implicitly equated the field slave’s rebellious act of running away from the plantation with the willingness of contemporary African Americans to fight for autonomy from white society. On the other hand, the house slave’s investment in the slave system was equated with the twentieth century African American’s desire for integration. Furthermore, he drew a parallel between the most oppressed segment of the slave population--the field Negroes--with that of the Black masses of his own time--the grassroots—to place their struggles in an historical continuum. Thus, the “message” that Malcolm brought to “the Grassroots” who had gathered there at King Solomon’s Baptist Church was clear: they must fashion a militant alternative to the “leadership” represented by those gathered at the Negro Summit Conference meeting at Cobo Hall.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Detroit's local press declared the Grassroots Conference a great success while reporting that the Summit Conference was a disappointing failure.⁹² The most thorough coverage was Grace Lee Boggs' analysis of the conference in an article titled "Black Revolution in North" in the November 1963 issue of *Correspondence*. She reported that the spirit of the conference was one of rejection of the prevailing social system. The participants had decided "that you are either free and equal—or you are not. Since you obviously are not, why should you care what the white man thinks? Why should you help him make the racist system work? Rather, your responsibility to yourself and to humanity is to tear up the system which makes some more equal than others." The DCHR meeting, on the other hand, represented a different group of people, with a different understanding of and relationship to "the system," and with a different political perspective. "Some Negroes decide that while things are bad, they have been worse, and they should therefore struggle in such a way as not to endanger their 'progress' by antagonizing whites," she wrote, arguing that the experience of the two conferences reflected a sharp division. "They begin thinking like the average white American," she continued. "These are the types who were represented by the Summit Conference."⁹³

In addition to helping to organize the conference and serving as chair, James Boggs submitted one of the conference working papers. The paper was titled "Rights of Man in An Age of Abundance," and reiterated two of the central ideas of The

⁹² Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, p. 58.

⁹³ *Correspondence*, November, 1963.

American Revolution. Firstly, the paper began by asserting the “two-fold revolution” taking place in the country: the black struggle “to establish equality for all men” and the technological revolution of automation and cybernation whereby human labor was being replaced by machines and computers in the work place. And secondly, he attempted to challenge the notion that all people must work, arguing for a new understanding of the relationship between work and society. The paper sought to dispel “the myth that Negroes can be assimilated into the American economy as it is presently constituted.” This notion, he said, is based “on the philosophy that only those who work have a right to a living.”⁹⁴

One of the central demands emanating from the conference was that African Americans be granted access to jobs. Boggs embraced that right, but also sought to complicate the political and strategic thinking which underlie that demand. “We should not only organize Black people not only to fight for jobs that soon will not exist,” he wrote, “but also to mobilize them to demand the equivalent income that would be derived from work if work is not available.” The fight must not be simply for jobs—access to the system—but for the means and resources to have a decent living—a new concept of the system, a new vision of society. In other words, he offers a reappraisal of citizenship and a new understanding of rights. Now, in an “age of abundance,” where technological advances have effectively removed the necessity

⁹⁴ Ibid.

of all to work, we must proclaim the right of all people to a living regardless of whether or not they work.⁹⁵

“Into the Sunshine of a Different Society”: Visions of Transformative Politics

While James Boggs’ role in the conference illustrates his influence and importance as an activist in local Detroit Black politics, he was also developing a greater visibility and recognition beyond Detroit’s activist community as a theorist of Black political struggle during this time. He was receiving requests for articles and speaking engagements and would soon receive offers to publish his book in other languages. Through his writing, Boggs was coming in contact with activists and thinkers nationally and international. One such person was Bertrand Russell, the world-recognized British philosopher and peace activist.

Russell had developed a strong interest and concern with the plight of African Americans, leading him to read widely both in the history African Americans and contemporary material on America’s racial conflict. He received newly published works from editors and writers, such as James Baldwin, who sent Russell a copy of The Fire Next Time. In the summer of 1963 Monthly Review editors Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy sent The American Revolution to Russell, who wrote Boggs after

⁹⁵ Ibid.

reading it. This letter, dated 20 August 1963, initiated a remarkable correspondence between the two men over the next several months.⁹⁶

Russell's letter indicated that he had been "greatly impressed" with the "power and insight" of this "remarkable book." The book "interests me very much," he explained, "not only because of the vital issues you discuss but because the survival of mankind may well follow or fail to follow from the political and social behavior of Americans in the next decades."⁹⁷ Russell's intellectual and political analysis in this period had led him to believe that the combined effects of America's international policies and its internal social crisis posed the primary threat to world peace.⁹⁸ Russell wished to know Boggs' views on the likely directions that American workers' political consciousness would take in the face of automation and the possibility of greater reaction in American political culture. "Will [American workers] not embrace a more harsh authoritarianism and delve for new victims...?" he asked. To what extent, Russell questioned, will "American whites, whose living standards have depended upon the exploitation of American negroes and non-European peoples, understand the American negro revolt. If they fail to make

⁹⁶ Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils (eds), Bertrand Russell's America, volume II, 1945-1970 (Boston: South End Press, 1983), ch. 17.

⁹⁷ Bertrand Russell to James Boggs, 20 August 1963, James and Grace Lee Boggs Collection, Box 1, Folder 20, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

⁹⁸ Feinberg and Kasrils, Bertrand Russell's America, p. 219.

common cause with it, will not the result be a further impetus towards neo-fascist popular Government?”⁹⁹

Boggs wrote a reply about two weeks later in which he addressed Russell’s questions and further articulated his own ideas about the coming social conflicts. “Your questions are very big questions,” he told the philosopher, issuing the caveat that his answers were necessarily speculative, before launching into insightful projections and analysis concerning the issues which Russell raised. “I believe that it will probably be in the north rather than in the south that the bitterness of the whites will overflow in spontaneous actions of a Fascist character,” Boggs said, adding that he foresaw economic issues to be a central catalyst. He said that confrontations could also come from the threat of Blacks gaining political power in many areas of the South where they are the majority of the population. Similar conflicts could come in the north, he said, where “in the big cities [there has been an increase in the] concentration of Negroes in the central districts with the whites in the suburbs commuting daily to the centers of power through (or, by means of expressways, over) the Negro areas.”¹⁰⁰

Russell replied in a letter dated 18 September in which he expressed appreciation for Boggs’ comments and extended the dialogue. “I cannot see how the Negro revolt can stop short of a challenge to capitalism,” he offered. Moreover, he

⁹⁹ Bertrand Russell to James Boggs, 20 August 1963, James and Grace Lee Boggs Collection, Box 1, Folder 20, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

¹⁰⁰ James Boggs to Bertrand Russell, September 5, 1963, James and Grace Lee Boggs Collection, Box 1, Folder 20, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

ascribed to the African American struggle an important role internationally. Russell saw the Black movement as a promising means to opposing the cold war and its logic of nuclear conflict: “I do think that the Negro revolt could be the means of opposing effectively and for the first time the assumptions of the United States and the race towards nuclear annihilation.”¹⁰¹ Russell also gave his analysis of the March on Washington, which had taken place three weeks earlier. “The March was deeply impressive but disappointing,” he wrote, “because the depth of feeling that one imagines negroes in America to experience about their treatment did not gain reflection in the demonstration.”¹⁰²

Russell had sent a strongly-worded message of support to the march calling it “the real Emancipation Proclamation” but cautioned that “it must lead to an end to indifference, to suffering and mass murder, in short, to a revolution into thinking and acting as Americans.” The text of Russell’s message was released to the press in London on 27 London and read during the march the next day. “I am convinced that the march on Washington is a turning point in the history of the United States,” he proclaimed. “The Negro in the United States is on the move and he will not stop. The meaning of this is that the values and the practices which have formed the United States over three hundred years are being fundamentally challenged. In a part of the statement which likely resonated with African Americans, but earned condemnation from the mainstream American press, Russell said that the number of Black

¹⁰¹ Bertrand Russell to James Boggs, September 18, 1963, James and Grace Lee Boggs Collection, Box 1, Folder 20, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Americans killed by murder, torture and maltreatment in the last 300 years exceeded those killed by the Nazis.”¹⁰³

Boggs’s reply to Russell’s letter did not come until three months later. In this period, during which he continued to work full time at Chrysler, Boggs was increasingly being called to offer his analysis of the Black movement in various forums both in Detroit and elsewhere.¹⁰⁴ Days before receiving Russell’s September 18 letter, Boggs received an invitation to speak at a public meeting addressing the future directions of the Black movement.¹⁰⁵ Organized by Monthly Review Associates, the event was set for November 21 at New York’s Town Hall, to address the topic, “Where is the Negro Liberation Movement Going? How Will it Get There?”

Boggs shared the platform with John Lewis, Chairperson of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Conrad Lynn, veteran civil rights activist, militant lawyer and Chairperson of the National Committee for a Freedom Now Party. Lewis had been one of the most militant though somewhat silenced voices at the March on Washington, where he had been forced to change his speech by scaling down his criticism and condemnation of the federal government.¹⁰⁶ Lynn

¹⁰³ Feinberg and Kasrils, Bertrand Russell’s America, p. 219-221; *New York Times*, August 28, 1963.

¹⁰⁴ G. Boggs, p. 116.

¹⁰⁵ Paul Sweezy to James Boggs, September 19, 1963, James and Grace Lee Boggs Collection, Box 1, Folder 18, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. Coming from New York, this letter would have arrived slightly ahead of Russell’s letter, dated 18 September, coming from the United Kingdom.

¹⁰⁶ Thus, though he would maintain a moderate position as SNCC moved to Black Power in 1965 and 66, in November 1963 Lewis represented the emerging militant opposition to accepted forms and assumptions of Black protest.

had been active in civil rights protest since the 1940s and most recently had served as lawyer to Robert Williams.

In addition to the choice of speakers, there are subtle but significant ways in which the Town Hall meeting highlights the development of new directions for the Black movement in November of 1963. Firstly, the location of the meeting, New York City, reflected the increasingly national scope of the movement.¹⁰⁷ Organized by a New York based organization, with two of the three speakers coming from large urban centers outside of the South, this was self-conscious attempt to combine and coordinate the efforts of Black activists across rejoin. Secondly, the language emanating from the meeting signals a break with the orientation of mainstream civil rights leadership. Consider, for example, that the meeting was called to discuss the movement for “negro liberation,” as opposed to “civil rights.” With this choice of language, the organizers set the ideological coordinates of the meeting, implicitly rejecting the prevailing precepts of liberal civil rights protest.

If the Town Hall meeting represented a challenge to the dominant paradigm of Black political activity, it did not present a completely articulated political program. Rather, the meeting reflected the growing sense of a need to give serious thought to

¹⁰⁷ The meeting venue was not anomalous, nor was it the first such meeting to be held there. On June 15, 1963, the Association of Artists for Freedom sponsored a panel discussion entitled “The Black Revolution and the White Backlash.” The symposium showcased the “irreconcilable viewpoints” between Black artists and white liberals. The artists on the panel were novelist John O. Killens and Paule Marshall, playwrights Lorraine Hansberry and Leroi Jones, and actors Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. The white liberals were television personality David Susskind, who served as moderator, journalist James Wechsler, and writer Charles Silberman. (*Illustrated News*, July 13, 1964, p. 3)

and discussion of the future course of action. In its announcement for the meeting,

Monthly Review Associates explained the rationale for the meeting:

Since the Birmingham crisis last may, the Negro liberation movement has experienced an extraordinarily rapid growth. Scores of new towns, cities, and counties in the South have erupted and, no less important, the movement has for the first time taken hold in the great metropolitan centers of the North. Demonstrations of all kinds... have shown that this is now a militant mass movement...yet it must be admitted that the progress that has been achieved toward the movement's goal of freedom and equality for Negro Americans has been very small.¹⁰⁸

To examine this “paradox”—the apparent inability of the movement, despite its strength and militance, to achieve meaningful change in the conditions of African Americans—this forum sought to foster public discussion and debate of critical issues. “Does the difficulty lie in the strategy and tactics of the movement itself?” the organizers asked. “Or is it to be sought in the character of the U.S. power structure? How can more, and more rapid, gains be won in the future?” Participants were invited to consider these and other questions concerning the very objective and nature of the struggle with “three men who we know have been thinking deeply about the problems of the liberation movement.”¹⁰⁹

Boggs' speech at the Town Hall meeting gave him the opportunity to address a large public gathering with the ideas he had articulated in his book. He spoke on “the American Revolution, which as of now is primarily a Black Revolution.” He told the audience that:

¹⁰⁸ James and Grace Lee Boggs Collection, Box 1, Folder 18, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

sometimes a Revolution starts because the people believed that the country in its present form can do more for them than it is already doing. So they go out and ask for those things which they call their 'Rights' under the system...If they get these 'Rights,' and then don't press any more, then the country has made a social reform...But if they don't get what they believe are their 'Rights,' and they continue to fight for them, they begin to make a Revolution.¹¹⁰

This, he explained, was precisely the pattern that Black protest had followed in the years since the 1954 Brown decision, during which time neither the Supreme Court decisions, nor any agency of the government, nor any social or political institution of American life could guarantee the rights which were granted to Black citizens under the constitution. "The Negroes," he said, "have been left ...to devise means of struggle for themselves...So the myth that American Democracy protects the rights of Negroes has been exploded." He went on to assert that "under this Democracy of which Americans are so proud, there has been more systematic exploitation of more people than there has been under any other political system. This is the truth that which the Black Revolution is beginning to expose." He said that as the Black Revolution proceeds, it will show that there is another form of society, an alternative to the status quo of American democracy, which had benefited the few at the expense of the many, for "democracy is a system which has been made

¹¹⁰ "Final Draft of JB's Speech, Town Hall, Nov. 21, 1963," p. 7, James and Grace Lee Boggs Collection, Box 3, Folder 20, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. (Emphasis in original.)

possible by the worst kind of class society in the world—the class society that is based upon the systematic exploitation of another race.”¹¹¹

Like he had done with the March on Washington, Bertrand Russell sent a statement to be read during the Town Hall meeting. Unlike the celebrated gathering in Washington, however, where his words seemed to be consistent with the mood of the hour, Russell’s message to those assembled in New York was at variance with the general tenor of the event. He expressed his “wholehearted and complete sympathy” with “the movement towards [racial] equality,” but declared: “I do not believe that this end will be achieved if the Negro movement adopts methods of violence.” He feared that the “rapidly increasing sympathy” with “the Negro cause” among many whites would “very largely cease if the movement abandons persuasion and attempts, instead, to use force.”¹¹² Russell’s memorandum was titled, “Should the Negro Movement in the U.S remain non-violent,” and was timely, as this very question and variants of it were a matter of great discussion and debate at the end of 1963. His counseling against violence was tantamount to an endorsement of nonviolent protest and represented a refusal to consider the possible merits of other forms of protest. This, of course, did not resonate with a meeting devoted to discussing new perspectives on the Black struggle. Furthermore, in his reasoning against organized violence, Russell implicitly placed an importance on appeals to white support and sympathy, a strategy which many in the movement had come to question, if not

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² *New York Times*, December 8, 1963.

abandon. Russell, in effect, urged a moderation which was out of step with the ideological orientation of the event.¹¹³

Boggs' remarks, which were made after Russell's message was read, implicitly challenged the philosopher's message. (For example, as we have seen, Boggs asserted that the Black movement was for more than "equality," as Russell had indicated.) A month later, in his answer to Russell's letter of September 18, Boggs directly addressed Russell's message to the Town Hall meeting and the issue of nonviolence.

He began the letter by saying: "It has been a long time since you wrote and lots of events have transpired, and yet nothing has changed."¹¹⁴ Indeed, the nation had seen a quickening in the pace of civil rights activism during the late summer and fall of 1963. So too was there the frustrating persistence and escalation of violent racist reaction, dramatically and sadly illustrated little more than two weeks after the March on Washington, on Sunday September 15, when a dynamite explosion killed four young girls in the basement of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. And then the nation was shocked on 22 November, the day after the Town Hall meeting, when President John F. Kennedy was fatally shot in Dallas, Texas. The year thus drew to an end with the nation recovering from this shock, but by no means relieved from its racial conflict and impending confrontation.

¹¹³ Feinberg and Kasrils, Bertrand Russell's America, p. 228. Alice Hilton wrote to Russell telling him that "your words were not header" at the Town Hall meeting.

¹¹⁴ James Boggs to Bertrand Russell, December 29, 1963, James and Grace Lee Boggs Collection, Box 1, Folder 20, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

This was the context in which Boggs sat down to pen his letter to Russell on 29 December. “To this date,” he wrote, “no one in this country wants to take responsibility for the thousands of Negroes who have been beat up, shot up, jailed up in this country just for asking for some normal rights that are common in most countries.”¹¹⁵ Further challenging Russell’s warning African Americans against violence, he cited the experiences and prevailing mood among many African Americans:

I do not believe that the temper of the Negroes is such that they will take eight more years of the kind of beatings and jailings that they have taken since 1954, just to prove that they are entitled to the things that everyone else has. In fact, I believe that period is over; that the Black masses will either retaliate—or they won’t act at all. But the one thing that they will not take any more is beatings.¹¹⁶

Boggs continued to explain the rejection of nonviolence and embracing of the principle of self-defense, making a statement quite similar in its tone and argument to statements which Stokely Carmichael and other vocal critics of nonviolence would make later in the decade (and which Malcolm X was making then). “The one thing that always goes unnoticed in all the eulogizing of the nonviolent behavior of the Negro is the open, direct violence of the American whites against the Negroes.” Implicit in such eulogizing, he said, was a readiness to accept the violence of the whites. “And if a nation has not felt aroused by the bestialities of whites, it has no

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

right to expect anything different from the Negroes who have been on the receiving end of these bestialities for over 300 years.”¹¹⁷

Boggs also responded to Russell’s proposal, posed in his last letter, that Black organizations tax African Americans and their white sympathizers one dollar monthly to raise which “would enable much to be done in the struggle.” Boggs responded to this by offering his analysis of the nature and current dynamics of the Black movement. “I think that perhaps here you are not aware of what is taking place totally in this country,” telling the philosopher that Black Americans did not all speak with the same voice as he seemed to assume. “This is not just a crusade for Negro rights as most Negroes thought it was at the beginning and many still think it is. This is a struggle to change a system, and as it becomes clear that it is not just a struggle for some rights and that each right that the Negroes win will help destroy a system, lots of Negroes are going to fall by the wayside in the struggle.” Emphasizing the revolutionary potential of the Black struggle, and placing it in historical relation with a the Russian revolution of 1917, he continued: “In fact, already the separation is getting sharper between those who are going to struggle and those who just want to be like other Americans, and splits are developing between Negroes as they developed between the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks in Russia which means that there isn’t any organization in this country which all of Negroes can support.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

Boggs recognized and articulated that the Civil Rights Movement was to experience divisions and splits, and that a new movement was soon to emerge from this. His statements, in short, anticipated the emergence of the Black Power Movement. If Boggs' words to Russell seemed to predict trouble ahead, he closed the letter on a hopeful--and revolutionary--note: "Here's hoping...that both of us will still be around to weather the storms and emerge into the sunshine of a different society, call it what you may."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Chapter 3

JAMES AND GRACE LEE BOGGS AS THEORISTS AND ARCHITECTS OF BLACK POWER, 1964-1969

If their exchange at the end of 1963 gave Russell reason to believe that Boggs anticipated violent confrontations in the coming year, then the philosopher would likely have been confirmed in this belief if he saw the cover photo of the January 13, 1964 issue of the *Illustrated News*. Boggs is pictured at a podium, flanked by two men wearing combat helmets, addressing a crowd of protestors on the steps of the Old County Building in downtown Detroit. The approximately 40 people were assembled on December 21, 1963 for a memorial service in honor of “martyred freedom fighters” and people who had been killed by Detroit police officers in the past year. The rally was organized by Richard and Milton Henry, leaders of GOAL and close collaborators of the Boggs throughout most of the 1960s, against strong opposition from the Detroit police. Thus, the helmet-clad members of GOAL’s security force did not represent an empty symbolism, but reflected the philosophy of self-defense as well as the possibility of a violent class with city police. While Boggs

spoke to the crowd from the podium, Richard Henry, who had secretly hidden in the building earlier that morning, emerged on the roof and spoke from a loudspeaker.¹

“The Man Who Would Not Be King”: The Political Style of an Organic Intellectual

Jimmy [Boggs] is different from any radical that I have ever met. Before we would start to talk about a particular political issue, he would ask me about my job, my car, my friends, my living situations. He would suggest solutions to various problems and would help me fix the plumbing or the car, but only after he thought I had made an effort myself.²

-- Richard Feldman, Detroit auto worker, 1977

The *Illustrated News* picture serves as a visual record of Boggs' activism. Capturing him in the role of community activist, it provides an historical snapshot of Boggs engaged in the struggles waged by Detroit's black citizens in the early 1960s. Such pictorial representations of his activism, however, are relatively rare, as the more abundant, and ultimately more telling record of his political engagement can be found in the political (and personal) relationships that he developed and in his writings. By 1964, Boggs was a well-known community activist who provided

¹ "The Man on the Roof," *Liberator*, vol. 4, no. 3 (March, 1964), p. 16; Grace Lee Boggs, Living for Change: An Autobiography (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 123.

² Richard Feldman, "Introduction," in James Boggs, Grace Lee Boggs, Freddy Paine, and Lyman Paine, Conversations in Maine (Boston: South End Press, 1978), p. xiv.

leadership to local Detroit black politics and to the emerging Black Power movement. But he was more likely to be behind the scenes than in front of the camera or microphone, and as the epigraph explains, he was in many ways he was not a typical political leader. “The Man Who Would Not Be King,” as Detroit poet Willie Williams described him, operated with a decidedly anti-elitist and humanizing political style. Capturing in verse Boggs’ commitment to creating a just society, Williams called him “the right question asker” and a “hate hater” who “fought the good fight everyday and every night of his life.”³

Indeed, the reflections of Boggs’ political collaborators and others who knew or worked with him paint a picture of a political activist and theorist engaged in a broad yet intensely personal project of human liberation. Consider, for example, Boggs’ comrade in the Forest Johnson Tendency, Filomena D’ Addario, who describes him as “a leader in thought and action” whose “distinction as a leader was reflected in his deep concern and feelings for the human condition.” More than simple charisma, she explains, his leadership was animated by a “genuine concern for everyone he met” and his unyielding practice sharing ideas “whether in a public forum or in a one-on-one discussion.”⁴ Another collaborator in the Tendency, Selma James, who worked with Boggs at the Third Layer School in 1952, described him as “a civilizer in politics” because his political style combined a “warm and sweet

³ Nkenge Zola, John S. Gruchala, and Grace Lee Boggs (eds.) *James Boggs: An American Revolutionary* (Detroit: New Life Publishers, 1993). This is a booklet of messages received after James Boggs’ death in 1993. Quotations from this booklet will be cited as James Boggs memorial booklet.

⁴ James Boggs memorial booklet.

temperament” with a “wealth of information about how society actually functioned.” Among his “enormous social gifts” she admired Boggs’ practice of “acknowledging others’ unique needs and therefore making the right help available.”⁵

These reflections highlight the essence of Boggs’ radicalism. To deepen our sense of his political style, we can add the voices of people for whom Boggs was a political mentor, a role for which his “enormous social gifts” were well suited. Kenneth Snodgrass, a Detroit activist who began organizing with the Boggs as a teenager in the late 1960, developed a relationship with Boggs over the course of 26 years which, “at varying times, was father-son and mentor-mentee.” He identified Boggs as a “grassroots fighter” who exerted an enormous impact on him and others through the advice he gave, the leadership he provided, and the ideas that he developed.⁶ Boggs also made an impact on young activists outside of Detroit, such as Bill Strickland, who was a leader of the Northern Student Movement during the first half of the 1960 and later was a key member of the Institute of the Black World. Reflecting on his visits to the Boggs Detroit home, Strickland recalled that “The Boggses University on Field Street was a great place to learn and be warmed in the fire of a politically exciting intellectual hospitality.” Among the political lessons that he learned in this environment was “that it was possible, indeed absolutely necessary, to make sense of the day-to-day reality in which one was immersed.”⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

A similar assessment comes from Aneb Kgositsile (Gloria House), who was a SNCC worker when she met Jimmy and Grace Boggs in the mid 1960s. She describes Boggs as a “freedom fighter” who was always striving “to understand, respond to, be a part of social change that moved us closer to fulfilling our humanity.” She was inspired by Boggs’ unusual but powerful mix of personal integrity and political commitment, characterized by his “gentle manners,” his “readiness to confront the problem, whatever or whoever it might be,” his “concern for children’s well being and survival,” and his “enthusiasm for intellectual work.” In further assessing his impact and contribution, Kgositsile provides the following statement which further helps us to apprehend the character of Boggs’ political activism:

As a revolutionary Jimmy showed us that one’s life can be an integration of physical labor, grassroots activism and intellectual production—a way of living that challenges the traditional elitism of the American left, thrives on the love and support of family, friends and comrades, and points the way to the community building of the future.⁸

Thus, a compelling picture emerges of a humanistic approach to political action. It portrays an activist who conceptualized love as a source of political commitment, everyday life as a site of political struggle, and ideas as catalysts to revolutionary action.⁹ In addition to community organizing, intellectual work was a

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ In the following passage, feminist scholar bell hooks eloquently portrays the political style of writer and activist Toni Cade Bambara: “Spreading that love, displaying it, offering it to all and sundry who came her way was a powerful dimension of her political activism. Everyday life was the site for

central component of Boggs' political engagement. He assumed for himself the role of a producer of ideas, and by 1964 he was gaining notoriety beyond Detroit through his writings and political analysis. In addition to The American Revolution, which brought him national and international attention, Boggs wrote several articles in this period in which he (and Grace Lee Boggs) further developed the ideological constructs that anticipated and informed Black Power. Two essays in particular, written in 1963, show him articulating the ideas from The American Revolution and developing new ideas.¹⁰

Early in 1963 Boggs wrote an essay titled "Black Political Power" in which he reviewed the book The Negro Revolt by black journalist Louis Lomax.¹¹ Published in the journal *Monthly Review*, Boggs used the essay to engage in the ongoing public debate concerning possible proposals and future directions for the Civil Rights movement. He critiqued liberals like Lomax as well as white radicals for their

transformation and change." This passage, though it describes an activist-intellectual who operated in very different context than Jimmy Boggs, nonetheless comports with the many personal reflections of his activism that my research has uncovered. The apparent similarities in the political practices of Boggs and Bambara (or at least similarities in the impact of their work on others) invites a comparison between them. My objective in drawing this comparison is to suggest and encourage among scholars a deeper engagement with the emotive character of intellectual and political work and the implications, in turn, for our understanding of these historical experiences. This objective has been inspired, in part, by an insight which Grace Lee Boggs offers in the introduction to her autobiography. Explaining her decision to focus on James Boggs' strengths, she writes: "I have found these strengths in other individuals. Like Jimmy, these individuals may seem quite ordinary and undistinguished, but when, like Jimmy, they have emerged from lives of hardship secure in the knowledge that their struggles have contributed not only to their own survival but to the continuing evolution of the human race, they are an invaluable resource. I hope that my focus on these qualities will contribute to their being recognized and nurtured in other individuals because of their importance to the future evolution of the country" (p. xiii).

¹⁰ These essays, along with his Town Hall speech and other writings later in the decade were published in his second book, Racism and the Class Struggle: Further Pages from a Black Worker's Notebook (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970).

Louis Lomax, The Negro Revolt (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). Boggs' essay is reprinted in Racism and the Class Struggle as "Liberalism, Marxism, and Black Political Power."

narrow and myopic visions of black struggle. Both, he argued, failed to recognize the changing nature and revolutionary potential of the black struggle. Lomax, he said, “can only see Negroes as a minority who must depend on” white liberals, while “Marxists substitute the working class for the liberals as the ally that the Negroes need.” Yet, the black struggle was increasingly being waged in the context of global politics, he said, and black people were beginning to see more clearly their relationship to the rest of the world. Boggs also critiqued liberals and radicals for their inability to see the race and class character of the black struggle: “It is not just the economic system against which the Negro struggles, as many Marxists would like to have it. And it is not just a question of persuading and re-educating some Southern Bourbons and reactionaries, as some liberals would like to believe.”¹²

According to Boggs, the fundamental flaw in most liberal and Marxist analyses of African Americans was their refusal or inability to move beyond outmoded patterns of thought. They were “still thinking in categories of the democratic revolution,” he wrote, “when what Negroes are fighting for is part of the world revolution and therefore against the whole structure of American society.”¹³ Thus, some Marxists continued to call on blacks to seek the solidarity of white workers in spite of considerable evidence that it was not forthcoming. For illustration, Boggs offered an anecdote of a recent situation in the plant where he worked: “when it was rumored that management was going to promote a few Negroes

¹² Boggs, Racism and Class Struggle, p. 28.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

into skilled trades, it was the steward who rushed to the men to arouse them to protest against Negroes coming into the department. It was not the company's fault, as Marxists would have the Negroes believe. It was the fault of plain American workers."¹⁴

As for liberals, Boggs cited similar theoretical blind spots. "What is fundamentally wrong with Lomax's book is that it is written by a Negro who still thinks in terms of white power as naturally as he thinks of eating when he's hungry." Here, we find Boggs not only calling into question some liberal presuppositions, but also suggesting new directions for the black movement. "[Lomax's] mind simply has not stretched beyond the idea of whites ruling and giving Negroes a greater share of his rule. He doesn't visualize that it could be the other way around, that it is in fact time for Negro political power to manifest itself."¹⁵ Boggs' notion of black political power is connected to the circumstances and opportunities arising from social and demographic changes in urban areas, and specifically the fact that "Negroes have become the hub of the industrial centers of the country."¹⁶ He concluded the essay with the prediction: "The struggle of the Negroes in the very near future will be the struggle for black political power," by which he meant "not the power of Negroes to put white men in office, but rather their own power to dispose over things."¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 30.

The essay is one attempt (among others) by the Boggesses to anticipate the next stage of the black struggle and to help plot its course. In particular, the essay articulates three interrelated ideas that foreshadow elements of Black Power thought: the call for black political power; a focus on the conditions and political impact of urban blacks; and placing black people and their struggle in an international context. The first two of these formulations—black political power and a focus on the importance of emerging black majorities in central cities—are at the heart of the Boggesses' subsequent theoretical work, most notably in their essay "The City is the Black Man's Land," which will be discussed below. As for the third formulation—the international context of the African American movement—Boggs returned to this in another essay written in 1963.

In "The Meaning of the Black Revolt in the U.S.A.," published in the Paris-based journal *Revolution* at the end of 1963, Boggs addressed himself to "a world audience which has been and still is confused about the similarities and differences between the black revolt in the United States and the world revolution taking place in Africa, Asia, and Latin America."¹⁸ The central argument of the essay is that the black American struggle, like anticolonial movements in the Third World, is fundamentally a revolutionary movement. Yet, while he does describe African Americans a colony within the borders of the United States, Boggs maintains that the revolutionary potential of the black movement is borne of its own unique history and character. The essay begins with a comparison between the black American situation

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

and that of South Africa, where the quite visible oppression of Apartheid made it clear to “most people all over the world” that “the only solution is a revolution by the African majority.” In the United States, however, where “the struggle in the South has centered around democratic rights,” most people could not recognize that the struggle was fundamentally “against the actual operation of the American system.”¹⁹

Boggs cited the spring 1963 desegregation campaign in Birmingham, Alabama as marking the turning point at which it became clear that “the enemy of the black revolution is not just the Southern racist but the whole system by which the United States operates.” For him, this was a pivotal moment, not simply because of the televised brutality, or because Birmingham residents showed their determination to go beyond nonviolence, but because it illustrated that the Southern struggle was connected to and in some ways presaged the development of the movement in the north. “Birmingham is the Pittsburg of the South,” he wrote. “It is the most highly industrialized city in the South and is most similar to a northern city in its work and residential patterns.” Drawing from his experience and observations in auto plants, he continued the analogy: “Inside the basic industries the black workers do the dirtiest and hardest work, work which the white workers consider beneath them. Inside the central city the Negro masses live in the black ghetto. It was these ghetto-ized Negroes who broke through the police lines on that memorable day in May 1963.” Thus, in addition to Southern segregation, the movement was aiming its attack on *de*

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

facto segregation, which immediately highlights the problem as one of “the way in which the American system actually operates.”²⁰

Thus, the systematic oppression of African Americans was rooted in the very nature and operation of the system, therefore a sustained challenge to racial oppression was necessarily a challenge to that system. “That is why,” Boggs wrote, “the black revolution, even though it is not an all-American revolution in the sense that it involves all the Americans who are oppressed, is still an American revolution in the sense that it threatens to wreck the whole system by which the United States has operated.”²¹ In assessing the revolutionary potential of the black struggle Boggs did not provide much explanation of how this threat would be realized. He did, however, place it in the context of the historical (and ideological) development of the movement. With equal parts of analysis, prophecy, and revolutionary optimism, Boggs wrote: “Negro Freedom Fighters have been confining the struggle within the framework of the system, but each time the struggle reaches an explosive pitch, more Negroes are driven to recognize that the things they are fighting for cannot be achieved within the system but are rather the ingredients for creating another system.”²²

In addition to illustrating Boggs’ thinking in this period and forecasting the directions it would take through the decade, this essay is noteworthy as an exemplar

²⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

²¹ Ibid., p. 12.

²² Ibid., p. 18.

of Boggs' stylistic writing. Consider, for example, the following passage, in which he paints for his readers a picture of an uncertain future:

Now that the black revolution has begun there are only two alternatives for the United States of America. Either the black revolution will succeed, in which case the whole system by which North America operates will be changed and the foundations of a new society—call it what you will—will be laid. Or it will be crushed, and then all Americans will have the opportunity to live under the kind of fascist terror which the black American has had to live under all these years. In either case American will never be the same again.²³

With such language (“fascist terror” and “revolution”) and apocalyptic predictions, this statement might seem more likely to have been made in the late 1960s than in 1963, the year of the March on Washington and King's “I Have Dream” oration. While there is a hint of hyperbole in this statement, and Boggs' prediction was not realized, he did demonstrate a small measure of prescience to the extent that he, more than most, foresaw the dynamic evolution of the Civil Rights movement into a struggle for “Black Power.”

In another example of Boggs' rhetorical flair, we see how his rejection of the notion that black and white working class solidarity as a viable political strategy is informed by an historical perspective: “The white workers who organized the CIO in the 1930s admitted a few Negroes for the same reason that Lincoln freed the slaves—to save the union.” The double entendre in this statement is meant to highlight the diverse historical examples where the self-interest of whites (sometimes

²³ Ibid., p. 17.

represented through institutions such as labor unions, politicians, etc.) was as strong if not stronger than racial benevolence as a factor in the treatment of black people. The CIO, he said, admitted black workers because “they were afraid that the company might use Negro workers to scab.” As historical parallels, Boggs cited President Roosevelt’s signing of executive order 8802 to “save the United States from Hitler and Tojo” and Truman’s integrating the armed forces “to win the war in Korean so that he could save the U.S.A. from the Communists.”²⁴

As Boggs intended, “The Meaning of the Black Revolt in the U.S.A.” reached an international audience. In April 1964 he received a letter from H. W. Edwards, a white American woman living in Ghana, who found in the essay “some cogent points as food for thought” but also wished to challenge some of his formulations.

Describing herself “as (formally) a white person” who “married into and crossed over to the U.S. Negro community,” Edwards told Boggs that “there are many of us in various spots in the world who are thinking along similar lines,” and she assured him that her criticism was offered in the spirit solidarity. (Revolution) Edwards was already familiar with Boggs’ work, having previously read “Black Political Power” in *Monthly Review* which, she said, “excited me tremendously” because it was consistent with things that she had been saying since her arrival in Ghana in 1962. She subsequently read the special issue of *Monthly Review* containing Boggs’ The American Revolution, at which time friends gave her a subscription to

²⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

Correspondence, which she regularly read and passed on to her colleagues in the Ghanaian press.²⁵

Among her points of criticism, Edwards most strongly took exception to Boggs' formulation of "dialectical humanism," which he articulated in the final paragraph of the essay. Boggs argued for a reconceptualization of the relationship between economics and politics as part of his challenge to and rethinking of the traditional Marxist concept of revolution. "Dialectical humanism" was Boggs' conceptualization of the need to combine moral and political choices alongside economic development as fundamental components of the revolutionary process. Edwards, however, found it to be a "meaningless slogan." The offending passage reads:

Coming in the United States at a time when there is no longer any problem of material scarcity, the Negro revolt is therefore not just a narrow struggle over goods and for the development of the productive forces which we call the era of "Dialectical Materialism." Rather it ushers in the era of "Dialectical Humanism," when the burning question is how to create the kind human responsibility in the distribution of material abundance that will allow everyone to enjoy and create the values of humanity.²⁶

Like a good Marxist, she could not accept the substitution of dialectical materialism with the ill-conceived notion of dialectical humanism. In her letter she asked "Since when

²⁵ H. W. Edwards to Editor, Correspondence, 13 April 1964, and H. W. Edwards to Editors, Revolution, 5 April 1964, James and Grace Lee Boggs Collection, Box 1, Folder19, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. Hereafter cited as Boggs Papers.

²⁶ Boggs, Racism and Class Struggle, p. 18.

has there been a special ERA for a scientific METHOD, which is all that ‘dialectical materialism’ is? Any scientific method is valid at ALL TIMES and applies to ALL ERAS.’²⁷ James and Grace Lee Boggs, however held the opposite view, believing instead that all ideas are inherently a product of the historical circumstances in which they were created. The notion of dialectical humanism was part of their attempt to create a new ideology appropriate for the changing black struggle and American society.

Revolutionary Black Nationalism: Creating a New Revolutionary Ideology

Nineteen sixty-three had established the principle that Negroes want to be free, and in 1964, we established the principle that Negroes will do whatever is necessary to be free.²⁸

-- Lawrence Landry

It isn't that time is running out—time has run out! 1964 threatens to be the most explosive year America has ever witnessed.²⁹

-- Malcolm X

²⁷ H. W. Edwards to Editors, *Revolution*, 5 April 1964, Boggs Papers, Box 1, Folder 19.

²⁸ Quoted in James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 202.

²⁹ George Breitman (ed.), *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 25.

These statements, both made during the spring of 1964, attest to the rising militance and sense of urgency among black activists and communities in this period. Landry spoke as a leader of a recently formed organization of civil rights activists taking the name ACT to highlight the group's intent to "act or utilize direct action to resolve civil rights disputes."³⁰ The group criticized national black leadership and represented a growing challenge to the precepts of mainstream civil rights activism. Among the members of ACT was Gloria Richardson, the militant leader of the Civil Right movement in Cambridge, Maryland who had participated in the Grassroots Leadership Conference. Others associated with ACT included Chicago-based scholar and activist John H. Bracey, Representative Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. of New York, Nahaz Rodgers of the Negro American Labor Council, comedian and activist Dick Gregory, and New York City activist Rev. Milton A. Galamison.³¹

One of the consultants to the group was Malcolm X, whose statement above is from his famous "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech. Delivered in April 1964, a month after his departure from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm's speech captures him and the African American freedom struggle at a crossroads. He prophesized that 1964 could be "the most explosive year" in American race relations in part because it was an election year, and also because in his judgment there was "more racial animosity, more racial hatred, more racial violence today" than at the beginning of the civil rights movement. Most importantly, however, Malcolm attributed this new political

³⁰ New York Times, April 17, 1964, p. 18, New York Time, April 19, 1964, p. 44.

³¹ Ibid.; Author's conversation with John H. Bracey, October 2001, Washington, D.C.

energy to a “new thinking” and “new strategy” emerging among young blacks, and in particular “the black nationalists” were “bringing about this new interpretation of the entire meaning of civil rights.”³² Malcolm asserted that black nationalist ideology was being taught throughout the black struggle, including in the Christian Church and mainstream civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, CORE, and SNCC. In the speech he even projected a black nationalist convention to be held that August. Thus, by April 1964, there were various indications that ideological and political differences existed within the black struggle, and the movement to achieve civil rights was already in the process of transforming into one for Black Power.

While the conference that Malcolm projected did not materialize,³³ a gathering held just weeks after his speech confirmed the presence of an emergent black nationalism. On 1-3 May, the Afro-American Student Movement (ASM), formed by a group of students at historically black Fisk University, convened the 1st National Afro-American Student Conference on Black Nationalism in Nashville, Tennessee.³⁴ The gathering brought together “nationalist minded students from North and South” who resolved to form a “Black Nationalist Youth Movement” that would take the responsibility to “forge a concrete alternative to Bourgeois Reformism, now.”³⁵ In addition to their rejection of the integrationist civil rights organizations, the students challenged the legitimacy of “traditional Bourgeois Nationalism” that, in

³² Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 32.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³⁴ Don Freeman, “Nationalist Student Conference,” *Liberator*, July 1964, vol. 4, no. 7, p. 18; A. Muhammad Ahmed (Max Stanford), “The Black Cultural Revolution,” *Kitabu Cha Jua*, vol. 1 no. 19 (summer 1975), p. 8

³⁵ Freeman, “Nationalist Student Conference.”

“projecting an autonomous Black Economy... failed to recognize the colonial nature of the exploitation of the black ghettos.” One of the conference sessions evaluated traditional Marxism, adopting a position articulated by black cultural and political critic Harold Cruse. While Cruse’s landmark study The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (1967) was yet to be written, his essays in the early 1960s on black nationalism and the nature of the black struggle were highly influential, especially among some of the young activists attending the conference. Cruse drew conclusions concerning the relationship between Marxists and the black struggle that were to a significant degree similar to those articulated by Jimmy Boggs, though the two men analyzed the relationship from different historical and ideological perspectives. Drawing in particular from Cruse’s “Marxism and the Negro,” the conference took the position that: “The essentially racist and reformist nature of the white working class leaves Marxists without a revolutionary proletariat to lead, and that the only revolutionary force in this society, the Afro-American freedom struggle, must be led by black radicals, not opportunistic white Marxists.”³⁶

In all of its proceedings, the conference was a clear reflection of the ideological commitments of Black Power. Reflecting the influence of Malcolm X as well as a marked internationalism, conference participants supported Malcolm X’s contention that the African American struggle should be characterized as a struggle for “human rights” rather than “civil rights” and called for African Americans to “vehemently oppose American imperialism and neo-colonialism in the ‘Third World’

³⁶ Freeman, “Nationalist Student Conference.”

or nonwhite nations.”³⁷ One session dealt with Pan-Africanism and the contemporary struggle of African states against colonial and neo-colonial oppression, including a discussion of their relationship to the Afro-American struggle. In addition, those assembled at the conference agreed that “a fundamental cultural revolution or re-Africanization of black people in America was a prerequisite for a genuine Black Revolution.” They asserted that “The Afro-American self-image must be revolutionized to foster a sense of collective ethnic identity as a unique Black People before Black Nationalism can emerge triumphant.”³⁸

While the Boggsses did not attend the conference, their influence was present both at the gathering and in subsequent developments. Days before the conference, they had been visited by Max Stanford (later Muhammad Ahmed), a radical student activists from Philadelphia who helped to conceive and organize the conference. Stanford had visited the Boggsses when he came to Detroit in 1963 and earlier in 1964 to meet with activists and to raise money for the Nashville conference. During their meetings, the Boggsses discussed various ideological and political developments with Stanford. Grace Lee Boggs, for example, shared with Stanford the problems that had emerged in the Michigan Freedom Now Party and outlined lessons to be learned that could guide his organizing efforts.³⁹ When Stanford came to see the Boggsses during

³⁷ Don Freeman, “Black Youth and Afro-American Liberation,” *Black America*, Fall 1964, p 16.

³⁸ Freeman, “Nationalist Student Conference.”

³⁹ Maxwell C. Stanford, “Revolutionary Action Movemtn (RAM): A Case Study of an Urban Revolutionary Movement in Western Capitalist Society,” master’s thesis, Atlanta University, 1986, p. 85-91.

the weekend before the Nashville conference, they “spent a great deal of time on [the] question of creating a new revolutionary ideology.”⁴⁰

Indeed, the need to develop a new ideological basis for revolutionary action was the primary theoretical concern that animated the Boggses’ work in this period. During the spring of 1964 they were in conversation with the editors of *Monthly Review* about putting together a special issue on the race issue in the United States to be published in different languages and countries. Jimmy⁴¹ was interested in the project in part because it could potentially be a platform “for putting forward some new thoughts that will be the basis for a fundamental approach for our time at this stage of world revolution.” The task of developing revolutionary theory “for our time,” he said, was pressing because “the only ideology of revolution that we have had up to now is one that was created as an outgrowth of Western Civilization” during a completely different historical and political context. With the rise of revolutionary movements throughout the Third World, what had previously been considered “unknown quantities” now constituted “the forces of revolution,” leaving “that ideology out of Western Civilization...in disarray.” Thus, extending his critique of Marxism to the Third World and Europe, Boggs argued that, just as African Americans had overtaken the industrial working class as the revolutionary social agent in the ‘black revolution’, the colonized and formally colonized people of the Third World, rather than the working classes of industrialized Europe, were poised to

⁴⁰ Grace Lee Boggs to Paul, 13 May 1964, Boggs Papers, Box 1, Folder 18.

⁴¹ To avoid confusion and repetition, I will occasionally use the Boggses’ first names when referring to one or the other.

lead the 'world revolution.' For this reason, Boggs viewed the black struggle as "a prototype of the world situation."⁴²

As such, he believed that it was important to assess the ideological development of the black struggle and its potential for revolutionary thinking.

I believe that the only source of revolutionary ideology in the black movement is among those who begin as black nationalists. The idea that there can be any revolutionary ideology from civil rights leaders like [James] Farmer, [Roy] Wilkins, or [Martin Luther] King, must be dismissed at the outset. On the other hand, among black nationalists at this point there is genuine creative thinking beginning to emerge.⁴³

Boggs conceded that not "every black nationalist has within his thinking the germs of a revolutionary ideology," but he identified the upsurge in nationalist thinking as an indication that sectors of the black movement were recognizing the importance of revolutionary thinking to revolutionary movements.⁴⁴ As editor of *Correspondence*, Grace Lee Boggs articulated this sentiment in a statement to subscribers announcing the suspension of the publication in July 1964. The statement asserted that "a revolutionary Black Nationalist leadership is being created," and it indicated that the publishers (which included the Boggses and their long-time political collaborators Freddy and Lyman Paine) were going to devote their energies towards aiding in the development of this leadership as it seeks "to evolve the theory, the perspectives and

⁴² James Boggs to Paul, 13 May 1964, Boggs Papers, Box 1, Folder 18.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

the program to deepen this revolution, both nationally and internationally.”⁴⁵ It was this perspective on black nationalism—as an ideological catalyst to the development of new ideas and new theoretical constructs to build a revolutionary movement—that the Boggses shared with Stanford on the eve of the Nashville conference.

Interestingly, Grace Lee Boggs was scheduled to participate in the Nashville conference, but her commitment to organizing the Freedom Now Party (FNP) prevented her from attending.⁴⁶ Building on the momentum that the Grassroots Leadership Conference had galvanized in November 1963, FNP organizers asked Boggs, who had been one of the central organizers of the Grassroots conference, to take the lead as coordinator of the Michigan FNP. In that role she traveled throughout the state to gather the signatures required to get the party on the ballot. Once certified, the FNP ran a complete slate of candidates in the fall of 1964, including Rev. Cleage for governor and Grace Boggs for an educational post (she was the only non-black candidate).⁴⁷ It is worth noting that the prospect of Boggs, a 48 year old Chinese-American woman attending a conference on black nationalism organized by militant college students certainly does not comport with received wisdom concerning the composition of such a gathering. Yet, the fact that Boggs shared ideological and political company with such students forces us to rethink such notions, and in particular it compels at least two interrelated considerations. Firstly,

⁴⁵ “A Statement to Our Subscribers and Readers, *Correspondence*, vol. 9, no. 1, July 1964.

⁴⁶ Grace Lee Boggs to Paul, 13 May 1964, Boggs Papers, Box 1, Folder 18.

⁴⁷ Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) p. 133.

her relationship to the conference is an indication of how integrally and organically Grace Lee Boggs was situated within the intellectual and political milieu of radical black politics, and specifically within Black Power politics. Secondly, her place within this milieu belies the image of Black Power as a rigid ideology based upon ethnic chauvinism and devoid of concrete political analysis.

After the Nashville conference, members of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), of which Max Stanford was one of the leaders, spent a week in the Boggses home. RAM was formally organized in 1963 by radical black students centered in Ohio, Philadelphia, and Northern California.⁴⁸ In a March 1964 article for *Correspondence* about RAM (which Grace had asked him to write following an earlier visit), Stanford explained that the organization's philosophy "may be described as revolutionary nationalism, black nationalism, or just plain blackism."⁴⁹ Despite this seeming lack of ideological clarity, RAM in fact developed a coherent political ideology which combined black nationalism with elements of Marxism and a strident Third World internationalism. To develop and disseminate its ideology, RAM published *Black America*, a bi-monthly magazine as its theoretical organ. As stated in its Summer-Fall 1965 issue, the purpose of the organization was consistent with revolutionary nationalism as it would be articulated later in the decade:

⁴⁸ On RAM see, Robin D.G. Kelley, "Stormy Weather: Reconstructing Black (Inter) Nationalism in the Cold War Era," in Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Is It Nation Time?: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), and Stanford, "Revolutionary Action Movement."

⁴⁹ *Correspondence*, March 1964. Cited in John N. Bracey, August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick (eds.), *Black Nationalism in America* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), p. 508.

To bring clarity and give direction in revolutionary struggle...To present a revolutionary program of national liberation and self-determination for the African captives enslaved in the racist United States of America...To forge a revolutionary unity among peoples of African descent...To unite Black America with the Bandung world (Asia, Africa, and Latin America) [and] to fight for the liberation of oppressed people everywhere.”⁵⁰

The RAM members spent a week in the Boggses’ basement working on the fall 1964 issue of *Black America*.⁵¹ The issue features a section on “The Roots of Revolutionary Nationalism” containing several pages of excerpts from the writings and speeches various black thinkers: Marcus Garvey, J.A. Rodgers, W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad, James Boggs, Robert Williams, Rev. Cleage, Harold Cruse, and Max Stanford. The magazine also includes a statement of greetings to “Our Militant Vietnam Brothers,” a report on the Nashville conference, and a list of “centers of black nationalist information and activity.” In addition, there are full-length articles by Stanford, Roland Snellings, and Jimmy Boggs.⁵² Titled, “Integration and Democracy: Two Myths That Have Failed,” Boggs’ essay urges would-be black revolutionaries to dispense with these “two philosophies that have become myths.”⁵³ Integration, he said was not a revolutionary concept because it “means assimilation into the system rather than a radical transformation of that system on the basis of new values and new methods.”⁵⁴ Similarly, the democratic

⁵⁰ Stanford, “Revolutionary Action Movement,” p. 81; *Black America*, Summer/Fall 1965.

⁵¹ Boggs, *Living for Change*, p. 134.

⁵² *Black America*, Fall 1964.

⁵³ Boggs, *Racism and the Class Struggle*, p. 33.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

process could achieve reforms *within* a given society but does not offer a means of *transforming* the society. Furthermore, he argued, given the nature of American capitalism, integration and democracy were antithetical to revolutionary political action. “Today,” Boggs wrote, “whether Negroes realize it or not, as long as they demand integration and democracy they are demanding the right to become capitalist exploiters, first of each other and then, if this is not enough, imperialist exploiters of the underdeveloped world.”⁵⁵

With the publication of this essay in the fall of 1964, Boggs had produced a significant body of work over the course of two years that both projected a new stage in the African American freedom struggle and attempted to theorize about its direction. The years 1963-1965, during which the nation witnessed the historic March on Washington and landmark Voting Rights and Civil Rights Acts, have rightly been characterized as marking a highpoint in the Civil Rights movement. Yet, as the foregoing analysis has illustrated, this period also saw various expressions of an alternative vision of black political struggle. This vision, which challenged the efficacy and even legitimacy of liberal integrationist politics, was the basis for the ideological development of the emerging Black Power movement. Jimmy Boggs was widely recognized as one of the people whose intellectual and political work helped to advance such a vision, and by the end of 1964 he was receiving invitations to speak, participate in forums, and publish his writing in which he could share his ideas with other people interested understanding or charting the directions of the black

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 37.

struggle.⁵⁶ In the years to follow he continued, increasingly in collaboration with Grace Lee Boggs, to develop these ideas, and together they put forward an analysis of Black Power as not only a struggle against racism, but also as a movement fighting for the revolutionary reorganization of American society. Also, beginning as early as the spring of 1965, the Boggses worked to create an organizational expression for their ideas.

The Organization for Black Power

Toward the end of 1964, Max Stanford arranged a meeting in New York between the Boggses and Malcolm X to discuss the possibility of Malcolm working with them “to build an organization to struggle for Black Power.”⁵⁷ Having witnessed the potential for movement building represented in the relative success of the Michigan Freedom Now Party campaign, the Boggses thought that such an organization would galvanize and organize emergent political energies within the black movement. Furthermore, Malcolm’s recent split with the Nation of Islam and the announcement of his intent to work with various elements of the black freedom struggle opened up tremendous opportunities for closer links between him and other radical activists. Malcolm’s response to the Boggses’ proposal, as Grace Boggs

⁵⁶ David Slavin to James Boggs, 7 November 1964, Boggs Papers, Box 2, Folder 1; Nell Salm to James Boggs, 19 August 1965, Boggs Papers, Box 1, Folder 18.

⁵⁷ Boggs, Living for Change, p. 134.

recalled it, “was that [me and Jimmy] should go ahead and form the organization without him because he saw his role as being an evangelist.”⁵⁸ The Boggses did in fact proceed to develop such an organization, which materialized the following spring. Tragically, Malcolm was assassinated on 21 February 1965, just months after their meeting, leaving to conjecture the meaning of his role as “evangelist” or how he might have related to the efforts of the Boggses and others.

We can speculate as well what might have come from such a close collaboration between Jimmy and Grace Boggs and Malcolm X as was proposed. Though from different perspectives, both Malcolm and the Boggses were actively thinking about how to organize and mobilize black political power. Also, they both were involved in this period—through speeches, writings, public appearances, and theoretical work—with laying the ideological groundwork for the Black Power movement (though of course Malcolm’s impact was felt much more directly). They shared mutual concerns yet approached them from divergent political contexts, making for a potentially powerful collaboration. We might consider, for example, what might have resulted from a fusion of the Boggses’ theoretically grounded analysis of American capitalism with Malcolm’s engaging and charismatic political persona? How might Malcolm’s activity in the international political arena and the Boggses’ grounding in local Detroit politics informed each other’s perspective, or produced a cross-fertilization of their work? While such questions remain unanswerable, we are able to reconstruct the Boggses’ effort following the meeting to

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 135.

develop “an organization to struggle for black power” and the political ideology from which it was conceived.

During the winter and spring of 1965 Grace and Jimmy Boggs continued to develop their plans for a radical black political organization. Its central operational idea was the need to foster and develop independent black political power, which they felt was the next step in the development of ‘the black revolution.’ Indeed, the call for independent political action would come to be a central element of Black Power politics. The Boggses identified expressions of this idea as early as 1963 during the March on Washington, citing John Lewis of SNCC, whose censored speech called for the black struggle to act independently of the Democratic party. They also cited the formation of the Freedom Now Party which, as an effort to create an independent vehicle for exercising political power, “contributed to establishing the idea of independent black political power inside the Northern freedom movement.”⁵⁹ By the spring of 1965, this ideas was gaining wider acceptance.

On 1 May 1965, activists from across the country gathered at the Boggses’ home to form the Organization for Black Power (OBP). It was conceived as a coalition of organizations, and those gathered in the Boggs’ basement included Bill Strickland of the Northern Student Movement, Harlem activists and rent strike leader Jesse Gray, members of RAM, ACT and other organizations.⁶⁰ This was more than a year before the Meredith March during which SNCC activists Stokely Carmichael

⁵⁹ Boggs, Racism and the Class Struggle , p. 45.

⁶⁰ Ibid.; Boggs, Living for Change, p. 136; Stanford, “Revolutionary Action Movement,” p. 117.

and Willie Ricks brought the “Black Power” slogan to the nation, and thus the use of the phrase here predates and in some ways prefigures the movement. In this context, the phrase referred specifically to the assumption and exercise of political power. This was conceptualized not as independent political organizing within the established political process, but rather “black state power,” that is, black people acting to assume control over forms of government.⁶¹ The organization thus set out to “establish a scientific basis for the perspective of Black Political Power in the historical development of the United States.”⁶²

A statement adopted by the organization at this founding meeting indicates that OBP identified black political power as a central and fundamental component of revolutionary social change.

At this juncture in history the system itself cannot, will not, resolve the problems that have been created by centuries of exploitation of black people. It remains for the Negro struggle not only to change the system but to arrive at the kind of social system fitting to our time and in relation to the development of this country.⁶³

The statement goes on to identify the nation’s cities as a vital political terrain and potential site for achieving black political power:

The city is the base which we must organize as the factories were in the 1930s. We must struggle to control, to govern the cities as workers struggled to control and govern the factories in the 1930s.

⁶¹ Stanford, “Revolutionary Action Movement,” p. 117.

⁶² Boggs, Racism and the Class Struggle, p. 45.

⁶³ Ibid. p. 45.

To do this we must be clear that power means a program to come to power by all the means through which new social forces have come to power in the past.

1. We must organize a cadre who will function in the cities as the labor organizers of the 1930s functioned in and around the factories.
2. We must choose our own issues around which to mobilize the mass and immobilize the enemy.
3. We must prepare ourselves to be ready for what the masses themselves do spontaneously as they explode against the enemy—in most cases, the police—and be ready to take political power whenever possible.
4. We must find a way to finance our movement ourselves.⁶⁴

Thus, at its founding the OBP began to project a program for black political power. As a coalition of organizations, the members of the OBP intended to “organize black people to politically take over large metropolitan areas in the 1970s.”⁶⁵ The OBP, however, was unable to maintain its coalition. Organizationally, this small short-lived group achieved little, but ideologically it demonstrated the creative and innovative directions that were open to black theorists and activists. In its focus on the meaning of and prospects for achieving black political power and on black people in the nation’s urban centers, the OBP presaged important elements of the Black Power movement. Despite the dissolution of the OBP, the Boggses

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 46.

⁶⁵ Stanford, “Revolutionary Action Movement,” p. 117.

continued to think through the implications of these ideas, and a year later they produced their first theoretical statement of these ideas.

“The City is the Black Man’s Land”

During the spring of 1965, while the Boggses were preparing for the founding OBP conference, Jimmy received an invitation to write a review of Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of The Earth (Les Damnes de la terre). In June, Boggs replied to the editor of the journal, explaining that his work on the conference had delayed his response but he was “highly pleased” to be asked to review such an important book.⁶⁶ Originally published in France in 1961, Fanon’s cogent and passionate analysis of anticolonial revolution was translated in English in 1965 and being marketed as “The handbook for a Negro Revolution that is changing the shape of the white world.”⁶⁷ Indeed, the book would prove to be a major ideological influence within the Black Power movement.⁶⁸ Boggs had not begun work on the review, but he was still willing to do so if time permitted. If so, he told the editor, the review would begin as follows:

If every black in America were to dispose of his Bible and pick up The Damned, he will have taken the first step towards relieving

⁶⁶ James Boggs to Mario Riofrancos, 6 June 1965, Boggs Papers, Box 2, Folder 2.

⁶⁷ See advertisement in *Liberator* vol. 6 no. 7 (July 1966), p. 26.

⁶⁸ Chapter 4 below contains a brief discussion of Fanon and his influence on the Black Power movement.

himself of all the western philosophies which have made him the wretched of the earth and acquired a new Bible to fight for his freedom which can only come through the unleashing of powerful forces to take power from an opposing set of powerful forces who at this stage in history can only offer the world naked barbarism.⁶⁹

With its hints of hyperbole (“naked barbarism”) and irreverence (“dispose of his Bible and pick up The Damned”), this particularly long sentence was apparently an accurate though impulsive expression of Boggs’ thinking. Nonetheless, the passage provides another example of Boggs’ passionate approach to revolutionary politics. It also offers a window into his thinking and intellectual concerns during this period. Boggs explained to the editor that he envisioned his review as “a stepping off point for a revolutionary looking at the American scene.”⁷⁰ He and Grace Boggs, as we have seen, had by then come to the conclusion that ideological and creative tensions within the Civil Rights movement had brought the black struggle to a new stage. Thus, in this period they were attempting to develop a theoretical framework for understanding that new stage and advancing the struggle towards revolutionary action.

This objective, which was the rationale for the OBP, animated their intellectual work. In a letter to James Lacy, a member of the sizable African American expatriate community in Ghana, Grace Boggs explained that she and her husband were attempting “to develop a body of ideas and perspectives related to the

⁶⁹ James Boggs to Mario Riofrancos, 6 June 1965, Boggs Papers, Box 2, Folder 2. Boggs did in fact write the review. The passage from his letter quoted here does not appear verbatim but its ideas are reflected. (The review is in the Boggs Papers, Box 1, Folder 9.)

⁷⁰ James Boggs to Mario Riofrancos, 6 June 1965, Boggs Papers, Box 2, Folder 2.

specific conditions” that characterized the current political scene. Writing in April of 1965, she said that the geographical expansion of the black movement beyond the south had demonstrated the need to deepen the theoretical basis for the black movement’s strategies and programs. Articulating an idea that became a central concept in the Boggses’ subsequent writings, she said that their “political-ideological work” was directed toward advancing a new concept of revolution in “this economically advanced but politically very backward country.”⁷¹ Similarly, Jimmy had written to the editors of *Monthly Review* in January that he was now “prepared to say that a new vision of revolution for the advanced countries must be evolved.”⁷² At the beginning of the year, the Boggses had begun to formulate such a vision that had as its starting point black people in American cities.

Early in 1965 Jimmy Boggs received an invitation to participate in a conference on “Cybernetics, Society, and the Negro” at Morgan State College, a historically black institution in Baltimore, Maryland. He was asked to make a presentation for a public symposium on “Cybernation and the Civil Rights Movement,” which he and Grace wrote together.⁷³ In March, Grace went to Baltimore in Jimmy’s place to deliver the speech (Jimmy was unable to leave work), which articulated their conception of black political power. They argued that in American cities, where black people were becoming the majority, black political

⁷¹ Grace Lee Boggs to James Lacy, 6 April 1965, Boggs Papers, Box 2, Folder 2.

⁷² James Boggs to Leo and Paul, 28 January 1965, Boggs Papers, Box 1; Folder 18.

⁷³ J. Haywood Harrison to James Boggs, 11 January 1965, Boggs Papers, Box 2, Folder 2; Boggs, *Living for Change*, p. 137.

power could reorganize the economy. In the months to follow, as developments in the country and beyond (such as the Watts rebellion in August 1965 and the escalation of the war in Vietnam) intensified the domestic political situation, the Boggses further developed their theory of revolutionary urban black political power, and this speech was the basis of an essay in which they stated this position.

In April 1966 *Monthly Review* published the essay under the title, “The City is the Black Man’s Land,” presenting the Boggses’ attempt to put forward a revolutionary theory of black urban struggle to reorganize American society. Appearing two months before the Meredith March, the essay also reflects their analysis of the contemporary political situation on the eve of Black Power’s emergence as a slogan and movement. The analysis begins with the recognition that African Americans were fast becoming a majority in the nation’s largest cities. These demographic changes, they argued, would bring political conflict because they would not likely to lead to blacks assuming “leadership of municipal government” as such changes had for previous ethnic groups, such as Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants. “Each previous ethnic grouping achieved first-class citizenship chiefly because its leaders became the cities’ leaders, but racism is so deeply imbedded in the American psyche from top to bottom, and from Right to Left, that it cannot even entertain the idea of a black political power in the cities.”⁷⁴ Thus, the struggle for black political power necessarily had to be a revolutionary one, with the objective of claiming control over the administration and functioning of the cities. “The war is not only *in*

⁷⁴ Boggs, Racism and the Class Struggle, p. 39

America's cities," they asserted, "it is *for* these cities." Essentially, the program for black political power in the nation's urban areas meant: "self-government of the major cities by the black majority, mobilized behind leaders and organizations of its own creation and prepared to reorganize the structure of city government and city life from top to bottom."⁷⁵

These radical conceptions of citizenship and black self-determination would be created through a black revolutionary organization. Citing the formation of the OBP among other developments, the Boggses said that "black revolutionaries all over the country have been working out the theory and practice of building" such an organization.⁷⁶ Specifically, they listed four areas in which this foundation must be laid.

First was "clarifying what black power would mean in real terms" by determining the types of programs that black government in the cities would institute. As examples, they said "Black Political Power would institute a crash program to utilize the most advanced technology to free people from all forms of manual labor. It would also take immediate steps to transform the concept of welfare to one of human dignity or of well-faring and well being." They conceded that such programs would require expropriating resources from current owners, and thus could not be achieved

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 40.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 46.

without black revolutionary governments in major cities and “in the most strategic position to contend with and eventually defeat [the] national power structure.”⁷⁷

Secondly, the Boggses identified as essential the task of “organizing of struggles around concrete grievances of the masses” which, along with improving the welfare of the community, can be a source of political education making the masses conscious of the ubiquitous and murderous exercise of “white power”:

It is white power which decides whether to shoot to kill (as in Watts) or not to shoot at all (as in Oxford, Mississippi, against white mobs); to arrest or not to arrest; to break up picket lines or not to break up picket lines; to investigate brutality and murder or to allow these to go uninvestigated; to decide who eats and who goes on city aid when out of work and who does not eat and does not go on city aid; to decide who goes to what schools and does not; who has transportation and who doesn't; who has garbage collected and who doesn't; what streets are lighted and have good sidewalks and what streets have neither lights nor sidewalks; what neighborhoods are torn down for urban renewal and who and what are to go back into those neighborhoods. It is white power which decides which people are drafted into the army to fight and which countries this army is to fight at what moment.⁷⁸

These powers, the Boggses said, were all in the political arena, thus this was the arena which the black revolutionary movement must take over. Apparently with the experiences of Watts and other urban rebellions in mind, they called for marches, picket lines and demonstrations to be focused on “the seats of power so that when spontaneous eruptions take place the masses will naturally form committees to take

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 46-47.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 48.

over these institutions rather than concentrate their energies on the places where consumer goods are distributed.”⁷⁹

The other two elements to building this revolutionary organization were not specific to the cities but were expressions of important ideological and political commitments among Black Power activists: self-defense and opposition to the Vietnam war. The Boggs’ called for the development of “paramilitary cadres ready to defend black militants and the black community from counter-revolutionary attacks.”⁸⁰ As for the war in Vietnam, they deemed it “the most immediate as well as profound issue affecting the whole black community and particularly black youth.” Thus, they asserted that the black revolutionary organization must “make it clear in theory and practice that the Vietcong and the Black Power movement in the United States are part of the same world-wide revolution against the same enemy.” Linking this position to that which Malcolm X’s internationalism, they continued “Like the black youth of Watts, the black revolutionary organization will make it clear that black youth have no business fighting in the Ku Klux Klan army that is slaughtering black people in Vietnam.”⁸¹

In a letter to one of the editors of *Monthly Review*, the journal which published the essay, Jimmy Boggs explained two elements of their analysis which were not thoroughly addressed in the article. Witting three months before the essay was published, Boggs explained how they envisioned the relationship between black

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 48.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 49.

political power and a potential socialist revolution. “There is no question but that black political power in any major United States city at this stage in history, while starting with the aim of self government, would have to take the road of socialist revolution.” However, he said, “the American socialist revolution has to have a base of strength, and we say that this base is now the city, its chief social force is the black urban community, and the first objective must be black political power.” To further illuminate, he explained that their concept of black power was more than “black power in the ghettos but the power of the ghettoized blacks in the city as a whole.” The distinction was an important one, borne out in the various groups and ideologies operating within the black struggle. Thus, Jimmy distinguished the Boggses’ ideas from other articulations or espousals of black power: “[Representative Adam Clayton] Powell and the Northern Student Movement have been doing a lot of talking about black power, but when you look carefully at what they have been saying and doing it turns out that they really mean only control by Negroes over their own communities and not black leadership of the city as a whole.”⁸² We can interpret this subtle but important distinction as such: what Boggs attributed to Powell and others was a call for ‘community control,’ or control of black *communities within cities* by black people, which was an expression of self-determination (a central component of Black Power ideology). The type of power or political control that the Boggs were theorizing, on the other hand, was a call for black control *of the city itself*.

⁸² James Boggs to Paul, 15 January 1966, Boggs Papers, Box 19, Folder 16.

In addition to its ideological innovation, “The City is the Black Man’s Land” is noteworthy for two reasons. Firstly, it is the Boggses’ first major collaborative theoretical work, and in part marks her emergence as a self-conscious theorist of Black Power. Through the 1950s the Boggses developed a remarkable political partnership as part of their lives together, but as described above, Grace chose to play a relatively reserved role in that period while she learned from Jimmy and the black community. By the 1960s, she felt that she “had been living in the black community long enough to play an active role” in the theoretical and practical development of the black movement in Detroit.⁸³ We have seen her organizing efforts in the Grassroots Leadership Conference and the Freedom Now Party in 1963 and 1964; she was also involved in “theoretical work” in this period, and “The City is the Black Man’s Land” is a reflection of that work. It is also an example of what activist and scholar Jennifer Jung Hee Choi has characterized as the Boggses’ “increasingly inseparable ideological and political collaboration.”⁸⁴

Secondly, the essay demonstrates how the Boggses’ theoretical work was integrally connected to concrete conditions and experiences. As we have seen, the ideas presented in the essay were developed in part through their efforts to form the OBP. The essay was written and its ideas developed during the period when the OBP was formed, and the organization itself was conceived as a means to operationalize

⁸³ Grace Lee Boggs, “Coming Full Circle,” p. 3, Unpublished paper presented to the North American Labor History Conference, Wayne State University, October 19, 2001 (in author’s possession).

⁸⁴ Jennifer Junh Hee Choi, “At the Margins of the Asian American Political Experience: The Life of Grace Lee Boggs,” *Amerasia Journal*, UCLA Asian American Studies Center, Vol. 25, no. 2 (1999), p. 39n25.

the ideas in the essay. Thus, their intellectual work (development of political ideas) was organically connected to their political work (development of political organizations), with each informing the other in a symbiotic relationship. This essay also illustrates how the Boggses' politics were 'place-based' and their political analysis was grounded in their own reality, including surroundings and experiences, personal and political. As local Detroit activists, they were attuned to the political dynamics of their city, where the black population was quickly rising, and this informed their analysis of urban black America. Also, they saw first hand the effects of automation on the labor process and especially on black workers, helping them come to their assessment of black people as the new revolutionary social force.

The importance of the 'politics of place' in the Boggses' ideological development and political activism was once again apparent in 1967, when Detroit was shocked by an urban rebellion, an increasingly familiar phenomenon of the Black Power era.

Rebellion or Revolution? Black Power and the "Great Rebellion" in Detroit

Black Power. Black Power. This is what is being written about and talked about in all strata of the population of the United States of America. Not since the specter of Communism first began to haunt Europe over one hundred years ago has an idea put forward by so few people frightened so many in so short a time. Liberals and radicals, Negro civil rights leaders and politicians, reporters

and editorial writers—it is amazing to what degree all of them are fascinated and appalled by Black Power.

-- James Boggs, “Black Power: A Scientific Concept Whose Time Has Come,” 1966⁸⁵

On 16 June 1966, two months after the publication of “The City is the Black Man’s Land,” Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Willie Ricks famously led a crowd of marchers in a chant of “Black Power” during a civil rights march in Greenwood, Mississippi. Within two weeks, according to historian Manning Marable, the slogan had sparked a national debate.⁸⁶ Jimmy Boggs engaged this debate in an essay written in the months following the march titled, “Black Power: A Scientific Concept Whose Time Has Come.” This was the Boggses’ first analysis of Black Power after the slogan marked the beginning of a movement under its name. The essay begins with the assessment of the debates concerning Black Power cited above, and then moves to a critique of liberals, radicals, and civil rights leaders for their failure to recognize that Black Power was fundamentally about the nature and exercise of power in American society. These analysts offered shallow commentary on Black Power because they “would rather keep the concept vague than grapple with the systematic analysis of American capitalism out of which the concept of Black Power had developed.”⁸⁷ For Boggs, the concept of Black Power was an expression

⁸⁵ The essay was written during 1966. Its first English publication was in the April and May 1967 issues of *Liberator*.

⁸⁶ Manning Marable, Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991 [1984]), p. 94.

⁸⁷ Boggs, Racism and the Class Struggle, p. 52.

of the black population as the new revolutionary social force. Rearticulating an argument that the Boggses began making with The American Revolution, he said that the uniqueness of the concept “stems from the specific historical development of the United States,” adding that “it has nothing to do with any special moral virtue in being black, as some black nationalists seem to think.”⁸⁸ Indeed, even at this early stage, Black Power could be interpreted differently even among its advocates. Further highlighting what they found to be the fundamental importance of the Black Power concept, the Boggses continued:

Nor does it have to do with the special cultural virtues of the African heritage. Identification with the African past is useful insofar as it enables black Americans to develop a sense of identity independent of the Western civilization which has robbed them of their humanity by robbing them of any history. But no past culture ever created a revolution. Every revolution creates a new culture out of the process of revolutionary struggle against the old values and culture which an oppressing society has sought to impose upon the oppressed.⁸⁹

The essay summarizes the central ideas of “The City is the Black Man’s Land” and connects them to a discussion of the meaning of the emerging Black Power movement. Boggs asserts that the call for Black Power created two “splits within the movement.” The first was between Black Power advocates and civil rights advocates, who remained committed to integrating African Americans into the society without any substantial change to that society. The other split was within the Black Power movement, between “the idealists or romanticists and the realists.” This

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 58.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 58.

split, he explained, highlighted the need for a black revolutionary party. “The romanticists continue to talk and hope to arouse the masses of black people through self-agitation. They deluded themselves by “creating the illusion that one set of people can replace another set of people in power without building an organization to take active steps to power, while at the same time agitating and mobilizing the masses.”⁹⁰ The realists, on the other hand, “base themselves first and foremost on a scientific evaluation of the American system and of revolution.” Furthermore, the realists recognized that “Black Power cannot come from the masses doing what they do when they feel like doing it, but must come from the painstaking, systematic building of an organization to lead the masses to power.”⁹¹ Written at the end of 1966 and published in the spring of 1967, this essay was as much a projection for the future of Black Power politics as it was an analysis of contemporary developments.

The political and cultural activity among African Americans in Detroit during 1966 suggests that Black Power had already reached Detroit when the slogan became a part of the political landscape in June 1966. In addition to the Boggses’ theoretical analysis, the city was by then home to several militant black formations, including UHURU, a militant group of young activist who would soon help form the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Rev. Cleage’s Shrine of the Black Madonna Church and the growing Black Christian Nationalist Movement, and a black nationalist collective called Forum 66. In addition, Detroit was one of the centers of Black Arts

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 59.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 59-60.

movement, which was described by one of its principles, Larry Neal, as the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the black power concept.” On 24-26 June 1966, Detroit artists and activist held a Black Arts Convention with speakers and panels addressing such topics as the black writer, religion, nationalism, theatre, black history, and the war in Vietnam.⁹² Among the participants was Grace Lee Boggs, who spoke on strategies for citizens to take control of their communities during a session on politics.⁹³

Carmichael had been scheduled to deliver the keynote address to the Convention on June 24, but he was unable to attend because of injuries sustained in confrontations with Mississippi state police on June 23. He did, however, come to Detroit the following month, addressing a Black Power rally at Cobo Hall on July 30. Carmichael drew a crowd of several hundred supporters, but some of his detractors circulated rumors that a riot had been planned by local militants in conjunction with his visit. Though the city enjoyed the reputation as a model city of race relations, speculation about the possibility of racial unrest increased throughout the summer. There was a minor incident between black Detroiters and the police in August, but it lasted only two days and there were no fatalities.⁹⁴

The following year, however, in July 1967, Detroit was the site of one of the most violent and destructive urban rebellions (or ‘race riots’) in American history.

Sparked by a police-raid of an after-hours saloon (called “blind pigs”) in one of

⁹² Sidney Fine, Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1989), p. 29; Lawrence P. Neal, “Report on Black Arts Convention at Detroit,” *Liberator*, vol. 6, no. 8 (August 1966), p. 18-19.

⁹³ Suzanne E. Smith, Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 175.

⁹⁴ Fine, Violence in the Model City, p. 29; Smith, Dancing in the Street, p. 176-177.

Detroit's largest black neighborhoods, the rebellion lasted five days and claimed forty-three lives (thirty killed by law enforcement officers).⁹⁵ Again, newspapers, police, city official, and others speculated that the civil disturbance—called a 'riot' by some and "the Great Rebellion" by others—had been the result of a conspiracy or an organized effort by Black Power militants.⁹⁶ One commentator even suggested that the Boggses, along with Rev. Cleage and three other local activists, were responsible for the rebellion.⁹⁷ In fact, the Boggses were in California during the 23-28 July eruption. They certainly played no role instigating the rebellion, nor did they have any impact on its course of direction. The rebellion did, however, have an effect on them, as it did activists throughout the city.

The rebellion intensified Black Power sentiments and political energies in Detroit, and over the next two years several new black power groups were formed in the city, many of them organized by people who had been collaborators and allies of the Boggses in local Detroit struggles. For example, in 1968 former Milton and Richard Henry (taking the names Brothers Gaidi and Imari Obadele) formed the Republic of New Africa.⁹⁸ Also in that year, former members of UHURU and other black auto workers formed the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), which by 1969 had grown to form the city-wide League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW). These and other expressions of Black Power politics reflected the

⁹⁵ Thomas J. Sugrue, Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 259; Fine, Violence in the Model City.

⁹⁶ "Anatomy of a Riot," Detroit News, July 30, 1967, p.1.

⁹⁷ Boggs, Living for Change, p. 138.

⁹⁸ Robin D. G. Kelley, Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), p. 124.

intensity and variety of movement activity in post-rebellion Detroit. As for the Boggses, Grace recalled that “The rebellion of 1967 forced us to rethink a lot of philosophical questions.”⁹⁹ The Detroit rebellion erupted just weeks after the Newark uprising, and both took place in the shadow of Watts in 1965. Together, they demonstrated the powerful impact of urban uprisings on Black Power politics. For the Boggses, the urgency, anger, and outrage embodied in these rebellions led them to reevaluate and further develop their understanding of the revolutionary process and the place of urban black youth and spontaneous rebellions in that process. Thus, as they watched events unfold nationally and in Detroit, the Boggses felt the need “to draw a clear distinction between rebellion...and revolution.”¹⁰⁰

Meanwhile, Jimmy continued receiving invitations to speak at universities and conferences across the country. In addition, The American Revolution had been translated and published in Italian, Spanish, Japanese, French, and Portuguese, bringing the Boggses’ ideas to an ever widening international audience. In June 1968, as plans were underway to publish in Italian a collection of Jimmy’s essays, the publisher invited him to speak to university students in several Italian cities. Thus, in the midst of the massive social upheaval across the continent, the Boggses traveled to Italy, also visiting Paris and Rome, sharing ideas and observing political developments there.¹⁰¹ From there, they spent a week with African revolutionary

⁹⁹ Grace Lee Boggs, “My Philosophical Journey,” (1998), p. 7, Unpublished paper (in author’s possession).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁰¹ Boggs, Living for Change, p. 141.

Kwame Nkrumah in Conakary, Guinea, where he had been living in exile since being deposed as President of Ghana by a 1966 military coup. In 1967 the Boggses began correspondence with Nkrumah, who Grace had known since 1945, to arrange their visit. The week in Conakry gave them the opportunity to discussing the political situation both in Africa and the U.S., which they continued through correspondence and the sharing of writings until Nkrumah's death in 1972.¹⁰²

When the Boggses returned to the U.S. at the end of June 1968 they revisited their concern with the theoretical difference between rebellion and revolution. The fast-paced and powerful developments within the Black Power movement (including the assassination of Martin Luther King, the subsequent wave of urban rebellions, and the rapid rise of the Black Panther Party) led them also to concentrate on “projecting and initiating struggles that involve [the oppressed] in assuming the responsibility for creating the new values, truths, infrastructures, and institutions that are necessary to a new society.”¹⁰³ Shortly after returning to the country, they spent time with their long-time comrades Freddy and Lyman Paine on Sutton Island in Maine, where they had wide-ranging conversations about these issues. Through these discussion (which the four continued every summer for several years¹⁰⁴), the Boggses began working through the theoretical concepts that would inform their next intellectual and political effort.

¹⁰² Kwame Nkrumah to Mr. and Mrs. James Boggs, 23 September 1967, Kwame Nkrumah Papers, Box 154-1, Folder 19, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

¹⁰³ Grace Lee Boggs, “Coming Full Circle,” p. 4, Unpublished paper presented to the North American Labor History Conference, Wayne State University, October 19, 2001 (in author's possession).

¹⁰⁴ Boggs, Boggs, Paine, and Paine, Conversations in Maine.

Their starting point was a reassessment of the Marxist conception of the revolutionary process. In The Other American Revolution and other writings the Boggses had argued that African Americans and their political movement, not the working class and labor movement, was the force which could lead a revolutionary transformation of American society. This challenged the Marxist notion that the working class, because they were most oppressed by capitalism, would necessarily emerge as the agent of revolution. In this scenario, the role of revolutionaries was to agitate and educate the workers, mobilizing them to action. Not accepting this scenario for late twentieth century America, the Boggses and Paines, asked: how else might we understand the concept of revolution and our role as revolutionaries? Rejecting a rigid economic determinism, they discussed revolution as involving “an inner transformation or a great leap forward in the continuing struggle to become more socially and politically conscious and more responsible for governing ourselves.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, the role of ‘revolutionists’ could not just be to “rub raw the sores of discontent in order to get the oppressed masses to rebel.” Rather, revolutionists must recognize “the damage that a highly developed capitalist system, pouring out goods from its assembly lines, has done to all of us, victims as well as villains,” and therefore take the responsibility “to create strategies to transform ourselves as well as the victims of oppression into human beings who are more advanced in the qualities that distinguish human beings: creativity, consciousness, self-consciousness, and a

¹⁰⁵ Boggs, “My Philosophical Journey,” p. 7.

sense of political and social responsibility.”¹⁰⁶ This was an elaboration of the concept of “dialectical humanism” that Jimmy had introduced in “The Meaning of the Black Revolt in the U.S.”

With these ideas as a foundation, the Boggses now developed their theoretical distinction between rebellion and revolution, and with it a framework for understanding the current development of the Black Power movement. In her autobiography, Grace succinctly summarizes their conclusion:

Rebellion is a stage in the development of revolution but it is not revolution. It is an important stage because it represents the standing up of the oppressed. Rebellions break the threads that have been holding the system together and throw into question its legitimacy and the supposed permanence of existing institutions. A rebellion disrupts the society but it does not provide what is necessary to make a revolution and establish a new social order. To make a revolution, people must not only struggle against existing institutions. They must make a philosophical/spiritual lead and become more *human* human beings. In order to change/transform the world, they must change/transform themselves.¹⁰⁷

Thus, for Jimmy and Grace Lee Boggs, rebellion represented a struggle *against* something (oppression), while revolution was a struggle *for* (a new society). When they returned to Detroit at the end of the summer, the Boggses set out to develop a vision and program to lead black youth from rebellion to revolution.

¹⁰⁶ Boggs, *Living for Change*, p. 152.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

The Black Economic Development Conference and *The Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party*

By the summer of 1968 Detroit was a center of Black Power activity. Upon their return, the Boggses' saw manifestations of this activity across the city, representing various dimensions of the black struggle. For example, the rapid growth of Rev. Cleage's Shrine of the Black Madonna, the emergence of DRUM, and the willingness of black youth to take up arms reflected Black Power's challenge to the Christian church, American industry, and the police. In July 1968, plans were underway to address another aspect of racial oppression: the economic exploitation of black communities. Under the leadership of black clergyman Rev. Lucius T. Walker, Jr., the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) initiated the idea for national conference on black economic development to be held in Detroit. Planned for the following spring, the conference would bring together activists and thinkers from across the nation to address the economic conditions of African Americans, probe the relationship between racism and the national economy, and explore strategies for the economic development of black communities. Because it was a timely response to recent conditions and developments—including the failure of the government's poverty programs, the unsuccessful Poor People's Campaign, and a generally rising concern among black activists about the economic dimensions of racial oppression—Walker suggested that the conference theme “might well be

Black Power Through Black Economic Development.”¹⁰⁸ Over the course of the next several months IFCO and other organizations put together plans for the National Black Economic Development Conference to be held in April 1969. A prominent feature of the gathering was to be a series of keynote speakers, one of whom was Jimmy Boggs.

During this period, the Boggses pursued their plans to develop a revolutionary program for the current stage of the Black Power movement, resulting in the pamphlet, *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party*. Though the pamphlet carried Jimmy’s byline, he and Grace wrote it together and, it reflects their collaborative efforts in this period to develop a theoretical and practical understanding of the revolutionary process.¹⁰⁹ The *Manifesto*’s primary objective was to advance the proposition, which was based on the Boggses’ distinction between rebellion and revolution, that a black revolutionary political organization—a ‘vanguard party’—must be formed to provide revolutionary leadership to the Black Power movement. The *Manifesto* begins with a preamble stating in brief the rationale and general tasks for a black revolutionary party, and then provides in four concise chapters a systematic analysis of the historical development and revolutionary potential of black struggle. Read carefully, and in light of the Boggses’ intellectual and political work up to this point, the *Manifesto* is both a record of the ideas that

¹⁰⁸ Lucius Walker to Paul Moore, 15 July 1968, Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizations Papers, Box 5, Folder 14, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. (Hereafter cited as IFCO Papers)

¹⁰⁹ Author’s interview with Grace Lee Boggs, 17 November, 2001, Detroit, MI (hereafter cited as Boggs interview).

they developed through the decade and a manifestation of their commitment, self-consciously as theoreticians, to grapple with the changing circumstances, challenges, and opportunities facing the Black Power movement.

The first chapter, “Racism and Revolution,” describes how the historical development of the black struggle has forced a deepening social crisis for the nation. The struggle against racism has been waged since “the first shipload of slaves,” the Boggses wrote, but in recent years this struggle had developed into a movement that has now forced “ever-expanding and ever-increasing struggles over racism” into the consciousness and daily life of every American.¹¹⁰ Initially seeking reforms to eliminate relatively superficial expressions of racism, the movement was compelled to more revolutionary positions as the earlier hopes went largely unrealized. Thus the movement for civil rights became a movement for Black Power, “challenging the racism structured in every American institution and posing the need to reorganize these institutions from their very foundation.”¹¹¹ This course of escalating struggles, in turn, deprived these institutions of their legitimacy. Furthermore, “as the contradiction between the humane pretensions of this society and its actual anti-human practices in regard to Blacks has become more glaring, its barbarism towards other peoples and in other spheres has also become more unbearable.” The result, according to the Boggses, was that the nation was “hated and dishonored” abroad while anger, frustration, and desperation reigned at home. In this situation, where

¹¹⁰ James Boggs, *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party* (Detroit: Advocators, 1969), p. 3-4.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

“formally accepted values no longer command assent,” a great many people had begun to search for radical solutions, while the increasingly delegitimized government resorts to arbitrary and violent acts to maintain law and order. Hence, the revolutionary dynamics inherent in the development of the black movement: the struggle that appeared as a fight for one segment of the population to achieve its rights “has burgeoned into a total crisis of the whole nation.”¹¹²

The second chapter of the *Manifesto* addresses the question, “Who Will Make the Revolution,” to which the Boggses answer (as they articulated in earlier work): blacks have replaced the American working class as the revolutionary social force. In an elaboration of their position, they assert that the black struggle has the combined force of a national revolution (because of its relationship to and marginalization from white America through segregation) and a social revolution (because blacks are an economically exploited underclass and thus experience the contradiction between their own misery and degradation and the nation’s spectacular material development). “The combined dynamics of a national struggle for self-determination and a social struggle to resolve the contradictions of an advanced capitalist society have steadily driven the Black movement from a struggle for Reforms to a struggle for Black Power.”¹¹³

The Boggses also focused their analysis specifically on urban black youth, or the “black street force.” This reflects their observation and analysis of recent social

¹¹² Ibid., p. 5.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 9.

dynamics within the Black Power movement and within the black communities of Detroit and other cities. As the most disaffected and alienated segment of the black community, these youth represented for the Boggses “the future of Black people—one way or another.” On one hand, they were socially destructive: “Pushouts or dropouts, with plenty of time on their hands, they invade public buildings and private businesses, schools and offices, demanding and taking, challenging and defying, deepening the sense of crisis and insecurity inside the Black community.” Yet, “their Black Pride, their rejection of white values, and their expendability to the economy” imbued them with revolutionary potential. Thus, the Boggses concluded that if this potential was “systematically encouraged and developed,” these young people could “become the most dedicated fighters for Black liberation. If, on the other hand, older Blacks join with white America in calling for their repression and extermination as troublemakers and criminals, the white power structure will be glad to oblige.”¹¹⁴

The next chapter projects a program for the reorganization of society. Titled “How Black Power will Revolutionize America,” chapter 3 presents an extended discussion of the revolutionary social agenda outlined in “The City is the Black Man’s Land.” In that essay, the Boggses offered brief examples of the type of program that the black revolutionary organization would institute upon assuming control of city government. Here, they provide a fuller articulation of this vision, detailing the specific structural changes that they envision and the ways that these

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 14-15.

changes will transform society. The analysis proceeds from the Boggses' assessment that the nation had reached extremely high levels of economic development and productive capacity, but its citizenry had developed an exceedingly restrictive capacity for civic and political participation. Thus, Black Power was coming at a time when "the productive forces are already sufficiently developed to establish a material basis for communism, i.e. a society in which each has according to his needs and contributes according to his abilities." Therefore, the task at hand was "to increase the political power, participation, and understanding of the great masses of people in order to develop their capacity to become socially responsible and creative human beings." [17] Towards this end, black political leadership must affect the expropriation of "all those who now own the means of production, distribution, and communication" and "then redistribute these national resources to local communities."¹¹⁵ This, the Boggses explain, will facilitate the transfer of political power into the hands of the citizenry by giving them control over the resources necessary to determine the structure of their society.

What then, are the elements of this program for revolutionary social transformation? "The first step," they write, "will be to declare everyone, Black or white, North or South, young or old, entitled to the material goods they need to live in dignity, regardless of whether or not they have been involved in the process of labor."¹¹⁶ By guaranteeing each person a living, Black Power will "remove the

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

forced character of work and the stigma on those not working.” Furthermore, it will “give control over production to those on the job” so that their place of work will not only be for the production of goods but also a place “for developing their mastery of technology and releasing their creativity in the productive arena.”¹¹⁷ Beyond the production process, the Boggses project a program of Black Power that will guarantee full and free medical care to all people from birth, make public transportation a free public service, and create a new concept of “well-faring” in which the young, the aged, and mother’s with dependent children will be encouraged to play a central role in community decision-making¹¹⁸. Black Power will place schools under the control of local communities, “making clear that the fundamental purpose of education in the modern world is to produce socially responsible human beings,” and it will institute a “national crash housing program” to provide immediate housing and facilitate “long-range planning by the people themselves in order to make cities into human places to live and grow.”¹¹⁹ In the international arena, Black Power will act to change the relations of the United States to the rest of the world by: recognizing “the right and duty of all nations to establish the kind of societies which they deem suitable to their needs;” recognizing the rights of people “systematically exploited by Western imperialism to whatever economic aid they themselves decide is necessary to assist in

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 23.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 22.

their development; and “immediately [withdrawing] all military forces and basis in other nations.”¹²⁰

In the fourth chapter, “The Black Revolutionary Party,” the Boggses turn to the form and function of the revolutionary political organization that they envision. It begins by explaining the three roles of such an organization:

First, to develop and keep before the movement, the nation, and the world the real meaning and objectives of the life and death struggle in which the Black community is now engaged; second, to bring together in a disciplined national organization the revolutionary individuals who are being constantly thrown up by spontaneous eruption and the experience of struggle; third, to devise and project, in constant interaction with the masses in struggle, a long-range strategy for achieving Black Revolutionary Power in the United States.¹²¹

The first of these roles—the constant clarification of goals—was important because, the Boggses argued, the specific and unique characteristics of the African American struggle threatened to forestall its success. No historical models existed for a revolution in a nation “as technologically advanced and as politically backward as the United States.” The situation was also unique in that the responsibility for revolutionary action fell to a national minority. Finally, they asserted, “never before in human history has the counter-revolution had at its disposal so many resources to confuse, corrupt, and divert the revolutionary forces.”¹²² Given these circumstances, a strong revolutionary party must establish and maintain the perspectives and overall strategy of the revolutionary struggle.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 29.

¹²² Ibid., p. 29.

The second function of the party was to provide an organizational vehicle for the revolutionary energies among the masses. The Boggses felt that the party should be clearly distinguished from traditional civil rights organizations as well as from the many “ad hoc” groups which had recently been formed in the cauldron of Black Power militancy. The former had “been organized to integrate Blacks into and thereby save the system,” whereas the latter were formed around particular issues in the course of struggle. Such groups, which aroused the emotions of the masses around these issues, were capable of fostering rebellion but not leading a revolution. Thus, the revolutionary party must be a “cadre-type organization,” comprised of politically conscious individuals who are completely committed to the struggle and to building the party. The core of such an organization would be “cold, sober revolutionaries who are bound together by a body of ideas,” and who “recognize the vital importance of disciplined organization and strong leadership to revolutionary struggle.”¹²³

This reflects the Boggses assessment of the Black Panther Party (BPP) as an important development in the Black Power movement. While it has come to be the most well known, even emblematic, element of the Black Power movement, the BPP was one of many organizational efforts to advance the movement when it was formed in the fall of 1966. Over the next two years the BPP gained national attention, in large part because of its espousal of armed self-defense and its public confrontations with police, and began to have a presence beyond northern California, where it was

¹²³ Ibid., p. 30.

founded. In the period following the assassination of Martin Luther King on 4 April 1968, BPP chapters were organized throughout the nation, including Detroit, where the Boggses saw in practice some of the ideas and tendencies which they argue against in the *Manifesto*. The Boggses attempted to build on what they considered to be the primary contribution of the BPP, namely, that it was the first major attempt to create a revolutionary vanguard party and it mobilized and organized disaffected black youth.¹²⁴ Similarly, they examined the weaknesses of the BPP and incorporated this analysis into their program and projection for Black Power. For example, the Boggses found that BPP's highly public confrontations with, reaction to, and defense against the system, particularly the police, were ultimately less effective "than an offensive strategy leading to the conquest of power."¹²⁵

The following passage, which delineates in sum the Boggses' critique of the BPP, provides valuable context for understanding specific formulations in the *Manifesto*:

In reacting against the non-violent philosophy and opportunism of many black organizations, [the BPP] has been very easy to veer over into a philosophy of violence and an adventurism which, despite its aggressive appearance, actually keeps the organization tied up in legal defense actions. Critical of the lack of ideology in such organizations as SNCC and CORE, the Panthers borrowed intact the *Little Red Book*, without distinguishing between what is appropriate to China, or a post-revolutionary situation, and what is appropriate to the United States, or a pre-revolutionary situation... Forced on the defensive by the "search and destroy operations of the police, the Party has been led, step-by-step, into

¹²⁴ Boggs, *Racism and the Class Struggle*, p. 180-186.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

increased reliance upon the financial and legal help of white radicals, as well as into variations on their outmoded ideas of class struggle.¹²⁶

Thus, in the *Manifesto* the Boggses call for a party that opposes and works to reject the tendency to engage in futile confrontations, opportunism, compromise, or adventurism. Such a party, they say, is the most appropriate means for Black Power in the face of the system's attempts to cooptation as well as naked aggression.

Black liberation is not advanced by headlong confrontation with enemy forces, such as the police, the FBI or the CIA, any more than it is by accepting appointment into the Establishment on the theory that the higher the position the greater the service a Black leader can render to his people. It can only be advanced by revolutionary struggles in which masses of Black people increase their control over their real conditions of life.¹²⁷

The Boggs also address the specific membership of the party. As a Black Nationalist-orientated organization, its membership must be all-black, they say, though, like all revolutionary parties, it encourages other sections of the population to organize for revolutionary struggles. The party must also “pay special attention to the development of the political consciousness and revolutionary dedication of Black street youth.”¹²⁸ Differentiating the Black Revolutionary party from the practices and ideologies of many black nationalists, especially cultural nationalists, the Boggs call for the party to repudiate any tendency towards male chauvinism or relegating Black women to an inferior position in the struggle. Articulating an idea that black

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 184.

¹²⁷ Boggs, *Manifesto*, p. 31.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 32.

feminists in this period put forward: “The extraordinary fortitude of which Black women have brought to the struggle for survival of Black people in America is one of the greatest sources of strength for the Black Revolutionary Party.”¹²⁹

The final role of the black revolutionary party was to conceive and project a strategy for revolutionary social transformation. This strategy, the Boggses wrote, should “give the masses of Black people a sense of their growing power to improve their conditions of life through struggle.” A fundamental objective of such a strategy is to enable people to create “parallel power structures,” meaning community control of urban institutions such as schools, health care, welfare, housing, and police. Because control over these and other institutions was not concentrated within these communities, they were “occupied areas.” Yet, through struggles over relevant issues to capture this control they could be transformed into “liberated areas.”¹³⁰

The Boggses characterized these areas as being in a “classical revolutionary or pre-revolutionary” situation because the following conditions: the failure of those in power; lack of consensus among them; constant worsening of social conditions; and increasing political activity among the masses. They cite as an example the struggles over education, which was increasingly becoming a point of organizing and political activity throughout black communities. The failure of education, the Boggses explain, had created a crisis in every major city, both at the level of individual schools and classrooms and of administration. “This crisis,” they write, “has compelled the

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

entire Black community to come to grips with the issue of how long it is going to allow education to remain in the hands of a racist power structure which.” If and when black communities assumed control over education, this would not only advance the black struggle by starting in motion a reversal of a racist educational system. “It would [also] give the Black community of the control over enormous financial resources and the actual physical area of the schools. Thus, through the struggle for community control of education, it is possible for the Black movement to acquire the counterpart of a liberated area in an urban setting.”¹³¹

The *Manifesto* also calls for explicit solidarity with the nations of Asia, Latin America, and Africa. The black revolutionary party should consistently “keep before the movement” the need to support Third World national liberation struggles as well as the need for international support for the black revolution inside the United States. “The black Revolution,” they wrote, “is an integral part of the world revolution against imperialism” because “racism, like imperialism, is a totalitarian system for the dehumanization of one people by another.” They used similar means (economic, military, political, and cultural) to create a total system to dehumanize the oppressed or nation. Therefore, the black struggle shared a unity of purpose with these other revolutionary movements: “the revolution against racism and/or imperialism is not only to free the oppressed people or nation from the physical presence of their oppressors but to destroy the institutions of total dehumanization and to create in their

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 33-34.

place totally new relations between people, totally new relations between people and their institutions, and totally new institutions.”¹³²

The *Manifesto* was published in the spring of 1969. The Boggsses used it as a basis for organizing small groups of black activists in Detroit and other cities, and they presented it to National Black Economic Development Conference (NBEDC). In the former case the *Manifesto* was relatively effective, as the Boggsses were able to organize four local groups based on the ideas it contained, though they were not able to build the type of organization envisioned in the pages of the *Manifesto*. Grace Lee Boggs estimates that it was read by hundreds and perhaps thousands of people during this period, with an apparently strong impact in local circles.¹³³ However, it is difficult to confirm that the document had an exceptionally wide influence. Despite its challenging and insightful formulations, the *Manifesto*, like much of the literature emanating from the Black Power movement, apparently has been consigned to a relative obscurity. In its other use—as a position paper presented to the NBEDC—the *Manifesto* might have had an opportunity for a wider audience and impact. This was not to be, however. At the conference, which met on the campus of Wayne State University in Detroit on 25-27 April, 1969, the *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party* was overshadowed by a document titled, ironically it would seem, *Black Manifesto*.

¹³² Ibid., p. 37-38.

¹³³ Boggs, *Living for Change*, p. 162.

The conference convened on Friday 25 April with over 500 registered participants and a politically-charged mood.¹³⁴ Originally conceived in the summer of 1968 as a national platform to highlight various black economic development projects,¹³⁵ the conference agenda shifted towards a more ideological exploration of various economic strategies for black America. This reflected an increasing desire among Black Power activists to assess and address of the black economic condition, as well opposition to President Nixon's program of "black capitalism." By January 1969 the conference organizers projected this as "the most important gathering of Black people in terms of the new direction of Black communities" and suggested that "the creation of a few new Black capitalists...is unquestionably the wrong approach."¹³⁶ By the time that the program was set in April, the agenda was clearly focused on the economic dimension of racial oppression and the struggle for black liberation. On the eve of the conference, press releases indicated that the gathering would seek alternatives to capitalism, and that its approach would not only be economic in nature but also include "political and direct action activities."¹³⁷

This last point was dramatically illustrated on the second day of the conference when James Forman presented the *Black Manifesto*. A well-known and influential leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC),

¹³⁴ Robert S. Lecky and Elliott Wright (eds.), Black Manifesto: Religion, Racism, and Reparations (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), p. 10.

¹³⁵ Lucius Walker to Paul Moore, 15 July 1968, IFCO Papers, Box 5, Folder 14.

¹³⁶ IFCO to Economic Development Council of Greater Detroit, 9 January 1969, IFCO Papers, Box 6, Folder 14.

¹³⁷ "Statement of the Planners of the National Black Economic Development Conference," 15 April 1969, IFCO Papers, Box 10, Folder 14; Press Release, 22 April 1969, IFCO Papers, Box 8, Folder 14.

Forman had recently begun working with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and both he and the league helped to organize the conference. His keynote address, “Total Control as the Only Solution for the Economic Needs of Black People,” served as an introduction for the *Manifesto*, which called for white religious institutions to pay \$500 million in reparations to African Americans.¹³⁸ The money was to be paid by Christian churches and Jewish synagogues, “which are part and parcel of the system of capitalism,” as atonement and retribution for their complicity in and benefit from the exploitation of African Americans.¹³⁹ The money was to fund ten specific projects designed to achieve black economic self-sufficiency, such as the establishment of: a Southern land bank; four major publishing and printing industries; four television networks; the International Black Appeal to raise future capital for creating cooperative businesses in US and Africa; and a National Black Labor Strike and Defense Fund.¹⁴⁰

The *Manifesto* was adopted as the official conference statement and the planning committee moved to form a permanent organization (which later dropped the word “national” and became the BEDC).¹⁴¹ As part of his plan to implement the *Manifesto*, Forman called on black people to disrupt “racist churches and synagogues” throughout the nation. On May 4, he himself did just that, interrupting

¹³⁸ “Total Control as the Only Solution for the Economic Needs of Black People” and the *Black Manifesto* are reprinted in Lecky and Wright, Black Manifesto.

¹³⁹ Lecky and Wright, Black Manifesto, p. 119.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 120-122.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 311. For the *Manifesto* and the surrounding issues, see also, Arnold Schuchter, Reparations: The Black Manifesto and Its Challenges to White America (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970).

services at New York's Riverside Church where he presented the *Manifesto's* reparations demand. In the course of the next two months, this and similar *Manifesto*-related events captured significant news media coverage and considerably shook the American religious community.¹⁴² The *Manifesto* collected some funds, though far short of its goal, and was not able to substantially enact any of its programs.¹⁴³ Measured in attention garnered, however, the *Manifesto* was a major event.

That the *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party* received considerably less attention than Forman's *Black Manifesto* presents an interesting study in contrast. For, despite their coincidence of title and timing, the two documents present considerably different programs for black liberation. Both were decidedly anti-capitalist, both called for black self-determination through massive redistribution of society's resources, and both sought to reconstitute or recreate social institutions. However, they conceived of this distribution in different ways and through different means. Furthermore, at a more fundamental level, they held divergent and to some extent conflicting visions of the black struggle and its objectives. Forman's program of reparations made a claim on an existing institution for the redistribution of financial resources. The objective was to achieve black autonomy from racist social institutions and to create alternative structures for the independent development of black communities. The Boggses, on the other hand, made no claims on existing institutions as presently constituted. Rather, they sought to assume control over these

¹⁴² Lecky and Wright, *Black Manifesto*, p. 3.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 16-28.

institutions and then transform them to meet the needs of African Americans as well as the entire society. Their program, in contrast to Forman's, called for a struggle for political control—the power to govern—through which social resources can be redistributed and institutions reorganized.

The similarity in titles of these two documents may seem an irony, though upon reflection we can determine that it is not all together surprising that both would use the word 'manifesto' given the urgency and sense of purpose with which they were both conceived. Another, more compelling irony is that Jimmy Boggs, making his presentation the day before Forman, presented his own program of black economic development to the NBEDC. While the *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party* was presented but not read to the conference, Boggs articulated some of its ideas in his speech on the opening day of the meeting. Titled "The Myth and Irrationality of Black Capitalism," it outlined the relationship between racism and capitalism and proposed fundamental guidelines for the economic development of black communities which, he projected, could be achieved at the present time as part of a program for Black Power.¹⁴⁴ While it is difficult to know what response the speech received from those gathered at the conference, it seems likely that this too was obscured in the aftermath of Forman's presentation.

One of those many activists who attended the NBEDC was Frances Beal, whose intellectual work and political organizing helped to develop a very different

¹⁴⁴ Reprinted in Boggs, *Racism and Class Struggle*.

dimension of Black Power politics than that of James and Grace Lee Boggs.¹⁴⁵ Yet, as we will see below, in her exploration of the theory and practice of radical black feminism, she too advanced a vision of black revolution leading to a new and fundamentally more just society.

Chapter 4

THE CONTEXT AND CONTENT OF RADICAL BLACK FEMINISM: FRAN BEAL, “DOUBLE JEOPARDY,” AND BLACK THOUGHT

In August of 1969 *Ebony* magazine published a special issue titled “The Black Revolution” devoted to analyzing and interpreting the current stage of the black struggle. In the Publisher’s Statement that precedes the volume’s essays, John H. Johnson explained that *Ebony* was responding to the urgency of the historical moment: “Black people have been forced now into a position where they must either fight for their rights or be reduced to a permanent second class citizen. Black people have chosen to fight and this special issue examines the many facets of that fight.” The volume consisted of essays by various Black activists and scholars addressing topics such as “The Economics of Liberation,” “Politics and the Black Revolution,” “Black Students and the Impossible Revolution,” “The Black Panthers,” and “Black Art and Black Liberation.” According to Johnson, the volume was “must reading for anyone seeking insight into Black America in its most crucial period of history.”¹

¹ *Ebony* Special Issue, vol. xxiv, no. 10, August 1969. Reprinted in book form as The Black Revolution: An Ebony Special Issue (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1970). All references below are from the book.

The special issue did not, however, deal with one important aspect of black political life that was then developing: black feminism. By the mid-1960s the emergence and development of black feminist consciousness and politics was evident among a community of black women activists. Yet, it is likely that in 1966, when the Black Power slogan emerged, few outside of this community of black feminist activists recognized these early rumblings of a black feminist movement. The *Ebony* special issue was not alone in failing to recognize this dimension of the emergent Black Power movement. Still, as the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, and the era's political confrontations intensified, black feminism gained a greater visibility. Black feminists critiqued the masculinist rhetoric and sexist political ideas emanating from some quarters of the Black Power movement, challenging the movement to develop a more progressive analysis and understanding of gender relations. The sometimes volatile points of contestation inherent in these critiques have been taken by many as an indication that the two movements, black feminism and Black Power, stood in direct opposition to each other. Indeed, scholars have posited the theoretical proposition that feminism and nationalism are incompatible and contradictory ideological constructs.² Accordingly, they have generally characterized black feminist activity of this period as arising in direct opposition to black nationalism, and by extension, Black Power. Thus, black feminism has routinely been understood as

² See, for example, Ann McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (New York: Routledge, 1995), chapter 10.

antagonistic to Black Power, with the former being a challenge to, rather than a part of, the latter.³

Such a characterization, however, misapprehends the relationship between the two movements (black feminism and Black Power) and minimizes the depth and significance of black power-era feminism. In particular, two points of clarification will belie the notion that black feminism stood in complete or direct ideological opposition to the Black Power movement. Firstly, such an analysis collapses the distinctions between various strains of black nationalism, and then conflates the Black Power movement with this homogenized nationalism. Certainly, the call for Black Power was animated by the resurgent nationalism of the mid-1960s, but as a social movement Black Power was ideologically and programmatically broader than any particular line of black nationalist thinking. Furthermore, there were ideologically distinct expressions of black nationalism, ranging from the most conservative, such as those, for example, who advocated black capitalism, to those who were proponents of socialist revolution.⁴ Recognizing the diversity among these various stripes of

³ My argument parallels Alice Echols' critique of the historiography on "the sixties." She calls for a revisioning of the relationship between the women's movement and the New Left. Echols writes: "The remapping I envision would make the women's liberation movement an integral part of the sixties... This remapping should be understood as a political intervention that seeks to disrupt the accepted version of the sixties, especially versions that depict the women's liberation movement and the New Left as philosophically opposed. Conflicts between the New Left and the women's liberation movement were a consequence of specific historical circumstances, and not... the result of some inevitable and chronic antagonism." See, Alice Echols, "'We Gotta Get Out of This Place': Notes Towards a Remapping of the Sixties," in *Socialist Review*, p. 9-33.

⁴ On the differences among black nationalists in this period, see Alphonso Pinkney, Red, Black, and Green: Black Nationalism in the United States (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), and John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick (eds.), Black Nationalism in America (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970).

nationalism, black feminists saw no contradiction in vehemently critiquing the regressive gender politics of cultural nationalists, while often counting themselves among revolutionary nationalists (even while challenging the latent or less vulgar expressions of sexism among revolutionary nationalists). Thus, to equate a feminist critique of, or opposition to, a particular expression of black nationalism with an opposition to the broader movement simplifies the movement's ideological depth and erases black feminists' participation as Black Power activists and thinkers.

Secondly, the characterization of black feminism and Black Power as locked in an inherently antagonistic relationship is based upon a narrow definition of black feminism. It is generally acknowledged that black feminism arose in response to and challenged both the sexism of an increasingly male-dominated black political sphere and the racism and exclusion of the white-dominated women's movement.⁵ Yet, it is inaccurate to assume, as such an analysis does, that black feminism was solely or even primarily a critique of black nationalism and the women's movement. In fact, the racism of the primarily white women's movement and the sexism of the Black Power movement do in large measure explain the impetus to black feminist organizing, but they do not fully reflect the ideological basis of Black Power-era feminism. The development of black feminist consciousness in this period reflected the total experience—explicitly political and otherwise—of black women's lives,

⁵ A third element which might be added can be identified as state-sanctioned demonization of black women, typified most dramatically by the Moynihan Report. See the following dissertations: Kimberly Springer, "Our Politics Was Black Women's: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980," (Emory University, 1999), and Benita Roth, "On Their Own and For Their Own: African American, Chicana, and White Feminists Movements in the 1960s and the 1970s (Unpublished Dissertation).

which of course included but was not limited to the marginalization within or exclusion from political movements. Black feminists infused the political perspectives and agendas of the extant movements (anti-racism and anti-sexism) with their own unique concerns. For example, feminist critiques of “chauvinism” and sexist posturing within the Black Power movement were often connected to broader societal critiques of sexism and gender oppression. Thus, we might more appropriately see black feminism’s confrontation with sexism within the black movement and racism within the women’s movement as a starting point and platform for articulating a coherent body of political ideas and a political agenda concerning the intersections race and gender in American society.

How then, might we chart a new understanding of black feminism during the Black Power movement? We can begin with the recognition that black feminism in this period emerged largely as a part of, rather than just in opposition to, the Black Power movement. That is to say, black feminism arose as part of the political struggles in this period to achieve black liberation. As an emerging social movement, Black Power represented a commitment to: 1) re-evaluating the nature and mechanisms of racial oppression, and; 2) creating new ideas, organizations, and activities to fight it. By introducing the oppression of women into an analysis of black oppression, articulating a theory of multiple oppressions, and creating new organizational forms, black feminist politics exemplified these commitments. Furthermore, black feminists were centrally engaged in Black Power politics, both in

terms of organizational membership and as individual organizers, activists and thinkers.

Secondly, our understanding of Black Power-era feminism must identify and conceptualize the central objective of black feminism. Given the pull of ideological and political forces at play during this period, many of which worked to marginalize black women (and their ideas) as agents of political change, black feminist political activity was fundamentally and collectively aimed at the construction of a black woman's political identity and attendant political practice. Developing their own political praxis, black feminists envisioned themselves fighting in concert with other progressive struggles, all as part of a broader project of political struggle and human liberation. Just as some Black Power activists, thinkers, and organizations assigned new political roles to various segments of the black population, such as disaffected youth, workers, or the urban poor, black feminists sought to define a place for black women as agents of revolutionary change. In doing so, black feminists were not simply challenging expressions of male chauvinism, but were also advancing arguments for deeper revolutionary purpose, theory, and commitment; they were, in effect, applying and extending Black Power thought.

Thirdly, our understanding of Black Power-era feminism must necessarily highlight its epistemological focus on the polyvocality of multiple social locations.⁶ Through an integrative analysis of race, class, and gender, this analysis of oppression

⁶ Rose M. Brewer, "Theorizing Race, Class, and Gender: The new scholarship of Black feminist intellectuals and Black women's labor," in Stanlie M. James and Abena Busia (eds.), Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 13.

suggests that black women are situated within multiple sets of power relations and thus experience multiple forms of oppression which are relational, interactive, and mutually reinforcing. As feminist scholar and activist Barbara Smith writes, “A black feminist perspective demonstrates the simultaneity of oppressions as they affect Third World Women’s lives.”⁷ Indeed, the articulation of multiple oppressions is a foundational principle of black feminist thought.⁸

Anticipating the recent scholarly convention of employing race, class, and gender as categories of analysis, black feminist theorists in the late 1960s and 1970s developed this integrative analysis as part of their political practice. Smith explains that the concept of simultaneous oppressions grew out of “Black feminists’ efforts to comprehend the complexity of our situation as it was actually occurring” during the period. Writing in the early 1980s, Smith wrote that the concept was “still the crux of a Black feminist understanding of political reality,”⁹ and a decade later Rose Brewer demonstrated that this concept remains a hallmark of feminist ideology. Highlighting some of its theoretical insights, Brewer writes:

The conceptual anchor of recent Black feminist theorizing is the understandings of race, class, and gender as simultaneous forces. The major propositions of such a stance include:

⁷ Barbara Smith (ed.), Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press: 2000 [1983]), p. xxx.

⁸ For a broad historical discussion of black feminism which illustrates the centrality of this principle, see the introduction to Beverly Guy-Sheftall (ed.), Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought (New York: The New Press, 1995). For an important example of theorizing multiple oppressions, see Deborah K. King, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology,” in that volume.

⁹ Smith, Home Girls, p. xxxiv.

1. critiquing dichotomous oppositional thinking by employing both/and rather than either/or categorizations
2. allowing for the simultaneity of oppression and struggle, thus
3. eschewing additive analyses: race + class + gender
4. which leads to an understanding of the embeddedness and relationality of race, class, and gender and the multiplicative nature of these relationships: race x class x gender
5. reconstructing the lived experiences, historical positioning, cultural perceptions and social construction of Black women who are enmeshed in and whose ideas emerge out of that experience, and
6. developing a feminism rooted in class, culture, gender and race in interaction as its organizing principle.¹⁰

The seeds of these ideological developments were sown in the intellectual and activist work of black women dating back to the early nineteenth century.¹¹ The articulation of multiple oppressions reflects this accretion of knowledge over generations of black feminist thought as well as the political struggles of black feminists such as Fran Beal and organizations such as the Third World Women's Alliance during the Black Power movement. The development of the concept of simultaneous oppressions is embedded within their development of a radical feminist politics which would not simply challenge but also extend the ideological constructs of Black Power politics. To come to a deeper understanding of the emergence and practice of black feminism during the black power movement, it is necessary to sketch out the ideological context from which it emerged, and in many ways was responding to, during the mid-1960s.

¹⁰ Brewer, p. 16.

¹¹ Sheftall, "Introduction: The Evolution of Feminist Consciousness Among African American Women," in Sheftall, Words of Fire, p. 1-2.

“Black Manhood” as a Metaphor for Black Liberation

Let 1966 be the year that we decided that we would develop our own culture, that we would be proud of being black people, that we would no longer accept the use of the word Negro, but we would become mature, and we would regard ourselves as black men, black men in America.¹²

- Floyd McKissick

Floyd McKissick delivered these words in a speech on June 26 in Jackson, Mississippi which was part of the concluding rally of the Meredith March. Just days earlier SNCC activists Willie Ricks (Mukasa Dada) and Stockely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) had famously used the slogan “Black Power” at a rally in Greenwood, Mississippi, and the slogan was already beginning to capture the nation’s political imagination. Now, in front of the approximately 15,000 people assembled in the state capitol, at the end of what one historian has called “the last march” of the Civil Rights movement, McKissick and other civil rights leaders found themselves with perhaps the first public forum in which they could address themselves to the meaning of black power.¹³ McKissick was the newly elected national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and one of the most visible and vocal early advocates of Black Power.¹⁴ He used the opportunity to project a vision of this new political

¹² “Eyes on the Prize: The Time Has Come, 1964-1966,” (Video)

¹³ Clayborne Carson, In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 210; John Dittmer, Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 402. Dittmer titles his chapter on the Meredith march, “The Last March.”

¹⁴ Carson, p. 210; Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 30-32.

thrust, asserting that “1966 is the year of the concept of Black Power.” (Sitkoff, p. 200). In the passage quoted above, McKissick called for African Americans to reach a political and cultural maturity which he represented as collective manhood. Furthermore, McKissick conflated some of the ideas which would become central to Black Power politics—namely, the celebration of African American culture, self-conscious expressions of racial pride and unity, and the principle of self-definition--with an assertion and reclaiming of this manhood.

McKissick’s statement is an early example of the rhetorical use of “black manhood” in black political discussions and analysis during this period. As the Black Power movement grew in the months following the Meredith March, activists, speakers, and writers equated the cumulative effects of historical and systematic racial oppression with a denial of African American manhood. This rhetorical strategy was employed as a way of describing the totality of racial oppression. Thus, to speak of white America’s attack on “black manhood” was shorthand for the full range of racist ideas and actions—including the various forms of denial and defamation to which black people had been subjected; the range of psychological, economic, and political effects of American racism; the full weight of this systematic abuse--which constituted an assault on of black humanity. Consequently, black manhood stood as a representation of the paramount political objective, and the act of

reclaiming that manhood stood as the ultimate act of liberation. That is, the reclamation of black manhood was used as a metaphor for black liberation.¹⁵

As illustrated in McKissick's speech, the call for collective manhood was both an affirmation of certain principles and a call to act on them. These principles included, for example, the need for black Americans to become self-reliant and assertive in their political struggles, to reject the negative connotations of blackness imposed by white society, to proclaim the rights to self-definition, to assert and practice the right of self-defense, and the need for racial pride and unity. In this way, the metaphor was a powerful expression of black oppositional consciousness.¹⁶

However, black feminists recognized that there were limits to the unifying effects and political efficacy of using the gender-specific term "manhood" as the centerpiece of black political struggles. While its rhetorical use was ostensibly meant to represent African Americans as a whole, the use of "manhood" was not gender neutral. For example, it codified characteristics such as assertiveness and physical self-defense, masculine traits, as desirable racial attributes. In this and other ways, the manhood metaphor reflected a broader tendency to render black political

¹⁵ For an explication of the uses of manhood as a political ideal, see Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America (New York: William Morrow, 1984), p. 314-324.

¹⁶ These ideas had in some form been articulated and popularized by Malcolm X, whose ideas and persona were perhaps the central ideological force underlying the emergence of the Black Power movement. The beginning of the movement is conventionally dated to 1965, the year of his death (on 21 February). Actor and activist Ossie Davis drew on the symbolism of "black manhood" in his eulogy of the slain leader: "Malcolm was our manhood, our living black manhood! This was his meaning to his people. And, in honoring him, we honor the best in ourselves." Ossie Davis, "Our Shining Black Prince," in John Henrik Clarke, Malcolm X: The Man and His Times (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), p. xi.

experience in masculine terms. This masculinist political discourse, in turn, tended to treat black women as symbols rather than active political agents. Thus, Black feminists recognized the peril in popularizing such symbols that implicitly placed men as the primary black political subject and a masculine persona as the primary image of the black community. As feminist scholar E. Frances White argues, “representation has two meanings: the act of symbolically standing for a group and the act of revealing the nature of a group.”¹⁷ If “manhood” symbolically stood for the struggle for black liberation, then it simultaneously revealed that struggle to be male-identified. Discourses of black manhood thus amplified issues of political representation and participation that were part of an ideological clash over gender during the Black Power movement.

In her study of the ways in which nationalists ideologies construct and impact gender relations, White says that such oppositional thought “can be radical and progressive in relation to white racism,” yet “conservative and repressive in relation to the internal organization of the black community.”¹⁸ Indeed, the discourse of black manhood spawned several political ideas and constructs which defined the relationship between black women and men in ways that restricted black women’s positions and participation in the Black Power movement. A cataloguing of these ideas includes, for example, the notion that a premium should be placed on black male suffering because they are victimized to a greater degree than women by racial

¹⁷ E. Frances White, Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), p. 51.

¹⁸ White, Dark Continent of Our Bodies, p. 123.

oppression. This was based in part on the idea that black men, deprived of their status as protector of the family and head of their households, had been emasculated by white racism (a corollary to this, as we will see below, was that black women often acted in ways which emasculated, or castrated black men as well). In terms of political practice, this contributed to the tendency to elide women as agents of political change.¹⁹

Black men's supposed status as most oppressed was also based on the idea, espoused by men and some women, "that the black woman is already liberated." Barbara Smith explains that this "myth confuses liberation with the fact that Black women have had to take on responsibilities that our oppression gives us no choice but to handle...An ability to cope under the worst conditions is not liberation." She highlights the situation by indicating that activities which for white middle-class women might indicate a measure of independence---working outside of the home, constructing a life independent of a man, heading a household---held a different meaning for black women who did not have the race and class privilege of their white counterparts. In fact, Smith explains, black women's participation in such activities generally reflects the fact that "women of color generally have the fewest choices about the circumstances of their lives." Further exposing this myth, Smith writes: "Black men didn't say anything about how poverty, unequal pay, no child care,

¹⁹ These themes will be addressed below. See also, Giddings, cited above, and bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), p. 71-86, and 103-104.

violence of every kind including battering, rape, and sterilization abuse, translated into ‘liberation.’”²⁰

Another construct emanating from this male-centered discourse was a call for black women to subordinate their gender concerns to those of the race. A popular argument for such a position ran as follows: by introducing concerns about sexism and gender oppression, black women were being divisive and threatening a much needed black unity. Furthermore, women’s liberation was “the white woman’s thing” and had no place in the black movement. Thus, black women should put their racial identity and struggle first, less they be guilty of diluting or abandoning (or worse, betraying) the black struggle. Smith labels this notion, which either denies that sexual oppression exists or minimizes its impact on black women’s lives, as the myth that “racism is the primary (or only) oppression that black women have to confront.”²¹

Perhaps the most contested space in these ideological battles concerned the often posed question: “‘What is the black woman’s role in the black liberation struggle?’” This question reflected broader debates among black activists and thinkers during the second half of the 1960s concerning definitions of “man” and “woman,” the nature of the relationship between women and men, and their relative roles in the family and community.²² Many black women activists, of course, challenged the

²⁰ Smith, *Home Girls*, p. xxviii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. xxix.

²² For example, see the following articles which appeared in the *Liberator* magazine in 1965 and 1966: Katy Gibson, “Letter to Black Men,” *Liberator* July 1965; “The Role of the Black Women in a White

very foundations of the question, recognizing this to be an inherently paternalistic query which presupposed that men and women were predisposed to play distinct (and invariably unequal) roles. Kathleen Cleaver, who served as communications secretary of the Black Panther Party (a post she created), articulated the sentiment of many women with her famous response: “No one ever asks what a man’s place in the Revolution is.”²³

Still, the notion that women’s role in political (and especially military) struggle was different from, and inevitably subordinate to, that of men was widespread. Accordingly, black women could find themselves facing a battery of ideas and expectations of their roles in the Black Power movement. They were often told, for example, that they should remain in the background and play supportive roles to black men. They were to assume, it was said, a submissive, domestic role,

Society” (panel discussion from 5th Anniversary Writers’ Conference: “Black Writers at the Crossroads,” June 19, 1965), *Liberator* August 1965; Evelyn Rodgers, “Is Ebony Killing Black Women,” *Liberator* March 1966; Amerlia Long, “Role of the Afro-American Woman,” *Liberator* May 1966; Louise R. Moore, “When a Black Man Stood Up,” and Betty Frank Lomax, “Afro-American Women: Growth Deferred,” *Liberator* July 1966; Louise Moore, “Black Men vs. Black Women,” *Liberator* August 1966. See also the several responses to these articles in the letters to the editor in the subsequent issues. This dialogue in the pages of the *Liberator* illuminates these debates and the ways in which these issues were being politicized as early as 1965 and 1966.

²³ *Guardian*, 2 July 1970. Cleaver discusses these dynamics in her essay, “Women, Power, and Revolution,” in Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas (eds.), Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and their Legacy (New York: Routledge, 2001).

Reflecting on the question of women’s role, she writes: “Back then I didn’t understand why they wanted to think of what men were doing and what women were doing as separate. It’s taken me years, literally about twenty-five years, to understand that what I really didn’t like was the underlying assumption motivating the question. The assumption held that being a part of a revolutionary movement was in conflict with what the questioner had been socialized to believe was appropriate conduct for a woman” (p. 124). Historian Tracye Matthews borrows Neal’s phrase as the title of her excellent essay: “‘No One Ever Asks What a Man’s Place in the Revolution is’: Gender and the Politics of The Black Panther Party, 1966-1971,” in Charles E. Jones (ed.), The Black Panther Party Reconsidered (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998). Matthews cites Kathleen Cleaver’s statement from an interview printed in Philip S. Foner (ed.), The Black Panthers Speak (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), p. 145.

both in protest organizations and in personal relationships. They were thus expected to perform prescribed tasks such as clerical duties--typing press releases, speeches, and broadsides, for example--as opposed to the men's task of delivering speeches, holding rallies and the like. In the most misogynistic expressions of this ideology, women were expected to perform traditional duties such as cooking, and even being sexually available for male comrades.

A related theme, which in effect sought to push black women further away from overt political struggles, focused on reproduction. For some Black Power activists (male and female), the black women's most productive political role was as mother and child-bearer. Evoking images of women as the mother of the nation, while also reinscribing conventional gender roles, they asserted that black women's most important contribution to the black community's on-going struggle was "having babies for the revolution." Many black feminists, of course, challenged this idea on several grounds (some of which will be explored below). Aside from the obvious impracticality of this notion, they critiqued the anachronistic and patriarchal visions of family and society which underlie it. Far from being a reflection of the generally progressive politics of the era, "having babies for the revolution" seemed closer to a Victorian-influenced black nationalist politics of protection and respectability: women were relegated to the protected realm of the home and the respectable activity of child-rearing.²⁴

²⁴ For a discussion of the promise of protection, see Farah Jasmine Griffin, "'Ironies of the Saint': Malcolm X, Black Women, and the Price of Protection," in Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin

While it is not clear how widespread this idea was, it certainly did not form part of any serious political analysis or program. Nonetheless, it is an element of the ideological of the environment in which a variety of ideas were both developed and contested. The contestation over gender roles in the black community, and specifically in black political struggles, was an important part of the internal ideological struggles of the Black Power movement as well as the movement's confrontation with American society.

The Moynihan Report, Gender Ideology, and “The Role of the Black Woman”

The public discourse during the second half of the 1960s and the early 1970s concerning the role of black women—in the family, the community, and particularly in black political struggles—was impacted by the debates and conflicts surrounding a 1965 government report called “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.”²⁵ Authored by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the document was prepared in March of 1965 as a confidential report under the auspices of the Office of Policy Planning and Research of the Department of Labor. The report, which became known as the “Moynihan report,” was made public in August, and

(eds.), Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

²⁵ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” (Washington D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965).

subsequent developments—including the Watts rebellion which occurred shortly after the report was released—brought the report to a wider audience. By the end of the year the Moynihan report had become the center of public debate and controversy, both at the level of federal civil rights policy, and at the level of popular discourse among African Americans.²⁶

The report argued that African American families suffered from an alarmingly high proportion of female-headed households, and that this matriarchal family structure, because it deviated from the standard family in American society, was a fundamental source of weakness in the black community. Moynihan acknowledged that there was no inherent reason why a patriarchal structure was more desirable than a matriarchal one, but he nonetheless accepted without challenge the centrality and presumed benefits of patriarchal authority. “Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs,” he wrote. “The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage.”²⁷ With the recent legal and legislative changes, according to Moynihan, the primary barrier to African Americans assimilation into the American mainstream was a persistent cycle of poverty and disadvantage in the black community, which he

²⁶ See Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey (eds.), The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy (Cambridge: The M.I.T Press, 1967), and John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick (eds.), Black Matriarchy: Myth or Reality? (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1971). The report is reprinted in full in Rainwater and Yancey; the majority of the report is excerpted in Bracey, Meier, and Rudwick. All quotations from the report cited below are from Bracey, Meier, and Rudwick.

²⁷ Bracey, Meier, and Rudwick, p. 140.

labeled a “tangle of pathology.”²⁸ At the core of this cycle of despair was the deterioration of the black family, the hallmark of which was “the often reversed roles of husband and wife.”²⁹ Thus, the black family was being undermined by female dominance.

While Moynihan acknowledged that the ravages of slavery and segregation—“three centuries of injustice”—had tremendously impacted African Americans, he argued that the most enduring and devastating effects of these historical processes were the “deep-seated structural distortions” in African American families. He found that the most serious social ills facing black America—crime, drug abuse, poor health, and illegitimacy—were either directly or indirectly attributable to the breakdown of the family and the resulting social disorganization. “At this point,” he wrote, “the present tangle of pathology is capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world.”³⁰ And he continued:

At the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate, the cycle of poverty and deprivation.³¹

Thus, in the midst of entrenched social contestations over structures of American racism, Moynihan found that the true barriers to black advancement were not to be

²⁸ Moynihan borrowed the phrase from black sociologist Kenneth Clark; Kenneth Clark, Dark Ghetto (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

²⁹ Bracey, Meier, and Rudwick, p. 142.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

found in the structures of American society, but rather within the black community itself. The report then suggests that a clear policy implication follows: the torn and tattered black family must be made whole. Specifically, Moynihan called for a national effort to stabilize the black family, which in effect meant a coordinated effort to reinsert black men to their deserved and desirable place as head of the family.

Moynihan's call for the reassertion of black patriarchy highlights the implications of the report for ideological debates over gender roles. While ostensibly focused on the black family, the report places its primary emphasis and analysis on black men and their place in the family and community. There is therefore an underlying compatibility between Moynihan's analysis and those lines of political thinking, such as described above, in which a black male subject either implicitly or explicitly is the primary social agent in the black community and its political struggles. Furthermore, in Moynihan's formulation, the corollary to black male oppression and victimization was female dominance—the supposed control and power which women exercised as head of black families. He reasoned that black women held such power in part because they tended to fare better than black men in terms of education and employment. Despite considerable evidence of black women's relatively depressed position in the labor market and low economic status, Moynihan argued that black men had a "comparative disadvantage" relative to women in the labor market.³² Black women's economic advantage led to an

³² Bracey, Meier, and Rudwick, p. 145.

independence and dominance in family matters, which served to deny black men the opportunity to fulfill their roles as fathers and husbands.

From the perspective of black women, the report and these related ideas severely distorted historical experience and sociological reality. The uses of these ideas in public discourse amounted to a cruel set of reversals: the strength that black women had historically demonstrated was turned into betrayal; though they had been the victims of neglect and abandonment, black women were now cast as culprit; loyal mothers, wives and sisters was portrayed as traitors of their people.³³ The most controversial aspect of the report, and the most damaging to black women's image, was the idea of the black matriarch. Ironically, this idea did not originate with Moynihan. It had been articulated by black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, upon whose work Moynihan heavily drew in his study.³⁴ However, as feminist theorists Patricia Hill Collins writes, Frazier did not interpret "Black women's centrality in black families as a *cause* of African American social class status," but rather he "saw

³³ For explication and critique of the report from various disciplinary and political perspectives, see Giddings, Chapter 18; hooks, p. 179-183; Bettina Aptheker, Women's Legacy: Essays on Race, Sex, and Class in American History (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), chapter 7; Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (New York: Routledge, 1991 [1990]), chapter 4; Juan J. Battle and Michael D. Bennett, "African-American Families and Public Policy: The Legacy of the Moynihan Report," in Cedric Herring (ed.), African Americans and the Public Agenda: The Paradoxes of Public Policy (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997); and Daryl Michael Scott, Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 151-159.

³⁴ Frazier wrote extensively on the black family. See especially, E. Franklin Frazier, The Black Family in the United States (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948 [1939]). For a good, broad historical discussion of the concept of a black matriarchy, see Scott, Contempt and Pity. On the evolution and impact of Frazier's ideas, see Anthony M. Platt, E. Franklin Frazier Reconsidered (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

so-called matriarchal families as an *outcome* of racial oppression and poverty.”³⁵

Moynihan, on the other hand, did suggest that female-headedness was a causal factor of black poverty. Furthermore, he argued that the matriarchal family structure was responsible for “the failure of youth,” measured by educational achievement and employment options. Thus, Collins writes that “...the matriarch symbolizes the ‘bad’ Black mother,” explaining that “The modern Black matriarchy thesis contends that African American women fail to fulfill their traditional ‘womanly’ duties. Spending too much time away from home, these working mothers ostensibly cannot properly supervise their children and are a major contributing factor to their children’s failure.”³⁶

The implications of the black matriarchy thesis for Black Power-era gender ideology were readily apparent. For one, it supported the notions, described above, that “black women were already liberated” and that black men faced the brunt of racial oppression. Furthermore, it reinforced the idea that black women were party to black male emasculation and thus in collusion with the white power structure. By replacing the black man as head of the family, and by competing with him for employment, she denied him his manhood and thus guilty of “emasculating” (or “castrating”) her black man. Thus, while the report in effect championed the cause of the black man, it cast dispersion and even blame on the black woman. At their worst, these ideas had the cumulative effect of criminalizing black women, or casting them

³⁵ Collins, p. 73.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 73-74.

as the problem and enemy of black advancement. Ultimately, Collins contends, the matriarchy thesis presents a conservative gender ideology and a racist vision of black social organization. “The source of the matriarch’s failure is her inability to model appropriate gender behavior.” Furthermore, “...the absence of Black patriarchy is used to as evidence for Black cultural inferiority. Black women’s failure to conform to the cult of true womanhood can then be identified as one fundamental source of Black cultural deficiency.”³⁷

From the historical distance of three and a half decades, we can see that the Moynihan report helped to bring attention to discussions, assessments, and anxieties about the dilemma of black manhood (real or perceived), which have been a recurring trope in black social and political thought.³⁸ The report was particularly volatile within the context of the emerging Black Power movement, during which concerns over black manhood took even greater symbolic and political value. As historian Tracye Matthews reports, “Responses to Moynihan came from all sectors of Black communities, including academics, grassroots activists, politicians, service providers, artists, and independent intellectuals.” She affirms that “the implications of the Moynihan report on the internal debate in the Black community were important,” but

³⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

³⁸ For a discussion of gender power relations, including especially normative patriarchal gender relations and notions of patriarchal authority and male-centered nationalism, within traditions of black oppositional thought and leadership, see Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). In *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: Norton, 1999), Deborah Gray White presents a compelling history of black women’s organizational and ideological responses to these unequal power relations and political marginalization throughout the twentieth century.

warns that “this was not by any stretch of the imagination the beginning of such discussions about a Black matriarchy, Black male castration, and the like. Moynihan inserted himself...into previously existing discussions within Black communities.”³⁹

Indeed, critiques and condemnations of the report came from all quarters, ranging from the speeches, newspaper articles, and public statements of prominent and high profile civil rights leaders (such as Martin King, Bayard Rustin, James Farmer, and Whitney Young), to the private statements, positions papers, and public conversations of black feminists activists.⁴⁰ All found the report both fallacious and detrimental to the cause of black advancement. Most critics of the report, for example, noted that Moynihan’s explanation of the problems confronting black America grossly downplays structural dimensions—poverty, discrimination, unemployment—in favor of the alleged deficiencies of the black family and the attendant cultural failings: the alleged “tangle of pathology” associated with the matriarchal family structure. Yet, they did not necessarily do so on the same grounds. Refuting Moynihan’s characterization of the black community as pathological, critics challenged many parts of his reasoning (including, for some, a defense of black men,) but fell short of explicitly defending black women.⁴¹ Rather, it was black feminists, as we will see below, who felt compelled to put pen to paper in dispelling the many derogatory images and derisive ideas about black women which were articulated or

³⁹ Matthews, p. 276.

⁴⁰ On the response of civil rights leaders, see Rainwater and Yancey, p. 395-426. The responses of black feminists will be discussed below.

⁴¹ Giddings, p. 326-328.

supported by the Moynihan report. In defending black womanhood, black feminists challenged Moynihan (and the broader forces in American culture which conspired to defame black womanhood) as well as black male activists who used the report to justify or bolster any one of a constellation of ideas regarding gender roles.

It should be noted that black feminists recognized that such ideas were by no means universally held. Different male activists and organizations advocated such ideas to varying degrees, and some rejected them. Also, some women espoused variants of these ideas. Thus, most black feminists refrained from characterizing the Black Power movement as universally sexist and misogynistic (thus avoiding an oversimplification which many subsequent analysts of this era have succumbed to). Rather, they recognized and critically engaged in what was a complex set of ideological struggles and interactions. The foregoing discussion in this chapter has sketched some of the contours of these struggles, which in part constitute the ideological environment and political conditions from which black feminist consciousness and political organizing developed in the second half of the 1960s. This then, provides some perspective for the analysis below, which delves into the political work, activism, and ideas of black women activist intellectuals and the history of Black Power-era feminism.

Fran Beal: Feminist Organizer, Political Activist, and “Producer of Ideas”

Frances Beal was one of the most influential black feminist theorists and activists of the period.⁴² As a movement intellectual, Beal simultaneously engaged in the ideological development of the Black Power movement and the emerging consciousness and political development of black women. In 1969, while a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Beal authored the highly influential essay, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female.” This essay, which was first published in 1970 and has been widely anthologized since, was one of the first attempts to present a theory of multiple and simultaneous oppressions.⁴³

“Double Jeopardy” thus reflects the coordinates of an emergent black feminist political ideology and practice which combined anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-sexist commitments into a thoroughgoing and integrative analysis and critique of American society. As an activist and organizer, Beal helped to found the organization which came to be the Third World Women’s Alliance, which, as well will see below, was an early and important organizational expression of radical black feminism. As she explained in a recent interview, Beal felt “no contradiction in being

⁴² Beal’s intellectual contributions are cited, though not explored in Ula Taylor, “Read[ing] Men and Nations: Women in the Black Radical Tradition,” *Souls* volume 1, number 4 (fall 1999). In her anthology of black feminist thought (cited above), which includes Beal’s “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” Beverly Guy-Sheftall describes Beal’s work as pioneering thinker and activist (p. 15, 145).

⁴³ The essay was first published in two groundbreaking anthologies in 1970: Robin Morgan (ed.), Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings From the Women’s Liberation Movement (New York: Random House, 1970), and Toni Cade, (ed.), The Black Woman: An Anthology (New York: Signet, 1970). Sheftall reports that it “became the most anthologized essay in the early years of women’s liberation publications” (p. 145).

nationalists, in being feminists, and in being socialists.”⁴⁴ Beal’s political activism, like many of her fellow organizers and activists, began in college. Attending the University of Wisconsin in the late 1950s, Beal began to come of age politically in an environment of escalating black activism, particularly among students. In 1959 she served as the vice-president of the student chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).⁴⁵ She had not entered college with a fully developed political consciousness, but she did have a sense of purpose and commitment to the struggle against racial injustice. Furthermore, Beal and her colleagues were inspired by the rising civil rights movement:

we had been visited by some people from the south, some speakers had come up, they had talked about what was going on, we had raised some money for them. So we were kind of like inspired by what was going on. And even though I was just an 18 year old kid and didn’t know politics from anything I just new I had to be involved in this thing somehow.⁴⁶

In addition, Beal was motivated by an intuitive understanding of the mechanics of racial oppression. She recalls, for example, her participation in a direct-action campaign against a local Woolworth’s store as part of a national protest of the Department Store chain:

⁴⁴ Peniel E. Joseph, “Waiting Till the Midnight Hour: Black Political and Intellectual Radicalism, 1960-1975” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Temple University, 2000), p. 149.

⁴⁵ Tape recording of interviews with Frances Beal taken by Fanon Che Wilkins. The recording consists of one interview conducted by telephone in May, 1999, and one conducted in Oakland, California on 11 July, 1999. To avoid confusion, both recordings will be combined together and called Beal interview.

⁴⁶ This and all subsequent quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from Beal interview.

I knew very little at that time about the way corporate structures operated but somehow inherently...in your gut you knew that there was a connection between the Woolworth's in Madison, Wisconsin and the Woolworth's in Jackson, Mississippi, and that if you could bring some power to bear in Madison than it might have some influence.

Beal cites this early activist experience as an important part of her early political socialization and development. For example, the Woolworth's protest and her association with the NAACP helped Beal come to a deeper appreciation of the strategic and ideological dimensions of black politics, particularly the tensions among civil rights organizations over strategies. "I was called in by the president [of the student chapter]," Beal explains, recalling the aftermath of the protest. He told her that officials from the parent chapter were "very upset" that she had participated in the pickets, which were outside the realm of the NAACP's accepted forms of protests. This reflected the tensions between direct-action tactics (such as the Woolworth's pickets) and the NAACP's strategy of legalistic reform concentrated in the courts. The NAACP, she was told, was opposed to such activities, and Beal was asked to stop her participation.

Beal's response was three fold. First, she re-confirmed her commitment to the Woolworth's protest. Beal and her colleagues drew inspired from their contact with southern activists. Furthermore, this contact had primed them to see the connections between their activism and the dramatic struggles against segregation in the South, thus Beal told the president: "I'm not going to stop because I really believe in [the

protest].” Secondly, she affirmed her view that she and her fellow protestors “had not done anything wrong,” asserting that such direct-action methods were indeed an appropriate form of the protest. Finally, she was angered by the NAACP’s top-down, centralized bureaucratic structure. “I said ‘wait a minute,’” she recalled, “‘we’re the student chapter and we should be able to determine what our strategies and things are.’” Disaffection with the NAACP’s moderate politics “turned me more toward a revolutionary point of view.” It was mutually agreed that she would leave the organization, and “from that point forward,” she recalls, “I was definitely in the left wing of the black liberation movement.”

Beal’s experience with the Woolworth’s protest and the hierarchy of the NAACP was also the genesis of Beal’s working with SNCC, which was formed the following year under the guidance, vision, and direction of long-time activist Ella Baker. SNCC grew out of, and in turn gave organizational form to, the eruption of student protests of this period, and particularly the student sit-in movement initiated in February of 1960. The organization was founded on principles of direct action and group-centered leadership, reflecting Baker’s influence as well as the experience of the students.⁴⁷ SNCC’s organizational structure attracted Beal, and would come to be

⁴⁷ For SNCC, see Carson, *In Struggle*. On Baker’s influence and leadership style, see Barbara Ransby, “Behind-the-Scenes View of a Behind-the-Scenes Organizer: The Roots of Ella Baker’s Political Passions,” in Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (eds.), *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Charles Payne, “Ella Baker and Models of Social Change,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 14, no. 4 (1989); Joy James, “Ella Baker, ‘Black Women’s Work,’ and Activist Intellectuals,” *The Black Scholar* 24, no. 4 (fall 1994), reprinted in T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Renee T. White (eds.), *Spoils of War: Women of Color, Cultures, and Revolutions* (Lanham, Maryland: 1997); Carol Mueller, “Ella Baker and the Origins of ‘Participatory Democracy,’”

the organizational vehicle through which she found her place in “the left wing of the black liberation movement.” Her direct involvement with the organization, however, began several years after SNCC’s founding; during the period 1960-1966 Beal developed her political ideology in a very different context, one quite removed from the American South.

In 1960, at the age of twenty, Beal moved to France where she lived and studied for the next six years. Beal studied at the University of Paris, where she earned a diploma in French history, while also working as a translator and film dubber. She visited the US regularly during this period, staying relatively close to the developing civil rights movement in the southern United States and developing ties with SNCC. It was her experiences in France, however, which would profoundly inform her political consciousness laying the basis for her ideological and political development as a political activists and theoretician during the second half of the decade. In particular Beal credits her time in France with helping her to develop an understanding of and commitment to national liberation movements, as well as an international consciousness through which connections between black Americans struggle, anti-colonialism, and international left-wing politics became intelligible.

Recalling the social and political milieu in France when she arrived during the summer of 1960, Beal says “this was a very auspicious time relative to Africa.”

in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (eds.), Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Ella Baker, “Developing Community Leadership,” in Gerda Lerner (ed), Black Women in White America: A Documentary History (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 345-352.

Indeed, in the two decades following the beginning of the Second World War, a resurgent African nationalism had given rise to anti-colonial movements in almost every corner of the continent. By 1960, which has been called the “Year of Africa,” fourteen nations achieved independence, and others were engaged in anti-colonial wars.⁴⁸ One of, if not the most protracted and deadly of these conflicts was in Algeria, where since 1954 France had been fighting a war against the Algerian resistance led by the Front Liberation Nationale (FLN). The French government employed a massive military force to quell the resistance, and the war was a hotly contested matter in France.

Beal knew little about the Algerian conflict when she arrived in Paris, but she was quickly initiated. “The very first day I was there,” she recalled, “we heard all these students yelling, [so] I ran downstairs” to find that a large demonstration was in progress.

She saw students carrying signs and yelling, on one side, “Algerie pour Algerian” (Algeria for the Algerians), while others yelled “Algerie pour Francaise” (Algeria for France). Not knowing the depth and ardor of the conflict, Beal was caught unawares by the intensity of this demonstration, as well as that of the police. She recalls standing on the side watching the demonstrators, “then all of the sudden I saw these cops swinging their capes (with lead pellets sown in them)...a cop came up to me and banged my head.”

⁴⁸ John Grace and John Laffin (eds.), Africa Since 1960: Events, Movements, and Personalities (London: Fontana Press, 1991).

Beal subsequently came to learn a great deal about the Algerian struggle, as well as the dynamics and debates concerning the broader African independence struggle. In a period during which “one [African] country after the other was celebrating its one year anniversary of freedom,” she met several African students from former colonial countries from whom she learned a great deal about their countries and their respective political struggles. Together, they would “hang out in the cafes and talk and talk and talk about the kind of society that people wanted to have.” Anti-colonial politics was a central component of the intellectual activity among African and West Indian intellectuals surrounding the Paris-based journal *Presence Africaine*, while at the same time the French intelligentsia was having discussions and debates about colonialism, including the use of violence. In addition, Beal developed her understanding of the Algerian revolution and the politics of African anti-colonialism through the works of Frantz Fanon.

Fanon’s relationship to French colonialism and racism, first as a French colonial subject in his native Martinique, then as a medical student in France, and finally as a participant in the Algerian revolution, forms the context and the impetus for his political activism and intellectual production. In his short life (he died at the age of 36), Fanon authored four books in which he wrote perceptively and passionately in the cause of Third World liberation.⁴⁹ Fanon’s reputation as a Third

⁴⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), originally Published in Paris, France, as *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, 1952; Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), originally published in France as *L'An Cinq, de la Revolution Algerienne*, 1959; Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), first published in

World revolutionary rests perhaps most squarely on his, The Wretched of the Earth, first published as *Les Damnés de la Terre* in France just before Fanon's death in December 1961. Drawing on Fanon's experiences and observations in the Algerian War of Liberation, as well as from his travels in West African countries also engaged in national liberation struggles, the book delivers a scathing critique of European colonialism and a passionate analysis of the problems and prospects inherent in the struggle against it. Beal recalls that the book was the center of lively discussions among students in Paris, with whom it was immediately popular, adding to a stimulating intellectual environment in which "there was almost an anti-colonial fervor."

Fanon's work was also a central force in the ideological development of the Black Power movement. The Wretched of the Earth held a particular resonance for African Americans because its discussion of revolutionary violence as a potentially cathartic and cleansing force offered theoretical support for black American activists' arguments in favor of the principle of self-defense and against nonviolence as a political strategy. In addition, black Americans were inspired by Fanon's incisive articulation of the mechanics of racism, his commitment to Third World liberation, and especially, his passionate defense of anti-colonial revolt. Fanon helped black American thinkers and activists to draw analogies between European colonialism and American racism, and thus between Third World anti-colonialism and the struggle for

France under the title of *Pour la Revolution Africaine* , 1964; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), originally published in Paris, France, under the title of *Les damnés de la terre* , 1961.

black liberation in the United States.⁵⁰ This analogy was theorized in the concept of “internal” or “domestic” colonialism, which identified African Americans as a colonized people.⁵¹

Like many Black Power activists, who were increasingly identifying with the peoples and struggles of the Third World and framing the African American struggle in an international context, Fanon’s text influenced the growth of Beal’s international consciousness.⁵² Of course, France in the early 1960s was the context for Beal’s initial engagement with Fanon’s ideas, and thus when her colleagues encountered

⁵⁰ On Fanon’s influence during the Black Power movement, see William L. Van Deburg, *A New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 57-62. For Fanon’s influence with reference specifically to the colonial analogy, see Robert Staples, "Race and Colonialism: The Domestic Case in Theory and Practice," *The Black Scholar*, June 1976, pp. 37-47. Staples writes that Fanon was “by far the most influential writer on the colonial situation was the late psychiatrist and activist...It is on the basis of his writings that many of the internal colonialism works depend for their analysis of colonialism as a domestic form in the United States,” p. 38. Two such works are Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992 [1967]) and Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990).

⁵¹ Internal colonialism differed from formal colonialism in that the subjugated population resides within the “mother country,” rather than in a foreign land, but in both cases, a white (European or American) nation exercised economic, political, and cultural domination over a racialized and oppressed people within a given geographical territory. Internal colonialism articulated three interrelated ideological constructs which illustrate Black Power thought: 1) it renames African Americans’ relationship to the State (and white society) as colonial subjects, thus invalidating the goal of citizenship rights as structurally implausible; 2) which therefore suggests that the movement for civil rights must be recast as a national liberation movement; 3) and thus situates the struggle against racism in the United States as part of the broader world revolution. For early formulations of domestic colonialism, see John Henrik Clarke, "The New Afro-American Nationalism," *Freedomways* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1961), p. 285-95; and two 1962 essays by Harold Cruse, "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American," and "Negro Nationalism's New Wave," both of which were reprinted in Cruse's book, *Rebellion or Revolution?* (New York: William and Morrow, 1968). Subsequent works include: J.H. O'Dell, "Colonialism and the American Negro Experience," *Freedomways* 6, no. 4 (Fall 1966), and "A Special Variety of Colonialism," *Freedomways* 7, no. 1 (Winter 1967); Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); Robert Blauner, *Racial Oppression in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); and Robert Staples, *The Urban Plantation: Race and Colonialism in the Post Civil Rights Era* (Oakland: The Black Scholar Press, 1987).

⁵² See T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), p. 83-87, for a discussion of Fanon’s influence on Beal’s thinking.

Fanon's books as they came into English translation during the mid 1960s, Beal had already begun to digest his theories of racism, colonial domination, and liberation. Additionally, Fanon, the Algerian war, and African independence were constituent parts of Beal's experience and interactions in France that helped her to develop an international consciousness and global vision of political struggle. Later, as an activist in the Black Power movement, Beal was particularly attuned to the international dimensions of the African American struggle. She was an active member of the African American expatriate community in Paris, and she helped to found the Committee of Members of the Afro-American Community in Paris, which, along with the Federation of African Students in France, sponsored the meeting to which Malcolm X was to speak when he was refused entry into the country by the French government on February 9, 1965, less than two weeks before his assassination on February 21.⁵³

Beal returned to the United States early in 1966. She had maintained a connection to the developing Civil Rights movement during her time in France, visiting the U.S. every summer and working with SNCC activists in the south, and now she officially joined SNCC and entered a movement (and organization) rife with ideological battles and creative tensions. Beal's sojourn in France had been "an enlightening experience [which] created an internationalism in" her, especially in relation to Africa. "When I went back to the states and became more involved in the

⁵³ Beal interview; Clayborne Carson, *Malcolm X: The FBI File* (New York: Carroll and Graff, 1991), p. 350; Kofi Natambu, *Malcolm X* (Indianapolis: Alpha Books, 2002), p. 312.

Civil Rights movement I brought that with me,” she explains. During this time Beal also took a position with the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), serving initially as a research assistant in the New York office, and then in other capacities, including program specialist in African and Afro-American history and culture, and editor of the NCNW’s journal, Black Woman’s Voice.⁵⁴

In 1967 Beal assumed a leadership role in SNCC, working with the newly formed International Affairs Commission. The commission was spearheaded by SNCC veteran James Forman, whose travels in Africa and studies of revolutionary theory and political developments had led him to recognize the need to both build relationships with African governments and liberation movements, and to counter the official U.S. propaganda regarding the black American struggle.⁵⁵ The commission reflected SNCC’s growing international consciousness and identification of the connections between African American’s domestic struggle and the international political economy. Several SNCC members had been profoundly impacted by their experiences during a trip to Africa in 1964, and many more had been influenced by Malcolm X’s efforts to link the black American struggle to African nationalism and global politics. Furthermore, the anti-colonialism sweeping through Africa, Asia and Latin America provided powerful examples of Third World revolutionaries, and the

⁵⁴ Beal interview.

⁵⁵ James Forman, The Making of Black Revolutionaries (Seattle: Open Hand Publishing, 1985 [1972]), p. 504-52; Beal interview.

escalating conflict in Vietnam was being perceived as deadly evidence of the United States' role as an imperialist power.⁵⁶

Beal's international experience made her particularly suited for this post, and it was here that she began to emerge as an insightful and influential activist and theorist. Yet, even working in the international affairs section, Beal was not completely comfortable in the role of theorist or intellectual, nor was she encouraged to act in this role. It was her raising of the "women question" which led ultimately to her emergence as an influential intellectual force. While she had been a participant in political and policy discussions, Beal recalls, "I was not at that stage a producer of thought. I had some ideas but...I certainly did not do any writing."⁵⁷

Contestations over gender ideology led in part to Beal's development of a feminist consciousness, which in turn was a catalyst to her emergence as a political theorist. She recalls that male activists during this period (1967 and 1968) "began posing the question of the role of women, babies for the revolution, and adopting Moynihan ideas." At the same time, and in large part as a response to that, Beal and other women in SNCC began raising questions about gender in the organization and

⁵⁶ SNCC was one of the first civil rights/Black Power organizations to formally declare its opposition to the war in Vietnam. See, "Statement by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee on the War in Vietnam, January 6, 1966," Debbie Louis Civil Rights Movement Collection, Box 10, Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA. For a discussion, see Carson, *In Struggle*, p. 183-189. Beal recalls that Vietnam had a big impact on SNCC's internationalism, especially in the New York office of the organization, out of which the international affairs commission developed. A member of the New York SNCC office, Gwen Patton, who would also become one of Beal's main collaborators in the Third World Women's Alliance, organized the National Black Anti-War Anti-Draft Union (NBAWADU).

⁵⁷ Beal interview.

what they saw to be contradictory patterns in the organization.⁵⁸ For example, Beal recalled that, “collectively, the women in SNCC were called upon to take on various roles, and then to be told that they are oppressing black men” demonstrated marked inconsistencies. “There was a lot of stuff coming up in the organization [such as] women should be a few steps behind, and some of us said, ‘oh this is not right.’” In challenging these notions, Beal and her sister comrades began to develop a feminist consciousness which both made sense of their experiences and emboldened them to act on their own specific (yet collectively experienced) perspective and the politics which followed from them. For Beal, “It was almost as if becoming a feminist and being able to articulate those thoughts and ideas liberated the rest of me to be able to have confidence to say I have some real political thoughts of my own.”⁵⁹

In December of 1968, Beal presented a position paper on sterilization abuse and reproductive rights at a SNCC staff meeting. Her objective was to push the organization to pay more attention to gender inequality, and specifically black women’s oppression. While there was some hostility to the presentation, it succeeded in forcing these issues to the table. Thus, for the organization and for Beal, this

⁵⁸ Issues of sexism had been raised in the organization in the mid-1960s, particularly by two position papers (one was “anonymous”) written by two white women in the organization, Casey Hayden and Mary King. Beal was not in the organization in this period. See, Sara Evans, Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). For a discussion of the relationship between these two expressions of feminist consciousness in SNCC—the episodes in 1964 and 1965 of women in SNCC challenging sexist ideas and practices in the organization, and Beal and other black women in raising issues of gender equity in 1967 and 1968, see Kristin Anderson-Bricker, “‘Triple Jeopardy’: Black Women and the Growth of Feminist Consciousness in SNCC, 1964-1975,” in Kimberly Springer (ed.), Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women’s Contemporary Activism (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

⁵⁹ Beal interview.

marked a turning point, as it marks her emergence, in her words, as “a producer of ideas.” And as we will see below, Beal’s position paper not only holds an important place in her personal intellectual and political development. It also marks two pivotal developments in the history of Black Power-era feminism: the position paper was the genesis of Beal’s essay, “Double Jeopardy”; and out of the December 1968 meeting, which forced recognition and discussion of gender oppression within SNCC, came the formation of the organization that became the Third World Women’s Alliance.

The Black Woman: An Anthology, Black Women’s Intellectual Production, and the Articulation of a Collective Political Identity

In August of 1969, Beal received a letter from Toni Cade (Bambara)⁶⁰ inviting her to contribute to an anthology of writings by and about black women. As editor of the soon-to-be published volume, Bambara had already assembled an array of material for the book, and was close to publication, but she felt that the project had a void. She was happy with the works of poetry and fiction, as well as many of the essays dealing with issues facing contemporary black women. However, as she explained to Beal, “the pieces that address themselves to the Struggle, to the Black Woman and the Movement, to the Revolution tend to be rhapsodic but hardly

⁶⁰ In 1970, Toni Cade adopted the name Toni Cade Bambara. See Toni Cade Bambara (edited by Toni Morrison), Deep Sightings Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations (New York: Vintage, 1996), p. 205-206.

analytical or concrete.” Because of its insufficient political analysis, Cade felt that the collection was at that point “lightweight,” and she asked Beal if she had any “hard-headed, cold-blooded pieces” to contribute.⁶¹ Beal complied, contributing “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female.”

The book was published as The Black Woman: An Anthology in August of 1970.⁶² It was a pathbreaking showcase of black women’s intellectual production, remarkable not only for its subject matter, but also for the impressive array of contributors and wide range of writing genres included in the collection. Alongside works by some of the most important black women writers and thinkers of the period, such as Nikki Giovanni, Audrey Lorde and Paule Marshall, readers found selections from college students, community activists, and political organizers. The collection brought together trained writers and first time authors, musicians and political theorists. It included artists of considerable renown--such as Abbey Lincoln—as well as artists whose star was just then on the rise, like Alice Walker, whose first novel, The Third Life of Grange Copeland was also published that year. Through poems, short works of fiction, and essays, both autobiographical and analytical, the contributors to The Black Woman presented a wide range of thought, experience, and creative expression and addressed a variety of topics. Many of the contributors, for example, addressed issues arising from the contemporary debates black gender

⁶¹ Letter from Toni Cade to Fran Beal, August 26, 1969, in the Frances Beal Papers, Series 1, Box 1, Folder labeled “Double Jeopardy Permission to Publish Letters, 1969-1973,” National Park Service—Mary McLeod Bethune Council House NHS, Washington, D.C.

⁶² Toni Cade (ed.), The Black Woman: An Anthology (New York: Signet, 1970).

relations, such as: the myth of a “black matriarchy” and notions of family and motherhood; the debates regarding the role of black women in the contemporary black struggle; the meaning of manhood (and womanhood) and the possibility of black people redefining sex roles beyond dominant (white) patriarchal models; and discussion of the nature of black female/male relationships. Others topics included: birth control and the debates over women’s reproductive rights; the relationship between African American women to Vietnamese women and their respective political struggles; racism in education and the rationale for a black university; and the nature of the “black revolution” and its relationship to the Algerian revolution.

Together, these works constituted a compelling text that painted a colorful collage representing many of the interests and concerns of contemporary black women. The Black Woman, therefore stands as an intellectual artifact of the period. In the introduction to her anthology of African American feminist thought, black women’s studies scholar Beverly Guy-Sheftall cites The Black Woman as one of four books published in 1970 which “signaled a literary awakening among black women and the beginning of a clearly defined black women’s liberation movement.”⁶³ According to feminist scholar bell hooks, the book singlehandedly “placed black women at the center of various feminist debates” and “legitimized looking at black life from a feminist perspective.” Furthermore, she says, “the publication of this anthology not only helped compel the publishing industry to recognize that there was

⁶³ Sheftall, Words of Fire, p. 14. The other three books are Shirley Chisholm’s autobiography Unbought and Unbossed, Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, and Audre Lorde’s Cables to Rage.

a market for books by and about black women, it helped to create an intellectual climate where feminist theory focusing on black experience could emerge.”⁶⁴ Farah Jasmine Griffin concurs, saying that the book “is one of the first major texts to lay out the terrain of black women’s thought that emerged from the civil rights, Black Power, and women’s liberation movements,” adding that it reflects “the vibrancy, excitement, politics, and rhetoric of the time.”⁶⁵

These assessments of the book’s import, and those of Griffin in particular, highlight a crucial function that it served, namely, the opening of space to articulate ideas and develop a body of thought. This, in turn, was a necessary condition for constructing a political identity for black women, which was a central goal of Black Power-era feminism. By looking closely at the process through which The Black Woman came to be, we can gain an important perspective on this dynamic of creating space for black feminist thought.

The origins of the book can be traced through Bambara’s intellectual, professional, and political activities during the 1960s. A native of New York City and a writer from an early age, Bambara earned a B.A. from Queens College in theatre arts and English literature in 1959. In January of that year she published her first short story, “Sweet Town,” in *Vendome* magazine, with the second, “Mississippi Ham Rider,” published the following summer in *Massachusetts Review*. During the

⁶⁴ bell hooks, Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), p.231-232.

⁶⁵ Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Conflict and Chorus: Reconsidering Toni Cade’s *The Black Woman: An Anthology*,” in Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., (ed.), Is it Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 116-117.

next five years, Bambara studied at the Commedia del' Arte in Milan, Italy, and the City College of New York, where she earned a Master's Degree in American literature in 1965. Also during this period, she worked as program director at Colony House in Brooklyn, the recreational and occupation therapist for the psychiatric division of Metropolitan Hospital, as well as serving as coordinator or director of several local community and neighborhood programs.⁶⁶

From 1965 to 1969, Bambara taught English at the City College of New York, while continuing to write and publish her fiction (at least five stories between 1966-1969) in such journals and magazines the Negro Digest (soon to be changed to Black World) and Liberator Magazine, both of which were to be major venues of black thought and creative writing during the Black Power movement.⁶⁷ As a lecturer in the English Department, Bambara shared intellectual company with an impressive group of black poets, writers and literary scholars, including Audrey Lorde, Addison Gayle, Barbara Christian, June Jordan and Larry Neal. Many of Bambara's colleagues would, like her, go on to great achievement and acclaim in the years to

⁶⁶ Biographical material on Bambara is drawn from the following interviews and autobiographical statements: Toni Cade Bambara, "Salvation is the Issue," in Mari Evans (ed.), Black Women Writers: A Critical Evaluation, 1950-1980 (New York: Anchor Press, 1984); Interview with Toni Cade Bambara in, Claudie Tate (ed.), Black Women Writers at Work (New York: Continuum, 1983); Zala Chandler, "Voices Beyond the Veil: An Interview of Toni Cade Bambara and Sonia Sanchez," in Joanne M. Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin (eds.), Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); "How She Came by Her Name: An Interview with Louis Massiah," in Bambara, Deep Sightings; and Toni Cade Bambara, "What It Is I Think I'm Doing Anyway," in Janet Sternburg (ed.), The Writer on Her Work (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980).

⁶⁷ These and other stories are collected in Toni Cade Bambara, Gorilla, My Love (New York: Vintage Books, 1990 [1972]).

come; at this time, as artists and intellectuals, they were part of a growing trend towards greater politicization of knowledge and education.

In this intellectual and political environment, Bambara recalled, people encouraged her to put her insights and talents to broader use, and she identifies the prodding of three people in particular as the origins of The Black Woman. One of her students, Francine Covington (who subsequently was a contributor to the book) first suggested that she collect her ideas into a book. Then Dan Watts, editor of *Liberator* magazine, echoed the idea: “You have an interesting take on things,” he told her. “You ought to write a book.” Finally, Bambara’s colleague at City College Addison Gayle, himself a leading literary scholar, added his voice to the chorus, suggesting that she collect her spoken presentations into a book. Thus, in 1968, encouraged by the repeated suggestion, the idea came to Bambara: “Oh, a book about black women. That would be great.”⁶⁸

For the scope and form of the book, Bambara initially turned to the experiences of women in Black Power organizations, but she ultimately came to adopt a broader thematic focus and format to reflect the specific concerns and needs of a wide range of black women intellectuals, artists, and activists. Recalling this process, she told an interviewer:

I had read a piece by Ruby Doris (Smith Robinson) about women and leadership and SNCC, so I talked to the women in the Panther Party, women in CORE, women in SNCC. They were writing position papers and taking the brothers to task for their foolishness

⁶⁸ Bambara, “How She Came by Her Name,” p. 229.

and shit. I wanted to get some papers out of them and put them in a book. But the women said, 'No, this is in-house stuff. We are not interested in going public.' I thought that was a shame and I said, 'I'll wait...' Then I began looking around for an agent... We began going around to the publishing houses and I began running into a lot of people I used to go to school with, white folks. They are saying things like, 'I've seen fabulous manuscripts from Black women, but they wind up on the sludge pile because there is no market for Black women's works.' So then I got this idea: Never mind the papers from the Panther party women; let me do a book that will kick the door open... I put together this anthology that I felt would open the door and prove there was a market.⁶⁹

Thus, a primary motive of the collection was to open space for black women's intellectual production by showcasing a variety of writings by black women, including poetry, fiction, essays and political commentary. Bambara expounds on this objective in the book's preface, where she provides both context and rationale for the book. Situating its intellectual concerns, political motivations, and artistic expressions within the political contestations of the day, she begins by asserting:

We are involved in a struggle for liberation: liberation from the exploitative and dehumanizing system of racism, from the manipulative control of a corporate society; liberation from the constrictive norms of 'mainstream' culture, from the synthetic myths that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly from without (reaction) rather than from within (creation). What characterizes the current movement of the 60s is a turning away from the larger society and a turning toward each other. Our art, protest, dialogue no longer spring from the impulse to entertain, or to indulge or enlighten the conscience of the enemy; white people, whiteness, or

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 229-230. The essay by Ruby Doris Smith Robinson to which Bambara refers may in fact be the position paper written by Mary King and Casey Hayden in 1964. It was presented anonymously, and there was speculation at the time that it was written by Robinson. Authorship has since been verified as King and Hayden. See Sara Evans, *Personal Politics*, p. 84-88.

racism; men, maleness, or chauvinism: America or imperialism...depending on your viewpoint and your terror.⁷⁰

For Bambara, the first task for women was to determine for themselves what liberation meant. She goes on to survey various fields of study—ranging from psychiatry to history—finding that they have been dominated by either white men or women, or in some cases black men, and their analytical perspectives, methods of data collection, type of analysis, and conclusions were ultimately insufficient in helping women “to define that term in respect to ourselves.” Consider for example, Cade’s assessment of the field of literature:

The “experts” are still men, Black or white. And the images of the woman are still derived from their needs, their fantasies, their second-hand knowledge, their agreement with the other ‘experts.’ But of course there have been women who were able to think better than they have been trained and have produced the canon of literature fondly referred to as “feminist literature”: Anais Nin, Simone de Beauvoir, Dorris Lessing, Betty Friedan, etc. And the question for us arises: how relevant are the truths, the experiences, the findings of white women to Black women? Are women after all simply women? I don’t know that our priorities are the same, that our concerns and methods are the same, or even similar enough so that we can afford to depend on this new field of experts (white, female).

It is rather obvious that we do not. It is obvious that we are turning to each other.⁷¹

Bambara’s challenge to these “experts” and the knowledge that they produce is a central part of the rationale for The Black Woman: the necessity of black women to speak and think for themselves, not only about their own condition, but about the

⁷⁰ Cade, The Black Woman, p. 7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

broader struggle to change society. As a manifestation of the principle of “turning toward each other,” Bambara saw the book as part of a groundswell of activity among black women in which they sought to collectively define and determine their political perspectives and objectives. “Throughout the country in recent years,” Cade explains,

Black women have been forming work-study groups, discussion clubs, cooperative nurseries, cooperative businesses, consumer education groups, women’s workshops on the campuses, women’s caucuses within existing organizations, Afro-American women’s magazines. From time to time they have organized seminars on the Role of the Black Woman, conferences on the Crisis Facing the Black Woman, have provided tapes on the Attitude of European Men Toward Black Women, working papers on the Position of the Black Woman in America; they have begun correspondence with sisters in Vietnam, Guatemala, Algeria, Ghana on the Liberation Struggle and the Woman, formed alliances on a Third World plank.⁷²

These activities affirmed the development of a collective political consciousness and feminist organizing among black women, and The Black Woman gave voice and legitimacy to black feminists by documenting their activism. For example, the anthology included the transcript of a 1969 rap session among women students of the City College of New York. Participants in the session, which was one of the activities of a Women’s Workshop that some of the women had formed during a conference commemorating Malcolm X, engaged in a wide-ranging dialogue about their relationships as black women to white women as well as to each other, the

⁷² Ibid., p. 9-10.

politics of “natural” hair, and leadership in the black struggle, among other topics.⁷³

This is an illustration of black women’s use of the rap session as a form of “consciousness raising,” one of the strategies associated with second-wave feminism and the women’s liberation movement and an obscured expression of black women’s activism.

The anthology also included three documents which highlight the work of a group known as the Mount Vernon/New Rochelle group, a network of black women who had been discussing and organizing around issues of concern to poor black women since the early 1960s.⁷⁴ Two of these selections came under the title “Poor Black Women’s Study Papers,” and they demonstrated the direction of the group’s efforts in the late 1960s. The first was a “Letter to a North Vietnamese Sister From an Afro-American Woman” in which the women of the Mount Vernon/New Rochelle group expressed their solidarity and common cause with Vietnamese women. The letter was written in the fall of 1969, just months after some of the group members had met with Vietnamese revolutionary women. The second piece was “On the Position of Poor Black Women in This Country” which was part of the group’s response to the argument that black women should reject birth control and “produce children,” therefore “aiding the REVOLUTION in the form of NATION building.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Adele Jones and Group, “Ebony Minds, Ebony Voices,” in Cade, The Black Woman.

⁷⁴ M. Rivka Polatnick, “Poor Black Sisters Decided for Themselves: A Case Study of 1960s Women’s Liberation Activism,” in Kim Marie Vaz (ed.), Black Women in America (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995).

⁷⁵ Pat Robinson and Group, “Poor Black Women’s Study Papers,” in Cade, The Black Women. Polatnick reports that the meeting between members of the group and Vietnamese women was held in

The group's third contribution to The Black Woman was an essay titled "A Historical and Critical Essay for Black Woman in the Cities" which offered a theoretical assessment of the prospects for a black revolutionary struggle and the liberation of black women "in the time of the cities, cybernetics, nuclear power, and space exploration."⁷⁶ These selections document the group's engagement with the political issues and events of the day as well as their working through theoretical implications of these political issues.

In addition to documenting black feminist organizing and theorizing, The Black Woman played an important role in laying the groundwork for a black feminist praxis. For example, several of the essays in the anthology addressed the current debate concerning gender roles and the role of women in the black liberation struggle. In an essay entitled, "Is the Black Male Castrated," Jean Carey Bond and Patricia Peery take up this issue—"a burning question in our community"—by challenging "a popular and dangerous fiction: the myth of Black male emasculation and its descendant concept, the myth of the Black female matriarchy." They argued that these notions--that black society is matriarchal and that black women are primarily responsible for the denial of black manhood—were responsible for "superficial and unbalanced attitudes" leading to a "lack of seriousness and sobriety in the debate."⁷⁷

Canada in July 1969. The letter is dated September 1968 in The Black Woman, but Polatnick says this is mistaken.

⁷⁶ Pat Robinson and Group, "A Historical and Critical Essay for Black Women in the Cities," in Cade, The Black Women.

⁷⁷ Jean Carey Bond and Pat Peery, "Is the Black Male Castrated?," in Cade, The Black Woman, p. 113-114.

Citing the Moynihan report as playing a large part in the popularization of these age old myths, Bond and Peery suggest that these and related myths reflect the values and needs of the status quo rather than African Americans' history or present sociological reality. The acceptance by some blacks of these ideas, and the patriarchal values upon which they are founded, reveals an adherence to the "basic premises of the American value system." The attendant definitions of masculinity and femininity are used by the powers that be in "their design of divide and rule." "It is the transference of values...that has pitted the Black man against Black woman and vice versa—a situation which, needless to say, is anathema to the pursuit of self-determination."⁷⁸ Thus, the essay engages the debate by offering a critique of a ideas and practices by some black men (and some women), arguing that they reinforce the values and legitimacy of the system, and subsequently reinforce white supremacy and black oppression. Additionally, the argument offered in the essay is an implicit defense of black womanhood and an assertion of black women's political agency.

In Bambara's own essay titled, "On the Issue of Roles" (one of her three essays in the book), she also addressed the hotly debated topic of "the Black woman's Role in the Revolution." Like Bond and Peery, she took issue with "this sick society's definition of 'masculine' and 'feminine,'" and in particular she critiqued the notion that there are immutable masculine and feminine traits which lead to natural gender roles. These "socially contrived roles" did not represent the natural, nor the most

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 116-117.

humane or productive order of things, but rather worked to support the status quo and its relations of power. “Generally speaking, in a capitalist society a man is expected to be an aggressive, uncompromising, factual, lusty, intelligent provider of goods, and the woman, a retiring, gracious, emotional, intuitive, attractive consumer of goods.”⁷⁹

Sounding a consistent refrain among black women activists, Cade suggested that such ideas had exerted a corrupting influence on black political analysis. She identified a “dangerous trend in some quarters of the movement” in which women were being “assigned an unreal role of mute servant” and “being encouraged---in the name of revolution no less—to ‘cultivate’ virtues that if listed would sound like the personality traits of slaves.”⁸⁰ Lamenting the implications of these ideas (and the black manhood as black liberation metaphor), Cade pointed to “the horror of a situation in which we...ignore the danger of having one half of our population regard the other half with such condescension and perhaps fear that that half finds it necessary to ‘reclaim his manhood’ by denying her peoplehood.” Offering a truly transgressive vision of social identity, she continued: “Perhaps we need to let go of all notions of manhood and femininity and concentrate on Blackhood” and “the task of creating a new identity, a self, perhaps an androgynous self, via commitment to the struggle.”⁸¹

Thus, Cade proposes that black people reject western notions of what it means to be a man or woman, opting instead to develop new understandings of these

⁷⁹ Toni Cade, “On the Issue of Roles,” in Cade, *The Black Woman*, p. 101-102.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102-103.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

identities that are more consistent with their situation and social experience. Drawing from Fanon's analysis of the Algerian revolution, Cade suggests that new understandings of these identities will be forged through the revolutionary struggle to change America. "The job then regarding 'roles,'" she concludes, "is to submerge all breezy definitions of manhood/womanhood (or reject them out of hand if you're not squeamish about being called 'neuter') until realistic definitions emerge through a commitment to blackhood."⁸²

Fran Beal's essay, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," also helped to clarify issues and to articulate ideas that were critical in developing a political identity and feminist agenda for black women. Perhaps the most analytical and theoretic essay of the collection, "Double Jeopardy" has become one of the most cited essays of the book (and of the period), and is recognized as laying the foundation for black feminist thought in this period. It was one of the first efforts to theorize the simultaneity of racial and gender systems of oppression, arguing that racism and sexism have worked in concert in the lives of black women, creating a particular set of experiences, concerns, and problems. As such, Beal articulated a theory of multiple oppression that not only anticipated later feminist analysis and conceptual frameworks such as intersectionality and standpoint theory,⁸³ but also helped to expand the boundaries of Black Power thought. Like Bond and Peery, Cade, and

⁸² Ibid., p. 109.

⁸³ For a discussion of these ideas in black feminist theory, see Patricia Hill Collins, Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), and Collins, Black Feminist Thought.

others, Beal's essay challenged prevailing gender norms and sexist ideas, including the Moynihan report and the uncritical acceptance or implicit support of it. In addition, the essay argues that changes in both social structures and social relations must be part of a program for black liberation and revolutionary transformation.

Because "Double Jeopardy" confronted many of the same concerns addressed by other women in The Black Woman, played an important role in the formation of the Third World Women's Alliance, and articulated fundamental elements of black feminist thought generally, it will be worthwhile to make a close examination of the essay. Furthermore, by exploring the ways in which her analysis differs from other feminist analyses, we can gain a clearer perspective and deeper understanding of the development of Black Power-era feminist thought.

Fran Beal as Radical Theorist: "Double Jeopardy"

Beal's essay was one of several in The Black Woman that critiqued the conservative gender ideology that black women confronted, including the call for black women and men to assume traditional gender roles. Specifically, she and others articulated a central tenet of Black Power-era feminism: that the accepted notions of masculine and feminine, or what it means to be a man or a woman, not only reflect patriarchal values, but also reflect the values of white middle class

society and the status quo. Thus, to call for black women to conform to such norms was inconsistent with the thrust of black oppositional thought, antithetical to notions of cultural autonomy, and counter productive to the black struggle.

Beal added her voice to this critique by pointing to the inherent contradiction in the recent call for patriarchal authority. “Since the advent of Black Power,” she wrote, “[the black male] sees the system for what it is for the most part. But where he rejects its values and mores on many issues, when it comes to women, he seems to take his cues from the ages of Ladies Home Journal.”⁸⁴ For example, she argues that the idea that the woman’s most productive role in life is having and raising children is taken completely from a bourgeois white model of womanhood. Furthermore, the notion that the most important thing for black women to do to contribute to the black nation is have children negates the contributions of black women historically, such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, as well as contemporary figures such as Fannie Lou Hamer.

In rejecting established gender roles, Beal also challenged male-centered models of leadership and political agency. She warned that “Those who are exerting their ‘manhood’ by telling black women to step back into a domestic, submissive role are assuming a counter-revolutionary position,” adding that “Black women likewise have been abused by the system.” Beal then affirms the underlying principle of black feminist politics: “we must begin talking about the elimination of all kinds of

⁸⁴ Beal, “Double Jeopardy,” p. 92.

oppression.”⁸⁵ Thus, she is not only defending black womanhood against the charges of treason and alleged collusion with the oppressor, she also clearly affirmed the fact of Black women’s oppression, making it clear that a political perspective which implicitly places a premium on black male suffering was neither historically accurate nor politically efficacious.

Like other black radicals, Beal identified capitalism as the central engine of black oppression, and like other feminists, she also implicated the economic system as a derisive force in the relationships between black women and men. “The system of capitalism (and its afterbirth...racism),” she wrote, “has attempted by many devious ways and means to destroy the humanity of all people, and particularly the humanity of black people.”⁸⁶ Furthermore, this system:

found it necessary to create a situation where the black man found it impossible to find meaningful or productive employment...And the black woman likewise was manipulated by the system, economically exploited and physically assaulted. She could often find work in the white man’s kitchen, however, and sometimes became the sole breadwinner of the family. This predicament has led to many psychological problems on the part of both man and woman and has contributed to the turmoil that we find in the black family structure.⁸⁷

Thus, Beal seems to accept the notion that black men have historically fared worse than women in the labor market, an idea that Moynihan and others used to argue a very different position than Beal’s. However, she parts company with them

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 93.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 90.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 90.

in two important ways. First, she lays the blame for black men's economic deprivation squarely at the feet of capitalism, not just slavery or discrimination (and certainly not competition with black women). Secondly, she finds that this has harmed both black men and women. Thus like others, she: 1) stressed the unity of men and women, highlighting their common oppression, as opposed to the antagonisms between them, as the fundamental fact of their political reality; and 2) highlighted capitalism not only as a fundamental source of racial oppression but also as the primary culprit in a strategy of divide and rule within black communities.

The essay also addressed the economic exploitation specifically of black women under American capitalism. Drawing parallels to the relationship between poor whites and black people, Beal argued that "the oppression of women acts as an escape valve for capitalism...by giving to men a false feeling of security (at least in their own home or in their relationships with women)."⁸⁸ The ideology of male superiority was reinforced by women's structurally weak position in the U.S. economy, and for black women this situation is magnified. As evidence of this structural inequality, Beal cites U.S. Department of Labor data to show that women are paid less than men for the same work, and black women are at the bottom of an economy-wide, racially and gender stratified unequal wage scale. In addition, she presented the often cited fact that "jobs that are specifically relegated to women are low-paying and without possibility of advancement," adding that "those industries

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 94.

which employ mainly black women are the most exploitative in the country.”⁸⁹ As general examples of the last assertion, she cited domestic and hospital workers, and she gave the specific example of garment workers in New York City, and their union, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). While the membership of the union was mostly black and Puerto Rican, its leadership was primarily white and male. “To add insult to injury,” she wrote, the ILGWU had invested union funds in business enterprises operating in apartheid South Africa. Beal offered this as an example of the problematic relationship between black people—and especially black women—and the labor movement. In particular, she charged that labor unions “have historically been racist and chauvinistic,” upholding racism domestically, condoning imperialist exploitation around the world, and failing to challenge the racism of white workers. Thus, the racism and sexism of the labor movement has not only made it a party to the super exploitation of black workers and women, but has also “been a severe cancer on the American labor scene.”⁹⁰

Beal’s examination of the mechanisms of black women’s oppression also included an analysis of what she labeled “bedroom politics,” by which she meant the struggles surrounding women’s reproductive control. By the close of the 1960s, the women’s movement had led women to a greater awareness of their health, sexuality, and reproduction, and abortion had become a particularly politicized issue.⁹¹ Within

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 94.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 95.

⁹¹ Winifred D. Wandersee, On the Move: American Women in the 1970s (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), p. 81-82.

black activist communities, discussions about women's reproduction included debates concerning the political salience and health implications of birth control, abortion, and sterilization.⁹² For example, some in the Black Power movement (primarily men but some women as well) called for black women to reject birth control, identifying it as part of a racist, genocidal plot to stop the birth of future fighters for black liberation. Because it kept black women from "having babies for the revolution," the push for widespread use of birth control was in effect an attack on the black nation (in the making). Beal of course was strongly opposed to the idea of "having babies for the revolution." For Beal, the issue of reproduction was less about an attack on the black nation than it was as an attack on black women's right and ability to control their bodies, their health, and the conditions of their lives.

We are not saying that black women should not practice birth control or family planning. Black women have the right and the responsibility to determine when it is in the interest of the struggle to have children or not to have them. *It is also her right and responsibility to determine when it is in her own best interest to have children, how many she will have, and how far apart and this right must not be relinquished to anyone.*" (emphasis in the original)⁹³

In addition to affirming black women's right to use the birth control pill, Beal challenged the practice of forced sterilization--which she called "surgical genocide"--and the "rigid laws concerning abortions in this country [which] are another vicious

⁹² Loretta J. Ross, "African American Women and Abortion, 1800-1970," in James and Busia, *Theorizing Black Feminisms*, p. 150-157.

⁹³ Beal, "Double Jeopardy," p. 97-98.

means of subjugation, and indirectly, of outright murder.”⁹⁴ Here, Beal directed her critique towards the state and its efforts to deny black (and all poor) women equal access to the means by which they could exercise reproductive freedom.

The lack of the availability of safe birth control methods, the forced sterilization practices, and the inability to obtain legal abortions are all symptoms of a decadent society that jeopardizes the health of black women (and thereby the entire black race) in its attempts to control the very life processes of human beings.⁹⁵

Characteristically, Beal connected this analysis to the larger political agenda:

The elimination of these horrendous conditions will free black women for full participation in the revolution, and thereafter, in the building of the new society.⁹⁶

It is worth noting here that we can see in Beal’s analysis an articulation of the principle that “the personal is political,” one of the central theoretical insights of the women’s liberation movement.⁹⁷ Beal assess the political implications of personal acts, as well as the ways in which political developments and ideas impact women’s lived experiences. However, this should not obscure the fact that Beal and other black feminists had uneasy and often outright antagonistic relations with their white sisters in the women’s liberation movement. In “Double Jeopardy” Beal discusses what she finds to be the basic differences between the political struggles of black and

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 97. Abortion became a legal medical practice in 1973 with the supreme court decisions, *Roe v. Wade* (Texas) and *Doe v. Bolton* (Georgia). See Kathleen C. Berkeley, *The Women’s Liberation Movement in America* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. 66-67.

⁹⁵ Beal, “Double Jeopardy,” p. 98.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

⁹⁷ Carol Hanisch, “The Personal is Political,” in Barbara A. Crow (ed.), *Radical Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

white women and the barriers to improved relationships between black women and the broader women's liberation movement, or "the white woman's movement."

However, she does so in a way which has been lost in deviates from the standard narrative of this relationship and illuminates black power-era feminism. Rather than simply attribute the impasse between black and white women to the racism of the white movement" (which is generally cited as the reason for black women's alienation from and rejection of "women's lib"), Beal suggests that ideological and political differences anchor the impasse and are the basis for the divisions between black and white women. From their respective experiences and social locations, black and white women had developed different sets of political priorities. Ultimately, Beal argues, a unity of purpose between black and white women can only be purchased with white women's adherence to two fundamental principles: anti-imperialism and anti-racism. That is, their common experiences as women are insufficient for common political bonds; only ideological unity can forge political unity. In uncompromising terms, Beal explains:

If the white groups do not realize that they are in fact fighting capitalism and racism, we do not have common bonds. If they do not realize that the reasons for their condition lie in a debilitating economic social system, and not simply that men get a vicarious pleasure out of 'consuming their bodies for exploitation' (this kind of reasoning seems to be quite prevalent in certain white women's groups) then we cannot unite with them around common grievances or even discuss these groups in a serious manner, because they're completely irrelevant to black women in particular or to the black struggle in general.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Beal, "Double Jeopardy," p. 99.

The essay concludes with a section titled “The New World,” in which Beal calls for a black political vision which recognizes black women as agents of political change, maintains a commitment to eliminating all forms of oppression, and is ultimately engaged in a struggle to transform power relations and institutions throughout society. She begins the section with the assertion that “The black community and black women especially must begin raising questions about the kind of society we wish to see established.”⁹⁹ By calling for a discussion not only of what the struggle is *against*, but also what it is *for*, Beal moves from an examination of the mechanisms of racial and gender oppression to the broader theoretical issues of political vision and revolutionary purpose. In particular, Beal identifies what to her is a necessary element of this revolutionary transformation: all members of society must both participate in the struggle for a new society and be liberated from all forms of oppression in the process of creating this new society.

In this vision of revolutionary transformation--a “people’s revolution”-- individuals would be transformed in the process of transforming their society, thereby forcing changes in social relations. “This will mean changing the traditional routines that we have established as a result of living in a totally corrupting society. It means changing how you relate to your wife, your husband, your parents and your co-workers.” Beal specifically challenged the practice of assigning “women the role of housekeeper and mother while men go into battle” as a “highly questionable doctrine

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 99.

for a revolutionary to profess,” and reiterated the point that women must not be reduced to junior partners in the struggle for a new society. “Those who consider themselves to be revolutionary,” she wrote, “must begin to deal with other revolutionaries as equals.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, Beal’s vision of revolutionary transformation brought together three social and political objectives: taking power, creating new institutions, and re-fashioning personal relations between men and women. She argues the point by stating:

Given the mutual commitment of black men and women alike to the liberation of our people and other oppressed peoples around the world, the total involvement of each individual is necessary. A revolutionary has the responsibility of not only toppling those that are in a position of power, but more importantly, the responsibility of creating new institutions that will eliminate all forms of oppression for all people. We must begin to re-write our understanding of traditional personal relationships between man and woman.¹⁰¹

Because the concept of multiple oppressions is at the heart of Beal’s analysis, and the objective of eliminating all forms of oppression is the fundamental goal, black women’s oppression is central to her vision of a social transformation and the construction of a new society. Throughout “Double Jeopardy,” Beal presents evidence that “black women have very specific problems that have to be spoken to”¹⁰² and argues that these problems must be addressed, not as something separate from the black movement as a whole, but within the framework of black liberation.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 99-100.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 100.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 100.

In the essay's concluding section Beal explicitly draws out the connections between black women's political struggle and the larger black struggle, raising again a challenge to the idea that black women's concerns should be subordinated to the interests of the larger struggle. Indeed, in Beal's analysis, the problem of black women's oppression is not a marginal or secondary goal of the black struggle, but is recast as a measure of the struggle's revolutionary potential.

The value of this new system will be determined by the status of those persons who are presently most oppressed... Unless women in any enslaved nation are completely liberated, the change cannot really be called a revolution. If the black woman has to retreat to the position she occupied before the armed struggle, the whole movement and the whole struggle will have retreated in terms of truly freeing the colonized population.¹⁰³

Coming to Terms: Towards A Definition of Radical Black Feminism

These two interrelated concepts—the simultaneity of oppression and the centrality of black women's liberation to the black struggle—form the basis of black feminist thinking during the Black Power movement. Beal's organization, the Third World Women's Alliance, built upon these ideas as they developed a particular black feminist praxis. In the next chapter, we will see how these women fashioned a unique and incisive political language within the context of the Black Power movement. The history of the TWWA reveals a multi-situated social movement--radical black

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 99.

feminism--that emphasized structural critiques of capitalism and the state (including both its domestic and foreign policies) as part of its confrontation with sexism, racism, and economic exploitation.

Several scholars have recently argued that historical analyses of black feminism must take into account the variation that has existed between expressions of black feminism over time and within particular historical periods.¹⁰⁴ In her discussion of “feminisms” from the civil rights and Black Power era, feminist scholar Joy James explains that “all antiracist and antisexist politics are not equally ambitious or visionary in their confrontations with state dominance and in their demands and strategies for transforming society.”¹⁰⁵ She goes on to offer a framework which differentiates between black feminisms:

Black feminisms that accept the political legitimacy of corporate-state institutional and police power but posit the need for humanistic reform are considered *liberal*. Black feminisms that view female and black oppression as stemming from capitalism, neocolonialism and the corporate state are generally understood to be *radical*. Some black feminisms explicitly challenge state and corporate dominance and critique the privileged status of bourgeois elites among the “Left”; those that do so by connecting political theory for radical transformation with acts to abolish corporate-state and elite dominance are *revolutionary*.¹⁰⁶

By virtue of its ideological positions, the TWWA certainly fits within James’ schema as a radical formation. In the following account and analysis of the

¹⁰⁴ Joy James, *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999); Sharpley-Whiting, *Frantz Fanon*; James and Busia, *Theorizing Black Feminisms*.

¹⁰⁵ James, *Shadowboxing*, p. 78.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

organization's activities, we will assess to what extent its historical example might be characterized as *revolutionary*.

Chapter 5

THE THIRD WORLD WOMEN'S ALLIANCE AND THE PRACTICE OF RADICAL BLACK FEMINISM, 1969-1972

In December 1968, Fran Beal presented a position paper on sterilization abuse and reproductive rights to a SNCC staff meeting that reflected the direction of her political thinking as well as the growing feminist consciousness among black women activists in the organization.¹ By the fall of that year, Beal's duties within the New York office of SNCC had grown to include her work with James Forman in organizing the International Affairs Commission as well as coordinating fund raising programs for the national organization.² As she began to assume a more active role in the organization, Beal was also becoming more engaged in SNCC's ongoing ideological evolution. In particular, she and other women took note of an emergent line of thinking during this period within the Black Power movement—characterized by such ideas as the call for black women to have babies for the revolution, or that black women should stay in the background and support her man—that sought to effectively restrict their participation as black women activists. Within SNCC, this

¹ Beal interview.

² Beal interview; Fran Beal to Bob Smith, August 2, 1968, SNCC Papers; Kristen Anderson-Bricker, "Triple Jeopardy: Black Women and the Growth of Feminist Consciousness in SNCC, 1964-1975," in Kimberly Springer 9ed.), Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women's Contemporary Activism (New York: New York University Press, 1999), p. 58.

ideological orientation reinforced patterns of gender inequality in the organizational sexual division of labor, whereby women were routinely confined to secretarial and other supportive roles irrespective of their individual capabilities.³ These ideas, they believed, were inconsistent with SNCC's expressed commitment to the liberation of oppressed people.⁴ Beal wrote and presented her paper as an intervention into the discussion of gender roles, hoping to push the organization to pay more attention to the oppression of black women.

Beal's paper, which was the genesis of her groundbreaking essay "Double Jeopardy," was important conceptually and ideologically. It brought attention within SNCC to problems specific to black women and thus underscored the lived experience of racial and gender oppression. Additionally, it reflected Beal's and other women's emerging feminist consciousness, which was borne in part of their experiences in SNCC and the movement and led to an interrogation of specific facets of their lives as black women. They came to see gender inequality in the organization as a reflection of a refusal or inability on the part of some men in the organization and the broader movement to see women's oppression. Furthermore, the position paper foreshadowed the work of the Third World Women's Alliance and their radical black

³ Beal interview; "Third World Women's Alliance: Our History, Our Ideology, Our Goals," in the Records of the National Council of Negro Women, Series 24, Box 4, Folder 29, National Park Service—Mary McLeod Bethune Council House NHS, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter cited as NCNW—Beal Papers)

⁴ Speaking of black women activists, Beal recalled: "We truly had been revolutionized by our participation in the Civil Rights movement, and we were talking about freedom and liberation, and then all of the sudden to have a sector, I'm not saying it was all black men, but a sector of them to begin promoting what was essentially backwards lines for black women was too much of a disjuncture between this talk of freedom and our own lives." (Beal interview)

feminist politics. For example, by calling attention to government programs which coerced or forced women of color, and especially poor black women, to accept sterilization, sometimes as a precondition for continued government assistance, Beal highlighted the intersections of race, class, and gender oppression in black women's lives. She directed her critique towards the state, finding the source of oppression in state policies and practices (not just the attitudes and actions of men).

Politicizing Black Women's Lives: Reproductive Rights

Beal's choice of subject matter, sterilization abuse, deserves comment for at least four reasons. Firstly, it was particularly prescient. By the end of the decade, the practice of coerced and involuntary sterilization of poor black women was widespread, but unfortunately this painful reality was not widely known, or at least it had not gained much attention from policy makers and reformers.⁵ Readers of Beal's essay might have thought she was guilty of exaggeration, or simply spreading misinformation, when she wrote of sterilization programs: "these outrageous Nazi-like procedures on the part of medical researchers are but another manifestation of the totally amoral and dehumanizing brutality that the capitalist system perpetuates on black women." And as she continued the analogy, Beal might have been accused of

⁵ Dorothy Roberts, Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty (New York: Vintage, 1997), p. 89-98.

employing a disingenuous moral appeal: “The sterilization experiments carried on in concentration camps some twenty-five years ago have been denounced the world over, but no one seems to get upset by the repetition of these same racist tactics today in the United States of America—land of the free and home of the brave.”⁶ In fact, a decade later a scholarly study confirmed Beal’s claim, pointing out that the sterilization rates of black women under federally funded programs equaled the rate reached by Nazi sterilization programs in the 1930s.⁷ Furthermore, a series of high profile episodes of sterilization abuse of young black women in the early and mid 1970 brought to light the extent of such practices throughout the country, implicating the federal government as well as local and state agencies.⁸

Secondly, the topic was immediately and personally relevant for black women in general, and for women in SNCC in particular. The paper was inspired in part by the stories of women active in the Civil Rights movement who had suffered the violation of coerced or uninformed sterilization.⁹ One such person was Fannie Lou Hamer, the indefatigable civil rights activists, leader of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and one of the most respected women in SNCC. In 1961, while she was hospitalized to have a small cyst in her stomach removed, a doctor performed

⁶ Frances Beal, “Double Jeopardy,” in Toni Cade, The Black Woman: An Anthology (New York: Signet, 1970), p. 97.

⁷ Roberts, Killing the Black Body, p. 93. Roberts cites Allan Chase, The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

⁸ Angela Y. Davis, Women, Race, and Class (New York: Vintage, 1983), p. 215-218; Roberts, Killing the Black Body, p. 93-95; Robert G. Weisbord, Genocide? Birth Control and the Black American (New York: Greenwood Press, 1975), p. 158-174.

⁹ Kimberly Springer, “Our Politics Was Black Women: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980” (Unpublished Dissertation, Emory University, 1999), p. 118.

a complete hysterectomy without Hamer's knowledge or consent. Though she said little about her own experience publicly or privately, Hamer more than once made public statements about the forced sterilization of rural black women in Mississippi.¹⁰

Thirdly, by broaching the topic of women's reproduction, Beal addressed the most important issue of the young women's movement: reproductive rights.¹¹ As radical feminist Ellen Willis explains, the struggle over abortion was the first major public effort of women liberationists because, "more than any other issue, abortion embodied and symbolized our fundamental demand—not merely formal equality for women but genuine self-determination." She adds that the right to an abortion was fundamentally important to radical feminists because it spoke to "women's moral right to control their fertility and therefore the direction of their lives."¹² For black women and the black community, however, debates and struggles over abortion played out differently. As feminist historian Alice Echols writes, "for the young, mostly-white middle-class women who were attracted to women's liberation, the issue was forced reproduction. But for women of color, the issue was as often forced sterilization."¹³

The debate over birth control and reproduction in the black community were especially charged. Dating back to the 1920s, African American intellectuals,

¹⁰ Chana Kai Lee, For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), p. 21-22, 80-81.

¹¹ Alice Echols, "Nothing Distant about it: Women's Liberation and Sixties Radicalism," in David Farber (ed.), The Sixties: From Memory to History (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), p. 158.

¹² Ellen Willis, "Foreword," in Alice Echols, Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. vii-viii.

¹³ Echols, "Nothing Distant," p. 171 n36.

political leaders, and others challenged birth control and family planning as “race suicide” or schemes to eliminate blacks.¹⁴ During the Black Power movement opposition to birth control and abortion intensified, with some calling them genocide. As described in the previous chapter, some black nationalists implored black women “to have babies for the revolution” as their contribution to the struggle. They therefore rejected birth control and abortion as detrimental to the cause of black liberation. Others opposed birth control based on the need for black autonomy and the historical legacy of family and child-rearing under slavery. For example, in a 1971 article in *Ebony* magazine, comedian and activist Dick Gregory wrote:

For years they told us where to sit, where to eat, and where to live. Now they want to dictate our bedroom habits. First the white man tells me to sit on the back of the bus. Now it looks like he wants me to sleep under the bed. Back in the days of slavery, black folks couldn't grow kids fast enough for white folks to harvest. Now that we've got a little taste of power, white folks want us to call a moratorium on having children.¹⁵

Opposition to abortion and birth control was even articulated by more moderate black leadership. In a toned-down version of the “babies for the revolution” rationale, they made their case against birth control using a “strength in numbers” argument, such as the following statement from a NAACP official: “Our women need to produce more babies, not less...and until we comprise 30 to 35 percent of the population, we won't

¹⁴ Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, p. 98.

¹⁵ Quoted in Weisbord, *Genocide?*, p. 91.

really be able to affect the power structure in this country.”¹⁶ Furthermore, there was a widespread suspicion among blacks that birth control was a racist ploy, especially in the form of programs run by whites. But Beal and others shifted the terms of the debate: rather than focus on the supposed impact of birth control and abortion on the black community as a whole, they focused on how black women as individuals, the people to whom the responsibility of child-bearing (and inevitably, child-rearing) fell.¹⁷

Finally, Beal’s paper was written against the backdrop of the emerging women’s liberation. On 7 September 1968, three months before the SNCC staff meeting, the women’s liberation movement was dramatically introduced to the nation as one hundred feminists staged a protest of the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City.¹⁸ Echols reports that the women’s liberation movement took shape in late 1967 and 1968 with the appearance of several important theoretical writings and the formation of women’s liberation groups such as the Westside Group of Chicago, D.C Women’s Libetation, and New York Radical Women.¹⁹ While these developments were primarily among white women, they are significant because their rhetoric and actions helped to create the cultural and political context within which black feminism emerged.

¹⁶ Loretta J. Ross, “African-American Women and Abortion: 1800-1970,” in Stanlie M. James and Abena P. A. Busia (eds.), Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 153.

¹⁷ Roberts, Killing, p. 98-103; Diane Schulder and Florynce Kennedy, Abortion Rap (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971) , p. 153-161.

¹⁸ Echols, “Nothing Distant About it,” p. 149; Kathleen C. Berkeley, The Women’s Liberation Movement in America (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. 3-6.

¹⁹ Echols, Daring to Be Bad, p. 51-74.

Nonetheless, feminist political issues were still fighting to be heard in SNCC and the Black Power movement in 1968. Given this situation, and with the organization in crisis, Beal's presentation was apparently not considered to be the most important or noteworthy event of the December 1968 meeting. In his history of the organization, Clayborne Carson recount the meeting but does not mention the paper, focusing instead on the ideological battles and struggles for organizational control reflected in the firing of SNCC leaders Willie Ricks and Cleveland Sellers. This is curious, given that three pages later, Carson reports that the TWWA was "the only SNCC project during the early 1970s that gave any evidence of success."²⁰

Organizing the Black Women's Liberation Committee

In fact, the TWWA began as the Black Women's Liberation Committee, which was founded at the December 1968 staff meeting. "It was out of that meeting," Beal recalled, "that we talked about the need for a special women's focus."²¹ During the meeting she proposed that a black women's caucus be formed in SNCC to address this need. SNCC members responded positively and approved the formation of the caucus, which took the name, Black Women's Liberation Committee. There was, of course, opposition to the idea of forming a women's caucus, with some members

²⁰ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 293-296.

²¹ Beal interview.

offering the familiar charge that discussions of gender introduced divisions into the movement. Nonetheless, the caucus was approved. In January black women in SNCC's New York office began meeting as the BWLC, and by February they had moved to formally organize the group with an established membership, elected leadership, and independent funding base.²²

The BWLC began immediately to establish an organizational and ideological identity. "At that time," Beal recalled of the organization's founding, "the purpose of the organization was to take a stand and put forward a progressive view on the role of women and the status of women in society... and take a clear position against these backward views," such as the notion that women's roles were to have babies for the revolution, and "that women should step back and support her man, or she's my queen, put her on an pedestal."²³ By the beginning of 1969, debates concerning gender relations and women's roles in the Black Power movement helped to draw marked ideological battle lines.

One such division had been characterized as cultural nationalism verses revolutionary nationalism, exemplified most dramatically by the conflict between the US organization and the Black Panther Party in Los Angeles, California. Indeed, this conflict came to a head in January of 1969 when the US-Panther conflict erupted into a shoot-out on the campus of UCLA. While their conflict reflected several factors, including interpersonal rivalry and the manipulation of local and federal law

²² "General Resolution of Unincorporated Association, First National City Bank, New York," 21 Feb 1969, NCNW—Beal Papers, Box 3, Folder 24.

²³ Beal interview.

enforcement agencies, the conflict between cultural and revolutionary nationalists in general was based upon a divergence in ideological explanations of racial oppression and competing visions of black liberation.²⁴ For cultural nationalists such as the US organization, the articulation and practice of specific gender relations formed a fundamental aspect of political ideology. Often using mythical notions of traditional Africa, such ideology tended to project a conservative vision of black gender relations that called for women's submission to male authority.²⁵ Consider, for example, US founder Ron "Maulana" Karenga's notion of gender complementarity:

What makes a woman appealing is femininity and she can't be feminine without being submissive. A man has to be a leader and he has to be a man who bases his leadership on knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. There is no virtue in independence. The only virtue is in interdependence... The role of the woman is to inspire her man, educate their children and participate in social development... We say male supremacy is based on three things: tradition, acceptance, and reason. Equality is false; it's the devil's concept. Our concept is complimentary [sic]. Complimentary [sic] means you complete or make perfect that which is imperfect.²⁶

²⁴ On the US organization see Scot Brown, "The US Organization, Black Power Vanguard Politics, and the United Front Ideal: Los Angeles and Beyond," *The Black Scholar* vol. 31. no. 3-4 (fall-winter 2001). For FBI involvement in the conflict, see Ward Churchill, "'To Disrupt, Discredit, and Destroy': The FBI's Secret War Against the Black Panther Party," in Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas (eds.), Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and their Legacy (New York: Routledge, 2001).

²⁵ For a discussion, see E. Frances White, Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

²⁶ Quoted in Tracye Mathews, "'No One Ever Asks, What A Man's Role in the Revolution is?': Gender and the Politics of The Black Panther Party," in Charles E. Jones (ed.), The Black Panther Party Reconsidered (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), p. 272.

Thus, while the women in the BWLC would challenge the hyper-masculine expressions which at times emanated from the ranks of the BPP, they took particular aim at the sexist ideology of the US organization and similar groups.

In early January the BWLC sent a letter to women in SNCC announcing a BWLC organizing and planning meeting to be held in Atlanta, Georgia on March 1st. The letter was written by Gwen Patton, BWLC chairperson and veteran civil rights activist and organizer. She had been a student radical at Tuskegee Institute, was a founder of the National Association of Black Students, and since joining SNCC in the mid 1960s, her activities included organizing the National Black Anti-Draft Anti-War Union.²⁷ Now Patton put her organizing experience and skills to the task of building an organizational vehicle for black feminist politics. “The time has come for us to sit down to seek answers to some of our major problems,” she wrote, explaining the purpose of the Atlanta organizing meeting. “We need to take time out to regroup and to redefine some basic concepts and ideas.”²⁸

Patton argued that the state of political and ideological development concerning these problems had reached “rock bottom,” borrowing a phrase from SNCC veteran and Director of the International Affairs Commission, James Forman. In his 1967 paper titled “Rock Bottom,” Forman lamented what he perceived as SNCC’s lack of ideological development and the impediment it presented towards

²⁷ Manning Marable, Blackwater: Historical Studies in Race, Class Consciousness, and Revolution (Niwot, Colorado: University of Colorado Press, 1993 [1981]), p.125; Peniel E. Joseph, “Waiting Till the Midnight Hour: Black Political and Intellectual Radicalism, 1960-1975 (Unpublished dissertation, Temple University, 2000), p. 142-143; Beal interview.

²⁸ Gwen Patton to Sisters, 6 January, 1969, NCNW—Beal Papers, Box 3, Folder 24.

effective engagement in the changing environment of black political struggles. Forman argued that SNCC members were in need of a political education program that would help the organization develop a theoretical framework through which they would analyze and understand the changing political circumstance, assess the nature of black people's problems, and plot the future directions of their struggle.²⁹ Patton's invocation of Forman's ideas reflects his influence, both within SNCC and on the development of the organization that came to be the TWWA. Patton's "rock bottom" declaration also underscores the urgency that Patton, Beal and others attached to the development of ideological clarity as part of the task of addressing gender relations and the problems faced by black women. Articulating a concept that would be popularized by the women's liberation movement during this period, Patton revealed: "I am of the opinion that our problems, even on a day-to-day living basis, are political." In addition, she highlighted the depth of the task at hand, adding: "we must begin to analyze the nature of the American system and its effects on black people, particularly on black families."³⁰

Patton attached a series of provocative and wide-ranging questions to serve as the basis for the discussions during the Atlanta meeting. Covering various theoretical, political, and ideological issues, the questions fell under four categories of inquiry: notions of gender and social identity; black male-female relationships;

²⁹ James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: Open Hand Publishing, 1985 [1972]).

³⁰ Gwen Patton to Sisters, 6 January, 1969, NCNW—Beal Papers, Box 3, Folder 24.

women's roles in the black liberation movement; and political theory.³¹ These questions spoke to the core concerns of black women's political activity. Patton invited participants to add further questions to the ones that she posed, all toward the objective of serious reflection: "we are calling a group of women to sit down for the sole and soul purpose of knocking our heads together to find answers." Furthermore, Patton felt that the process of raising and grappling with such questions was an essential component to organization building. "It is only when we address ourselves to these questions we will begin to have effective programming among ourselves and for our people. Without answers we will only be another ad hoc group with no purpose and no direction."³²

A review of some of the questions will help us to capture the spirit and tenor of the document and will allow us to get a sense of the political imperatives that directed the organization. Furthermore, this will help us to map their ideological development and engagement with Black Power politics.

The questions which focused on social identity challenged societal notions of gender as well as women's positions in (and relationship to) American society. Consider, for example, the following questions which came under the heading "Female":

What is a woman? What is her function and purpose? As a single woman? As a 'married' woman? Is a black woman different from

³¹ The questions were listed under seven headings: Female, Male-Female, Black-White, Family, Philosophy, and Revolution. Because there is considerable overlap among these headings, I have chosen to organize them into four different groupings to facilitate the present analysis.

³² Gwen Patton to Sisters, 6 January, 1969.

a white woman? Why? Does her function change when she becomes a mother? If so, why? Should it?

What are the functions of a woman in the American system? Should she ascribe to those roles defined by this society before her birth? Are there different roles for black women than for white women in this society? If so, why?

What is femininity? If we accept a concept of the revolutionary woman will it diminish her femininity? If so, why? Can a black woman cook, clean house, make love, develop revolutionary programs, learn self-defense, and offense at the same time? Will there be a conflict? If so, how does this differ from the present American society that ascribes roles to women?³³

Similarly, under the heading “Family,” inquiries were raised that highlighted political dimensions of very personal experiences. “How do you raise children to be revolutionaries? What is a revolutionary home?” Probing further into family life and child-rearing, for example, the question was posed: “Are children responsibilities?” With the follow-up queries: “If so, to whom? To the mother? To the father? To both? To the community?”³⁴ And ultimately, this line of questions brought attention to (and suggested a critique of) the socio-economic order:

“Are babies problems? Why? Does capitalism say babies are problems? If so, should the black woman deal with capitalism first so that procreation can be beautiful instead of a hang-up? Are babies expensive or does capitalism tell you they are? Can you organize for the Revolution if you have children? If not, why? If so, how?”³⁵

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

Questions in the second category--black male-female relationships--squarely confronted the current tensions and debates revolving around this subject. The following questions, for example, called for a critical examination of two popular (though highly suspect) notions concerning black women and their relationship to black men:

Why do we keep hearing the slogan, "The only people who have been free in this country have been black women and white men?" Is this true? Is this slogan a 'justification' or rationale for black men who did white women? Are freedom and sex synonymous? Are love and sex synonymous? Are love and revolution synonymous?

What is a castrator? Is the black woman one? Were Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman castrators? Who said black men are weak? If they are, why aren't they extinct? Does capitalism try to make all people weak spiritually, psychologically, physically? If so, then isn't capitalism the real castrator?³⁶

Many of the questions addressed the ubiquitous issue of black women's role in the struggle for black liberation. Some seemed to be designed get to the root of this hotly debated topic by asking basic questions such as "What is leadership?" and "What do we mean by being revolutionary?" Others more directly confronted prevailing notions of womanhood and sexual division of labor within Black Power organizations:

Can the black woman take a leadership role in the struggle? Should she? If so, how? If not, why? Can there be a revolutionary woman? If so, how does she think? What does she do? Should she be confined to deal with children, cultural

³⁶ Ibid.

programs, and typing revolutionary speeches? If so, how does this differ from the roles ascribed to her by the American system?³⁷

Still other questions engaged this topic as it related to women's sexuality and reproductive freedom. As we have seen above, the issue of female reproduction was politicized during this period was the call for black women to have "babies for the revolution," as well as the charge that the birth control pill and family planning were part of a genocidal plot, among other ideas. Several of the questions sought to reorient the terms of such discussions and to politicize sexuality and reproduction in different ways:

Should the black woman take birth control pills? Why? What is nation-building? How does this differ from this country's concept of nation-building? Do we accept nation-building or accept or reject it? Why? What is genocide? Does the birth control pill play a part in this? How? (specifically to black people?)

The black woman who is "going with" the revolutionary brother: is that the extent of her role in the struggle? What is black pussy power?³⁸ Is it only her function to "screw" revolutionary brother and/or brothers? If not, what else can she do for the making of the revolution? Will there be a conflict? The black woman who is "going with" the revolutionary brother: are her thoughts, development and contributions stifled by the brother? If so, why?³⁹

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ This phrase was used to describe women's supposed ability to compel men to political action by withholding sex. Eldridge Cleaver articulated this idea in several speeches during 1968. See Robert Scheer (ed.), Eldridge Cleaver: Post Prison Writings and Speeches (New York: Vintage, 1969), p. 143; and Mathews, "No One Ever Asks," p. 281, p. 300n53, p. 301n59.

³⁹ Gwen Patton to Sisters, 6 January, 1969.

Finally, the questions dealing with political theory sought to explicate the philosophical and ideological contours of an emerging black feminist politics. For example, one of the questions asked, “Can black women as a group create and analyze an ideology?... If so, how does it relate to the total ideology of black people?”

The questions went on to ask:

Should women as a group be against capitalism and imperialism?
How has capitalism affected the black woman’s mind? How has capitalism affected the black family?

What is communalism, socialism, communism? (She should know what is capitalism and imperialism) Does the woman have any real role and purpose in any of the governments and philosophies? Should she? What is Fanonism, Nkrumahism, Pan-Africanism, Marxism? Should the black woman believe in the Third World Concept? If so, should she learn from the women in the Congo, Cuba, Algeria, People’s Republic of China, Vietnam? If not, does she have to outline a new unique revolutionary program for oppressed women in the United States?

What is revolution? What will revolution offer to our people? What will the Revolution offer to women as a group? Is it worth fighting, killing, and dying for? If so, then what part will the black woman play in the armed struggle? Does the black woman feel that she can fight, kill, and die? Will she take up a gun? Will she pay for the ammunition?⁴⁰

In all, this series of questions, which covered three pages and included several points of inquiry, reflects the importance which the women in the BWLC attached to the practice of debating and studying the issues which confront them. The document ends with the following charge: “LET’S GET TOGETHER SISTERS. WE ARE

⁴⁰ Ibid.

NOW AT ROCK BOTTOM AND WE MUST TAKE TIME OUT NOW!!”⁴¹ This commitment to sustained, collective discussion of political ideas was at the root of black women’s construction of a black feminist political identity and facilitated the BWLC (and eventually the TWWA) to engage a thorough and critical assessment of their ideological foundation and political objectives. Specifically, many of these questions and subsequent discussions led to the concerns, ideas, and points of organizing and political engagement that TWWA engaged in the coming months and years.

Consciousness Raising and Organization Building: From the BWLC to the Black Women’s Alliance

The BWLC’s March 1969 meeting not only exemplified the group’s initial work, which was geared toward internal discussion and ideological development, but was also an important organizing activity. In bringing together women (approximately thirty) for sustained dialogue and debate, it afforded them the opportunity to collectively discuss their experiences, concerns, and perspectives as black women activists. Through this interaction and study, the BWLC began to create new ideas and develop a political language through which the organization

⁴¹ Ibid.

gave voice to a collective feminist consciousness. Thus, the meeting was a vitally important step in the formation of a radical black feminist organization as it began to clarify political positions, define an organizational purpose, and set an agenda within the context of Black Power politics.

The BWLC's use of group discussions was in effect an example of "consciousness raising," which being developed and used to great affect in the women's liberation movement during this period. Consciousness raising was the practice of women meeting together in group discussions, articulating their experiences and concerns, and thus discovering common problems. It was meant as an impetus to (or necessary condition of) organizing and political action by generating a consciousness of collective oppression. It led woman to recognize that their problems were social and not just personal in nature, therefore collective action was the most appropriate way to address them. Thus, it was a process of radicalization, through which the social origins of personal problems were revealed and a basis of political action was established. As such, consciousness raising was directly related the principle of "the personal is political," a central theoretical insight of the women's movement that asserted an organic relationship between personal and social experience.⁴² This involves the recognition that issues, by virtue of their intimate place within an individual's lived experience, are considered personal, can at the same time be inherently political, or as one women's liberation activist put it, "the

⁴² Sara Evans, Personal Politics: The Roots of the Women's Liberation Movement in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), especially p. 133-134, 137.

political reinterpretation of one's personal life."⁴³ As Ellen Willis explains, this expresses the idea "that sexuality, family life, and the relations between men and women were not simply matters of individual choice, or even of social custom, but involved exercise of personal and institutional power and raised vital questions of public policy."⁴⁴

One of the outcomes of the BWLC's consciousness raising efforts was the decision to expand the scope and membership of the organization. As SNCC's black women's caucus, the women of the BWLC took their dissatisfaction with their marginalization within the organization as their point of departure, but after meeting over a period of months they came to the position that there was a need to form a black women's organization beyond SNCC. They decided to expand the organization to include women from other organizations, attracting welfare mothers, community workers, and campus radicals, and by the beginning of 1970, the group left SNCC and changed its name to Black Women's Alliance (SNCC kept its women's caucus).

The change in organizational name and membership composition corresponded with development in political ideology. Through study of ideological and political issues, internal dialogue, and political education, the women of the BWLC/BWA developed a critique of capitalism and an anti-imperialist ideology. The organization came to identify an "intimate connection between the oppression of

⁴³ Quoted in Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, p. 83.

⁴⁴ Echols, *Daring to Be Bad* p. 83-84. For a brief discussion of black women and consciousness raising, see Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), p. 28-29, p. 54-55, p. 64.

women and the form of government which is in control,” and they “began to see the economic basis of our oppression and we became convinced that capitalism and imperialism were our main enemies.” Reflecting their study of Marxism and its application to the conditions of black and other women of color, the BWA also asserted: “It is economically profitable to exploit and oppress third world women. We represent a surplus labor supply, a cheap labor supply, a free labor supply (in our homes).”⁴⁵ Beal’s leadership was important in this ideological development, as she had already begun to develop a radical sensibility informed by an understanding of Marxism and her critique of imperialism through her experiences in France.

During the year following the Atlanta meeting, from the spring of 1969 to the spring 1970, the women of the BWLC/BWA moved from a focus on (and implicitly, a defense of) women’s roles in the Black Power movement to establishing the ideological and organizational basis for their engagement in the movement. In April 1969 Beal wrote to Julia Herve in France, updating her friend and political ally on developments in SNCC and the BWLC. She told Herve, who had visited the country several months earlier, that the BWLC was focused on politicizing black women around “the question of the role of women in general and black women in particular in the revolutionary struggle.” She said that this question was “a crucial one” because “many nationalists are going around saying that the family is women’s concern and that the most important contribution she can make to the revolution is to (1) have

⁴⁵ “Women in the Struggle,” *Triple Jeopardy*, Sept-Oct 1971, vol. 1 no. 1, p. 8

babies for the army, (2) build a strong family structure, (3) support her man in everything that he does, i.e. be submissive.”⁴⁶ A year later, Beal wrote to prospective members of the BWA explaining that their purpose was “the formation of a radical black woman’s organization.” This she said, “has been seen as a dire need for some time now” in part because “the socio-economic realities of the black experience in the U.S. are quite unique and there is virtually no relevant material available at this time concerning the situation of the black woman.”⁴⁷

Thus, they identified struggle on the ideological plane, that is, in the realm of ideas, as a vital element to the development and success of the Black Power movement. “We hope to be able to create a revolutionary ideology for ourselves and for propaganda purposes,” Beal wrote, explaining the organization’s intent to engage in this dimension of the struggle. “We think that it is important that black people begin to destroy old myths and distortions of fact and build a consciousness based on sound political, economic, and social truths.” Beal concluded the letter by assuring the women that the BWA would not only be “a think tank” but was also “action oriented,” with plans to “engage in those activities which we feel will improve the conditions of black people and particularly the condition of the black female.”⁴⁸

During the summer of 1970, the organization was again spurred to an expansion of their ideological framework and membership. Two women who were members of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party and active in the Puerto Rican

⁴⁶ Fran Beal to Julia Herve, 23 April 1969, NCNW—Beal Papers.

⁴⁷ Fran Beal to Sister, 30 April, 1970, NCNW—Beal Papers.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

independence movement asked Beal and other members of the BWA about joining the TWWA. This forced the BWA to confront the implications of its anti-imperialist position and to again give serious thought to its political orientation and composition as an organization. A debate within the organization followed the request, with some members arguing that the BWA should not permit non-black women to join because the historically unique situation of African American women demanded that they remain an all-black organization. The BWA could form coalitions with other groups, they said, but not let allow non-black women to become members as this would alter the focus of the group. The other side of the debate, to which a majority of the BWA ascribed, articulated a different understanding of American power relations and the dynamics of racial oppression. This position held that “the complexities of intersecting oppressions [were] more resilient than the distinctions of the particular social groups.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, they felt that opening membership to other women of color was a logical and appropriate expression of the organization’s anti-imperialist ideology of Third World solidarity. “The daily oppression suffered by our peoples,” they argued, “gave us the realization that our similarities transcended our differences.” Finally, they “realized that we would be much more effective and unified by becoming a third world women’s organization.”⁵⁰

So, in the summer of 1970, the BWA expanded to include “all third world sisters”—meaning, in the parlance of today, all women of color. The name was

⁴⁹ Springer, “Our Politics Was Black Women,” p. 122.

⁵⁰ Third World Women’s Alliance, “Women in the Struggle.”

changed to the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) to reflect its ideology and composition.

The Formation and Early Development of the TWWA

Our purpose is to make a meaningful and lasting contribution to the Third World community by working for the elimination of the oppression and exploitation from which we suffer. We further intend to take an active part in creating a socialist society where we can live as decent human being, free from the pressures of racism, economic exploitation, and sexual oppression.

-- "Third World Women's Alliance: Our History, Our Ideology, Our Goals," 1970

One of the first tasks of the newly renamed organization was to write and distribute a pamphlet describing the organization. Titled, "Third World Women's Alliance: Our History, Our Ideology, Our Goals," this mimeographed document announced the TWWA as a new organizational force within the intersecting worlds of Black Power, feminism, and radical political movements. It includes a brief history of the organization followed by two sections giving the rationale and importance of such an organization. Responding to the argument (which was implicitly made both within the Black Power movement and the women's liberation movement) that third world women should struggle only on one front, these two sections addressed the questions: "Is a third world women's group divisive to the national liberation

struggle?” Why a separate third world women’s group?” They responded, first by asserted that “there is no contradiction in being nationalists, in being feminists, and in being socialists.” Then the pamphlet explained that the TWWA took the position “the struggle against racism and imperialism must be waged simultaneously with the struggle for women’s liberation, and only a strong independent women’s group can ensure that this will come about.” Furthermore, the women of TWWA believed that, because of their location in the social hierarchy, “a third world women’s group could potentially be the most revolutionary movement confronting the US ruling circle” In fact, the decision to open the group to all women of color (third world women) did not substantially alter or dilute the organization’s participation in black feminist politics. Black women continued to make up the majority of the TWWA’s membership and the group’s point of reference remained the historical and contemporary black struggle.⁵¹

The first section of the pamphlet is a brief statement on the derivation and meaning of the term “third world.” As distinct from the first world (“the capitalist-imperialist nations) and the second world (eastern European socialist nations), the third world consists of the colonized or formerly colonized nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In the U.S., the statement explained, the third world consists of the descendants of Africa, Asia, and Latin America: “Afro-Americans, Puertoriquenos, Chicanos, Latinos, Asian-Americans, Native-Americans (Indians)

⁵¹ “Third World Women’s Alliance: Our History, Our Ideology, Our Goals,” NCNW—Beal Papers, Box 4, Folder 29.

and Eskimos.” The TWWA believed that people of color in the United States suffered from the same kind of exploitation and colonial oppression “as our brothers and sisters in our homelands.” and therefore shared a common oppressor and should have common goals. “To combat an international enemy, an international resistance is needed.” The TWWA espoused a concept of “third world unity” encompassing “the struggles for liberation in the Americas, Caribbean, Africa and Asia.”⁵² In calling themselves third world people and asserting common oppression and historical struggles, the women of the TWWA adopted a political perspective that many activists in the Black Power movement.

The pamphlet also listed six goals of the organization. More a statement of principles than concrete objectives, this list of goals nonetheless gives further indication of the TWWA’s ideological and political commitments:

1. To promote unity among Third World Women within the United States in matters affecting the educational, economic, social, and political life of our peoples.
2. To create a sisterhood of women devoted to the task of developing solidarity among the peoples of the Third World, based on a socialist ideology of struggling against oppression of all kinds: man by man, race by race, religion by religion, nation by nation, or woman by man.
3. To collect, interpret, disseminate and preserve information about the Third World, both as home and abroad, and particularly affecting its women.

⁵² Ibid.

4. To establish an education fund to be used to promote educational projects, to publish articles, and to employ such other media as is necessary to carry out such educational projects.
5. To recreate and build solid relationships with our men, destroying myths that have been created by our oppressor to divide us from each other, and working together to appreciate human love and respect.
6. To struggle for the complete elimination of any and all forms of oppression and exploitation based upon race, economic status, or sex and to use whatever means are necessary to accomplish this task.⁵³

Perhaps the most important part of the pamphlet was its “Ideological Platform.” It does not present a complete political program, and as we will see, this platform was not sufficient to direct and sustain the organization. Nevertheless, it gives some indication of the TWWA’s developing vision of alternative and more just social relations and institutions. For example, with regard to the family, the TWWA would “encourage and support the continued growth of communal households and the idea of the extended family.” The organization called for “alternative forms to the patriarchal family” and the “socialization of housework and child care with the sharing of all work by men and women.” Furthermore, they asserted women’s right to reproductive freedom. This meant “free and SAFE” family planning, including abortion, as well as an end to forced sterilization and mandatory birth control programs. In the realm of employment, the TWWA called for “guaranteed full, equal and non-exploitative employment controlled collectively by the workers;” a

⁵³ Ibid.

guaranteed income; and an end to the “racism and sexism which forces third world women into the lowest paying service jobs.”⁵⁴

The TWWA platform also projects a reconceptualization of education as it applies to third world women. To reverse and accommodate for the historical patterns, they called for an educational program that: rejects gender-specific training; provides “self-knowledge,” meaning access to the history of third world women and their participation in liberation struggles; guarantees professional and technological training for women; is controlled by local communities and consistent with the language and cultural context of the students; and training for men “in those areas in which they have been denied equality, such as childcare.”⁵⁵

The last three areas of the platform speak to the conditions of women activists, including their relationships to men and their positions in political and social institutions. Under the subheading “Women in Our Own Right,” the platform makes the demand that: “all organizations...(including all so-called radical, militant and/or revolutionary groups) deal with third world women in their own right as human beings and individuals, rather than a property of men and only valued in relationship to their associations or connection with some man.” The women of TWWA also proclaimed their right and responsibility to bear arms, based upon their belief that all members of an oppressed group should be involved in all facets of their liberation struggle. Similarly, they affirmed “the principle that third world women shall be full

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

participants on all levels of the struggle for national liberation i.e. administrative, political, and military.”⁵⁶

The TWWA experienced tremendous growth during the fall of 1970. In October Beal reported that membership had grown to 150 active members. They were engaged in a variety of community activities, while continuing to hold weekly political education classes and consciousness raising meetings. At this time the group was also in the midst of organizing a mass march and rally in Harlem to support Third World liberation movements and protest the Vietnam War. Their organizing efforts reached out to unions, students, churches and elsewhere and included Asian American and Latinos as well as African Americans. The TWWA’s activities and literature increasingly brought the group into contact with individuals and other organizations who were interested in their program. However, as the TWWA received requests for information about their positions and about beginning other chapters, Beal and others began to identify weaknesses in the organization. Specifically, they found that their administrative structure was inadequate to respond to this growing interest, and despite their earlier efforts, there was “uneven political development” among TWWA members.⁵⁷

To deal with these problems, the organization went into a retreat during which they continued and intensified their political education program. As they explained to supporters in December 1970, the TWWA “decided to call a halt to all outside

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Frances Beal to All SNCC Workers, 9 October 1970, NCNW—Beal Papers, Box 3, Folder 20; TWWA to Friends, 1 December 1970, NCNW—Beal Papers.

activities and attempt to hammer out a solid ideological platform based on a scientific revolutionary analysis, as well as to formulate a workable structure which would facilitate our growth into a national third world women's organization."⁵⁸ The retreat consisted of a "leadership cadre" of fifteen women meeting four times a week in political education sessions covering such topics as "revolutionary ideology," "dynamics of imperialism," and "the political thought of Frantz Fanon."⁵⁹ The reading list for one session, "summary, review, and practical projections," included James and Grace Lee Boggses' *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party*. It is not clear what influence the Boggses had on the TWWA, but this suggests that there was some measure of recognition and appreciation for their ideas among the women of the TWWA. It will be recalled that Beal had attended the National Black Economic Development Conference, where she would have likely come across the *Manifesto* and the Boggses.

By the spring of 1971, the TWWA had completed its retreat, further solidified its ideological platform, and renewed its efforts to expand its membership and political activity. The group adopted democratic centralism as its organizational structure, placing an emphasis on collective leadership to allow for the development of each member's potential. In the fall, prospective member went through an orientation consisting of seven meetings designed to introduce them the organization's goals and objectives and its ideology ("i.e. socialism"). One of these

⁵⁸ TWWA to Friends, 1 December 1970, NCNW—Beal Papers.

⁵⁹ Fran Beal to Sandy Scott, 14 December 1970, NCNW—Beal Papers, Box 4, Folder 2; Fran Beal to All SNCC workers, 9 October 1970, NCNW—Beal Papers.

sessions involved discussion and analysis of Beal's "Double Jeopardy" as well as a document called "Why Do We Study?," which was a list of nine reasons why ideological development was important to the organization. The first reason was "to equip ourselves with the knowledge of the art and science of making a revolution." Other reasons included: to develop an understanding of third world women's relationship to the nation and how they fit into the struggle against exploitation and oppression; to train cadres who can organize a revolutionary mass organization; to fight "petty bourgeois tendencies: such as individualism, greed, liberalism, and elitism; and to build "a firm commitment to a life of struggle for world socialism." Also, several sessions focused on theoretical Marxist concepts such as dialectical and historical materialism, the forces, relations, and modes of production, and surplus value.⁶⁰

As reflected in these orientation sessions, TWWA's retreat produced an intensification of the TWWA's previous ideological development rather than a change in its orientation. Specifically, we see an emphasis of revolutionary theory. If this seems to suggest that internally, the focus on revolutionary theory meant a de-emphasis on third world women, we will see below that this certainly was not the case in the TWWA's public expression of its politics. It is not clear if this orientation process was instituted permanently, but it gives a sense of the organization's political

⁶⁰ Madame Binh Orientation Group, n.d., NCNW—Beal Papers, Box 5, Folder 15.

course in the fall of 1971, as the TWWA embarked on its main effort to project an anti-racist, anti-sexist socialist society: the publication of a newspaper.

Triple Jeopardy

In September 1971 the Third World Women's Alliance began publishing *Triple Jeopardy*, which served as the group's news organ. The title of the paper was an elaboration of Beal's concept of double jeopardy—adding economic exploitation as the third oppressive forces operating in third world women's lives. The title also reflected the organization's expanded focus from black women to Third World women. Under the title, the paper's masthead read "Racism, Imperialism, Sexism," reflecting the organization's ideological position that these were interlocking systems of oppression, and that their impact was experienced simultaneously in women's lives. As Beal recalled, "The combination of these things was the basis upon which we understand theoretically and politically the condition of black women in this country." They chose imperialism as the manifestation of economic exploitation as it affected third world people throughout the world. "We didn't say capitalism explicitly," she explained, "but domestically that's what we meant, we knew this was

a class society...and we understood that you couldn't just eliminate one of those things" without eliminating the others to truly liberate third world women.⁶¹

The women of TWWA envisioned the paper serving three primary functions. Firstly, it was to be informational. To "clarify what the realities are," the paper would disseminate facts and interpretations of development in the U.S. with specific emphasis those issues which concern third world women. They also wanted to show readers an alternative to "the American reality concerning women" by reporting how "progressive nations around the world are dealing with these same issues." The comparison between the conditions and experiences of women living under capitalism and those of women living under socialism was "an important weapon in our hands."⁶²

The second function of *Triple Jeopardy* was to engage in current ideological struggles. This included ideas within the Black Power movement—such as the call for black capitalism coming from some conservative elements—as well as the women's liberation movement, where "some are proclaiming that that men the major enemy and completely reject any analysis based on the class or race to which women belong." Furthermore, TWWA enlisted the paper as an important vehicle for educating black male activists who "do not understand the insidious nature of male chauvinism, or they claim that this problem can only be tackled once socialism is

⁶¹ Beal interview.

⁶² Untitled document about Triple Jeopardy, NCNW—Beal Papers, Box 5, Folder 37.

victorious.” The paper sought to spread the TWWA’s position that the struggle against racism, capitalism, and sexism must be fought simultaneously.⁶³

Finally, the paper was used as an organizational tool by spreading TWWA’s ideology to women across the country and recruiting members. The paper’s primary target audience was “third world women who make up part of the labor force.” While *Triple Jeopardy* was written for all third world women, and TWWA also hoped that third world men would read and be influenced by the paper, the focus was on women workers because “this segment of the population is by far the most populous and we believe, have an extremely important role to play in the struggle or social justice in this country.”⁶⁴

Each issue of the paper, which was published from September 1971 through the summer of 1975, contained columns designed to perform these functions. For example, “On The Job” highlighted the experiences of women in various workplace settings. In each issue the TWWA interviewed different women to illustrate how they faced similarly oppressive conditions. A column called “Skills” taught women to perform mechanical and technical tasks such as changing a fuse or a flat tire that are generally accepted as the province of men. The importance of learning such skills, the TWWA believed, was not only to obtain a measure of independence (though that was deemed important), but also a matter of their rights and responsibility as revolutionaries: “In order to participate in the struggle for

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

liberation, we must develop all possible skills.”⁶⁵ Other columns dealt with women’s health and political prisoners (male and female). In addition to these regular columns, each issue included news stories covering domestic and international events, an editorial, and a list of the TWWA’s “Tuesday Schedule” of discussions and other public activities for the coming month.

The first issue of *Triple Jeopardy* (September-October 1971) illustrates the TWWA’s engagement with Black Power politics while simultaneously addressing concerns and political developments pertaining to black women (and other women of color). There are articles on the recent high profile events at Attica Prison—where inmates who overtook the prison and staged a protest were stormed by Prison and New York State law enforcement officers—and San Quentin Prison, where celebrated prison intellectual George Jackson was killed by prison guards. The end of the Jackson article reprints the text of a telegram that the TWWA sent expressing sympathy and revolutionary solidarity to Jackson’s mother. In addition, an article on anti-war demonstrations call for third world people to take leadership in upcoming of protests to “carry it from a simple series of anti-war demonstrations to a truly anti-imperialist, anti-racist level.”⁶⁶

This issue of *Triple Jeopardy* also exemplifies the way that feminism in general, and black feminism in particular, politicized areas of life generally not considered within the purview of radical political action. For example, an article

⁶⁵ *Triple Jeopardy*, vol. 1 no. 1 (Sept-Oct 1971), p. 12.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

titled “Day Care Centers: a problem for whom?” informed readers about a massive demonstration in the New York City to protest recent curtailments of child care services by city, state, and federal authorities. After describing the inadequate and unsafe daycare centers provided by the city, the article asserts: “We need 24 hour free day care centers. We want decent facilities to fit the needs of our children. We demand adequate supervision and adequate trained personnel... When the people have day care centers that we control, then we will be able to develop and work in order to further benefit our communities.”⁶⁷

The column on women’s health provides another example. It discusses the anatomy and physiology the female reproductive system, and as a side bar explains, their attention to this topic was prompted by personal experiences. Six TWWA members had recently become pregnant and as their pregnancies progressed the women in the organization realized how little they knew about the reproductive process. After talking to other women they realized that this lack of knowledge was pervasive and therefore began to discuss this lack of information within the organization. They invited a woman doctor to speak at a meeting and then started a workshop. The article in *Triple Jeopardy* was from a booklet titled “Women and Our Bodies” that they used in the workshop. Thus, very personal experiences and problems were translated into a shared and collective language. This reinterpretation not only facilitated an improvement in the lives of individual women but also allowed

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.6.

TWWA to articulate the political implications of these issues: “[This] information is a weapon without which we cannot begin the collective struggle for control over our bodies.”⁶⁸

The inaugural issue of *Triple Jeopardy* also contained information about the TWWA. Under the title “Women in Struggle,” a revised version of the organization’s pamphlet “Third World Women’s Alliance: Our History, Our Ideology, Our Goals” was printed with pictures depicting armed women throughout the world dispersed throughout. There is an article reporting on the situation of TWWA member Kisha Shakur, who was arrested the previous July while attending a hearing for her husband, Black Panther Party member and “NY 21” defendant Richard Dhoruba Moore. In this and every issue, the organization’s schedule of events for the coming month, including political discussions, guerrilla theatre performances, film screenings and discussions, and public forums are listed at the end of the paper under “Third World Women’s Alliance Tuesday Schedule.”

The editorial in this issue was written by Beal, under whose direction and editorship the paper was produced. Printed here without a title, the editorial was based on Beal’s essay, “A Woman’s Organization—Its Purpose and Task,” which offers a justification and rationale for the TWWA. She asserts the importance of revolutionary theory and the need for women to be educated in political

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

consciousness and practice, and says that the TWWA is such a vehicle for developing and training women activists. “The task before us,” she writes, is to:

develop a sisterhood of women which stretches across all countries—a sisterhood that finds within itself the resolve and strength to actively participate in all phases of the liberation struggle, while at the same time, making sure that the role of women in the new society will be one that will not continue the same kind of stunting attitudes which are still in mode today, among even the most revolutionary of men.⁶⁹

To contemporary sensibilities, such an international sisterhood seems unlikely. Certainly it would require a tremendous galvanizing force, such as a broadly supported cause, event or situation around which these political energies could coalesce. In fact, in the heady times during which Beal wrote these words, it is likely that many people, including Beal and her comrades in the TWWA, believed that such a situation was at hand in the fall of 1971, embodied in the person and cause of Angela Davis.

Angela Davis and the TWWA: The Contours of Black Power-era Feminism

In addition to the news reports and political analysis in the first issue of *Triple Jeopardy*, the paper carried an announcement for a rally to “End Racism and Repression” on September 25 in New York. “Get it together at Central Park Mall,”

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

the announcement read, “for Angela Davis Day.” The was TWWA among the organizations coming together with the New York Committee to Free Angela Davis to form a United Coalition for Angela Davis. The event was part of a signature drive to demand bail for Davis, who had spent several months imprisoned on charges of conspiracy and murder. On the announcement, the TWWA proclaimed: “It is only through mass action by the people that we will be able to stem the tide of growing repression against those who dare raise their voices to dissent. We particularly ask our sisters to join us on this day to express their indignation at the continued intimidation and outrageous treatment of our sister, Angela.”⁷⁰ Many people headed the call, with approximately 5,000 people gathering in Central Park on the day of the event to fight for bail and a fair trial for Davis.⁷¹

The TWWA had been involved with the movement to defend Davis since the events that made her an internationally recognized political prisoner were set in motion a year earlier. She was charged with conspiracy, kidnapping and murder based on the assertion that guns registered to her were used in the August 7, 1970 raid on Marin County Courthouse led by Jonathon Jackson, younger brother of “Soledad Brother” George Jackson.⁷² Two months later Davis was arrested in New York, and eventually extradited back to California to stand trial. Denied bail and charged in

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

⁷¹ Louise Patterson to Fran Beal, 29 October 1971, NCNW—Beal Papers, Box 4, Folder 21.

⁷² On Davis and her case see, Bettina Aptheker, The Morning Breaks: The Trial of Angela Davis (New York: International Publishers, 1975); Angela Y. Davis, Angela Davis: An Autobiography (New York: International Publishers, 1988 [1974]); and Angela Y. Davis (and other political prisoners), If They Come in the Morning, (New Rochelle, New York: The Third Press, 1971).

connection with a crime for which she was not present, it was clear to her supporters that Davis was being persecuted for outspoken politics, including her membership in the communist party and especially her work with the Soledad Brothers Defense Committee. As black (and other third world) feminists, the TWWA immediately became part of a broad-based support movement that grew in response to her case. There was not, however, universal support for Davis among the nation's feminists.

On August 26, 1970, the women's movement commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment with a Liberation Day March, drawing thousands of feminists from across the country. The TWWA took part in the march, carrying signs that read "Hands Off Angela Davis." At this time Davis was still "underground" trying to avoid capture by the FBI, which had placed her on its list of 10 Most Wanted Fugitives. For the TWWA, defense of Davis was a feminist issue, but one of the leaders of NOW, the National Organization for Women, approached Beal and the other women of the TWWA and said angrily, "Angela Davis has nothing to do with women's liberation." Beal responded by saying, "It has nothing to do with the kind of liberation you're talking about but it has everything to do with the kind of liberation we're talking about."⁷³

The Third World Women's Alliance continued to support Davis after her arrest, working with the New York Committee to Free Angela Davis as well as

⁷³ Charlayne Hunter, "Many Blacks Wary of 'Women's Liberation' Movement in U.S.," *New York Times*, 17 November 1970, p. 60.

covering her case in *Triple Jeopardy*.⁷⁴ The January 1972 issue carried a letter from Davis written from Marin County Jail while she prepared for trial. The cover of the next issue, Feb-Mar, featured a drawing of Davis and jailed Puerto Rican independence activist Lolita Lebron, and pictures of each woman appeared next to a story about international women's day, March 8. The April-May 1972 issue ran an article on the "U.S. Worldwide Campaign Against Sister Angela" carried out by the U.S. Information Agency (U.S.I.A). This issue also contained a poem for Davis by Cuban poet Nicholas Guillen. Written in September 1971, Guillen's poetic tribute to Angela Davis sent a message of solidarity and hope:

I call your name, Angela, louder
I put my hands together
not in prayer, plea, supplication or petition
that they pardon you—
but to urge you on
I clap my hands, hard
hand to hand, harder
so you'll know I'm with you!⁷⁵

After Davis was acquitted on June 4, 1972, several TWWA members conducted an informal interview with her. During their conversation, some of which was published in the March-April 1973 issue of *Triple Jeopardy* [vol 2 no 3], Davis explained what the movement to gain her freedom meant to her politically and how her current work with other political prisoners was meant to build upon it. After

⁷⁴ Louise Patterson to Fran Beal, 29 October 1971, NCNW—Beal Papers, Box 4, Folder 2; Marvel Cooke to Frances Beal, 10 May 1972, NCNW—Beal Papers; "An Evening for Angela Davis," NCNW—Beal Papers, Box 2, Folder 35.

⁷⁵ *Triple Jeopardy*, vol. 1 no. 5, April-May 1972, p. 15.

being asked about her decision to continue working on behalf of political prisoners,

Davis said:

First of all, the victory of my freedom was a people's victory. It was won by sisters and brother struggling throughout this country [and] throughout the world. It was only natural that after I was freed, I would see my most important contributions to be in the arena of building a movement to free other political prisoners... We recognized that if we allowed the entire movement that had emerged around the struggle for my freedom to subside and to simply fade away, we would really be missing a very important moment of history in this country.⁷⁶

“Building a better society by whatever means it takes”: Making Connections at Home and Abroad

Indeed, within the Black Power movement many activists and organizations in this period placed a greater focus on prisons as a form of government repression. In addition to cases like Davis involving political activists, they began to develop and organize around a critique of the nation's criminal justice system and its relationship to African Americans. The TWWA was among these groups.

The organization established a “prison project” in which members communicated and attempted to work with prisoners as one of TWWA's many activities in the early 1970s. One objective of the program was to spread the organization's ideology among the prison population, not in the sense of

⁷⁶ “Angela Raps on Repression,” p. 4, NCNW—Beal Papers, Box 4, Folder 25.

proselytizing, but rather as a way to ameliorate “the isolation of prisoners from outside struggle and vice versa.” Thus, they sought to “influence the female TW population, raising their political consciousness,” and recruit for TWWA, while at the same time assist “prisoners as much as possible and let them know we are concerned.” In addition, the project was designed to expose the racist conditions in prison and “propagandize [the] public about specific cases and general conditions. Finally, the TWWA worked to help freed prisoners to “adjust and become oriented to outside struggle.”⁷⁷

Beal carried on correspondence with several people in prison, both women and men. She passed on copies of *Triple Jeopardy* and other material to her correspondents, who were generally eager to receive them and often requested more. The letters also dealt with personal matters. For example, Beal discussed her children and their exploits at school. Their dialogue covered a variety of topics, mostly political and pertaining to the conditions of black and other people of color. At least once, this correspondence challenged Beal’s feminist sensibilities. In response to a request from a male prisoner with whom she had exchanged several letters, Beal wrote:

I don’t have any recent picture, but I suppose I can get one made. I’m not too sure I want to comply with the request for pin-ups as this is totally against what I think the role of women should be in our struggle. However, I understand the isolation that one feels when in the joint and I’ll think it over.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ “Project Descriptions,” n.d., NCNW—Beal Papers, Box 5, Folder 22.

⁷⁸ Fran Beal to Sam, 10 November 1971, NCNW—Beal Papers.

While Beal's response may appear to be a softening of her feminist stance, we might also consider an alternative reading: in attempting to balance her commitment to challenging standard gender roles with her empathy for her correspondent, Beal used this opportunity to share her ideological perspective with a comrade. By engaging him, rather than rejecting or rebuking him, Beal may have (consciously or not) compelled her correspondent to rethink normalized ideas. Thus, on a small but still significant scale, this exchange demonstrates Beal's black feminist praxis.

In a letter to three of her long-time correspondents ("please excuse the 'form' letter," she explains, "but I wanted to write to all of you immediately"), Beal shared of her recent experience visiting Cuba. She spent six weeks on the island at the end of 1971 and the beginning of 1972 as a representative for *Triple Jeopardy* participating in a journalists' conference. "Cuba was a mind blowing experience," she wrote, echoing the sentiment of many black activist and thinkers (including Angela Davis) who visited since the 1959 revolution. "We had the opportunity to travel around and see socialism being constructed. I identified easily with the Cubans, undoubtedly because of our common African heritage. We visited schools, factories, canefields, youth brigades, housing developments, museums, universities and got a real taste of what is happening."⁷⁹ Further sharing her experience, Beal included a letter written from Arnaldo—an "out of sight" Afro-Cuban man that Beal befriended during her stay—to Beal's children. Arnaldo explains that, because of her

⁷⁹ Fran Beal to Sam, Arthur, and Levi, 32 January 1971, NCNW—Beal Papers, Box 4, Folder 22.

“natural” (afro) hairstyle, Beal was often mistaken for Angela Davis, who “everybody in Cuba has heard about.”⁸⁰

The impact of the trip on Beal’s political passion was considerable. “I have returned more committed to building a better society by whatever means it takes. As a mother, as a woman, and as a revolutionary, I have nothing to lose but racism and exploitation.” Thus, Beal returned to her work with the Third World Women’s Alliance in the beginning of 1972 with a political resolve. In this period, before a series of forces conspired in mid-decade to bring an end to the Black Power movement, such sentiments were still found in many quarters of the Black Power movement. In this environment, Beal and the TWWA exchanged information, analysis, and political strategy with a wide array of individuals and organizations. One of these was the Institute of the Black World (IBW) in Atlanta, Georgia.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Arnoaldo to Anne and Lisa, 27 January 1972, NCNW—Beal Papers, Box 4, Folder 22.

⁸¹ TWWA apparently received material that IBW distributed such as its Monthly Reports. See folder labeled “Institute of the Black World” in NCNW-Beal Papers, Box 1, Folder 19.

Chapter 6

“REVOLUTIONARY SCHOLARSHIP”: VINCENT HARDING, THE INSTITUTE OF THE BLACK WORLD, AND INTELLECTUAL LEADERSHIP DURING THE BLACK POWER MOVEMENT, 1967-1972

Our work is at one and the same time intellectual, educational, political and propagandistic. We are not about conducting or stimulating research for research sake. Neither are we about producing a sterile, ivory-tower kind of scholarship, or a detached, non-committed, ‘objective’ educational experience for ourselves, for our people, or for America. Rather we are converting our intellectual work, knowledge and energy into weapons in our struggle to reorganize the society along the lines that are more consonant with the needs of our people and the rest of the world’s people that have become victims of American exploitation and oppression.”¹

-- Institute of the Black World

In addition to deepening our understanding of the ideological dimensions of the Black Power movement, the preceding examination of radical black feminism challenges us to expand the temporal boundaries within which we reconstruct the period. The intellectual production and political activism of black feminists during the early 1970s, a period which is often taken as a declining period of black political activity, prompts our recognition of Black Power as a movement extending beyond the celebrated “sixties.” As Cornel West has argued, we should understand the sixties

¹ “About the Institute of the Black World,” IBW Papers.

“not [as] a chronological category which encompasses a decade, but rather a historical construct or heuristic rubric that renders noteworthy historical processes and events intelligible.”² As we have seen, the year 1970 saw the publication of Toni Cade Bambara’s The Black Woman as well as the formation of the Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA), both of which reflected the growing feminist consciousness of the previous years and forecasted the black feminist (political) activity of the coming years. Thus, in uncovering the history of Black Power-era feminism we are reminded of professor West’s council. Similarly, during the period when the TWWA and others were developing black feminist politics, other facets of the Black Power Movement were simultaneously emerging-- including the formation of new organizations—which represented a continuation of Black Power politics. One of these was the Institute of the Black World (IBW), a collection of politically engaged intellectuals conducting research, analysis, and advocacy programs. Although they were engaged in different realms of Black Power politics, IBW and the TWWA shared similar temporal and organizational trajectories. Each started within existing organizations beginning in late 1968, and each grew to become an autonomous organization by fall 1970; each grew out of an existing organization that had its roots in the civil rights movement; and, in the process by which each became an independent organization, they engaged some of the ideological battles and creative tensions that were inherent in the development of the Black Power

² Cornel West, “The Paradox of the African American Rebellion,” in Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p.22.

movement. It should be said that IBW and organizations like it are not generally considered Black Power formations. However, IBW represented broadly shared political sensibilities, and this examination shines some light on the various ways in which Black intellectuals, activists, and artists sought to mount a multifarious confrontation with and challenge to American institutional life during the movement.

Vincent Harding as a Movement Intellectual

Activist and scholar Vincent Harding was the principle driving force behind the founding of the Institute. Born in New York in 1931 to Barbadian parents, Harding was raised in predominantly West Indian communities in Harlem and the South Bronx.³ One of the strongest influences on his development was his church, the Victory Tabernacle Seventh-Day Christian Church, which was an offshoot of the black Seventh-Day Adventist denomination. Victory Tabernacle introduced Harding to with what he later described as a “nonconformist Christianity,” and he credits his church community with instilling in him a strong race-consciousness and a reverence for education (“I grew up knowing that I was going to college”). He also took from

³ The following discussion of Harding’s intellectual and political development is drawn from these sources: Rachel E. Harding, “Biography, Democracy, and Spirit: An Interview with Vincent Harding,” *Callaloo*, vol. 20, no. 3 (Summer 1998); transcript of interview with Vincent Harding by Vincent J. Browne, August 16, 1968, Washington, D.C., in the Ralph J. Bunch Oral History Collection, Howard University; and an interview with Vincent Harding by Hazel Carby and Don Edwards, in *Visions of History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983 [1976]), edited by Henry Abelove, Betsy Blackmar, Peter Dimock, and Jonathon Schneer. (They will be cited by their publication or archival location)

his church background a strong tradition of spirituality. Harding carried these things with him in his subsequent pursuits, and they became important elements of his intellectual and political work.⁴

In keeping with the expectation among the church members that the young people would better themselves through education, Harding earned a bachelor's degree in History from the City College of New York and a Master's Degree from Columbia University's School of Journalism. Upon his graduation from Columbia in 1953 Harding was drafted in the U.S. Army, where he served for two years. Harding recalls those two years in the military as being very important to him "on many personal levels." Two incidents in particular stand out:

One was the experience of being down on my stomach on the Fort Dix, New Jersey rifle range early in the morning, as soon as the sun was up, for rifle practice. Because I like sports and athletics, generally, I was enjoying learning how to get someplace close to the bull's-eye. And all of a sudden it occurred to me one morning that the army was not spending money and rounds of ammunition for me to enjoy myself hitting bull's-eyes. What they were doing was training me to kill another human being whose face I hadn't even seen. It was a very, very powerful understanding.

The second experience was bayonet training. There seems always to be a hardened, veteran drill sergeant who goes up there on the platform in front of you. Meanwhile you face the dummy, who is the enemy, and what you are supposed to learn to do, in approaching the enemy, is to forth all kinds of animal sounds—growls, yells, shrieks, and everything else—that, according to the theory, I believe, are supposed to throw this enemy off guard. But how I understood it was that we were being encouraged in such sounds so that we would forget that we were human, until we could move to what was the purpose of the

⁴ Visions of History, p. 220.

drill—learning how to spill out someone’s guts with just one swipe of the bayonet—and forget about all the things that we had been taught in church about love and shared humanity under God. Those two training experiences really got to me.⁵

These experiences led Harding to make a serious reflection upon his religious convictions and, upon his release in 1955, he became a conscientious objector.⁶

Following his military service, Harding moved to Chicago to study history at the University of Chicago and, at the same time, to serve as an associate lay pastor with a small Seventh Day Adventist congregation on the South Side of Chicago.⁷

While in the Army he had decided that he wanted to teach, choosing to continue the path of studying history that he began as an undergraduate at the City College of New York. At the University of Chicago he was immediately drawn to the field of intellectual history and to the history of Christianity in America as a topic. “I’d already begun a search,” Harding remembers, “to try to understand who I really was, and what *I* believed in relation to [my] church community.” Thus, his choice of scholarly pursuit had a personal connection. “So, as I think has been the case with most of my academic experiences, the study of history was integrated into my personal spiritual quest.”⁸ Similarly, Harding’s “independent life as a lay pastor” was of great importance for his intellectual and political development. Harding identified

⁵ Ibid., p. 223.

⁶ Ralph J. Bunch Oral History Collection, p. 1 When he entered the Army, Harding followed the policy of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, which encouraged a semi-conscientious objector, meaning that one should serve in the military but only in non-combatant roles. He initially tried to get an assignment in military intelligence but was refused as a candidate for officer school.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Visions of History, p. 221.

this bringing together of his participation in these two worlds—the university and the church—as operating at two important levels: “one, the integration of my personal quest with the academic environment and, two, the integration of my life beyond the university into the larger community.”⁹ Thus, we can see early on Harding’s fusion of scholarly work and social and political activism, which was a hallmark of IBW.

Harding recalls that his graduate school experience was a positive one, “except, of course, for the major gap of the study of the Black experience.”¹⁰ Although the 1950s was in some respects a watershed period in African-American historiography, the opportunity to study the black historical experience was often closed to young black scholars of the time.¹¹ Still, Harding’s scholarly work reflected this merging of intellectual, personal, and eventually political concerns. In the late 1950s he began writing a dissertation on “Lyman Beecher and the Transformation of American Protestantism, 1775-1863,” which fed his personal and spiritual quest. He also credits that scholarly experience with giving him an understanding of “the flow of white American history.” That understanding, he said, “helped me as I developed my own education in Black history and then began a new vision of the nation’s true history.”¹²

⁹ Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 222.

¹¹ August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-1980 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 151. Harding says: “When I was in graduate school none of the ‘great universities’ in America considered serious study of the Black experience to be worth their time.” (Visions of History, p. 222)

¹² Visions of History, p. 222.

By 1958 he had left the Seventh-Day Christian Church and became part of the collective leadership of Woodlawn Mennonite Church, an interracial congregation on Chicago's predominantly south side.¹³ During this period his study of the reformation movement had led Harding to become interested in the Anabaptists, and at the same time he learned of a contemporary Mennonite congregation in Chicago. Drawn to the Church's pacifist teachings, Harding was particularly interested in this congregation's attempt to develop a meaningful ministry in a predominantly black urban situation. Harding and others involved in the Mennonite church, including his soon to be wife Rosemarie Freeney, encouraged this "traditional peace church community" to think through the relationship between its commitment to peace, nonviolence, and reconciliation with the growing civil rights struggle in the south, which itself embodied these principles. "As the issues were arising in our country and in the deep South," Harding recalled, "we kept talking about how important it was for those of us who said we believed in these things to find a way to make common cause with those who were living and dying for them."¹⁴

This led to Harding's first personal experience with the South and his introduction into the Civil Rights movement. In the fall of 1958, Harding and four other male church members (one other black person and three whites) took an "exploratory trip" through the South in an attempt to witness and directly experience developments in the region. Packed in a station wagon, they began in Little Rock,

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

¹⁴ *Callaloo*, p. 689.

Arkansas and traveled for several weeks throughout the South, including some of the recent flashpoints of civil rights protest. The trip proved to be a powerful window into the dynamics of southern racism (“We learned a lot!” he recalled), encouraging not only Harding and his fellow travelers, but also the church leadership to seek an active engagement with the civil rights struggle in the South.¹⁵

In the beginning of 1961 the Mennonite Central Committee asked Harding and his wife (they were married in 1960) to go south as representatives of the North American Mennonite Church to learn about the civil rights struggle, raise important issues for the movement, and be of service in that struggle. The Hardings agreed to leave their work in Chicago—he was then writing his dissertation and she was teaching in public school—because they decided that going to the South was an important and necessary task. “The fundamental decision” he recalled “was to give ourselves to the struggle for as long as seemed right.” Here we see a window into the early development of Harding’s moral and political commitments and their relationship to his intellectual work.

At that time, I had doubts about whether I would ever finish the dissertation, but this call from outside of the university seemed absolutely compelling, and it was clear to me that the life in the university had to bend. It seemed to be organic to my life [to] have a sense of focus and purpose and direction outside of the university. From that point on it became more obvious than ever that the university had to come under the guidance and direction of the rest of my life. It was not my primary vocation.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ralph J. Bunch Oral History Collection, p. 12.

¹⁶ *Visions of History*, p. 225-226.

At the end of the summer of 1961, when student sit-ins and freedom rides in the South had captivated and shocked the nation, Vincent and Rosemarie Harding went to Atlanta, Georgia as representatives of the Mennonite Central Committee and established “Mennonite House.” Set up in the fashion of a dormitory, this was a large house where black and white civil rights activists and supporters from throughout the South came to live and work together. Mennonite House was based on the principle of racial reconciliation and was meant to be a witness to its possibilities. “Our concept was that if we really believed in the reality of the need for reconciliation between blacks and whites, and if we really believed that blacks and whites could live together in integrity, well then what we ought to do is try to help to realize some microcosm of that kind of experience.”

Beyond its role as an experiment in and model of interracial living, Mennonite House served as a center of movement activity and coordination, where people from throughout the South gathered. In addition to both formal and informal discussions, visitors and residents found in Mennonite House a place for relaxation and renewal—a relief from the often tremendous pressures of the movement¹⁷.

Mennonite House also served as a base of operations from which Harding and his wife traveled throughout the South working with movement organizations and community groups as negotiators, mediators, and teachers. The Hardings developed a friendship with Martin and Coretta Scott King, who were their neighbors in Atlanta,

¹⁷ *Callaloo*, p. 689.

and King regularly asked them to participate in SCLC's desegregation campaigns throughout the South. During the period 1961-1964, Harding was involved in some of the most significant civil rights battles of the period, such as the movement to desegregate Albany, Georgia, in 1961-1962, where he was arrested in the massive jail-ins. He was also deeply involved in SCLC's pivotal Birmingham, Alabama, campaign during the spring of 1963. He helped to mediate between the opposing forces in that struggle and negotiate the settlement that marked the beginning of the end of segregation in that city.¹⁸

In 1965, Vincent Harding returned to the University of Chicago to complete his dissertation, earning the degree that summer. During this time, Harding was offered the position of Chair of the Department of History and Sociology at Spelman College, one of the five historically black colleges which made up the Atlanta University Center. This position had become vacant with the firing of Howard Zinn, a white radical and civil rights supporter who ran afoul of the College's administration for his involvement with SNCC. The irony of replacing Zinn, himself an activist historian with a commitment to the civil rights struggle, was not lost on Harding, and when he accepted the position at Spelman Harding made it clear that activism would remain a central part of his professional and personal life. He

¹⁸ Ralph J. Bunch Oral History Collection, p. 14-18; Meier and Rudwick, Black History, p. 208. Harding, however, was not completely satisfied with the agreement. Asked to evaluate the success of that movement, he said: "My own feelings about Birmingham are very, very mixed because I have the personal feeling that...SCLC and the Birmingham Christian Movement settled for far less than they should have, partly I think, because they were afraid of the tremendous power that was inherent in the young people who were building up their activity at the time." (Ralph J. Bunch Oral History Collection, p. 18) This is perhaps an early expression of his independence from mainstream civil rights politics, foreshadowing his subsequent ideological and political positions.

explained to Spelman's President Albert Manley that he "was going to be working outside the institution, inside the institution, and around the institution...in a way that would sometimes challenge the institution."¹⁹

Thus, in the fall of 1965 Harding returned to Atlanta and began teaching and chairing the Department of History and Sociology at Spelman College. In his work there with the Civil Rights movement he had served, in a sense, as a movement intellectual, but by the time Harding arrived at Spelman he had begun to question some of the assumptions that had guided his earlier activism, such as the focus at Mennonite House on interracial unity and reconciliation. This period also saw Harding begin intense study of African American history and its relationship to the current era of black political struggles. "Over the last few years," he told an interviewer in 1968, Harding came "to recognize that in the light of our history, black and white, in this country, that so cheap a reconciliation is impossible. Even if one was to speak on simply philosophical or religious grounds, cheap reconciliation is over. My own feeling is that there can be no reconciliation that does not somehow take into consideration the long, long bloody trail that has led us to this point."²⁰

The experience of teaching at Spelman was part of broader process of radicalization of Harding's thinking and politics in this period. In this charged atmosphere of heightened political awareness and activity among students, Harding was compelled "to explore for myself the meaning of that powerful Black symbolism

¹⁹ Quoted in Winston A. Grady-Willis, "A Changing Tide: Black Politics and Activism in Atlanta, Georgia, 1960-1977 (Ph.D. Dissertation, Emory University, 1998), p. 224-225

²⁰ Ralph J. Bunch Oral History Collection, p. 32-33.

and its political and religious implications.” Harding found that he “was in accord with many of the basic concerns, and I had to transmit the implications of that set of ideas to my students. So I got associated with Black Power very quickly.” Another element of this process was “the connectedness through personal relationships and struggle with the folks who were actually engaged in all the actual conditions of the erupting movements of the sixties.”²¹ Furthermore, Harding’s embrace of Black Power flowed from his previous commitment to the civil rights struggle and his on-going role as a scholar:

For so many of [his students], Black Power was a way of looking behind what they understood to be the traps of the mainline civil rights definitions of the struggle. I felt that the issues had to be linked to a sense of positive Black identity and an independent Black critique of American life and American foreign policy, all encouraging the upsurge of a Black cultural renaissance. It seemed to me that this was part of what naturally followed from my commitment to the struggle and my role as a teacher of Black Studies.²²

Thus, as the movement for civil rights was transforming into one for Black Power, Harding saw a continuation rather than abatement of his role as an intellectual. In the years to come, Harding’s intellectual and activist work demonstrated how his ideological commitments, both religious and political, were creatively and organically linked, forming the foundation of his intellectual leadership. During 1965 and 1966, this dynamic was powerfully illustrated in his thinking and writing concerning the war in Vietnam.

²¹ *Visions of History*, p. 228.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 228.

Vincent Harding, Martin Luther King, and Black Opposition to the War in Vietnam

As a declaration of independence from the American state and of solidarity with Third World liberation movements, opposition to the war in Vietnam was an important expression of Black Power radicalism.²³ For Harding, an anti-war position was both a logical expression of his previous moral and ideological commitments and a reflection of his increasingly radical perspective on the Black struggle and American society. In 1965, Harding decided that he had a responsibility to learn more about the situation in Vietnam and the U.S.'s role. By the time he arrived at Spelman he had immersed himself in the study of issues related to Vietnam, particularly the morality of the war and the relationship of the war to the black struggle. He began writing about these issues for the journal *Christianity and Crisis* and other periodicals, becoming, in his words, "a central spokesperson for a radical anti-war position within the Freedom Movement."²⁴

In an effort to push the mainstream civil rights community towards an anti-war position, Harding wrote a long letter to King and the SCLC in advance of the organization's August 1965 convention urging them to take a public stand against the war. Unable to attend the convention, but convinced that the nation's policy in Vietnam was wrong, Harding hoped that his letter would help advance the position

²³ Taylor, *Vietnam and Black America*.

²⁴ *Visions of History*, p. 228.

that “freedom movement organizations like SCLC and leaders like King needed to say something very clearly [against the war] and needed to put themselves out in the open in solidarity with the suffering of the people of Vietnam.”²⁵ King had already begun to speak out against the war earlier that spring, though in less forceful terms than he would in the next two and a half years. Perhaps prompted by Harding’s letter, King gave a speech at SCLC’s convention calling for an end to the bombing of North Vietnam (which had begun in February 1965) and negotiations between the U.S. and the North Vietnamese National Liberation Front.

King and Harding continued to discuss their opposition to the war between August of 1965 and April 1967, when King gave his famous speech condemning the war at New York’s Riverside Church. In the fall of 1966 King’s aide Andy Young asked Harding to prepare a memo of his understanding of the Vietnam situation in preparation for a meeting between King and Arthur Goldberg, the U.S. mission to the United Nations. Shortly after that meeting, King accepted the invitation to speak at Riverside, and King again drew on the insights of his friend, Harding. “He asked me to prepare a draft of what he might say,” Harding recalled. “Essentially, the speech he gave on April 4, 1967, was what I drafted.”²⁶ The speech, delivered one year to the day before King’s assassination, marked a decisive moment in King’s life and career as well as in the civil rights and anti-war movements.

²⁵ Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer (eds.), Voices of Freedom (New York: Vintage, 1988), p. 336.

²⁶ Visions of History, p. 229. See also, Hampton and Fayer, Voices of Freedom, p. 336-337 and p. 344.

Harding's passionate and principled opposition to the war also manifested itself in poetic form. Written 1966, Harding's "To the Gallant Black Men Now Dead" is a long poem which, as Clyde Taylor remarks, blurs "the distinction between prose and poetry."²⁷ Two statements from the Atlanta Journal Constitution newspaper serve as an epigraph for the poem. The first statement claims that "Pentagon official are praising the Negro as a gallant, hardfighting soldier," and in the very next sentence (apparently blind to the glaring irony) continued: "New figures show that proportionately more Negroes have died in Vietnam than military personal of other races." The second quote describes a great number "of the enemy" that took "a savage toll among the communist troops." Harding takes these statements, and especially the descriptor "gallant," as his point of departure for an historically grounded analysis of black murder and murdering in America.

His poem recounts in dramatic language and imagery the saga of black men and their relationship to the state and its brutality and savagery. His aim is to mock the ideas from the epigraph: 'gallant' black soldiers being praised for their service to the nation, and condoning—even celebrating—of the savage brutality that is carried out in its name. He draws out the irony in black men being praised for their killing in Vietnam when they have been the victims of the nation's brutal killing for so long, and both under the banner of (though actually, in denial of) freedom.

²⁷ Vincent Harding, "To the Gallant Black Men Now Dead," in Clyde Taylor (ed.), Vietnam and Black America: An Anthology of Protest and Resistance (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973). Taylor is quoted from p. 3.

The poem begins: “My brothers, I weep for you/Hearing sounds of your death in the jungle/performing great deeds of gallant savagery/I weep because I remember.”

The poem goes on to list in vivid and passionate imagery recollections of black suffering and death. This list begins with being captured in Africa:

I remember , my brothers, how you died in thousands with hands chained behind your backs, How you died as you walked the path of sorrows from hear of darkness to the light of Christian ships and guns and hymns of praise. (22)

You are good at dying, gallant black brother. Too good.

And then the Middle Passage:

I remember how you died on board a thousand ships And heard no mourner song where you were left one hundred fathoms in the deep. Were you gallant then? Or just a stinking slave? The times have changed black brother. The times have changed, the tunes have changed and I weep for you because I remember. (23)

And then in slavery:

Who gave you medals sir when lashes from ten thousand whips stole bitter measures from your flesh? When the booted feet of praying men stamped your black image into the dust of God’s own chosen land? Who saw Who cared?

Harding’s words are meant to highlight the irony, again, that black men, whose tradition of fighting for liberty runs deep, would be engaged in this killing and denial of liberty in another land. Moving through history into contemporary times, the poem laments the dying caused in all instances: “They say you die well my brother/Oh God, how you have died!”

Harding's dissent and opposition to the war in Vietnam was part of his radicalization process and his evolution into ever expanding directions and outlets of intellectual work and political activism during the Black Power movement. As we will see, he continued to bring intellectual leadership to the movement, exemplifying the role as a movement intellectual that he assumed during the civil rights phase in the first part of the 1960s. For Harding, as for many others, the burgeoning Black Studies movement symbolized the new directions and avenues of activism that opened up in the second half of the decade.

“Scholarship in the Context of Struggle”: Black Studies and the Founding of the Institute of the Black World

The first Black Studies program in the nation was implemented at San Francisco State College in the fall of 1967 after militant student protests led to a campus wide strike. Black students there had compelled the administration to offer a course in Black Nationalism during the spring of 1966 and, through the newly organized Black Student Union, they pushed for a full Black Studies program during the summer.²⁸ Through much controversy and conflict, Black Studies at San Francisco State had achieved departmental status by September of 1968. Similar

²⁸ Robert H. Brisbane, *Black Activism: Racial Revolution in the United States, 1954-1970* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974), p. 225.

confrontations took place throughout the nation, including widely publicized incidents at Ivy League schools such as Cornell, Harvard, Columbia, and Yale, as well as small liberal arts colleges such as Antioch College. There the conflicts arising from the demands of militant Black Students led to Dr. Kenneth B. Clark, the only Black member of the Board of Directors, to resign in response to the student's attempt to impose what he labeled as a "black separatist policy."²⁹

For all who cared to notice, these efforts by students, their mentors, and community activists to forge Black Studies programs across the country were more than simply the spread of nationalist or "separatist" sentiment, but were very real expressions of an emergent ethic of Black Power. By challenging the racism embedded in and reproduced through U.S. educational institutions, Black Studies was an embodiment of Black Power politics—community empowerment, confrontation with institutional racism, and the attempted transformation of those institutions. As a means to collective self-definition and reclamation of Black people's historical identity, Black Studies was an expression of the era's cultural sensibilities—self-determination, racial consciousness, and celebration of an authentic cultural identity. Thus, this was not only a student revolt, but a fight over the control and definition of a source of the nation's cultural and material resources. If allowed to reach its promise, many believed, Black Studies provided a vehicle for the propagation of

²⁹ Quoted in Alphonso Pickney, *Red, Black, and Green: Black Nationalism in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) p. 180.

black revolutionary ideology. It was, in short, an aspect of a broader movement for Black liberation.³⁰

IBW was conceived as a way to give these ideas and experiences organizational expression. Beginning in the fall of 1967, just as the San Francisco State program was being launched, Vincent Harding began talking with poet and literary critic, Stephen Henderson, about the implications and possibilities of this emergent, and insurgent, Black Studies. Harding was at this time Chair of the Department of History and Sociology at Spelman College, and Henderson was Chair of the Department of English at Morehouse College, both in Atlanta, Georgia. They “talked through many a long night” about how they might engage in and contribute to the Black Studies enterprise from their position in southern Black colleges.³¹ “Our thought,” Harding recalled later, “was that with Black Studies programs burgeoning in the predominantly white Universities, we ought to establish a base where black people could become the primary interpreter of the Black Studies experience.”³²

As politically engaged scholars, they embraced and sought to contribute to a long tradition of black intellectual activism. And being situated in Atlanta, Harding and Henderson were well aware that they labored

³⁰ William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) p. 64-82.

³¹ Harding, “Introduction” to *IBW and Education for Liberation*, p. iv; Rachel E. Harding, “Biography, Democracy, and Spirit: An Interview with Vincent Harding,” *Callaloo*, vol. 20, no. 3 (Summer 1998), p. 691

³² Rachel Harding, “Biography, Democracy, and Spirit,” p. 691.

in the historical and intellectual shadow of perhaps the most celebrated of these scholar, W.E.B. Du Bois.³³ As Harding would later explain:

IBW came into existence as a result of our commitment to the hopes and plans of the dead yet living fathers in the Black intellectual community, most notably W.E.B. DuBois. Based as we were in the Atlanta University Center schools, it was not difficult for us to remember and recount his work at the beginning of the century toward a research center which would develop a hundred-year study of the Black Experience.³⁴

Indeed, from the beginning of their efforts with the institute, members of IBW consciously saw themselves, as individuals and as an organization, in a tradition of socially conscious and politically engaged scholars, with Du Bois as a fountainhead and foundational figure in this tradition.³⁵

So too were these young scholar-activists influenced by the exigencies of their own day. One of the many expressions of the emerging Black Power movement was the rising revolt of black Students. Not only on white campuses, but also on Black Colleges and Universities Black students demanded an education that reflected the emerging values, cultural sensibilities, and political imperatives of the era. It was in this context that

³³ Author's interview with Vincent Harding, conducted by telephone on 29 October 2001 (hereafter cited as Harding interview).

³⁴ This passage is from "IBW and Education for Liberation," published jointly by Third World Press (Chicago) and the Institute of the Black World in August, 1973. The pamphlet, which was part of IBW's series of "Black Papers," consists of an essay by Lerone Bennett, Jr., "The Challenge of Blackness," an introduction and overview of IBW by Vincent Harding, and a "Postscript" by the IBW staff.

³⁵ Hardin interview.

Harding and Henderson “talked through many a long night,” beginning in the fall of 1967, “about ways in which the work of Du Bois could find a renaissance in the context of the steadily growing demands that the Negro Colleges and Universities become Black-oriented institutions.” From these early conversations and thoughts Harding and Henderson, along with a few other Black intellectuals, began formulating the idea for an Institute for Advanced Afro-American Studies in Atlanta.

Soon, other members of Atlanta’s expanding black intellectual community joined them in conceptualizing the Institute. In addition to Harding and Henderson, the official planning staff included sociologist Gerald McWorter (Abdul Alkalimat), who had just come from Fisk to teach in Harding’s Department; poet and Jazz scholar, A. B. Spellman who had come to teach at Morehouse; anthropologist Council Taylor, who was a visiting scholar at the Atlanta University Center; and William Strickland, former director of the Northern Student Movement and Deputy Director of the 1967 Black Power Conference in Newark, New Jersey. Strickland, who would come to be one of the most active members of IBW’s research staff, was then lecturer in History at Columbia University and worked with the planning of IBW on a commuting basis.³⁶

³⁶ Ibid, p. vi. Lawrence Rushing of the Atlanta-based Southern Education Program joined the planning staff later.

This planning process was suddenly and tragically interrupted by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on 4 April 1968. “It was at that moment,” Harding recalled, “that every thought was shattered and some were reshaped.”³⁷ Indeed, King’s assassination prompted passionate reactions and responses from Black America. James Baldwin, ever the astute observer of America’s racial crisis, told white America: “...to the black people in this country [King’s assassination] means that you have declared war.” In his customary candor, Baldwin issued a collective indictment: “whether it was done by one man or by a State trooper, which is a possibility; or whether it was a conspiracy, which is also a possibility...I accuse the American people and all its representatives [for the assassination].”³⁸ The sentiments that Baldwin put into words were also expressed in the urban rebellions and racial violence that were widespread in the days following the assassination.³⁹ The formation of new Black Power organizations also followed in the wake of King’s murder, reflecting a growing black consciousness and demand for African American

³⁷ Ibid, p. iv.

³⁸ These passages are from an interview with James Baldwin in *Esquire* magazine, August 1968. They are quoted here from Herbert Aptheker (ed.), *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, 1960-1968, vol. 7* (New York: Citadel Press, 1994), p. 564-565.

³⁹ Marry Frances Berry, *Black Resistance, White Law: A History of Constitutional Racism in America*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1994 [1971]), p. 179. See also, Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); and Joe R. Feagin and Harland Hahn, *Ghetto Revolts* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 105. It should be noted that urban rebellions had marked the previous four summers and would continue in the summers of 1968 and 1969. While they reflected broad and deep political disaffection, most rebellions were sparked by incidents of police abuse and violence of Black citizens in Black communities. For a discussion of the Watts rebellion of 1965 (the first of these uprisings to completely capture national attention) and its implications for the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, see Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville, 1995).

self-determination.⁴⁰ In this charged environment, Black students and their activist mentors were able to pressure most of the major colleges and universities to establish Black (or Afro-American) Studies programs.⁴¹ As Harding recalled, after King's assassination:

...the intensity of [the black community's] response could not be buried. Across the nation, the revived interest in the study of Black life and culture—which had been given peculiar impetus by the presence of Malcolm—became with the murder of King a clamorous demand...⁴²

Shortly after the assassination, Coretta Scott King asked Harding to take the leadership in the creation of the Martin Luther King Library Documentation Project, which was planned as a repository of material to serve as the major documentation center for the post-1954 Civil Rights Movement. Out of the preparation of this project came the idea for a larger, multi-faceted, “living” memorial that would be an even more appropriate remembrance for King. During the discussions for this larger memorial, late in late summer of 1968, Harding proposed that the Institute for Advanced Afro-American Studies be included as a part of the King Memorial Center.⁴³

⁴⁰ Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chalep Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 71, 94-95.

⁴¹ Pickney, *Red, Black, and Green*, p. 180.

⁴² Harding, “Introduction,” p. v.

⁴³ While the Institute was initially conceived as functioning within the Atlanta University Center, ideological and political differences precluded such an arrangement. Harding explained that the impasse arose from “the out-spoken commitment on the part of several of us towards radical change, towards Black solidarity and towards Black control of Black institutions.” As we will see below, a similar conflict soon developed between IBW and the King Center's Board of Directors.

The idea was accepted, and by the fall of 1968, the planning staff had produced the first full draft of a proposal for what was then being called the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Advanced Afro-American Studies. The planning staff had also proposed a Governing Council for the Institute, composed of several prominent scholars and artists,⁴⁴ and in consultation with that council, decided on a name that was “more descriptive of [its] purposes: The Institute of the Black World.”⁴⁵ In the summer of 1969, the Institute of the Black World was formally organized under the auspices of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center as the second of its projected four components (the first was the Library Documentation Project). With Harding as the Director, the Institute’s senior research staff also included Henderson, Strickland, and four new members: Lerone Bennett, Jr., Chester Davis, Joyce Ladner, and Sterling Stuckey. Bennett was senior editor of *Ebony* magazine and widely known for his popular articles on Black History, which had been collected and published as his 1962 book, Before the Mayflower. Davis, whose area of focus was pre-college education, was a member of the Taskforce on Childhood Education. Sociologist and former the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) member Joyce Ladner joined the IBW staff having begun her study of Black womanhood, published in 1971, as Tomorrow’s Tomorrow: The Black Woman.⁴⁶ Stuckey, who in 1962 had

⁴⁴ This included Margaret Walker Alexander, Lerone Bennett, Horace Mann Bond, John Henrik Clarke, Ossie Davis, St. Clair Drake, Katherine Dunham, Rene Piquion, and Bernice Reagon.

⁴⁵ Harding, “Introduction,” p. vi.

⁴⁶ Joyce A. Ladner, *Tomorrow’s Tomorrow: The Black Woman* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971)

founded the Amistad Society to foster the study of Black history, was professor of History at Northwestern University and former Chicago high-school teacher.

As scholars coming together to engage in collective research into the experiences and conditions of Black people, IBW envisioned itself as “a model of black responsibility for that intellectual work which defines and directs the black community.”⁴⁷ This joining of scholarly responsibility and political struggle was clearly articulated in the Institute’s statement of purpose:

The Institute of the Black World is a gathering of Black intellectuals who are convinced that the gifts of their minds are meant to be fully used in the service of the black community. It is therefore an experiment with scholarship in the context of struggle.⁴⁸

IBW’s first activity was to organize a summer research seminar on Black Studies during the summer of 1969 analyzing the situation in Black Studies programs across the country. A task force of students, faculty, and others took interviews and examined documents related to approximately 200 Black Studies programs to identify the relationship of these programs to their surrounding Black communities, the sense of self-definition and direction that they had taken, and the political struggles that they were engaged in. This was followed with a three-day workshop in November

⁴⁷ IBW advertisement for “Black Papers,” IBW Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. The IBW Papers are not yet completely catalogued, therefore all material from this collection will be cited in this essay as IBW Papers.

⁴⁸ “Institute of the Black World, Statement of Purpose and Program,” fall 1969, IBW Papers. For IBW’s Statement of Purpose, see also *Negro Digest* (March 1970), p. 20.

during which the Directors of 35 Black Studies programs came “to share and analyze their experiences” with the IBW staff and some of its associates.⁴⁹

IBW staff member Lerone Bennett, Jr. addressed the Director’s workshop on the subject, “The Challenge of Blackness,” in which he presented a statement of IBW’s vision of Black Studies as part of the larger struggle for self-definition and self-determination. “We have come together in the Institute of the Black World,” Bennett said, explaining IBW’s role in that struggle, “because we believe at this particular moment that the exigencies of blackness require a collective and communal effort to define and control our experience.” Highlighting the theme of his presentation--and IBW’s broader philosophical basis--Bennett asserted that “the first challenge of Blackness is the challenge of defining it.” He explained that IBW was moving to meet this challenge on several levels, including, firstly, IBW’s attempt to create Black Studies research materials, documents, and other tools necessary for the productive development of the field. In addition, the Institute hoped to create “a new pool of clarifying concepts” through which Black America would “develop a new frame of reference which transcends the limits of white concepts.” This would include “a new philosophy of education, conceived broadly as an instrument for social and personal change,” and a renewed model of Black intellectualism, where “the black community must help define what an intellectual is and what intellectuals should do.” (p.4). Finally, Bennett said, IBW’s work to define Blackness led

⁴⁹ Harding, “Introduction,” p. iii.

ultimately to a large but necessary task: “to redefine American experience in order to remake American society.”⁵⁰

Thus, even at this early stage in IBW’s development, when its primary focus was on shaping the field of Black Studies, we can see the articulation of a radical ideological perspective and critique of American society. “In its essence,” Bennett argued, “the black experience is a radical re-appraisal of a society from the standpoint of the [people] on the bottom...For if black reality is not what America said it was, then obviously America is not what it claims to be.” Highlighting his theme (and articulating the oppositional essence of Black Power), Bennett continued: “Blackness is a challenge, then, to America and to *all* its institutions and values.”⁵¹

The Institute was formally launched on January 17, 1970 with its opening ceremony, “Celebration of Blackness.” Combining art and politics, the celebration clearly indicated IBW’s grounding in the cultural and political sensibilities of the Black Power Movement. Performances from the Katherine Dunham Dance Troupe, the Harambee Singers, Miles College Choir, and the newly formed Black Image Theatre Group (composed of Atlanta University Center students) were combined with addresses from Coretta King, Harding, Rev. C.T. Vivian and Lerone Bennett. The poetry of Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti) and others gave artistic expression to IBW’s commitment to “defining, defending, and illustrating blackness.”⁵² Consistent with Black Power’ call for independent institutions, the written program for the celebration

⁵⁰ Lerone Bennett, Jr., “The Challenge of Blackness,” in *IBW and Education for Liberation*, p. 2-4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² “Celebration of Blackness” program, IBW Papers.

informed guests that “The Institute, as its name suggests, is by, of, for, and about the black peoples of the world.”⁵³

By the time of the opening IBW had already started to implement its program of work. Staff members were offering a series of semester long research-oriented seminars for credit and non-credit participants, and the Institute sponsored a series of lectures and seminars by scholars, artists, and organizers from throughout the Black community. The Institute also established cooperative relationships with Black students and the faculties of Black and African studies programs at Dartmouth College, Brooklyn College, and Cornell University. At Wesleyan University, IBW staff presented a semester-long course, “Introduction to Black Studies,” during the fall of 1969, and guided four Wesleyan students in their work in the Institute. By the summer of 1970 IBW was developing a “Consortium for research and development on the Black Experience” in conjunction with Fisk and Howard Universities to help several Black Colleges and Universities create educational programs that were “unashamedly devoted to the building of African peoples.”⁵⁴ Beyond the academy, IBW worked with various national Black organizations, such as the Congress of African People (CAP), the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, and the newly formed African Heritage Studies Association (AHSA).⁵⁵ IBW’s connection to these and other

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “IBW: The First Year,” IBW Papers; “Report of the Staff of the Institute of the Black World, May 11, 1970” IBW Papers.

⁵⁵ Memo, September 24, 1970, “Re: Specific steps towards black ecumenism,” IBW Papers; Nicholas D.U. Onyequ to Vincent Harding, November 26, 1969, IBW Papers; Gloria A. Marshall to Vincent Harding, January 17, 1970, IBW Papers.

groups was an organic one, as they represented some of the many organizational expressions of Black Power that emerged in this period.

The parallels and connections between IBW and the AHSA were particularly strong. Both organizations were formed during the summer of 1969 by Black intellectuals who shared a vision of politicized scholarship. While IBW was formed to assert black control over the definition and development of Black Studies, the AHSA was created by black American and African scholars challenging the racism and conservatism of white scholars and their domination of the decade-old field of African Studies through the African Studies Association.⁵⁶ Discussions about their mutual objectives and possibilities for collaboration led to IBW's participation in AHSA's second annual conference held 1-3 May 1970.⁵⁷ The meeting was held on the campus of Howard University in Washington, D.C., but it was far from the standard academic affair. In addition to the panel presentations, the program included a series of cultural events called "Ujamma Evenings," and the Chair of Local Arrangements, Federal City College Professor Acklyn Lynch, ensured that Washington D.C.'s local Black community had a strong presence in the conference.⁵⁸ This combination of intellectual exchange, cultural celebration, and broad community involvement reflected the spirit of community regeneration and sweeping social

⁵⁶ "The Origins and Development of the African Heritage Studies Association (AHSA)," John Henrik Clarke Papers—AHSA files, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

⁵⁷ IBW Papers; Nicholas D.U. Onyequ to Vincent Harding, November 26, 1969, IBW Papers; Gloria A. Marshall to Vincent Harding, January 17, 1970, IBW Papers.

⁵⁸ Author's conversation with Acklyn Lynch, 17 March 2000, Atlanta Georgia. Lynch headed the program committee along with Gloria A. Marshall of the University of Michigan.

change which were part of this era, and the specific vision of AHSA (and IBW) that intellectual work was a part of this process. In his report of the conference, one observer explained that everyone in attendance seemed “to have the awareness that we were involved in the bringing to life of a new epoch for black people, and the studies that concern them.”⁵⁹

The conference brought together more than 2,000 scholars, activists, and artists from various points in the Black world, including people from seven African nations and parts of the Caribbean.⁶⁰ Some of the conference participants had already been or would soon become part of the life of the Institute of the Black World. One such person was C.L.R. James, the venerable Trinidadian scholar, Pan-African activist, and Marxist theorist, who had visited the Institute in December of 1969. During his stay James gave three public lectures (IBW’s first annual W.E.B. DuBois memorial lectures) and led a seminar for IBW staff. This was the beginning of James’ active involvement with IBW. Another member of IBW’s international network of scholars, Walter Rodney, was also a panelist at the AHSA meeting. In fact, it was here that Harding and Strickland first met the brilliant young Guyanese historian and political activist. Robert Hill, who was appointed to IBW’s staff at the end of the spring, and would become one of the Institute’s key theorists, had met and worked

⁵⁹ Cyprian Lamar Rowe, “The Birth of the African Heritage Studies Association,” *Black Academy Review*, Vol., No. 3, Fall 1970.

⁶⁰ “The Origins and development of the African Heritage Studies Association (AHSA),” John Henrik Clarke Papers.

with Rodney in Hill's native Jamaica.⁶¹ Both James and Rodney, two of the most gifted and influential radical West Indian intellectuals of the era, spent periods of residence at the Institute during its first year and would come to play important roles in IBW's programmatic and ideological development.⁶²

In addition to its international collaborators, IBW recruited a national network of Associates that included an impressive array of figures in the world of African American letters. For example, IBW hosted visits by St. Clair Drake, Margaret Walker Alexander, and Horace Cayton during its first year. Contemporary figures of Black struggle--including Amiri Baraka, Black Arts Movement poet and founder of CAP, and Stokely Carmichael, formally of SNCC--were also part of the Institute's activities during this period.⁶³

Amidst their other activities, IBW staff members and visiting fellows maintained a focus on research and writing which included the development of a publishing program to disseminate the Institute's work. The program was initiated in April, 1970, with the publication of the Institute's first "Black Paper," a series of pamphlet-form essays. Eventually published jointly with Black-owned Third World Press in Chicago, "Black Papers" were designed to focus "on the nature and prospects of the black experience" by examining the "political, social, economic and cultural

⁶¹ See Vincent Harding, William Strickland, and Robert Hill, "Introduction," to Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D.C: Howard University Press, 1982 [1972]), p. xv.

⁶² See *Walter Rodney Speaks: The Making of an African Intellectual* (Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press, 1990).

⁶³ Memo, March 25, 1970, IBW Papers; Memo, April 3, 1970 "Subject: Details of Stokely Carmichael Lecture," IBW Papers; "IBW: The First Year," IBW Papers.

developments, here and abroad, that affect *black power aspirations and programs*.”⁶⁴ The inaugural pamphlet was Lerone Bennett’s “The Challenge of Blackness,” the text from his address to the 1969 Black Studies Directors workshop. An advertisement for the “Black Papers,” apparently from the summer of 1970,⁶⁵ announces Harding’s recently published “Beyond Chaos: Black History and the Search for the New Land,” (the second in the “Black Papers” series), as well as future essays such as William Strickland’s “On the Need for a Black Revolutionary Theory,” and “Black Repression in the Cities: An Analysis of Institutional Racism in the 70s,” by Joyce Ladner and Walter Stafford. Giving further indication of IBW’s ideological perspective, the advertisement cites a passage from the work of Frantz Fanon, the Martiniquan-born anti-colonial theorist and revolutionary, whose study of anti-colonial revolt, The Wretched of the Earth, greatly influenced Black radicals of the Black Power era.⁶⁶

The language of this advertisement, the subject matter of the “Black Papers,” and the invocation of Fanon’s revolutionary spirit give some indication of IBW’s intellectual influences and radical political perspective in the spring and summer of 1970. Moving beyond its initial emphasis on the development of the field of Black Studies, while maintaining its commitment to “work as fully as we can towards Black control over the definition of the

⁶⁴ Advertisement for “Black Papers,” IBW Papers (emphasis added).

⁶⁵ The advertisement was made while IBW was a part of the King Center. IBW left by September 1970.

⁶⁶ Fanon’s quote: “Shall we continue fulfilling the slave destiny assigned to us by the system we live under; or shall we consciously, deliberately betray this destiny for our own souls, our own future?”

Black experience,”⁶⁷ the Institute sought to thoroughly engage in the current stream of Black political thought and activity of the new decade.

“Revolutionary Scholarship”: Intellectual Work and Black Power Politics

However, IBW’s political perspective was at variance with the Martin Luther King Center’s mission and its vision for the Institute. In fact, during the spring and summer of 1970 the Institute was also engaged in a battle of sorts with the Boards of Directors of the King Center. The press releases, speeches, and general spirit of celebration that accompanied IBW’s opening in January seemed to announce a unity of purpose between the Institute and the King Center, but differences soon led to conflict between IBW and the larger entity under whose auspices it was organized. While financial matters were an aspect of the conflict, and personal differences may have also played a role, at the heart of the conflict were ideological and political differences. In April of 1970 the Center’s Board of Directors moved to create a panel to review and evaluate the Institute’s operations. “In light of the many concerns about” the Center, the Board requested that the staff of IBW submit a report to the review panel, which the Institute submitted in April.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ “Towards a Black Agenda,” IBW Papers.

⁶⁸ The Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial Center Board of Director’s Meeting, April 21, 1970, IBW Papers.

The report began by stating the Institute's vision of King's legacy and the relationship of that legacy to its work. It explained that IBW found in King's life and death the embodiment of a "new confidence ... in the power of black people to create radical change in America," and that the Institute intended to build on "the deep sense of pride and dignity" that King "helped to bring to black people." In addition, the staff of IBW believed that King's life work was vitally important in the contemporary stage of struggle because of his "constant exposure of the depths of racism in all the major white American institutions."⁶⁹ Thus, for the activist-intellectuals of IBW, King symbolized race pride, radical political struggle, and a critique of institutional racism.

The committee appointed to evaluate the Institute found that "the Institute's purpose was not in harmony with the one adopted by the Center's Board [of Directors]."⁷⁰ In particular, there were three programmatic points of divergence between the two bodies: IBW's lack of commitment to the philosophy of nonviolence, the level of primacy placed on King in IBW's work, and the role of whites in the Institute.

The committee said that it was disturbed not by what the IBW claimed as King's legacy, but by what it did not claim. The offending omission was nonviolence.

The committee's report said:

It seems clear that the [IBW] statement of purpose is deliberately phrased so as to avoid the use of the word non-violence. It is difficult for members of the panel to understand why in a memorial

⁶⁹ Report of the Staff of the Institute of the Black World, May 11, 1970, IBW Papers.

⁷⁰ "Report of the Committee Appointed to Evaluate the Institute of the Black World," IBW Papers.

dedicated to the memory of the life, work, and death of Martin Luther, there should be hesitancy and even deliberate avoidance of affirming commitments to his basic philosophy.⁷¹

The panel also took issue with the Institute's refusal to give priority "to researching the life, work and contributions of Dr. King." The Institute's report had declared King's legacy as a base, a starting point from which they would analyze the whole of the black experience, past, present and future. "Out of this base," the Institute explained, IBW

has moved logically to attempt to carry on the intellectual work which must be a part of the continual struggle of black people toward self-determination and self-knowledge. It has committed itself to seek work toward black control of the definition of our peoples' experiences, from Africa to the New World. It believes that research on the past, present, and future condition of black people is absolutely necessary if we are to continue as the vanguard in the struggle for justice to which Martin gave his life.⁷²

Thus, for IBW, paying homage to King's legacy meant carrying on—and extending—the struggles he helped wage. The review panel (and the entire Board of Directors), however, envisioned a different form of reverence, one apparently heavy with symbolism and which unmistakably centered on King. "In the home of the Institute of the Black World," the committee's report complained, "it should be obvious as one enters, that this is a memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr. and not to other leaders of the Black World." Apparently stating the obvious, the report griped:

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Report of the Staff of the Institute of the Black World, May 11, 1970, IBW Papers.

“It is the opinion of the members of the panel that in the Institute other black leaders have been given a higher place than Martin Luther.”⁷³

A third point of contention between the Board and the Institute was the role of whites in the Institute. As we have seen, IBW was founded on the principles of self-definition and Black control of Black institutions which included IBW’s position that Black people must claim the (exclusive) right to define their own experience. The committee, however, “could not accept the position that all white scholars and all white students must be excluded from participation in the Institute’s programs.” To exclude people “solely on the ground of race,” they felt, was in conflict with Dr. King’s ideals, contradictory to the aims of the entire movement, and would be hard to explain “to the world when at the same time, we will be approaching the people of the nation of all races, colors and creeds to support our program.”⁷⁴

On July 1, 1970, Harding responded to the charges made by the review panel. He defended the Institute’s desire for total Black participation and development, reminding the Board that IBW was “an institution committed to a new, necessary,

⁷³ “Report of the Committee Appointed to Evaluate the Institute of the Black World,” IBW Papers. This charge was probably true. While King was clearly respected, it seems that few among IBW’s staff could be counted among the martyred leader’s devote followers. While Harding maintained the appreciation that he developed for King after working with King and the Southern Civil Rights movement, he never abandoned his connection to and appreciation for other ideological and philosophical approaches to the struggle. Many of IBW’s staff and associates were radical intellectuals whose ideas found correspondence with, and were often influenced by, revolutionary thinkers throughout the world. Among these were theoreticians and leaders of African liberation movements, such as Amilcar Cabral and Frantz Fanon, as well as figures coming from other Third World areas such as Cuba and Vietnam. Also, as discussed above, radical West Indian intellectuals C.L.R. James and Walter Rodney were important ideological and intellectual influences and both participating in IBW projects.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5-6.

black interpretation of our own past, present, and future. In such an Institute,” Harding continued, “it seemed only right” that all of its participants as well as those people deciding its direction should be Black. “The work of defining our experience is our responsibility.” He also responded to the charge that IBW should place King and nonviolence at the center of its work. “It seemed to me that if [IBW] was to be truly a gathering of intellectuals and organizers representing the Black world, its staff could not be limited by a demand that they espouse only one of the philosophies of our struggle within that Black world.” Harding concluded by addressing the unstated yet central point of contention: IBW’s orientation towards engaging in the contemporary struggles of Black America. “I fear for the future of a Center,” he said, “dedicated to Martin King which does not take seriously the deepest strivings of the younger black community of the 1970s, strivings which move them towards new levels of self-determination, self-definition, and unity.”⁷⁵

These differences led to IBW’s separation from the King Center in the fall of 1970, and are therefore important to understanding IBW’s history. Furthermore, looking at the conflict gives us some insight into the ideological orientation of the Black Power Movement, as the conflict is representative, at least symbolically, of the very real ideological and political debates of the post-war Black Freedom movement. For the activists intellectuals of IBW, as for many other Black radicals of the era, discussions of violence/self defense, the affirmation of cultural pride, and other

⁷⁵ “Some Personal Reflections on Pluralism in the Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial Center,” p. 2-3, IBW Papers. This document was authored by Harding, dated 1 July 1970.

ideological components of Black Power were reflective of deeper questions about the nature of American society, Black people's relationship to it, and the prospects for not only fighting racism but of changing American society.

By September, 1970 IBW had formally separated from the King Center. In its fall 1970 pamphlet IBW announced that it was "an autonomous operation" whose basic purpose was to create a community of "black scholars, artists, and organizers who are committed...to forward the struggles of the black community towards self-understanding, self-determination, and ultimate liberation." Specifically, IBW's point of engagement into Black Power politics was primarily in the realm of ideas. As it described itself, the Institute of the Black World "was born into a national struggle over the control of the definition of the Black experience."⁷⁶ Underscoring the political significance of this, IBW theorist Robert Hill explained that they sought to define the Black experience "in order to shape it for the contestation of hegemony with the white racist values (and, one supposed, institutions) of the broader society."⁷⁷ This was the basis of "revolutionary scholarship," a conceptual framework through which IBW developed the objective of their intellectual work: the transformation of knowledge into politics.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Institute of the Black World (ed.), *Education and Black Struggle: Notes from the Colonized World*, Monograph No. 2, Harvard Educational Review (Cambridge: Harvard Educational Review, 1974), p. 1.

⁷⁷ "III. Beginning Again," IBW Papers.

⁷⁸ The concept of revolutionary scholarship is discussed in several of IBW's internal documents, and is generally attributed to Robert Hill and William Strickland. In a document titled "Towards a Theory of Scientific Direction," apparently written by Strickland, revolutionary scholarship is defined as "scholarship dedicated to educating an oppressed people to take power. Its purpose is to demonstrate,

Towards a Black Agenda

The most direct manifestation of this was IBW's "Black Agenda." During the spring of 1970 IBW began developing a comprehensive multi-year project "of research, analysis, and program projection focused on some of the most critical problems facing the Black community in America."⁷⁹ In March, Harding drafted an initial document, "Toward a Black Agenda," proposing the development of a network of people to engage in coordinated and collective analysis of the contemporary conditions and future prospects of Black life in 1970s. The document identified several areas to be explored, and from this, four core sectors of investigation were identified: Economic Development, Health and Welfare, Political Organizing, and Education. In May, following a series of staff discussions and planning sessions focused on "Towards a Black Agenda," the document was circulated among IBW Associates and others who were asked to submit it to critical review, provide suggestions for such a project, and to join in its implementation.

Through the summer of 1970 IBW staff and Associates prepared and distributed preliminary working papers, and the first meeting of the Black Agenda group was held in October. During this three-day conference the forty-two participants laid the structural groundwork for the Agenda and established the Black

propagate, analyze and agitate for the absolute necessity for blacks to take power as the only way of resolving their fundamental grievances."

⁷⁹ "Proposal for Funding of the Black Agenda Network," April 23, 1971, IBW Papers.

Agenda Network (BAN)--a collection Black intellectuals and committed activists “who are committed to those tasks of research, analysis, planning, and advocacy which can assist our people in the struggle towards national liberation.”⁸⁰ Among them were the legendary organizer Ella Baker; long-time activists James and Grace Lee Boggs; Psychiatrist Alvin F. Poussaint; and Haywood Burns, Director of the National Council of Black Lawyers.

BAN participants organized four Tasks Forces to conduct sustained analyses into the chosen areas of the Black life and to develop popular interpretive materials based on this work. A coordinating committee of the IBW staff worked with local and national groups to arrange the dissemination and implementation of BAN analyses and programs. For IBW, this was an essential undertaking. “At this point in history,” the IBW staff asserted in 1971, “there are no black-controlled and black-staffed national programs for careful research and analysis on the history, present condition and future of black people other than the Institute of the Black World and its Black Agenda Network.”⁸¹ The Black Agenda would provide the research and analysis required for the Black community to “understand and identify the mechanisms of white power which keep us from realizing the self-determination we need.” The Black Agenda’s call for Black self-determination—a central ideal of the Black Power Movement—was conceived as a necessary step in the process of effecting a transformation of American society at large. As Harding explained, “The

⁸⁰ ‘Ibid; Black Agenda Progress Report, November 16, 1970,” IBW Papers.

⁸¹ “Proposal for Funding of the Black Agenda Network,” April 23, 1971, IBW Papers.

Agenda...sought to move the Black community towards that control of our lives, our institutions, and our environment which will help make possible the revolutionary change necessary to create a humane society in America.”⁸²

The conception and implementation of the Black Agenda illustrates the Institute’s engagement with and contribution to Black Power politics. Not only did it embody IBW’s mission of collective intellectual work, but in its call for “revolutionary change” the Agenda articulated the era’s ideological and political commitment to changing the Black condition and the entire society. Furthermore, IBW and the Black Agenda played a central role in laying the ideological foundation and framework for the National Black Political Convention held in Gary, Indiana in March 1972. This was one of the major events of the Black Power movement, and in some sense represents its highpoint. Though less known than Amiri Baraka and the other organizers, IBW members, specifically Harding, Strickland and Bennett, made indispensable contributions to its success. IBW’s work was represented in the Gary Convention in many ways, including the “Gary Declaration” which was co-authored by Harding and Strickland. It read, in part:

Towards a Black Agenda

So when we turn to a Black Agenda for the seventies, we move in the truth of history, in the reality of the moment. We move recognizing that no one else is going to represent our interests but ourselves. *The society we seek cannot come unless Black people organize to advance its coming.* We lift up a Black Agenda recognizing that white America moves towards the abyss created

⁸² “Towards a Black Agenda,” IBW Papers.

by its own racist arrogance, misplaced priorities, rampant materialism, and ethical bankruptcy. Therefore, we are certain that the Agenda we now press for in Gary is not only for the future of Black humanity, but is probably the only way the rest of America can save itself from the harvest of its criminal past.⁸³

⁸³ “The Gary Declaration,” in *The National Black Political Agenda*, (Washington, D.C.: National Black Political Convention, 1972).

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