Black Awareness Is Their Motto:
The Black Power Movement in Providence, 1967-1972

by Ben Bienstock

A protestor supporting the Black Panther Party raises the Black Power fist atop a statue outside the Federal Building in Kennedy Plaza, Downtown Providence. Original photo by Chris Burnett published in Extra! *Vol. 1 No. 24, Oct. 7-21, 1969.*

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Note

After spending a year and a half working on this thesis in Providence, I missed the city dearly as I spent the final weeks, days, and hours of writing and editing not at my carrel in the Rock as I had envisioned, but remotely at my home in New York. This abrupt relocation sadly took me away from the subjects and setting of the stories of this thesis, and put hundreds of miles between my work and the communities of local activists that inspire me to do it. Beyond the emotional impact of working away from Providence at a moment when community organizing in the Black Power tradition has never been more important, working remotely during the present crisis restricted my access to materials and resources as I completed the thesis. In the submitted version, I included fewer photographs than I had hoped to. Additionally, the photograph of the Providence Black Panther Party letter on page 51 is poor quality, and I hope to replace it, if I am able, with a high-quality scan when Phillips Library at Providence College reopens.

Introduction

On July 3, 1969, Justice Joseph Weisberger of the Rhode Island Superior Court heard the final arguments in the case of Providence Branch, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), et al vs. Rhode Island Chapter, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, et al.[1] These groups were unrelated. The prestigious Providence branch, operating since 1913 ("In theory only," charged one of the defendants), sued the recently formed radical Rhode Island Chapter over the use of its name.[2] The case's final witness was Walter C. Curtis, the former president of the Providence branch; nevertheless, he testified on behalf of the Rhode Island Chapter.[3] The Providence branch, he said, was a "'completely immobile' … social club."[4] Weisberger ruled in favor of the Providence branch.

In faux-NAACP chapters and other groups, far from the capitals of Black Power politics of Oakland, California, and Detroit, Michigan, Black radicals in Providence, Rhode Island, in the late 1960s and early 1970s built a movement to address their local issues. Whether fighting for the retention of Black community schools as the city implemented its desegregation plan, organizing against police brutality in segregated South Providence, or raising consciousness through Black Arts education, Black Power activists in Providence had diverse ideologies, strategies, and campaigns.

In 1969, 15,875 Black people—including both African American descendants of enslaved people and immigrants from the African diaspora, particularly Cape Verde—lived in Providence, making up only 8.9 percent of the city's residents. Yet from 1967 to 1972, many

[1]"NAACP Gets Order Against Rival Group," *Providence Journal*, July 4, 1969.
[2]Justice Joseph Weisberger, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, et al vs. Rhode Island Chapter, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, et al, No. 69-2163 (Rhode Island Superior Court July 3, 1969).
[3]"NAACP Gets Order."
[4]Ibid.

Black residents of Providence organized and demanded that the city act in the interests of their communities, just as Black people did in cities of all sizes across the country during those years. Through urban rebellions, sit-in campaigns, community education programs, economic pressure, and militant organizing, Black Providence residents fought systemic racism and the liberal white power structures, including the segregated educational system, insufficient anti-poverty programs, and racist police, that oppressed them.

Yet amid the scholarly and popular revival of interest in both the Black Power Movement on the local level and the political history of Providence in this very period, historians and journalists have paid virtually no attention to the city's Black Power history.[5] Within New England, scholars have focused on movements elsewhere in the region, particularly in Boston and New Bedford, Massachusetts, and New Haven, Connecticut, where white backlash to both school desegregation and the local chapters of the Black Panther Party (BPP) led to racist violence, contributing to a period of crisis that hindered the movement nationally.[6] These clashes garnered local and national media attention, contributing to an extensive archive for future researchers of these cities and a mainstream narrative of the supposed violence of the Black Power Movement and Black Panther Party. Meanwhile, the gangster film–style depictions of Providence's political corruption and the mayorship of Vincent "Buddy" Cianci in the popular podcast *Crimetown* and the Trinity Repertory Company play *The Prince of Providence* (based on

[5]The only texts focused on the 1960s and 1970s Black freedom struggle in Providence are memoirs of local activists and members of civil rights organizations. See John Reynolds, *The Fight for Freedom: A Memoir of My Years in the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2012); Andrew J. Bell, *An Assessment of Life in Rhode Island as an African American in the Era from 1918 to 1993* (New York: Vantage Press, 1997).
[6]See Duncan MacLaury, Judson L. Jeffries, and Sarah Nicklas, "The Black Panther Party and Community Development in Boston," in *The Black Panther Party in a City Near You*, ed. Judson L. Jeffries (University of Georgia Press, 2018), 89–136; Jama Lazerow, "The Black Panthers at the Water's Edge: Oakland, Boston, and the New Bedford 'Riots' of 1970," in *Liberated Territory: Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party*, ed. Yohuru Williams and Jama Lazerow (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 85–135; Yohuru Williams, *Black Politics/White Power: Civil Rights, Black Power and the Black Panthers in New Haven* (St. James, NY: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000).

a bestselling 2004 book of the same title by former *Providence Journal* reporter Mike Stanton) have ignited interest in the history of Providence during the years of the Black Power era while largely ignoring Black Providence residents.[7]

It should not be necessary to neatly fit the history of the Black Power Movement in Providence within the regional Black Power historiography or the local corrupt political machine narrative in order to justify its study. The stories of radical Black resistance to white power in Providence stand on their own apart from the narratives that exclude them. Yet it is also true that this story is essential to and missing from these histories. Struggles for Black Power in Providence resembled those in nearby cities, but Providence organizers' unique tactics and alliances—which they developed in part due to the entrenched power of liberal city institutions, from the corrupt white government to mainstream Black organizations—shed light on the challenges facing Black residents and activists in the Black Power era.

This thesis examines only a small sliver of that longer era, centering on the five years from 1967 to 1972 in which most Providence Black Power organizations formed and peaked in their activities. The history of Black political resistance in Providence predates this period by more than three centuries. Since British settlers brought the first enslaved Africans to the colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in 1636, generations of Black people have survived and fought against racism in Providence. Their struggles for equal, desegregated public

[7]See Marc Smerling and Zac Stuart-Pontier, "Chapter One: Divine Providence," *Crimetown*, podcast audio, November 20, 2016, https://www.crimetownshow.com/episodes-1/2016/11/2/episode-one-divine-providence, accessed March 27, 2020; *The Prince of Providence*, by George Brant, directed by Taibi Magar, Trinity Repertory Company Dowling Theater, Providence, RI, October 26, 2019; Mike Stanton, *The Prince of Providence: The Rise and Fall of Buddy Cianci, America's Most Notorious Mayor, Some Wiseguys, and the Feds*, (New York: Random House, 2003); Ella Comberg, "Rhode Island Is Famous for You," *The College Hill Independent*, April 5, 2019, Vol. 38 Issue 8, http://www.theindy.org/1714, accessed March 27, 2020.

education and the right to safely occupy public space date back to the nineteenth century and have persisted throughout the Civil Rights and Black Power era to today.[8]

The basic principles of the Black Power Movement—political self-determination, racial pride, economic justice, and rejection of assimilation into white power structures and culture—have deep roots in the centuries-old Black radical tradition.[9] The popular explosion of the slogan "Black Power" beginning in the mid-1960s marked a monumental turning point in Black radical history. As Communist organizer Harry Haywood wrote in his memoir *Black Bolshevik*, "[Black Power] marked a basic shift in content and direction of the movement, from civil rights to national liberation, with a corresponding realignment of social forces."[10] After the national Civil Rights Movement reached its legislative apex with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, many Black radicals took inspiration from anticolonial struggles in Africa and elsewhere in the Third World and mobilized under the revolutionary banner of "Black Power" made world famous (but not coined) by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader Stokely Carmichael in Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1966.[11]

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[8]See Irving H. Bartlett, "The Free Negro in Providence, Rhode Island," *Negro History Bulletin* 14, no. 3 (1950): 51–67; Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, "Slavery and Justice Report" (Brown University, 2005); Erik Chaput and Russell J. DeSimone, "The End of School Segregation in Rhode Island," *Small State Big History* (blog), August 19, 2016, http://smallstatebighistory.com/end-school-desegregation-rhode-island/, accessed March 2, 2020; William G. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island, A History*, States and the Nation (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986); Liza Yeager, "Rosy Colored Eyeglass People," *Now Here This* (Providence, Rhode Island, April 2016), https://www.nowherethis.org/story/rosy-colored-eyeglass-people/, accessed March 2, 2020.

[9]Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*, (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 2-3. Also see Peniel E. Joseph, "Community Organizing, Grassroots Politics, and Neighborhood Rebels: Local Struggles for Black Power in America," in *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level*, ed. Joseph (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1-20; W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[10]Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago, Ill.: Liberator Press, 1978), quoted in Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 69.

[11]Aram Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Meredith March Against Fear* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 142-3.

At its most basic, Black Power meant self-determination for Black people and communities. In his co-written 1967 book named after the slogan, Carmichael explained that Black Power "is a call for Black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for Black people to begin to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations and to support those organizations."[12] Though these central principles of Black Power consistently drove activists in the movement, the politics of groups associated with Black Power varied widely. In a 1968 primer on the movement, radical scholar Robert L. Allen wrote of five "formulations" of Black Power—Black capitalism; electing Black politicians; Black group integration (or Black "ethnic politics"); "Black control of Black communities"; and anticolonial armed struggle—which ran the gamut from reactionary to revolutionary.[13]

The broader politics of the US Left and center-Left were diverse in the 1960s and 1970s. In this thesis, I primarily use a pair of terms (radical and liberal) to describe the political ideologies of groups, individuals, and movements; and a second pair (militant and moderate) to describe their approaches to social change. These categories are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, but at the risk of oversimplifying complex political orientations, I define and use these terms precisely.[14] Radical and liberal describe the political ideologies held by people and enacted through public programs. Radical politics—as suggested by the Latin origin of the word,

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[12]Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Random House, 1967), 44.
[13]Robert L. Allen, "Dialectics of Black Power" (Weekly Guardian Associates, 1968), https://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/Black%20Liberation%20Disk/Black%20Power!/SugahData/Books/Allen4.S.pdf, 7-8, 11, 13.
[14]Most scholars of the Black Power Movement and radical American politics do not define these terms in their works and many would, no doubt, dispute elements of my definitions. These definitions are informed by historiographical and historical uses of the terms, but I have no pretension of defining other authors' terms for them. Rather, by defining and using them consistently throughout this work, I hope to eliminate vagueness that might otherwise cause confusion for the reader.

meaning "root"—seek to address the fundamental causes of social problems, with an analysis of power and oppression that is typically grounded in an economic and historical critique of racial capitalism.[15] Though radicals may work for reform, revolution, or both, they frame their campaigns as part of a struggle for the liberation of a people or all people from the oppression of interconnected systems of power. Liberal politics, by contrast, emphasize the importance of individual liberty and equality, and liberal activists and officials work to reform existing economic and political systems to reduce inequality. The US radical movements of the 1960s—best encapsulated by the revolutionary wing of the Black Power Movement (represented by the BPP) and the anti-imperialist youth movement against the Vietnam War—developed against the backdrop of the climax of twentieth century US liberalism, when the federal government under President Lyndon B. Johnson envisioned a Great Society and enacted civil and voting rights legislation and established social welfare programs in response to pressure from liberal and radical activists.

While I use radical and liberal to describe the political ideologies of people and programs, I use militant and moderate to describe the approaches that organizers and organizations take to create social change. Militant organizing seeks to make immediate change through collective and direct action that responds to social problems by targeting oppressive systems to prevent them from functioning as usual. The Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56, in which Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, among other leaders, forced the desegregation of the city's public transportation system, is perhaps the most iconic militant action of the Civil

[15]Pioneering Black Marxist theorist Cedric Robinson noted that: "The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism. I have used the term 'racial capitalism' to refer to this development and to the subsequent structure as a historical agency." Robinson, 2.

Rights-Black Power era. Popular parlance equates militancy with the use of violence, but the hallmark of militant organizing is nonviolent direct action. Moderate organizations seek to make change slowly. In their rhetoric and tactics, moderate organizations prioritize gaining or retaining access to power in order to make changes from within the system.[16] As this thesis will show, moderate Black groups in Providence in this period were often caught between trying to appease the radical young people they hoped to recruit and the liberal white establishment that gave them funding and influence.

Though radicals often use militant tactics and liberals frequently take moderate approaches to change, these categories are not equivalent. The exemplars of militant protest, the strike and the sit-in, are not inherently radical or liberal, but rather take on ideological components only in context of the goals and political visions of their organizers and participants. Further, as Robert Allen's formulations show, the Black Power Movement encompassed radical and liberal politics and left room for both militant and moderate groups to organize for very different visions of the same nominal political project.

As scholars have noted, the mainstream narrative of the Black Power Movement views it in opposition to the Civil Rights Movement—as the violent, evil twin that ruined what its sibling had won through peaceful advocacy.[17] This portrayal misses the mark on two counts: Firstly, it

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[16]"Moderate" here refers to moderate Black organizations, whose orientation toward racial equality differed greatly from that of white moderate groups and individuals. Moderate Black groups often advocated a slow pace of change not because they shared white moderates' racial politics, but because they feared their resistance. In "Letter From Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is … the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.'" Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter From Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail

[17]See Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Judson L. Jeffries, ed., *Black Power in the Belly of the Beast* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge,

obscures the ideological and strategic diversity of both the Black Power and Civil Rights movements. Activists in the Black Power Movement sought to build power through various methods, including (but by no means limited to) community organizing in Black neighborhoods, protesting for Black Studies programs in high schools and universities, forming socialist and Black nationalist political parties, starting welfare and poverty programs or working within existing ones, establishing Black feminist political and literary collectives, radical labor organizing, founding Black arts and theater organizations, and armed resistance. (These formations were largely the work of Black Power radicals, but as Allen suggests and as this thesis will show, what began as a leftist slogan soon rang through the halls of mainstream Black organizations who reframed their old, moderate policies in a militant tenor to maintain support throughout the era.) This split between "good" Civil Rights and "bad" Black Power also misrepresents the former movement, giving historians, politicians, and others the opportunity to sanitize its radical goals and demands—as well as its sometimes ambivalent stance toward violence—in order to establish the illegitimacy of the latter.[18]

Secondly, the false juxtaposition of the movements misleadingly portrays them as two separate and opposed movements.[19] In reality, activists for Civil Rights and Black Power often collaborated, and, in many cases, Black activists on the local level moved between groups with

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Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2010); Joseph, ed., *Neighborhood Rebels*; Brian Purnell, *Fighting Jim Crow in the County of Kings: The Congress of Racial Equality in Brooklyn* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2013); Jeanne Theoharis, Charles M. Payne, and Komozi Woodard, *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); and Theoharis, Woodard, and Dayo F. Gore, eds., *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

[18]Ogbar, 69-71. The NAACP took no official, "philosophical" stance supporting nonviolence exclusively, and even some members of firmly nonviolent groups such as SNCC and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference carried weapons as protection for themselves and other activists. Cornel West calls the process of sanitizing the radical legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. the "Santa Clausification" of King. See David Sirota, "Santa Claus-ifying Martin Luther King, Jr.," In These Times, February 1, 2013, http://inthesetimes.com/article/14524/santa_clausifying_martin_luther_king_jr.

[19]Joseph, "Community Organizing, Grassroots Politics, and Neighborhood Rebels," 2.

different political programs and constituencies. As historian Françoise Hamlin writes, "Flexible loyalties and alliances to organizations helped local people adapt to their current crises and pool resources quickly and as needed. It helped them to survive."[20] Hamlin argues that scholars must look at the Black movements of the 1950s through the 1970s not as national mass movements, but on the local level. She writes, "Looking at one place provides a window for analyzing the complexity of movements even within the locales. It complicates our understanding of a mass movement, or, more accurately, a mass of movements throughout the nation, each peculiar to its locale and population."[21]

Black Power Providence, 1967-1972

This thesis seeks to apply the model used by Hamlin and other scholars of the Black Power Movement on the local level to examine Providence's Black Power movement. In the local Black Power studies historiography that has transformed the study of the movement since the late 1990s, scholars have largely ignored Providence and elsewhere in Rhode Island.[22] Despite this lack of scholarly attention, Providence's rich and unique Black Power history offers much to the historiography. It sheds light on the challenges Black militants faced in trying to build power in a small city where economic conditions for Black residents were among the worst

[20]Françoise N. Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta After World War II*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 14.
[21]Ibid, 2.
[22]See Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Judson L. Jeffries, ed., *The Black Panther Party in a City Near You* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2018); Judson L. Jeffries, ed., *Comrades: A Local History of the Black Panther Party* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Theoharis, Woodard, and Countryman, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South,1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Jakobi Williams, *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Yohuru Williams, *Black Politics/White Power*; Yohuru Williams and Lazerow, eds., *Liberated Territory: Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party*; and Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation*.

in the North. It illustrates how simmering tensions between Black radicals and powerful liberal establishment figures and institutions could subtly stymie the movement just as thoroughly as violence and outright hostility did in other cities. Finally, it illuminates how the lack of central, unifying organizations such as SNCC and the Black Panther Party simultaneously fractured a local movement and created the opportunity for creative and flexible organizers to establish political formations influenced by the larger movement but outside of national dogmas.

Surveying Providence's massive Black-white income inequality in the years leading up to the desegregation of the city's schools, sociologist and civil rights activist Anna Holden writes, "Although the economic status of Blacks in Providence in the early and mid-1960s was closer to that in major Southern cities than in comparable Northern communities, the city had not experienced massive civil rights demands and demonstrations."[23] By the end of that decade, though movements for desegregation and reparations among other campaigns had brought militant Civil Rights and Black Power activism to the fore in Providence, the economic conditions of Black Providence residents had stayed much the same. According to the 1970 census, though Providence was more similar in overall and Black population to Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Syracuse, New York, the poverty rate of Black residents of Providence was more similar to that of Black residents of Charlotte, North Carolina, and Birmingham, Alabama.

[23]Anna Holden, *The Bus Stops Here: A Study of School Desegregation in Three Cities* (New York: Agathon Press, 1974), 141.

Comparison of Northern and Southern Cities by Black and Overall Poverty Rate[24]

City	Black Poverty Rate	Overall Poverty Rate	% Black Population
Shreveport, LA	48.0%	22.1%	34.2%
Jackson, MS	47.2%	24.1%	39.7%
Memphis, TN	41.1%	20.8%	36.9%
Birmingham, AL	39.8%	23.0%	42.0%
Providence, RI	**38.6%**	**18.6%**	**8.9%**
Charlotte, NC	34.1%	15.0%	30.3%
New Bedford, MA	31.7%	11.9%	3.5%
Syracuse, NY	29.3%	14.1%	10.8%
Boston, MA	28.4%	16.2%	16.3%
New Haven, CT	28.2%	17.5%	26.3%
Milwaukee, WI	27.4%	11.4%	14.7%
Springfield, MA	25.7%	12.7%	12.6%
Oakland, CA	25.2%	16.6%	34.5%
Hartford, CT	24.9%	17.0%	27.9%
Fort Wayne, IN	21.8%	9.3%	10.6%
Bridgeport, CT	21.3%	11.7%	16.3%
Gary, IN	21.2%	15.1%	52.8%
Flint, MI	20.6%	12.4%	28.1%

Though almost forty percent of Black residents in Providence lived below the poverty line by the end of the 1960s, two civil rights groups primarily representing the Black middle

[24]All data comes from United States Bureau of the Census, "1970 Census of Population and Housing: Census Tracts" (Washington, D.C., 1972), https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1972/dec/phc-1.html. In my interpretation of Holden's "major Southern" and "comparable Northern" cities, I included large southern cities, particularly those with notable connections to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. For northern cities, I included Providence's geographical neighbors and cities with similar populations of Black residents and overall.

class held most Black political and social power in the city throughout the decade. Founded in 1913 and 1939, respectively, the local chapters of the NAACP and the National Urban League (NUL) organized legal defenses and jobs programs for Black Providence residents. By the 1960s, these two groups were the primary powerbrokers for Black Providence residents, having formed longstanding relationships not only with Black communities in the city, but also with the city government and powerful and wealthy white liberals on the city's East Side.[25] By 1970, however, many young critics of the city's Black establishment saw it as entirely disconnected from the lives and interests of ordinary Black residents. Joe "Yusuf" Forestier, a member of the radical Afro Arts Center, argued that the people whom the white establishment and the *Providence Journal* presented as Black leaders "do not in fact speak for the 'grass roots black people of Providence.'"[26]

Black Power activists in Providence struggled against the city's powerful liberal institutions, both white and Black, which, for political, economic, personal, and strategic reasons, frequently attempted (and often succeeded) to stifle radical activists. Yet at times, some moderate Black organizations, particularly the Urban League, provided crucial financial and political support behind closed doors. Though this support kept the lights on at Black Power organizations, it often restricted these groups' ability to establish themselves as viable independent political institutions. However, as the appeal of Black Power grew among young Black residents, the city's Black establishment sought new strategies to stay relevant. The

[25]See Bell; Claire McMahon Fishman, "Respectable Human Rights: The Rhode Island Fair Housing Movement, 1959-1965" (Senior thesis, Providence, Rhode Island, Brown University, 2019), https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:919167/; Anderson Kurtz, phone interview by author, Providence, March 4, 2020. For the first half of the twentieth century, until the city of Providence and Brown University displaced Black communities on the East Side through urban renewal and gentrification, the East Side was home to many communities, including working-class Cape Verdean and Portuguese immigrants in Fox Point, middle-class Black families in Lippitt Hill, Jews on the north side of the neighborhood, and wealthy white Protestants throughout.

[26]"Blacks Found Divided on Fund Requests," *Providence Journal*, March 13, 1970.

NAACP typically went on the offensive, proclaiming the illegitimacy of local radicals. This strategy failed, leaving the branch "ripped to uselessness by disputes between the young and the old, the self-consciously militant and the defensively moderate."[27] On the other hand, the Urban League's hesitant support of Black Power groups and canny co-option of the slogan helped them retain power, but their influence within increasingly young and militant Black Providence communities started to decline.

In response to the challenges and bureaucratic roadblocks militants faced in liberal Providence, Black organizers worked both inside and outside traditional power systems. Though no one radical group dominated the local scene, flexible loyalties allowed a network of organizers to support each other in organizations of varied political orientations. Black Power activists like Richard Metts organized for radical political education one day, trained for armed resistance another, and challenged the NAACP a week later. This flexibility characterized Providence's Black Power movement, which drew participants and power from various communities and organizations within the city's Black population.

Therefore, though Providence's Black Power history deserves a comprehensive scholarly and public study, here I primarily examine a handful of radical organizations and activists. These include Freeman Soares, perhaps the city's most prominent Black Power activist, who challenged the white leadership of Providence's federal anti-poverty program and organized Black residents into the "Fearless Fifty" to fight school segregation; the aforementioned Richard Metts, who led the Black Liberation School in educational revolt against the city's wealthy institutions; Anderson Kurtz, who founded and led the Afro Arts Center, a revolutionary Black arts program and community hub; and the many activists who attempted to found or claimed to

[27]James N. Rhea, "One Foot in the Ghetto, One on the Mall," *The Rhode Islander*, October 12, 1969.

represent a Providence chapter of the Black Panther Party. I pay particular attention to these figures' relationships to the NAACP, the Urban League, and the War on Poverty agency Progress for Providence, the three most significant civil rights institutions in the city during this period. I also explore their relationships to the Black Panther Party, the most culturally significant and inspirational Black Power organization for many Black residents of Providence and of cities across the United States. The Panthers cast a long shadow on Black Power activism in Providence, even as their formally constituted presence in the city is in question.

Black Power Prelude: Progress for Providence, 1965-1966

The federal anti-poverty program Progress for Providence (PFP) was a key site of Black Power community organizing in Providence. Freeman Soares, a radical Black activist of Cape Verdean descent, and other Black community leaders and activists saw PFP as an opportunity to gain power for the disproportionately poor Black community in Providence, as well as to increase their own personal political influence.[28] Black Providence organizers pressured the largely middle-class, white, liberal establishment that dominated PFP's ranks, but they were not alone in the country. Historian Tom Adam Davies argues that across the United States, Black Power activists used the War on Poverty's Community Action Program (CAP) and the local agencies that administered it to "challenge traditional urban power arrangements and advance their own visions for political and economic empowerment and urban improvement."[29] Working within these official urban bureaucracies, Black Power activists organized to create jobs and grassroots political power in Black neighborhoods and communities.

[28]John Perrotta, "Representation of the Poor in the Community Action Program in Providence, Rhode Island: 1965-1969" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York, New York University, 1971), 179, 182.
[29]Tom Adam Davies, *Mainstreaming Black Power* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 7.

Under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the federal government directed funding to local communities across the United States to fight poverty through Community Action Programs "developed, conducted, and administered with the maximum feasible participation" of the poor people the CAPs would serve.[30] The meaning of the mandate for "maximum feasible participation" was vague, and many poor people interpreted it as requiring their leadership in fighting poverty in their communities.[31] This interpretation—especially when enacted by Black community leaders—threatened the economic and political control of the urban, middle-class, white establishment. In Providence as in other cities across the country, white leaders resisted this challenge to white supremacy and attempted (and often succeeded) to wield the urban political machine to prevent Black Power activists from using the CAP to benefit poor Black communities.[32]

Progress for Providence divided the CAP in South Providence into the Flynn and Roger Williams sections, each named for the schools located in the neighborhoods. Though Black residents did not make up a majority in either neighborhood, Black leaders dominated the Neighborhood Advisory Committees (NACs) that advised PFP, most notably in the Flynn NAC. Though these NACs had little power to influence the actual functioning of the CAP, they played a major role in determining how, where, and to whom the CAP distributed jobs.[33] Beginning in 1965, Freeman Soares, George Castro, and Edward Sylvia, "self-described 'hustlers'" who served on the NAC and held jobs as community organizers and liaisons in the CAP, attempted to use their positions and influence over job placements to build economic and political power for

[30]"An Act to Mobilize the Human and Financial Resources of the Nation to Combat Poverty in the United States," Public Law 88-452, U.S. Statutes at Large 78 (1964): 516.
[31]Davies, 30.
[32]Ibid, 29; see Perrotta, "Machine Influence on a Community Action Program: The Case of Providence, Rhode Island," *Polity* 9, no. 4 (Summer 1977): 481–502. See Hamlin for an example of this process in a southern, rural setting.
[33]Perrotta, "Representation of the Poor," 2.

Black residents of South Providence.[34] These Black Power leaders envisioned the CAP fundamentally as a vehicle for Black political struggle; as Castro saw it, "Here's an opportunity for the black man to do his thing. If we don't the black man is going to lose it to the white man."[35] While Castro framed this struggle in terms of the political representation the NAC could provide for Black communities, the Flynn Black Power organizers also worked to use their influence within the CAP and NAC to direct the benefits of PFP (including youth drop-in centers, education funding for teenage mothers, and afterschool community programs) and the jobs within it to Black residents of their neighborhood.

Political scientist and former *Providence Journal* reporter John A. Perrotta (whose brother Ralph was a PFP executive from 1965 to 1968) argues that Soares, Castro, and Sylvia aimed to build a political machine out of the CAP.[36] To the extent that this suggests that these activists intended to emulate the powerful and corrupt Democratic machine that controlled Providence politics, this assertion captures important elements of Soares, Castro, and Sylvia's strategy and vision, but misses the larger story. The "Soares clique," as Perrotta calls them, did indeed build and retain power relying on strategies similar to those of the patronage-based Democratic machine: they rewarded NAC allies with elevated positions in the CAP, pushed middle-class Black and white leaders out of the NAC, and directed CAP hires to use their jobs to raise awareness among residents about the NAC and its programs in order to promote identification with and involvement in the program.[37]

However, through the lens of the broader Black Power movements in the city and within CAPs across the country, the Flynn activists' political and economic maneuvering less resembles

[34]Ibid, 181.
[35]Ibid, 182.
[36]Ibid.
[37]Ibid, 188.

the construction of the foundation of a political machine than Black Power organizing within an established bureaucracy. Perrotta writes that for Soares, Castro, and Sylvia, "The [CAP] components were valuable only to the extent that they served to politicize the neighborhood."[38] Perrotta sees this "politicization" of poor Providence residents—that is, "making them aware of their interests vis-a-vis the CAP and other institutions in the city"—as the main impact of the city's NACs and the many neighborhood leaders who served on them.[39] Yet in Flynn, Soares, Castro, and Sylvia used job placements and community relationships not solely to make Black residents of South Providence aware of their ability to influence the CAP, but also to encourage racial consciousness and create a neighborhood base for Black Power struggles. Perrotta rightly frames the CAP as merely a vehicle for the Flynn activists' campaign of politicization, but he seems to view the possibilities of that politicization too narrowly, within the framework of machine politics. He misses Davies' crucial interpretation that the War on Poverty created an opening for radical Black Power organizers to move into mainstream political institutions and use their resources to build larger and more powerful neighborhood bases that those that they previously had been capable of organizing.

Throughout 1965 and much of 1966, Freeman Soares had used his positions as a member of the Flynn NAC and the community school liaison in the CAP to make the popular Flynn community afterschool program a site of political education for Black residents of the neighborhood.[40] By connecting community education (a program of the CAP) with politics (that is, the structure of the CAP), Soares sought to transform the Flynn school into a center of neighborhood organizing and a catalyst for institutional change in the city.[41]

[38]Ibid, 183.
[39]Ibid, 2.
[40]Ibid, 183.
[41]Ibid.

However, in April 1966, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) instituted a national conflict-of-interest policy, similar to one that middle-class PFP officials had for months tried to install in order to remove poor Providence residents from NACs.[42] The policy banned Soares, his Black Power allies, and anyone else from simultaneously serving on a NAC and holding a CAP job. The conflict-of-interest policy disproportionately impacted poor, Black neighborhood residents who gave up their NAC membership to keep their jobs.[43] Some Black Providence residents who had to choose between their NAC positions and CAP jobs thought the move revealed that the middle-class, establishment leadership of the anti-poverty program prioritized preserving its own class interests over organizing community action to fight poverty.[44] This effectively deradicalized PFP operations, isolating its leadership from the poor communities it served. As a poor, Black CAP worker who had to choose between her job and her Lippitt Hill NAC position said, "All the people who were really interested because they were a part, a working part, of the program, they were pushed aside. The people who moved in were people who were or were striving to be middle-class."[45] The class conflict in PFP made middle-class Black and white officials alike targets of scorn. As Davies writes, across the country, CAPs revealed that "Class tensions, and a clash of political cultures, could just as easily occur between established black middle-class and professional political elites and black poor citizens as it could between the black community and white officials."[46]

Though after April 1966, poor, Black Providence residents lost access to the institutional power and politicized jobs that had given them both stable employment and direct political

[42]Ibid, 140.
[43]Ibid, 141.
[44]Ibid.
[45]Ibid.
[46]Davies, 46.

influence, Progress for Providence and its programs continued to be a major center of Black Power organizing, politicization, and protest throughout the period covered in this thesis. PFP served as a site of convergence for many of the major players in Providence's Black Power movement: from militant community organizers and poor and working-class Black residents to middle-class white liberal leaders and government officials; from moderate Black civil rights groups to dissatisfied young Black radicals unassociated with any one group. For the last years of the 1960s and the first years of the 1970s, PFP remained a major source of jobs for Black Providence residents as well as a major site of political struggle—only now its programs and their failure to meet the needs of poor Black residents of South Providence became the focus of protest and criticism from inside and outside the organization. Shortly after the conflict-of-interest policy forced Freeman Soares out of the Flynn NAC, he founded the Fearless Fifty, a South Providence-based grassroots organization that used direct action and advocacy campaigns to challenge the power of many of the city's liberal institutions—the government, Progress for Providence, the schools—and establish Black control of Black communities and schools.[47] It would not be the last time that community dissatisfaction with a liberal organization's failings prompted the establishment of a new Black Power group in Providence.

Flynn and Hope: Black Power Desegregation

In the summer of 1966, as Freeman Soares and the Fearless Fifty promoted Black Power at rallies and pickets, slowly building a constituency primarily composed of children and youth in South Providence, Providence school superintendent Charles O'Connor unveiled the city's first plan to desegregate its public schools.[48] Black Providence residents and activists had

[47]Hamilton E. Davis, "South Providence Negro Is Bitter," *Providence Sunday Journal*, July 24, 1966.
[48]Perrotta, "Representation of the Poor," 197-9.

demanded desegregation for years, but when the city announced the official "Providence Plan" on April 12, 1967, Black parents, children, educators, and organizers in South Providence and on the East Side swiftly rejected the policy.[49] The grassroots opposition to the Providence Plan was one of the first major instances of direct action for racial justice in Providence; what the city had previously lacked in a high-profile Civil Rights movement, it gained in a militant Black Power campaign.

Though the campaign united many of Providence's most important and elite liberal Black and white organizations with radical and working-class Black residents, it also heightened the appeal of Black Power in South Providence and amplified divisions between and within the branches of the city's racial justice movement. As an organized, popular, and militant Black Power movement emerged in Providence, the city's most prominent Black institutions, the NAACP and Urban League, had divergent reactions. While these mainstream groups struggled to remain relevant to Black constituencies, the experience of living through and collectively resisting the desegregation policy heightened Black residents' desire for control of their communities and galvanized many, especially children and youth, to organize for Black Power outside of the liberal Black establishment. The struggle for Black Power in Providence's schools was a citywide effort, but organizing surrounding two schools—Flynn Elementary School in South Providence in 1967 and Hope High School on the East Side in 1969—exemplified the significance of the campaign on Black communities and youth throughout the late 1960s.

[49]Ibid, 205.

Map of Providence.

Although the organizing efforts of Black abolitionist George Downing led Rhode Island to officially ban racial discrimination in school admissions a century before in 1866, public schools in Providence remained segregated in the 1960s.[50] As in other northern cities, a host of mutually reinforcing public and private policies resulted in the segregation of Providence schools: discriminatory housing and employment policies concentrated poor, Black residents in South Providence and pockets of the East Side; corrupt school committees appointed often unqualified administrators based on patronage and neighborhood ethnic politics while allowing school facilities to deteriorate; and a permit system made it possible for white parents (if they had not already fled to the suburbs or sent their children to private schools) to transfer their children out of schools with significant Black student populations.[51] During the 1965-66 school

[50]Holden, 154.
[51]Ibid, 151, 157. See Kerner Commission, *Report of the National Advisory Commission On Civil Disorders* (Washington, D.C., 1968), http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000339500.

year, Black students across all schools made up 16 percent of the city's total enrollment.[52] However, 82 percent of Flynn Elementary School students in 1967 were Black, and while the 1966 Black enrollment of Hope High School on the East Side was among the highest in the city's senior high schools at only 15 percent, the lower concentration of Black students in secondary schools did not stem from diminished segregation, but rather reflected another racist failure of the school system—the high dropout rate among Black students.[53]

Under the initial O'Connor Plan for desegregation, the city would have bused Black and white children alike to racially mixed schools outside of their neighborhoods. Though many of the city's liberal organizations—including the NAACP, the Urban League, the League of Women Voters, and the American Civil Liberties Union—supported the O'Connor Plan, the combined forces of Mayor Joseph A. Doorley Jr.'s political machine, deliberate school committee inaction, and racist white resistance succeeded in thwarting the proposal.[54] Though the white opposition to two-way busing in Providence did not lead to the intense violence that it did in Boston, it was no less similarly rooted in racism; one Republican state senate candidate who told voters in a middle-class Irish neighborhood bordering South Providence simply to *consider* the O'Connor Plan badly lost her election and was called a "nigger lover."[55] After Doorley won reelection in November 1966, he took control of desegregation, appointing a "working conference" of elite Black and white leaders to develop a new plan. This conference—which one South Providence mother said excluded parents from the neighborhood because "only the people they thought were civilized were invited to help"—produced the Providence Plan, under which only Black children and families would bear the burden of busing to schools far

[52]Ibid, 143.
[53]Ibid, 155-6.
[54]Ibid, 184.
[55]Ibid, 182.

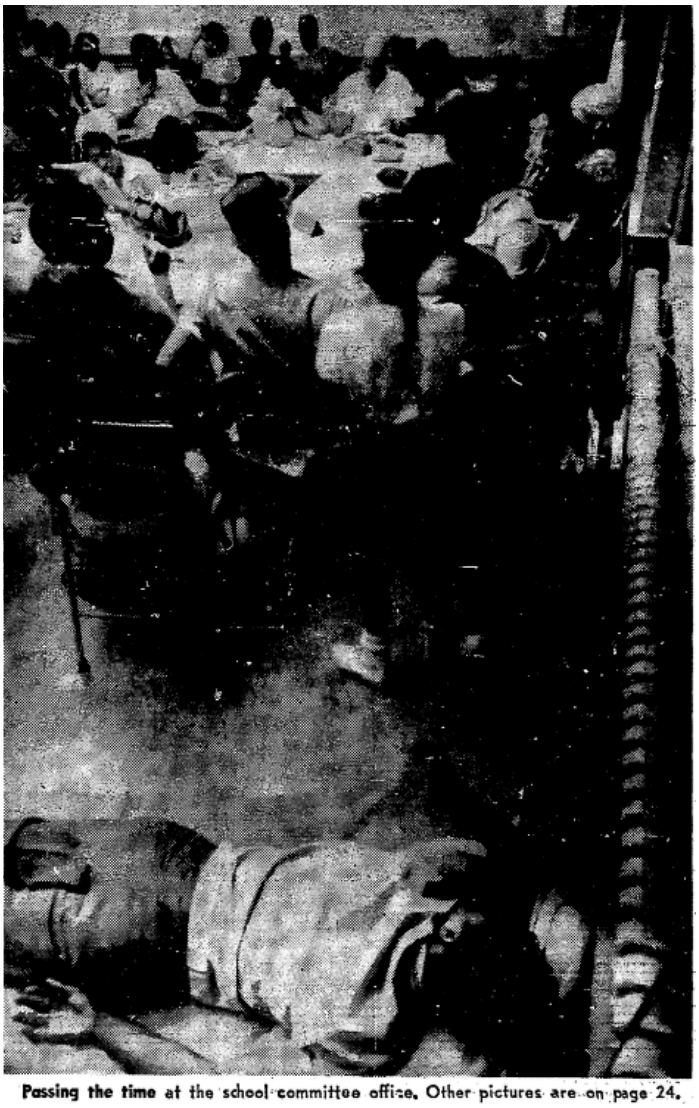
from their homes.[56] The plan also called for the city to convert Flynn Elementary from a neighborhood school to a special education school for students from across the city.

Organized resistance to the Providence Plan began in South Providence almost immediately after the plan's announcement, with Freeman Soares leading an April 15 protest of neighborhood residents condemning the mayor's "handpicked" committee. As protests continued, the opposition centered on a few common complaints. Activists objected to the lack of neighborhood representation on the mayor's committee, families dreaded the possibility of splitting siblings among multiple distant schools, and parents "bitterly resent the fact that their children are being bused out of the neighborhood in order to partake of the benefits of rubbing elbows with middle class whites, whereas no whites are being bused in to rub elbows with them."[57]

However, no issue mobilized residents as effectively as the threat to shutter Flynn, which Soares called a source of "community pride."[58] Built upon the foundation of politicization that organizers within Progress for Providence laid, the grassroots campaign against the closure of Flynn harnessed the appeal of Black Power and the widespread concern over discriminatory education policy to galvanize residents to take collective action. Their militant demonstrations—including pickets, rallies, sit-ins, and an eventual school boycott—simultaneously inspired, demanded, and demonstrated greater community pride and power.

Over the spring and summer of 1967, Freeman Soares, Anita M. Baker, Dal Nichols, PFP workers, and countless mothers and children (whom the media never gave their due credit) mobilized Black residents in an escalating series of direct actions that saw militant tactics and

[56]Ibid, 186.
[57]Davis, "What Happened to 'Integration'?" *Providence Sunday Journal*, July 16, 1967.
[58]Holden, 197.



Passing the time at the school committee office. Other pictures are on page 24.

Day one of the sleep-in. Photo by Lei Romero, Providence Journal*, September 1, 1967.*

politics of Black self-determination take precedence over access to traditional power structures and integration. As the school year approached and the city sent families word of their children's school assignments, the struggle reached a dramatic climax. Starting in the morning of August 31, more than sixty protesters, most of them mothers and children, staged a thirty-six hour "sleep-in" at the school committee office to demand that Flynn remain open as an integrated neighborhood elementary school, that the city hire a Black principal at Flynn, and that the school committee meet with the group.[59] For a brief time, it seemed the protests had succeeded; on September 4, the school committee agreed to alter the Providence Plan to keep Flynn open and to hire a Black principal or assistant principal at a school in the city, if not at Flynn. However, Doorley strongly opposed changing the plan, and the forces of the Democratic machine pressured the committee to stay with the original proposal.[60] At a public meeting on September 11, the largely Black audience of more than 400 residents cried, "white

[59]Dal K. Nichols, "School Protest Position," *Providence Sunday Journal*, September 3, 1967; Carol J. Young, "Negroes Protest Integration Plan with 'Sleep-In,'" *Providence Journal*, September 1, 1967.
[60]Holden, 215.

racists!" as the school committee voted unanimously to break its promises to the protestors and move ahead with the Providence Plan.[61] It made no difference, however; the protestors expected this result and had begun a school boycott earlier that day.[62]

The South Providence school boycott continued until October 4, and with at least 175 families participating, it was Providence's longest and largest Black Power campaign.[63] Through word-of-mouth and rallies at PFP offices, organizers raised awareness of the boycott and trained teenagers to recruit boycotters at bus stops.[64] By the end of the first week of the boycott, organizers had established "Freedom Schools" with the help of South Providence churches, the Urban League, and a Brown University professor.[65] Throughout the campaign, organizers built upon pre-existing community structures and social networks to both expand the boycott and provide the services that children would otherwise have received at school. As with the "liberation schools" later established by various chapters of the Black Panther Party and other groups including a Providence organization, the Freedom Schools and the community action of the boycott demonstrated Black Power and self-determination in action.

Both during and after the boycott, flexible organizers formed alliances with an ideologically diverse group of organizations and individuals, with one significant exception: the NAACP. The Urban League, the workers of Progress for Providence, white parents of disabled children, and a member of the Los Angeles Black Panther Party (who, unbeknownst to the organizers, visited Providence as his first duty as an informant in the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)'s Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO)) all supported the boycott,

[61]Ibid.
[62]Ibid.
[63]"S. Providence Sets Boycott of Schools," *Providence Journal*, September 11, 1967.
[64]Ibid.
[65]Holden, 216.

but the NAACP remained steadfastly supportive of the Providence Plan.[66] According to the *Providence Journal*, after the first day of the sleep-in, the Providence branch had considered suing the school committee if it sided with the Black Power protestors and altered the plan.[67] The split of the Black establishment between the two sides presaged a pattern that would persist throughout the years of significant Black Power organizing in Providence: while the Urban League provided private support for radical causes (in this instance, helping recruit teachers to the Freedom School), the NAACP threatened Black activists who challenged the status quo with legal action. Crucially, however, neither group in the liberal Black establishment played a leading role in the boycott. The boycotters won the struggle when on October 4, the school committee publicly apologized to the community of South Providence and announced that Flynn would reopen as an integrated neighborhood school in January.[68] With the city's oldest Black organization opposing the protestors and its second oldest solely in a supportive role, the group of South Providence organizers, mothers, and children proved that militant Black Power activism from the grassroots could overpower the city's government and its most powerful institutions.[69] The liberal Black establishment was seemingly losing its relevance, if not its grip on power.

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[66]Ibid, 215; Art Norwalk, Interview with Earl Anthony, WJAR-TV, ca. September 3, 1967, Film Collection, Rhode Island Historical Society; Earl Anthony, *Spitting in the Wind: The True Story Behind the Violent Legacy of the Black Panther Party* (Malibu: Roundtable Publishing, 1990), 38. Earl Anthony, one of the founders of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party, writes in his dubious 1990 memoir—generally mistrusted by historians due to its self-aggrandizing narrative and publication during the profitable period for Panther memoirs shortly after BPP leader Huey Newton's murder—that the South Providence organizers asked to meet with him (shortly after he secretly became an informant) due to his experience organizing a boycott of the San Francisco Public School System. While in Providence, he (seemingly falsely) claimed in a television interview to be in the process of forming a local chapter of the Black Panther Party.

[67]Young.

[68]Holden, 216.

[69]The organizers also demonstrated the collective might of working families and inspired parents across the city to participate in educational revolt. Despite Soares and Nichols' many ableist pronouncements rejecting the special education school on grounds of not wanting to bring disabled children into South Providence, according to Holden, Black desegregation activists "directly inspired" and worked alongside parents of disabled children in solidarity with their struggle for adequate special education; Holden, 222.

Black children in Providence were among the first to learn this important lesson from the desegregation struggle. Facing racism from white teachers and students alike, radical Black students at Hope High School in 1969 decided to take action into their own hands without relying on adult institutions to advocate on their behalf. After nearly two school years under the Providence Plan, Black students had experienced firsthand the policy's serious limitations in combatting racism and promoting equity in their schools. As a result of the desegregation and restructuring of various schools across the city, Hope's Black enrollment increased to twenty-two percent of the school in the 1968-69 school year, but the school had taken few steps to ensure the equality of this significantly expanded population.[70] In 1969, Black students at Hope demanded that the school immediately offer a course in Black history taught by a Black teacher, fire racist teachers, and waive certain grading policies related to summer school.[71] On May 9, after Hope's conservative white principal refused to meet to discuss their demands, 150 Black students walked out of the school.[72]

Serving as their own representatives in negotiations with school administrators, the students no doubt took inspiration from the national movement of college and secondary school students who struck and took over school buildings to demand Black Studies and Ethnic Studies programs—including, in 1968, Black students at Pembroke College and Brown University, only blocks away from Hope.[73] Yet many Black teenagers in Providence had much experience in militant Black Power actions to draw upon as well. Forming the core constituency of Freeman

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[70]Holden, 246.
[71]Ibid, 245; Margret Lamare, "High School Students Unite!" *Extra!* May 13-28, 1969, Vol. 1 No. 17, John Hay Library, Providence, RI.
[72]Holden 244-5.
[73]See Gabrielle Emanuel and Emily Judem, "Fifty Years Ago, Black Students At Brown Walked Out For Change," WGBH News, December 5, 2018, https://www.wgbh.org/news/national-news/2018/12/05/fifty-years-ago-black-students-at-brown-walked-out-for-change; Ibram H. Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972*, Contemporary Black History (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Soares' organizing efforts, rallying at City Hall in favor of the release of imprisoned Black Panther leader Huey Newton, and leading the urban rebellions that upended South Providence in the summers of 1966 and 1967, Black children and teenagers had long been at the center of many of the most notable militant public rejections of the city's racist status quo.[74]

The students at Hope were knowledgeable and capable organizers who engaged in tactics few other Black Power groups in the city were willing to use.[75] On May 13, after negotiations with the school administration quickly stalled—and with organizers fearing that the administration would pin the alleged assault of two white students on the negotiators to weaken their position—Black students led what the media characterized as a "rampage" throughout the school.[76] According to Holden, the students mostly smashed school furniture and windows, though some physically attacked white teachers and students.[77] Following the violence, classes at Hope ceased for four days as many teachers refused go back to work without police protection and promises that the administration would discipline the protestors.[78] Ultimately, the protestors won most of their demands except the firing of racist teachers and the granting of amnesty to protestors, though not until liberal civil rights and parents organizations publicly criticized the school's approach to racism.[79] The students at Hope did not need the influence or connections of

[74]Arn Strasser, "Flag Day at Panther Rally," *Extra!* Oct. 7-21, 1969, Vol. 1 No. 24, John Hay Library, Providence, RI; Robert Taylor, "South Providence — Summer 1967," *Providence Sunday Journal*, August 6, 1967; Perrotta, "Representation of the Poor," 200.
[75]In various television interviews and statements found in the Film Collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society, school administrators and white community members alleged that "outsiders" came into the school to "rile up" or "influence" students to take action and ultimately destroy school property. However, no officials ever accused any specific individuals or groups. In *Extra!* Jack Hawkes accused the administrators of alleging outside influence solely to refuse blame and discredit the Black students' demands; Jack Hawkes, "Hope Rises," *Extra!*, May 27-July 1, 1969, Vol. 1 No. 18, John Hay Library, Providence, RI.
[76]Holden, 246.
[77]Ibid.
[78]Ibid. The teachers also issued a condition challenging the Black students to name specific instances of racism perpetrated by teachers or else drop the charges. *Extra!* alleged that Hope administrators called the FBI to threaten students; see Hawkes.
[79]Holden, 248-50.

liberal groups to organize a campaign that brought the school to a halt; yet it did need those groups in order to win. Though Black Power organizers proved through education activism that they could pose a threat to the white liberal establishment and Black civil rights institutions, many radical organizers were frustrated with liberal groups and sought to challenge them from the outside.

Militant Organizing, Moderate Challenges

Dissatisfied—whether personally, politically, or both—with the city's moderate civil rights institutions, some Black Power activists in Providence formed or threatened to form militant groups as a challenge to mainstream organizations and to fulfill political, economic, and social needs they saw these ineffectual organizations as incapable of providing. In every city where Black Power emerged, activists critiqued and challenged the liberal status quo. However, in Providence, where mainstream civil rights groups held disproportionate power and the most successful activists kept their loyalties flexible, the formation of militant groups often challenged moderate groups more symbolically than politically. Frequently, advocates for Black Power formed new organizations primarily to challenge the Providence NAACP and Urban League of Rhode Island for the allegiance of their bases. Whether these activists attempted to build their own long-term constituencies or merely sought to pressure existing organizations, they tried and sometimes succeeded to unsettle the Black establishment in Providence. Ultimately, however, the liberal groups overpowered and outlasted the radical activists in part due to their ability to wield institutional power against their challengers—although they did not emerge from these conflicts unscathed.

In August 1968, after police raided his workplace, a PFP drop-in center, Alfred Cabral called a press conference.[80] In front of the office of Providence Resistance, a left-wing, anti-war organization on wealthy College Hill, far from the city's major Black neighborhoods, the twenty-three year old Cabral reportedly announced to the media the founding of the Providence branch of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.[81] However, in conversation, Cabral denied that he had founded such a group. "You've got the wrong guy," he told me.[82]

In reality, Cabral said, the police raid convinced him of the need for a more militant and active local Black political movement. Cabral's experience of police brutality led him to believe that a group like the Panthers was necessary to protect against racist violence. In his press conference, he also positioned militant Black Power as a direct challenge to mainstream political organizations. Not only were Rhode Island's white government and social programs guilty of "condon[ing] police brutality and corruption," but Cabral also cast the Providence Panthers, a "solid Black" group, in opposition to the "Negroes" of Providence.[83] In framing the group's politics in terms of racial consciousness, not in the revolutionary Black socialism of most Panther chapters, Cabral suggested that the Black Power group that Providence needed differed from the moderate Black organizations it actually had not in its tactics or politics, but rather how it viewed, defended, and prided itself and the Black community out of which it arose. Liberal and state institutions—Progress for Providence, moderate Black organizations, the police—had subjected Cabral to violence or left him vulnerable to it, but in his eyes, a militant, "solid Black" organization would not fail to protect Black communities the way liberal Black leaders and

[80]Ali Cabral, interview with author, Providence, June 13, 2019.
[81]C. Fraser Smith, "Panther Leader Is Mild," *Providence Journal*, August 30, 1968; Tony Ramos, 1968: Tony Ramos Interview, interview by Linda Wood, May 22, 1998, The Whole World Was Watching: An Oral History of 1968, https://cds.library.brown.edu/projects/1968/narrators/transcripts/T.RAMOS.trans.html.
[82]Cabral, interview with author.
[83]Smith, "Panther Leader Is Mild."

institutions had. As the *Providence Journal* noted, "The objectives [Cabral] outlined could be embraced easily by the Congress of Racial Equality, by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People or by any more moderate-sounding Black group."[84] Cabral was not a major Black Power leader or organizer in the city. However, his brief entry into Providence's Black Power history demonstrates the diversity of Black Power politics among the city's Black residents. In Cabral's case, he advocated militancy and the formation of a Black Panther Party because he needed protection that mainstream groups were not providing him, not necessarily because he disagreed with the overall goals of liberal Black politics.

Similarly, Norman Lincoln,Jr. contested the authority and moderate policies of the Providence branch of the NAACP by forming a militant group after a professional dispute left him disillusioned with the organization. In December 1968, Lincoln, the vice president of the Providence NAACP, lost an election to become the branch's president. According to Richard Metts, Lincoln considered the election "rigged," and in retaliation, he, Metts, Soares, Castro, and Gloria Dismuke legally incorporated a new group to oppose the NAACP—a group that Lincoln named the "Rhode Island Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People."[85]

As previously stated, the Providence NAACP balked at Lincoln's challenge, suing the new group for infringement of its name. In court, Justice Weisberger rejected Lincoln and his fellow defendants' pointed claim that the two groups would not cause confusion because the leaders of the Rhode Island Chapter were well known among Black residents of Providence to be more radical than the leaders of the Providence branch.[86] In his ruling issuing an injunction

[84]Ibid.
[85]Richard Metts, phone interview by author, Providence, September 7, 2019.
[86]"NAACP Name Dispute Aired," *Providence Journal*, June 21, 1969.

against the Rhode Island Chapter, Weisberger wrote, "The evidence indicates that ... the methodology of the Rhode Island Chapter might be more activist or militant than that of [the Providence, Newport, and Woonsocket chapters]. However, substantially, the aims and goals of both sets of organizations are identical."[87] Weisberger's inability or refusal to differentiate between the two groups illustrates the extent to which moderate Black organizations had a monopoly on Black politics in Providence; Weisberger could not imagine a radical alternative to the NAACP even as one sat right in front of him. His ruling likely also reflects the nature of Lincoln's challenge to the NAACP. By no account does it seem to be the case that Lincoln created the Rhode Island Chapter as a legitimate organization with plans to organize constituencies and build power with a different mission than the Providence chapter.[88] Rather, it served to challenge the entrenched power of the NAACP by putting pressure on its mixed constituency of loyal liberals and young radicals with no other political home.

In official NAACP documents, both internal and public, the organization did not mince words condemning the rival group. In the *Crisis*, the national NAACP said the Rhode Island Chapter was a "rump organization" and called its founders "dissidents."[89] Providence NAACP lawyer Joseph G. Le Count wrote in private letters that the "Rhode Island insurgents" were a "bogus" group whose legal strategies were nothing more than "fool tactics."[90] This was in character for the Providence NAACP, whose leaders often denigrated Black Power activists for their politics and behavior. In a memo detailing local "Ghetto Leaders" sent from Providence to the national headquarters, the Providence branch called Freeman Soares "dangerous & harmful

[87]Weisberger.
[88]Metts, interview with author.
[89]The Crisis Publishing Company Inc, "Dissidents Denied Use of NAACP Name," *The Crisis*, August-September 1969.
[90]Joseph G. Le Count to Gloster Current, "Permanent Injunction Planning Letter," November 28, 1969, ProQuest History Vault; Le Count to Current and Nathaniel Jones, "Final Hearing Preparation Letter," January 12, 1970, ProQuest History Vault.

& profane" and suggested that his grassroots school desegregation activism with the Fearless Fifty was illegitimate because he sent his child to a private school.[91] (Perhaps unsurprisingly, after the court's ruling, the Providence NAACP sent a request to the national organization to suspend Lincoln, Castro, and Soares, the latter two of whom only became members following the incorporation of the Rhode Island Chapter.[92]) In a 1976 interview, Le Count said he was "not impressed" with Black militant activism, arguing that it "hurt the cause" of equal rights.[93] Publicly, many moderate Black leaders co-opted the slogan of Black Power to give their liberal politics a radical sheen. In private, however, members of the Black establishment like Le Count condemned radical activists and sought to use liberal civil rights groups' power to stop their progress.

In an interview, Metts described the NAACP legal counsel as "an army of lawyers—all Black."[94] Metts said, "Turns out, the only people the NAACP ever sued in Rhode Island, the whole state in the whole ninety year history, was *us*!"[95] The Rhode Island Chapter of the NAACP never got off the ground; the only "members" were the fellow activists who Lincoln asked to sign the charter for incorporation, and who were later implicated in the lawsuit. Metts said the group was "just playing," but the local chapter of the NAACP characteristically saw the activities of radical Black organizers as a threat.[96] The NAACP attempted to use its access to liberal power structures to stifle militant activism; according to one national NAACP official, Le Count's "high standing with the Rhode Island Bar and the friends that he had on the Bench

[91]Providence Chapter, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, "Response to 'Ghetto Leaders' Memo," September 15, 1967, ProQuest History Vault.
[92]Current to Roy Wilkins, "Memorandum," August 25, 1969, ProQuest History Vault.
[93]Joseph Conforti, "Finding Aid for From Immigrant to Ethnic: Interview with Joseph LeCount," May 14, 1976, Rhode Island College Digital Commons, https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/immigrant/14.
[94]Metts, interview with author.
[95]Ibid.
[96]Ibid.

certainly did not hurt the NAACP in anyway [sic]."[97] Just as activists like Lincoln and Cabral formed Black Power groups and made public statements to challenge the authority of moderate groups who had slighted them or let them down, moderate groups like the NAACP, too, acted upon interpersonal and professional conflicts within struggles over political ideology.

Radical Black Providence and the Liberal Black Establishment

Providence lacked any one dominant radical organization—a role often played in other cities by the local SNCC or BPP chapter—leading creative activists to keep their loyalties flexible and establish a broad constellation of new Black Power groups outside the mainstream. Providence's radical Black groups were ideologically and tactically diverse, but shared many significant characteristics. Though by no means the only radical groups in the city, the Black Liberation School and the Afro Arts Center were the two most notable of these organizations. Both groups attempted to leverage liberal institutions' financial and political resources to develop Black cultural education programs. However, while the Black Liberation School's militant tactics and lack of deference to liberal leaders alienated the Black establishment, the organizers and teachers of the Afro Arts Center were remarkably flexible, fostering immensely beneficial partnerships not only with the Urban League, but also with influential radical organizers across the country.

These groups took inspiration from many of the most prominent national radical Black Power groups, including SNCC, the Republic of New Afrika, and Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement. They also shared an admiration of the Black Panther Party, whose dress, revolutionary politics, and doctrine of Black community pride and self-defense greatly

[97]Current to Jones, "Memorandum," February 2, 1970, ProQuest History Vault.

influenced them. However, none of Providence's radical Black Power organizations was simply a carbon copy of any of these larger groups or of its local peers. Each took novel approaches to creating Black Power in the city and formed different relationships with liberal organizations and local Black residents. As they struggled to build coalitions within Providence's Black political networks, the Black Liberation School and Afro Arts Center briefly became established fixtures of the city's Black communities despite many liberals' assertions that the city had no young Black leadership.

On July 20, 1969, a group of Black protestors wearing black berets and leather jackets interrupted Sunday services at Beneficent Congregational Church in Downtown Providence.[98] As they assembled at the front of the church, one member assumed the pulpit from white liberal pastor A. Ralph Barlow and read the group's manifesto: "We are demanding $200,000 from the Christian White Church, to be paid to the Black Liberation School. This total is part of the $500,000,000 owed to the thirty million Black People in this country as part of the 'forty acres and a mule' we were promised."[99] Promising to return in a week to receive an answer, the Black Liberation School threatened to "declare war and … fight by whatever means necessary" if the church rejected their terms, though these threats were ultimately idle.[100] Drawing on Malcolm X's rhetoric, the BPP's aesthetic, and, most significantly, former SNCC executive secretary (and

[98]"Reparations Demand at Beneficent Church," *Providence Journal*, July 22, 1969. The make-up of the group is in dispute. Though the *Journal* reported that fifteen men walked in during the sermon, Black Liberation School member Richard Metts remembered in an interview with the author that the group included twenty to thirty Black men and women.
[99]Metts, interview with author; "Reparations Demand"; A. Ralph Barlow, "Salvation Events Left Unattended: An Inquiry into the Unconscious," *Pastoral Psychology* 55, no. 4 (March 2007): 400, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-007-0069-y.
[100]Ibid.

one-time Panther leader) James Forman's "Black Manifesto," the Black Liberation School brought radical Black Power politics and economics to the fore in Providence.[101]

During services at New York's Riverside Church earlier that year, Forman announced the Manifesto, calling on Black Power activists around the country to demand that their local white churches and synagogues pay half a billion dollars to fund a host of social and economic programs. [102] Forman argued these wealthy, white religious institutions had an obligation to pay reparations not only for their roles in the slave trade, but also for their contemporary support of the exploitation of Black Americans and imperialism in the Third World.[103] The Black Liberation School followed not only Forman's lead, but also that of the Black separatist Republic of New Afrika (RNA), which called for reparations to be paid to Black Americans to fund the creation of an independent Black nation-state.[104] Richard Metts—who was born and raised in Providence and was only about a year out of the Navy when he became a leader of the Black Liberation School at twenty-two years old—said that the group targeted Beneficent Congregational Church because of its perception of the church's wealth, which had been bolstered in 1967 when the church plated its large dome in gold.[105] A pamphlet the group distributed in South Providence the same day as the Beneficent Congregational action declared

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[101]El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz [formerly Malcolm X], speech (Founding Rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity, Audubon Ballroom, New York, NY, June 28, 1964), https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1964-malcolm-x-s-speech-founding-rally-organization-afro-american-unity/.

[102]"Jim Forman Delivers Black Manifesto at Riverside Church," *SNCC Digital Gateway* (blog), accessed November 26, 2018, https://snccdigital.org/events/jim-forman-delivers-black-manifesto-at-riverside-church/.

[103]Ibid.

[104]Metts, interview with author. Metts also spoke of his involvement in the Providence branch of the Black People's Library and Topographical Research Center (BPLTRC), which studied the geographical distribution of Black people throughout the United States in order to educate Black city residents on the importance of land ownership in response to white supremacy. The Chicago branch of the BPLTRC was a major influence on the activities of the Republic of New Afrika. See Yusuf Nuruddin, "Promises and Pitfalls of Reparations," *Socialism and Democracy* 16, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 109, https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300208428305; Paul Karolczyk, "Subjugated Territory: The New Afrikan Independence Movement and the Space of Black Power" (Dissertation, Baton Rouge, LA, Louisiana State University, 2014), 281.

[105]Metts, interview with author.

that the city's churches "have long been a politically powerful organization, yet they have not backed any meaningful legislation unless they can directly benefit from it."[106] Beneficent Congregational Church denied the Black Liberation School's demand, opting instead to donate $50,000 to a local fair housing association.[107]

Though the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence agreed in October to provide classrooms for the group to use for nontraditional, collaborative education promoting "self knowledge and self determination," the school maintained frosty relationships with the city's liberal leaders.[108] Within certain corners of the Black political establishment, Metts said, "We were pariahs." Some Black political leaders in Providence reportedly told Rev. Barlow of Beneficent Congregational "not to give the group a penny. The youth did not represent them. … The liberationists had no program, no leadership, no connections."[109] These leaders echoed the conclusions of *Providence Journal* reporter James N. Rhea, who said that young Black residents had "Spokesmen aplenty, but no leaders."[110]

Outside the church and the classroom, the School continued to alienate moderate Black groups. In March 1970, likely taking inspiration from the Black Panther Party, it launched a campaign demanding that twenty-three liquor stores in Black city neighborhoods pay $150 a month to fund a free breakfast and summer field trip program for Black children.[111] The School argued that the fact that the city's liquor stores were predominantly located in Black

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[106]"Reparations Demand."
[107]"R.I. Church Council Denies Black School Pay Request," *Providence Journal*, March 21, 1970.
[108]"Liberation School Gets Classrooms," *Providence Journal*, October 2, 1969.
[109]Barlow, 402.
[110]Rhea.
[111]"Black Unit Asks Cash from Liquor Stores," *Providence Journal*, March 7, 1970. Across the country, the Panthers asked businesses, including liquor stores, to donate to their Free Breakfast for Children and (similarly named) "liberation school" programs, often threatening to lead boycotts if the business declined to donate. See Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr, *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, (University of California Press, 2016), 185; "Panthers Give Away Goods at Boycott of Liquor Store" (KPIX-TV, September 18, 1971), Bay Area Television Archive, https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/208075.

neighborhoods was "another tool of oppression used against Black people," and demanded that the stores put some of the profits it made from Black residents back into their communities.[112] The *Providence Journal* noted that the city's Black political leaders' responses to the demand were sharply divided along generational and ideological lines; while the Providence NAACP flatly rejected the campaign and the director of the Urban League of Rhode Island said he disagreed with the group's militant methods, Joe "Yusuf" Forestier of the Afro Arts Center argued that the liberal leaders' refusal to support the Liberation School was simply further evidence that they did not truly represent local Black communities.[113]

The liquor store campaign seems to have quickly faded from prominence in April after police arrested and beat Metts in South Providence, leading to the formation of the Coalition of Black Leadership, which included both liberal and radical Black leaders.[114] In 1973 the Coalition successfully sued the city for civil rights violations, winning a consent decree that established broad police reforms.[115] Today, the campaign sparked by Metts' arrest and beating lives on as a result of the militant organizing that won the city's Community Safety Act (officially the Providence Community-Police Relations Act) in 2017.[116] As for the Black Liberation School, however, Metts left the group in the early 1970s, and without strong leadership, it collapsed.

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[112]"Black Unit Asks Cash." In *Black Voices*, the publication of the Urban Education Center at Rhode Island College, the Black Liberation School put forward a systemic economic critique: "The bottle is advertised by the capitalists as being a means of escape from the every day [sic] 'disease] that white America has exposed us to. They would like us to think that freedom comes from a bottle or from drugs." The Black Liberation School, "Why the Liquor Stores?," *Black Voices*, April 15, 1970, Providence Urban League Box 3 Folder 164, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection.

[113]"Blacks Found Divided on Fund Requests."

[114]"Blacks Stage Rally on Unity, Brutality," *Providence Journal*, April 19, 1970.

[115]Providence External Review Authority (PERA), "Providence External Review Authority Bi-Annual Report, Fall 2019," October 30, 2019, https://www.providenceri.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/PERA-Fall-2019-Bi-Annual-Report.pdf, 4.

[116]See Steve Ahlquist, "Providence City Council Passes the Community Safety Act," *RI Future* (blog), June 2, 2017, https://www.rifuture.org/csa-passes/; "ORD-2017-18 Providence Community-Police Relations Act," City of Providence, June 1, 2017, https://providenceri.iqm2.com/Citizens/Detail_LegiFile.aspx?MeetingID=6206&ID=3786.

Founded in 1969, the Afro Arts Center became perhaps the most established radical Black Power group in Providence, until a loss of funding followed by a series of fires shuttered it in 1973. Anderson Kurtz, a committed and flexible organizer, formed the group after spearheading a successful Black Arts festival with his brother in 1967. Kurtz had organized with the Urban League of Rhode Island since his teenage years, leading a campaign in the early 1960s that led to the establishment of Negro History Week in Rhode Island.[117] As a student in 1968, he was one of the Brown University organizers of the Black student walk-out led by Black women students at Pembroke College.[118] Inspired by a Black Arts festival in Boston, the Kurtz brothers invited Black residents to create original works of art featuring prominent Black figures in Rhode Island history for exhibition at the South Providence drop-in center.[119]

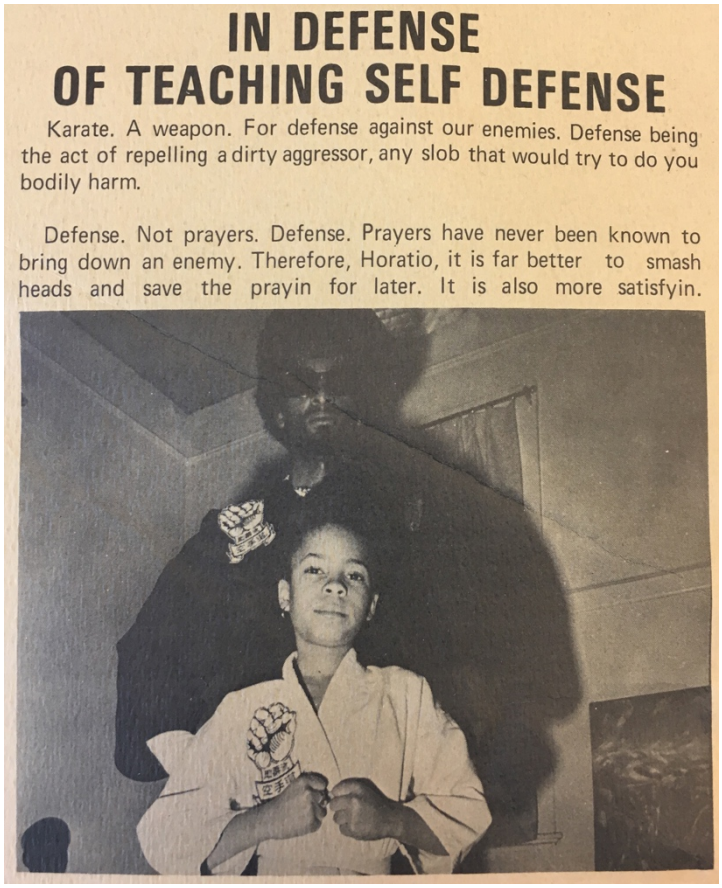
The festival caught the attention of the city's Black establishment, who approached Kurtz—still a senior at Brown—with the idea of continuing the work of the festival through an arts center. Black city leaders pulled strings with Mayor Doorley to acquire a vacant building in South Providence, and Kurtz obtained financial support for building renovations from his mentor, the Urban League of Rhode Island president James Williams. Kurtz served as the executive director of the Afro Arts Center, initially called the Martin Luther King Center of the Arts, while Errol Hunt—director of the South Providence drop-in center, future Urban League of Rhode Island director, and one-time Republican candidate for state assembly—became center administrator.

[117]Kurtz, interview with the author.
[118]Ibid.
[119]Ibid. Kurtz also told this anecdote, which he said "nobody knows": "The first two artists we got painting these pictures of Rhode Island Negroes, were two white young ladies. … Other Black people [would come in and say], 'What are they doing?' 'Well we're going to have this Negro, Black Arts Festival and they're pictures for it, they're doing pictures for it.' … 'Well we can paint too!' Boom."

Despite receiving the support of major liberal establishment Black groups and leaders, the Afro Arts Center was one of most vocal radical Black Power organizations in the city. In their educational programs, theatrical performances, and works of visual art, as well as in the newsletter of their writers' workshop, *Projection Black*, instructors and students at the Afro Arts Center endorsed armed revolution, harshly condemned liberal Black and white groups, and practiced self-defense and personal pride through children's karate lessons.[120] Though the Center was born out of relationships with local Black liberals, Kurtz and the Center's staff quickly cultivated relationships with the luminaries of radical Black arts and literature, including actors Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, author Ralph Ellison, and poet and playwright Amiri Baraka.[121] Baraka and Kurtz met at Baraka's home in Newark, New Jersey, to discuss how to establish the Black Arts Movement in Providence, as Baraka had done in Harlem and Newark.[122] The Afro Arts Center's programming also reflected their politics and connections to radical Black Power groups, as it hosted an open meeting of the Boston chapter of the RNA. In *Projection Black*, staff member Joe "Yusuf" Forestier condemned the local "Soul Patrol," a group of Black PFP workers who collaborated with police to prevent riots in South Providence. Forestier argued that if any group should serve as a community patrol, it should be (as Alfred Cabral had previously said) the Black Panther Party, a militant Black Muslim organization, or any other group that could represent those whom the Black establishment thought of as "'Un-American Negroes.'"[123]

[120]*Projection Black*, various issues, Box 7, Folder 8 Robert F. Cohen Jr. papers, John Hay Library, Providence, R.I. and Box 1, Folders 9-13, Providence Urban League Papers 1940-1972, Providence College Special and Archival Collections, Phillips Memorial Library, Providence, R.I.
[121]Kurtz, interview with the author.
[122]Ibid.
[123]Joe "Yusuf" Forestier, "Divide and Conquer," *Projection Black*, late 1960s or early 1970s, Box 7, Folder 8 Robert F. Cohen Jr. papers, John Hay Library, Providence, R.I.; C. Fraser Smith, "Quiet Was Unbelievable," *Providence Journal*, August 3, 1967.

Perhaps surprisingly, the Afro Arts Center's left-wing politics didn't alienate their liberal benefactors. The Center's board, dominated by Urban League benefactors, trusted Kurtz's leadership and the educational mission of the Center. Kurtz said, "The tension was there, but they never abandoned what we were doing. … I'd be up front, screaming, … They'd be behind the scenes working with the white people to try to keep my money going."[124] Maintaining the support of liberal Black groups was key to the continued success of the Center; Kurtz said that despite low level tensions, "It was never the kind of thing that would make us split from the older guys because we needed them desperately."[125] The Black establishment's connections with wealthy, white liberals and access to the state government—connections and access that the establishment could use to stifle challengers, as in the case of the Rhode Island Chapter of the NAACP—kept the Afro Arts Center alive throughout scandals over its students' confrontational artworks . The relationship benefitted the establishment as well, giving them connections to young, militant Black activists doing


IN DEFENSE
OF TEACHING SELF DEFENSE

Karate. A weapon. For defense against our enemies. Defense being the act of repelling a dirty aggressor, any slob that would try to do you bodily harm.

Defense. Not prayers. Defense. Prayers have never been known to bring down an enemy. Therefore, Horatio, it is far better to smash heads and save the prayin for later. It is also more satisfyin.

"In Defense of Teaching Self Defense," Projection Black*, late 1960s or early 1970s, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Phillips Memorial Library, Providence, R.I.*

[124]Kurtz, interview.
[125]Ibid.

community work that older moderates either refused to or could not do "because they had built lives around working well with white people."[126]

Yet Providence's liberal institutions remained wary of radical Black Power and their allegiances stayed with existing moderate groups in the face of militant challengers. In early 1970, the Black Liberation School requested $17,000 from the Rhode Island State Council of Churches (RISCC) to pay their director and co-director's salaries. The RISCC denied the request, not only because it saw the Black Liberation School as harmful to integration, but also because it believed the existence of the Afro Arts Center and the more moderate Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC) made the Black Liberation School unnecessary.[127] Seeing the Black Liberation School's Black-only education as a threat to the liberal goal of integration, the RISCC pit the city's two most prominent radical Black Power groups against each other. Further, it asserted that the OIC, a jobs training organization, was better suited to leading a Black education program than a new radical Black education group would be. Like Justice Weisberger, who in the Rhode Island Chapter of the NAACP case asserted that militant groups did not need to exist because moderate ones already did, the RISCC used its influential position as a white institution to control the development of Providence's Black Power Movement by declaring existing an existing liberal Black group more legitimate than a burgeoning radical one. At the same time, these liberal Black groups developed a new strategy for dealing with the challenge of Black Power: co-option.

The Urban League Meets the Black Panther Party

[126]Ibid.
[127]"R.I. Church Council Denies Black School Pay Request."

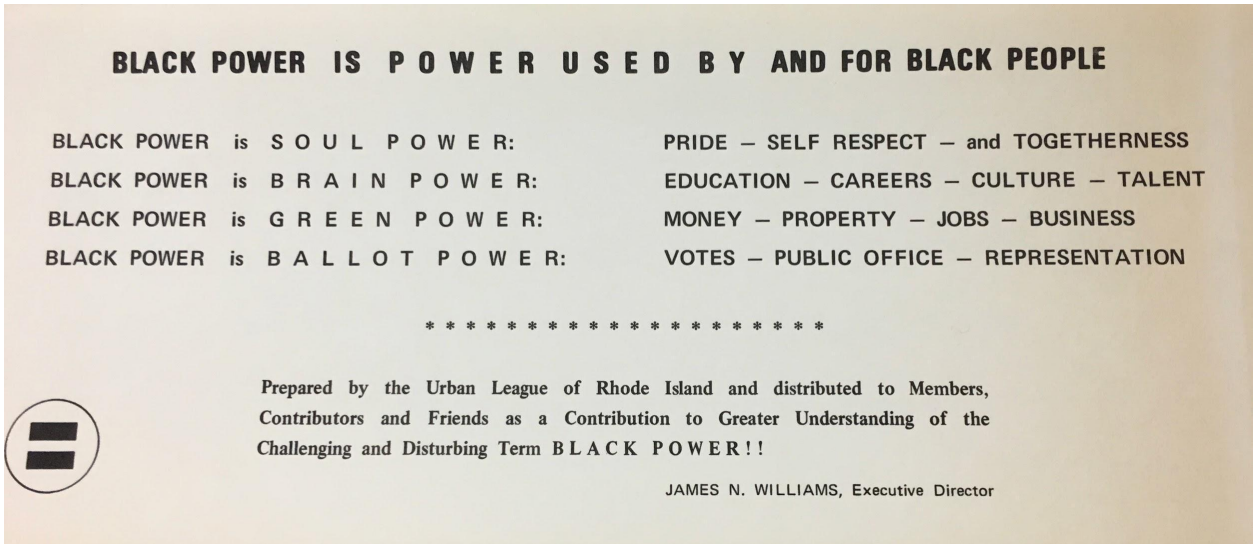
Moderate civil rights groups in Providence had ambivalent relationships with the movement for Black Power. The most prominent of these groups, both nationally and in Providence, were the Urban League and the NAACP. The national leaders of these groups harshly condemned Black Power, even as they simultaneously attempted to co-opt the slogan and its popularity for their own purposes. After Stokely Carmichael's endorsement of Black Power at the 1966 Meredith March Against Fear, NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins called Black Power "a reverse Mississippi, a reverse Hitler, a reverse Ku Klux Klan."[128] Leaders of the National Urban League and the SCLC also criticized the political slogan, the former organization more harshly than the latter.[129]

Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar writes that by the mid-1960s, Black Power challenged moderate civil rights groups because, unlike the dissenting Black Muslims of the Nation of Islam earlier in the decade, advocates for Black Power—whether in the form of armed resistance, increased militancy, skepticism of integration, or otherwise—were well represented within mainstream organizations of the Civil Rights Movement.[130] Their entry into these groups occurred as demands for civil rights (and the deadly costs of those demands) yielded sparse results. As SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) under Carmichael and Floyd McKissick, respectively, endorsed Black Power, the NAACP, Urban League, and SCLC set about reshaping their relationships both with these newly radical allies and with the white establishment.[131]

The Urban League of Rhode Island maintained complex public and private relationships to the local and national Black Power Movement. As Whitney Young, NUL executive director,

[128]Simon Hall, "The NAACP, Black Power, and the African American Freedom Struggle, 1966-1969," *The Historian* 69, no. 1 (March 2007): 49, doi:10.1111/j.1540-6563.2007.00174.x.
[129]Ogbar, 64-5.
[130]Ibid, 65-6.
[131]Ibid.

did on the national level, the Rhode Island branch of the organization publicly adopted "Black Power" as a motto for a capacious but decidedly moderate philosophy of Black self-determination. In a flyer printed in the late 1960s, the Urban League of Rhode Island took it upon itself to foster "greater understanding of the challenging and disturbing term BLACK POWER!!" among "members, contributors, and friends."[132] The flyer explained that Black Power fell into four main categories: racial unity and pride ("soul power"); educational and professional excellence ("brain power"); economic prosperity and property ownership ("green power"); and electoral participation and representation ("ballot power").[133]



Urban League of Rhode Island Black Power Flyer, late 1960s. (Providence College Special and Archival Collections, Phillips Memorial Library.) Photo, November 13, 2018.

According to the Urban League of Rhode Island, then, the slogan "Black Power" merely became a complicated, radical-sounding way of describing the broad, liberal program of none other than the Urban League of Rhode Island. As Ogbar writes, moderate, well-funded groups co-opted the slogan in order to remain in touch with their Black constituencies while appeasing

[132]Urban League of Rhode Island Black Power Flyer, late 1960s, Box 3, Folder 161, Providence Urban League Papers 1940-1972, Providence College Special and Archival Collections, Phillips Memorial Library.
[133]Ibid.

their white benefactors and critics.[134] The NUL in particular "[helped] to lead a process of deradicalizing Black Power by ascribing moderate principles to a fundamentally nebulous slogan."[135] Yet while the Urban League of Rhode Island used this tactic to publicly define Black Power as innocuous, pro-business demands for civil rights, it had complicated private relationships with Providence's Black Left on the ground, in addition to its public relationship with the Afro Arts Center.

Though publicly, the Urban League of Rhode Island followed the example of its national counterpart in sanitizing Black Power for its own gain, it had a private and ostensibly mutually beneficial relationship with a group of activists it identified as the local chapter of the Black Panther Party. On December 11, 1969, the Eastern Regional Office of the NUL sent a "Black Panther Activity Questionnaire" to field offices across the country. A month passed with no response from the Rhode Island branch. By the time executive director James Williams and associate director Errol Hunt finally wrote back in January 1970, they had met not only with the board of the Urban League of Rhode Island, but also with "our Panthers."[136] In these meetings, they decided "that we should not give any information to anyone that might shut off lines of communication which we have worked so hard to establish," noting that the supposed Panthers themselves said they "do not want any publicity at all."[137] Respecting both the desires of the supposed local Panthers to maintain low profiles for their own safety and the inquiries of the NUL, Williams and Hunt answered the questionnaire. Though they provided no identifying information of any Black Panthers, they requested secrecy from the national organization,

[134]Ogbar, 152.
[135]Ibid, 152-3.
[136]James N. Williams and Errol E. Hunt to William C. Wessels, "Response to 'Black Panther Activity Questionnaire,'" January 12, 1970, Box 3 Folder 160, Providence Urban League Papers 1940-1972, Providence College Special and Archival Collections, Phillips Memorial Library.
[137]Ibid.

suggesting that even the scant information they provided went beyond what they had agreed upon with the Providence Panthers.

Williams and Hunt's responses to the questionnaire paint a complex portrait of not only the now virtually unknown Providence Black Panther Party, but also the Urban League of Rhode Island's relationship to radical Black Power. The two groups, to whatever extent the Providence Panthers actually operated, seem to have had close, if tenuous, ties. The Urban League allowed the Panthers to use its mimeograph machine in order to make advertisements for the social welfare programs (including breakfast and education) they planned to initiate. In undated notes of an Urban League meeting with the Providence Black Panthers, it is clear that each group saw collaboration as mutually beneficial. [138] For the Panthers, the Urban League offered knowledge of and connections to the existing resources that the Panthers hoped to use to raise awareness in Black communities, as well as institutional support of their underground activities. The Urban League saw in the Panthers, as they did in the Afro Arts Center, a potential avenue into young Black communities that they had alienated with their moderate, middle-class politics. Most of all, each group offered the other the ability to spread their message in new ways to new bases: the Panthers, for whom "Black awareness is their motto," gained access to the Urban League's resources and broad membership, allowing them to attempt to create awareness and support among the many Black Providence residents who condemned the BPP; the Urban League gained access to the Panthers' grassroots, possibly radical, base, noting that "They can help us...get some info out in the street indescretely [sic]."[139]

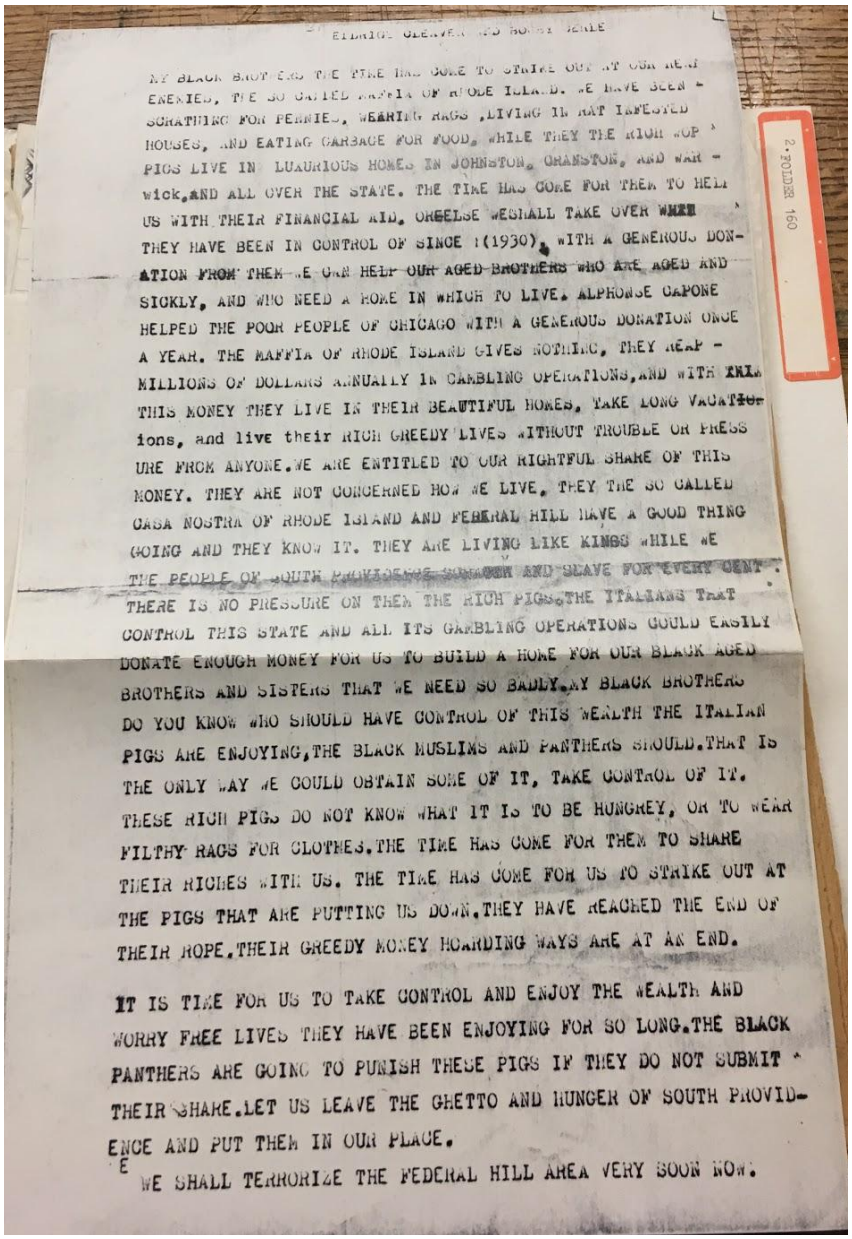
[138]Urban League of Rhode Island–Providence Black Panther Party Meeting Notes, late 1960s or early 1970s, Box 3, Folder 160, Providence Urban League Papers 1940-1972, Providence College Special and Archival Collections, Phillips Memorial Library, Providence, R.I.
[139]Ibid.

However, was this group an authentic chapter of the Black Panther Party? The archive is inconclusive, but for all intents and purposes, it seems Providence had no official, lasting BPP branch.[140] Anderson Kurtz, Richard Metts, and Alfred Cabral all stated there was no local chapter.[141] Historian and former Panther Billy X Jennings stated that no official chapter existed in the city, positing that perhaps the "Panthers" were merely young activists who sold *The Black Panther*, the BPP's newspaper. However, Jennings also conjectured a more dramatic solution to the question: COINTELPRO.[142]

According to a graphic letter addressed to Panther leaders Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Seale in the Urban League of Rhode Island archives, the Providence Black Panther Party planned an aggressive campaign targeting—or, in the words of the letter, "terroriz[ing]"—the Federal Hill neighborhood and its supposedly ungenerous Italian American, mafia-connected population.[143] On its face, the veracity of the letter is plausible: Italian American and Black residents of Providence had an often contentious relationship. Though violent white resistance to desegregation was not as prominent in Providence as it was in Boston, in 1970, the *Providence Journal* reported several instances of Federal Hill residents inflicting racist violence upon Black children in reaction to the implementation of the Providence Plan.[144] Further, Reynolds said that Black residents "felt the sting of [the mafia's power] … in terms of crime and crimes not being solved."[145] Yet as Jennings noted, the letter's language and narrative are replete with the

[140]Billy X Jennings, interview with author, March 20, 2019.
[141]John Reynolds, director of the Providence SCLC stated that he did remember a local BPP chapter, but his account is questionable, as he claimed Kurtz was a member.
[142]Jennings, interview with author.
[143]"Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Seale," Providence Black Panther Party, late 1960s or early 1970s, Box 3, Folder 160, Providence Urban League Papers 1940-1972, Providence College Special and Archival Collections, Phillips Memorial Library, Providence, R.I.
[144]"Racial Tensions Close Schools in Providence," *Providence Journal*, October 30, 1970; Local activist Marco McWilliams, conversation with author, Providence, October 30, 2018.
[145]Reynolds, interview with the author, March 22, 2019.

hallmarks of the disinformation the FBI used to attempt to destroy the BPP.[146] Through COINTELPRO, the FBI attempted not only to instigate violence between the BPP and rival Black Power groups, but it also had a history of pitting the mafia against radical activists, including the Communist Party and comedian Dick Gregory.[147]



MY BLACK BROTHERS THE TIME HAS COME TO STRIKE OUT AT OUR REAL ENEMIES, THE SO CALLED MAFIA OF RHODE ISLAND. WE HAVE BEEN SCRATCHING FOR PENNIES, WEARING RAGS, LIVING IN RAT INFESTED HOUSES, AND EATING GARBAGE FOR FOOD, WHILE THEY THE RICH POP PIGS LIVE IN LUXURIOUS HOMES IN JOHNSTON, CRANSTON, AND WARWICK, AND ALL OVER THE STATE. THE TIME HAS COME FOR THEM TO HELP US WITH THEIR FINANCIAL AID, OR ELSE WE SHALL TAKE OVER WHAT THEY HAVE BEEN IN CONTROL OF SINCE 1(1930), WITH A GENEROUS DONATION FROM THEM WE CAN HELP OUR AGED BROTHERS WHO ARE AGED AND SICKLY, AND WHO NEED A HOME IN WHICH TO LIVE. ALPHONSE CAPONE HELPED THE POOR PEOPLE OF CHICAGO WITH A GENEROUS DONATION ONCE A YEAR. THE MAFIA OF RHODE ISLAND GIVES NOTHING, THEY REAP MILLIONS OF DOLLARS ANNUALLY IN GAMBLING OPERATIONS, AND WITH THIS MONEY THEY LIVE IN THEIR BEAUTIFUL HOMES, TAKE LONG VACATIONS, and live their RICH GREEDY LIVES WITHOUT TROUBLE OR PRESSURE FROM ANYONE. WE ARE ENTITLED TO OUR RIGHTFUL SHARE OF THIS MONEY. THEY ARE NOT CONCERNED HOW WE LIVE, THEY THE SO CALLED CASA NOSTRA OF RHODE ISLAND AND FEDERAL HILL HAVE A GOOD THING GOING AND THEY KNOW IT. THEY ARE LIVING LIKE KINGS WHILE WE THE PEOPLE OF SOUTH PROVIDENCE SUFFER AND SLAVE FOR EVERY CENT. THERE IS NO PRESSURE ON THEM THE RICH PIGS, THE ITALIANS THAT CONTROL THIS STATE AND ALL ITS GAMBLING OPERATIONS COULD EASILY DONATE ENOUGH MONEY FOR US TO BUILD A HOME FOR OUR BLACK AGED BROTHERS AND SISTERS THAT WE NEED SO BADLY. MY BLACK BROTHERS DO YOU KNOW WHO SHOULD HAVE CONTROL OF THIS WEALTH THE ITALIAN PIGS ARE ENJOYING, THE BLACK MUSLIMS AND PANTHERS SHOULD. THAT IS THE ONLY WAY WE COULD OBTAIN SOME OF IT, TAKE CONTROL OF IT. THESE RICH PIGS DO NOT KNOW WHAT IT IS TO BE HUNGREY, OR TO WEAR FILTHY RAGS FOR CLOTHES. THE TIME HAS COME FOR THEM TO SHARE THEIR RICHES WITH US. THE TIME HAS COME FOR US TO STRIKE OUT AT THE PIGS THAT ARE PUTTING US DOWN. THEY HAVE REACHED THE END OF THEIR ROPE. THEIR GREEDY MONEY HOARDING WAYS ARE AT AN END.

IT IS TIME FOR US TO TAKE CONTROL AND ENJOY THE WEALTH AND WORRY FREE LIVES THEY HAVE BEEN ENJOYING FOR SO LONG. THE BLACK PANTHERS ARE GOING TO PUNISH THESE PIGS IF THEY DO NOT SUBMIT THEIR SHARE. LET US LEAVE THE GHETTO AND HUNGER OF SOUTH PROVIDENCE AND PUT THEM IN OUR PLACE.

WE SHALL TERRORIZE THE FEDERAL HILL AREA VERY SOON NOW.

Providence Black Panther Party Letter, late 1960s or early 1970s. (Providence College Special and Archival Collections, Phillips Memorial Library.)

[146]See Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Dissent in the United States* (Boston, M.A.: South End Press, 1990).
[147]Ibid, 103.

The FBI was certainly aware of Panther activities in Providence. Released COINTELPRO documents reveal that the FBI surveilled the Hartford, Connecticut, Panthers' recruitment trips to the city in the early 1970s; Kurtz remembered these recruitment trips and said they did not produce a local chapter.[148]As part of COINTELPRO, the FBI kept a file on the BPP in Providence.[149] However, recent requests for the release of this file under the Freedom of Information Act revealed that the FBI had destroyed it in the intervening years.

The quasi-existence of the Black Panther Party in Providence remains a mystery. Kurtz said that Providence's Black community was too small to accommodate an active chapter, and regardless of whether one existed underground, the lack of an official chapter profoundly shaped the trajectory of Providence's Black Power movement.[150] Without a central, national organization like the BPP to anchor Black organizing in Providence, radical activists like Kurtz and Metts were forced to be flexible and creative, allowing them to take influence outside of the dogmas of any one group. However, it also left Black radicals in Providence without a unifying political front, making them fractured and dependent on the support of liberal groups.

Conclusion

Black Power activists in Providence took on the challenge of becoming established while contending with the pressures of the existing establishment. In a city where power was concentrated within particular organizations, ethnic groups, and political parties, and passed from one person to another through secret networks and elite relationships, this challenge was

[148]Federal Bureau of Investigation, "157-NH-1079 v. 2," 1970, 284, Internet Archive, accessed April 16, 2020, https://archive.org/stream/BlackPantherPartyHartford/157-NH-1079-v-2-ARC-ID-5361941; Federal Bureau of Investigation, "157-NH-1079 v. 3," 1970, 163, Internet Archive, accessed April 16, 2020, https://archive.org/stream/BlackPantherPartyHartford/157-NH-1079-v-3-ARC-ID-5361942; Kurtz, interview with the author.
[149]David M. Hardy to Ben Bienstock, "FOIPA Request Response," March 4, 2020.
[150]Kurtz, interview with the author

particularly difficult. The people who made Providence's Black Power movement were on the margins of the city's Black political community: children and teenagers, working-class mothers, and energized young residents. They worked to translate their alienation from their supposed leadership into community power largely without access to political connections. Instead, they were creative, flexible, and militant, employing diverse strategies and forming varied coalitions to attempt to create new institutions from which Black communities could draw power and pride.

Though it failed to fully transform the city's social order, Providence's Black Power Movement won important campaigns. The decline of the movement left its work unfinished for contemporary local activists in the movement's lineage to further. In 2017, more than forty years after activists won police reforms in a campaign following the beating of Richard Metts, a coalition of community organizations including Direct Action for Rights and Equality (DARE) and Providence Youth Student Movement (PrYSM) successfully pushed for the city to vastly expand those reforms through the passage of the Community Safety Act. On May 13, 2010, almost exactly forty-one years after Black students first walked out of Hope High School and won Black Studies courses, student leaders of "Hope United" walked out again alongside 400 of their peers.[151] Hope United became the first chapter of the Providence Student Union, which since 2016 has organized across the city to win Ethnic Studies classes for a new generation of Providence high schoolers, the vast majority of whom are Black or Latinx.[152]

Reminiscing about his experiences as an organizer, Anderson Kurtz said, "I built the Afro Arts Center. Now, it didn't survive, but I built it anyway. So, we were trying to do institution building, and the model is to do that any way you can. And that was white people's and

[151]"PSU's First Campaign," Providence Student Union, accessed April 27, 2020, https://www.pvdstudentunion.org/hope-schedule.
[152]Steve Ahlquist, "Providence Student Union Launches #OurHistoryMatters Campaign," *RI Future* (blog), January 21, 2016, http://www.rifuture.org/providence-student-union-launches-ourhistorymatters-campaign/.

government money. So, that's what we did." This model may have buoyed the Afro Arts Center for a few years, but it failed to make lasting institutions out of any of the grassroots Black Power groups that adopted it as a strategy. Caught between the white political machine—for which Black residents represented a constituency small enough to be safely ignored—and the moderate Black establishment—which backed militant Black Power groups in order to win young Black residents to their ranks—Black Power organizers in Providence faced financial and political pressures from all sides. Many organizers maintained flexible loyalties, trying to collaboratively power build power wherever they could. However, whether Black Power activists worked inside the system and risked becoming politically and financially dependent on the out-of-touch establishment, or outside the system and faced the challenge of building an organization up from the grassroots in a city dominated by their powerful political opponents, Providence's liberal institutions severely hindered their ability to practice self-determination, let alone build it in Black communities.

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