3

Black Power on the Ground: Continuity and Rupture in St. Louis

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Introduction

A sea change is underway in the field of "Black Freedom Studies."[1] Not only have numerous scholars engaged new chronological, geographical, and conceptual frameworks to complicate popular narratives of postwar Civil Rights struggles (1955–1966), but they have also critically reexamined, and rehabilitated, key figures, organizations, and institutions associated with Black Power (1966–1975). Far from simply provocative rhetoric, inarticulate rage, and self-defeating violence, Black Power encompassed a range of concrete, programmatic initiatives geared toward tangible—indeed, political—visions and goals. Yet, historians and social scientists have further to go in recovering these many legacies. While an earlier wave of scholars excavated the "indigenous" character of Civil Rights campaigns, the growing subfield that historian Peniel Joseph has characterized as "Black Power Studies" remains in need of more local treatments that foreground the groups and activists that seeded the soil for the Black Nationalist renaissance of the mid-to-late 1960s and early-to-mid 1970s. As with the Black Freedom Movement writ large, Black Power achieved its successes, experienced its reversals, developed its various strategies, and encountered its myriad opportunities and constraints, on the ground.[2]

Focusing on Black Freedom activism in the border-state city of St. Louis, Missouri, this chapter contributes to the ongoing historical retrieval of localized Black Power struggles, and their genealogies. In one vein, this has an additive significance, for it helps augment a richer synthesis of Black Power. Using St. Louis as a case study of local movement trajectories, this chapter contends that the thesis of movement continuity must similarly be tested on the ground, with scholars paying attention to grassroots movements as they developed and evolved over time, and in response to changing social and

economic circumstances. One challenge lay in assessing not only the political and ideological blocs that surged and receded within shifting black activist communities over time, but also the uniquely *generational* schisms that emerged among freedom workers in different historical periods and defined the predominant forms of activism. In places like St. Louis, African American protest over the long haul of the Great Depression, World War II, early cold war, and the high tide of the late 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, was defined by historically specific leadership, strategies, constituencies, objectives, and popular understandings of "freedom." Thus, I trace the city's Black Freedom struggle from the 1930s to the 1970s to illustrate that while Black Power was consistent with preceding (and subsequent) efforts, it was nevertheless a distinct historical moment reflecting both continuity and change in the African American experience. Moreover, as the following section discusses, localizing Black Power studies requires establishing the importance of place, and its effects on social (racial) relations and political economy.[3]

The St. Louis Context

Located at the nation's center, St. Louis was a cultural and political transition point between the Northeast, Midwest, and the South, and embodied "a microcosm—often in exaggerated terms—of national trends."[4] The city was typical of a border-state environment; yet, what constitutes a border state is both simple and elusive. At its most basic, the concept identifies the slaveholding states—Missouri, Maryland, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Kentucky—that did not secede from the United States during its Civil War. At the same time, it speaks of other ways in which these states were both southern and conspicuously "non-southern." Their relatively small black populations contrasted with the large numbers of African Americans who resided in the former Confederacy, particularly in its cotton-producing areas. Likewise, the ethno-religious diversity of white border-state residents—the product of European immigration during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—departed significantly from the demographic homogeneity characteristic of most southern whites. Border-state black people participated in regular electoral politics, where the Democratic and Republican parties "shared" a plurality. This differed from mass black disfranchisement and white Democratic hegemony in the South. The breadth and depth of industrial mass production vis-a-vis the South also distinguished border-state cities, as did the uneven civic cultural influences inherited from Dixie.[5]

Located along the Mississippi River, near its confluence with the Missouri River, St. Louis City had been a vital center of steamboat commerce. After the war, it became a rail link between eastern financial interests and the conquered western territories drawn by the Market Revolution into an evolving national economy. The "Gateway City" also became a supplier of finished goods to the West. The city not only developed an industrial base, but also, similar to Chicago and Detroit—two of its midwestern neighbors—housed an active labor union movement. The heterogeneity of its European immigrant population (primarily

German and Irish), and the immigrants' Catholicism, were heavily inscribed in many of St. Louis's civic, as well as religious, institutions. This Catholic presence was even more the case, given St. Louis's colonial Spanish–French origins. Consistent, too, with a border-state typology, the city had small numbers of African Americans: Black St. Louis had grown dramatically following the Civil War, but in 1880 it only comprised 22,000 out of a total city population of 351,000. This factor, alongside Republican–Democratic contestation, had much to do with why black St. Louisans retained the vote even after ex-Confederates redeemed the South. White leaders fostered a public perception of interracial cooperation, and used discourses of racial "civility" to maintain black subordination, with outright brutality as an unspoken corollary. Incorporated into municipal and state patronage politics, St. Louis's emergent black leadership relied on white paternalism to tap political appointments and public employment and services.[6]

Jim Crow permeated St. Louis's institutional life. Missouri state law protected segregated public education and prohibited racial intermarriage; most public accommodations, aside from libraries and public transport, also enforced the color line. The same applied to residential settlement. In 1916, white voters passed the nation's first residential segregation ordinance achieved through a popular referendum. (Just one year later, major race riots erupted across the Mississippi River in East St. Louis, Illinois, similarly emblematic of white resistance to black migration and mobility during the Great War.) While a U.S. Supreme Court decision later nullified the law, it nonetheless set a precedent for private restrictive housing covenants. Thus, while black St. Louisans lived in clusters around the city, their area of settlement and growth became rigidly confined to older, declining areas near the downtown business district and central riverfront. African Americans were equally constricted in local job markets, where they were overwhelmingly employed as domestics and common laborers. Unusual even for African Americans in southern cities, St. Louis's black workers were excluded from the skilled building trades and most professional crafts.[7]

From the Great Depression to the Early Cold War

These conditions generated a range of indigenous black cultural, social, and political institutions, including the Civic Liberty League, and local chapters of the Urban League, Negro Business League, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). While ministering to African Americans' immediate needs, many of these organizations also helped ignite popular struggles for racial reform. During the 1930s, black St. Louisans waged community campaigns for more recreational space, schools, and relief and employment. The Colored Clerks Circle, working with the city's Housewives League, led efforts for the hiring of African American delivery drivers and dime-store sales staff. African Americans also comprised a particularly visible and militant core of the Unemployed Councils organized by the American Communist Party, and their involvement in downtown demonstrations and street fights with police helped goad city hall into establishing a formal public relief structure.

Assisted by the Trade Union Unity League, black female nutpickers and rag and bag factory laborers organized a massive, though short-lived, movement for wages and working conditions.[8]

Through the "Popular Front" vehicle of the American Workers' Union, black workers fought for equity in the emerging federal New Deal programs. The St. Louis Urban League, whose Industrial Department was an unlikely hub of radicalism during this period, supported the self-organization of black construction and hotel workers, motion picture projectionists, janitors, and domestics. St. Louis's Negro Workers' Council, created in 1934, challenged the monopoly on skilled work held by white tradesmen of the American Federation of Labor; after 1936, black organizers helped fortify a burgeoning Congress of Industrial Organizations, especially in the steel industry where they had a strategic foothold. St. Louis's branch of the National Negro Congress, though small and dependent on the Urban League, nonetheless was a convergence of black community-based mobilization, left-wing politics, worker self-organization, and industrial union militancy.[9]

The popular upsurge also affected the city's electoral politics. George Vaughn, Jordan Chambers, and David Grant—a young attorney involved in the Colored Clerks' Circle—were among a rising new coalition of black politicos who helped engineer a white Democratic sweep of local municipal offices, including the mayoralty and the Aldermanic Board. By 1937, 60 percent of the city's African American voters had defected to the party of the New Deal. Chambers, elected committeeman of the heavily black Nineteenth Ward, ascended as the city's principal black Democratic boss. St. Louis's decentralized, weak-mayor system of government allowed black ward-level politicians like "Pops" Chambers to exercise far greater power than was possible in machine-run cities like Chicago.[10]

As depression gave way to war and industrial regeneration, the March on Washington Movement galvanized black communities against racism in defense production and the armed forces. Spearheaded by the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), and adopting the vocal anticommunism of BSCP president A. Philip Randolph, the group generally eschewed any association with radicalism in favor of a militant liberal racial reformism. Highlighting the contradiction of maintaining Jim Crow at home while fighting fascism abroad, and using the imminent threat of disruption, the coalition leveraged a presidential executive order and the creation of a Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC). Yet, the March on Washington Movement was a grassroots project that continued throughout the war, sustained by active local committees that assumed the weight of actually implementing the federal decree. St. Louis's affiliate, led by Grant and local BSCP President T.D. McNeal, staged several marches to force the hiring and upgrading of black workers at McDonnell Aircraft, U.S. Cartridge, and other firms. As public transport and communications were deemed war industries by the White House, demonstrators also pressed for the employment of black men as streetcar and bus drivers, and picketed the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company for white-collar jobs for black women. By the spring of 1943, March on Washington activists boasted of having won more than 8,000 jobs for African Americans in the city.[11]

The mayor's office, maneuvering to staunch the tide of black militancy, avert the race riots that had erupted in cities like Detroit and Philadelphia, and preserve the city's image of interracial civility, created a race relations commission. But in areas where city hall failed to act, politicized citizens were more than willing. In 1944, a coterie of women associated with the local March on Washington committee, NAACP, and labor union auxiliaries formed the Citizens Civil Rights Committee, which conducted a series of sit-in protests at the segregated lunch counters of the major downtown department stores. Stemming from the women's ties to the Christian pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation, these were among the earliest sit-in demonstrations in the nation.

Following the war, black activists persisted in their efforts to dismantle American racial apartheid—for instance, lobbying for a permanent national FEPC. Yet, in a postwar climate of heightened U.S.–Soviet rivalry and perceived threats to internal security, "communistic" demands for racial equality invited unwanted attention from federal, state, and local authorities. This is not to say that Black Freedom workers ceased drawing the potent linkages between racial and economic justice. The Civil Rights Congress, active in St. Louis and East St. Louis, engaged in protests against police brutality and black unemployment in 1949 and 1950. In 1952, the St. Louis Negro Labor Council (NLC), similarly connected to a national united front of progressive trade unionists, veteran left-wing organizers, and members and "fellow travelers" of the American Communist Party, gained attention through its lengthy boycott of the city's main Sears, Roebuck and Company store. One of its leading figures, Hershel Walker, was a former Young Communist League member and a veteran of St. Louis's unemployed movement. The early cold war, however, had a chilling effect on forms of black militancy that had been possible during the Depression and World War II. Certainly, the protests of the NAACP and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) during this period were carried out by a small number of committed activists, who at best achieved short-lived and piecemeal reforms.[12]

Just thirty people walked the NLC's picket line, due in no small part to the fact it had been named in the U.S. Attorney's Subversive Organizations list. The NAACP, CORE, and the Urban League all refused any involvement with the demonstrations, and the council was largely ostracized in St. Louis's black public sphere. Harassed by police, and hounded by charges of subversion from conservatives and cold war liberals, black and white alike, the NLC's national body was forced to dissolve less than six years after its birth. (A similar fate befell the Civil Rights Congress.) Hence, the late 1940s and early 1950s comprised a moment of rupture in the Black Freedom Movement, particularly in the development of its radical flank.[13]

Civil Rights in St. Louis

As bus boycotts in Baton Rouge, Montgomery, and Tallahassee, Florida helped push matters of racial justice to the forefront of the national agenda, Civic Progress, Incorporated—an organization of the city's major industrial and civic

leaders—touted a proposal to revise the municipal charter. The plan unwittingly ignited the "heroic" period[14] of postwar Civil Rights struggle in St. Louis. For many African Americans, the proposed new charter's provisions reducing the Aldermanic Board and enlarging the scope of at-large elections directly undermined the electoral strength of a growing black populace. Between 1940 and 1950, 38,000 African Americans had migrated to the city; by 1956, they comprised approximately 180,000, or well over 20 percent of the city's population. Given the charter's silence on civil rights and fair employment guarantees in municipal employment and projects, and given that the city was entering the throes of a protracted downtown-area renewal, the proposal threatened to strip black people of their collective power in public decision making at the very moment they were poised to wield substantive influence at the polls.[15]

At a time when the NAACP was on the defensive in the South, and often recoiled from mass protest in the North for fear of accusations of Communism, St. Louis's branch launched a successful grassroots opposition to the charter's passage, one involving black ward politicians, beauticians, taxicab drivers, unionists, and clergy. It is noteworthy that the NAACP's president at this time was Ernest Calloway, a veteran union organizer and high-ranking official in Local 688 of the powerful International Brotherhood of Teamsters.[16] Calloway, a newcomer to the city, was of the same generation as individuals like Grant and McNeal; yet, he was part of a nascent cohort of mainly younger activists, like Margaret Bush Wilson and William L. Clay, who emerged out of the NAACP's community mobilization campaign.

The anti-charter moment of the late 1950s is also historically significant because it illustrates how early Civil Rights activism, including initiatives outside the South, responded to quality-of-life issues beyond ending Jim Crow accommodations. Victory over the proposal set in motion a modern black mass movement for better jobs and wages, meaningful electoral power, equitable education and housing opportunities, black communal stability amid urban redevelopment—as well as an end to segregated facilities. Local Black Freedom workers articulated this agenda in a comprehensive "Negro Proclamation." At the cutting edge of this activity were two NAACP affiliates—the Job Opportunities Council and the NAACP Youth Council—who often collaborated with St. Louis CORE. St. Louis's unit of the Negro American Labor Council (NALC), subsequently led by Calloway, was also involved in aggressive action against job discrimination.[17]

Cold war liberalism was not the only framework activists employed in response to racist exclusion. Muhammad's Mosque No. 28, which had grown dramatically since the early 1950s, represented a persistent Black Nationalist vision. Spurning the Civil Rights strategy of nonviolent direct action, members of the Nation of Islam (NOI) questioned the desirability of racial integration. Such messages resonated with many black St. Louisans. Some 3,500 people gathered at the city's municipal auditorium in August 1962 to hear NOI leader Elijah Muhammad deliver the apocalyptic prediction that the "rule of the white man over the black man" was coming to an end. Malcolm X, Muhammad's national spokesman, also drew a sizable audience during an early 1963 appearance. An effective organizer, Malcolm had been planting the seeds of a secular Black Nationalist rebirth since the late 1950s.[18]

But the NOI stood at the margins of black protest (and fell out of favor altogether with many black activists after Malcolm's assassination). As the tempo of Civil Rights struggle quickened in the South, the thrust of insurgency in St. Louis similarly became more robust, with CORE at the forefront. Many Youth Council members, hampered by their parent organization, defected from the local NAACP to CORE in the early 1960s. Appeals for a "fair" share of jobs became demands for "full" employment as definitions of black "freedom" evolved. African Americans were negligibly employed in banks, retail stores, and grocery chains; soft drink, dairy, bread, and brewing companies hired them neither as plant workers nor driver-salesmen. Racial inequality also defined the hiring policies of the city's utility companies and major industrial firms. With one in every three black St. Louisans employed in unskilled work or household service, African American families earned an annual income of $3,000 in contrast to $6,000 for whites. Another result of economic disfranchisement was a high rate of black unemployment. Between 1958 and 1964, black unemployment stood at more than 10 percent, with one of every six black youth absent from the formal labor force. The problem was especially acute for black men. Still, the fact that women had an easier time finding work did not mean they were better employed: In 1960, 62 percent of black women in paid labor earned $1,999 or less. Suitably, women anchored most Civil Rights projects, despite the fact that gender equity was not an explicit basis of organization. However, the nature of many jobs campaigns implicitly promoted the expansion of employment available to black women, albeit within the confines of "women's work"—retail, telephone operative, and petty clerical work.[19]

St. Louis's Civil Rights movement reached its peak in 1963–1964, when CORE activists launched mass disruptions at the Jefferson Bank and Trust Company in response to its hiring practices. The campaign assumed the form of a "general strike" against city hall, downtown businesses, and other institutions that deposited their receipts at the bank. CORE, once a small, predominantly white middle-class organization philosophically sworn to nonviolence, changed dramatically as younger, working-class blacks swelled its membership, questioned nonviolence, leaned closer to Black Nationalism than liberalism, and contested for leadership. The increasingly militant character of CORE's civil disobedience, and mass arrests, elicited criticisms from older activists like Calloway and then-State Senator McNeal, who the "Young Turks" dismissed as "Uncle Toms." The dispute revealed the straightforwardness of a grassroots rank-and-file who, facing structural unemployment, had no abiding allegiance to the rules of civility that had governed relations between black and white leadership. Intergenerational schisms also underlay the hostilities. Many of the critics, having come of age during the forties, or earlier, had been schooled in earlier paradigms of militancy that adhered to legal boundaries. For veteran activists, the Jefferson Bank boycotters represented a form of protest they neither understood nor appreciated. Mass protests eventually dented racial apartheid in the bank's employment practices, but this success was contradictory. It splintered local movement forces, exacerbating CORE's internal differences over tactics and goals, and the complexion of the group's leadership.[20]

A major outgrowth of this disaffection within CORE was the formation of the Action Committee to Improve Opportunities for Negroes (ACTION) in 1964, chaired by Percy Green, an ex-gang member and McDonnell Aircraft Company worker. Composed initially of CORE dissidents, the group first came to public attention after Green and Richard Daly, a white member, climbed the base of the unfinished Gateway Arch and secured themselves more than 125 feet above workers, police, and other demonstrators. The highly visible protest, spanning four hours, was designed to draw attention to the exclusion of black workers, by unions and contractors, from skilled work at a federally funded project. ACTION quickly gained a militant reputation for its flamboyant, yet meticulously planned, nonviolent guerrilla theater waged against the local construction industry, and the metropolitan area's other major employers. A purely local organization, ACTION nevertheless informs a broader history of the postwar Black Freedom Movement. Focused primarily on "More and Better Paying Jobs for Black Men," its leadership was characteristic of the ways in which black "freedom" during this period imagined the redemption of a black "manhood" premised on the patriarchal, male-headed household. This paralleled an emergent thesis of cultural pathology that attributed black poverty rates to the dominance of black matriarchy in African American communities.[21]

Like a number of other local groups around the nation, ACTION also constituted a vital bridge between the civil rights movement and what would soon come to be labeled "Black Power." At a time when national organizations such as CORE and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were adopting the policy that white members should organize anti-racist campaigns in their own communities, ACTION remained stubbornly interracial. Yet, its top leadership positions were self-consciously reserved for African Americans only, under the presumption that black activists deserved to play the central role in their own struggles for self-determination. Members adopted many Black Nationalist flourishes common to the period, including military berets, army field jackets, and dark sunglasses. Influenced by third world revolutionary movements, the organization even established a youth auxiliary known as the ACTION Guerrilla Force. And while adhering to a strategy of nonviolent action, members were not philosophically opposed to self-defense. As a number of scholars have illustrated, this was not atypical of Civil Rights activists. However, it is noteworthy that ACTION's leadership went beyond a pragmatic support for defensive violence, and actually made preparations for the time when revolutionary violence might be historically necessary: Members regularly participated in military training in forest preserves outside the city. When viewed as organizational transition points from "Freedom Now" to "Black Power," indigenous groups like ACTION reveal organic linkages between the two phases.

From "Freedom Now" to "Black Power" in the Gateway City

It is noteworthy that a number of elder activists—mainly cold war liberals who had survived the anticommunist purges of the late 1940s—were put off by what

they regarded as black "separatism." Existing organizations like the NAACP and Urban League rejected the concept with equal vehemence. Even senior Black Nationalists like Elijah Muhammad were out of step with their junior counterparts. Although the NOI continued to attract members, it remained tainted by Malcolm's death and its general aversion to political engagement. Not only were the Black Muslims politically suspect, but many younger activists also found them culturally reactionary. Steeped in a nineteenth-century paradigm of Black Nationalism that echoed Western discourses of "civilization" and regarded sub-Saharan Africa as backward, Muhammad publicly lambasted beards and "afro" hairstyles as "germ-catchers." Fruit of Islam members, adhering to strict codes of "respectability" with their clean-shaven faces, closely cropped hair, and conservative suits and bowties, likewise stood in stark contrast to their peers in dashikis, sandals, earrings, and dangling African jewelry. Moreover, at a time when black women were beginning to assert (proto)feminist identities and interests within movement organizations, the NOI held fast to patriarchal ideals.[22]

In St. Louis, as elsewhere, Black Power sprang from numerous changes in the movement's landscape. Foremost were the remarkable, if qualified, successes of Civil Rights activism. These included the attainment of greater black representation on the St. Louis school and aldermanic boards by the end of the 1950s, and T.D. McNeal's election, in 1960, as Missouri's first black state senator. With the passage of a public accommodations ordinance in 1961, activists finally achieved a major goal many had been seeking since 1948. The 1963 March on Washington had powerfully symbolized black demands for full citizenship, and helped yield national legislation that included the 1964 Civil Rights and 1965 Voting Rights acts, and the advent of the federal "War on Poverty."

These reforms exposed, at the same time, deepening racial inequalities. Automation eroded black advances in semi-skilled operative jobs, leading one sociologist to ruefully contemplate, "Who needs the Negro?"[23] Despite the defeat of the Civic Progress-touted charter in 1957, large-capitalist prerogatives had prevailed in directing the path of urban redevelopment. Beginning in 1959, the demolition of St. Louis's central-city black enclave, Mill Creek Valley, displaced some 20,000 black St. Louisans. Many moved north of downtown, or took up occupancy near the central business district in the massive Pruitt-Igoe homes and other federal housing projects. The relocations tightened the spatial containment, and the racialized poverty, of the black community: in 1960, for instance, 70 percent of the city's 214,337 African Americans lived in or near old, decaying housing. White St. Louisans retired to the suburbs of St. Louis County, with private capital and federal welfare programs following them. Because its boundaries had been frozen since 1876 (when voters approved home rule), St. Louis City's government lacked the power to annex economically thriving adjacent communities.

Moreover, bitter experiences of arrests, beatings, church bombings and assassinations—and the unreliable nature of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations as Civil Rights allies—helped to sour younger activists on the idea that they could end racism, poverty, and militarism through American liberalism. They became deeply critical of local anti-poverty agencies like St. Louis's

Human Development Corporation (HDC), which, while supportive of popular participation in principle, resisted genuine popular control. Premised on correcting the defective behavior of the black urban poor, rather than structural racial inequalities, many Johnson-era Great Society programs trained younger black workers for declining or obsolete jobs.

The pervasive influence of Malcolm X, and the inspiring examples of third world revolt and revolution, also conditioned profound strategic, tactical, and ideological transformations among young African Americans. Drawing from the contemporary examples of Malcolm, Robert F. Williams, and formations like the Deacons for Defense and Justice—as well as from a longer history of black armed "self-help," activists publicly (re)asserted and popularized discourses of self-defense. Civil Rights workers also critically reevaluated the place of white organizers in the movement, and formally adopted long-term "community organizing" projects. As part of this strategy, existing organizations, such as SNCC, attempted to expand their base beyond the South, where their activities had been concentrated before the demise of legal apartheid. Further, black radicalism and (inter)nationalism, while certainly present during the early cold war, discovered new mass constituencies as it journeyed from the movement's margins to its center in the mid-to-late 1960s. Thus, when SNCC organizer Willie Ricks and chairman Stokely Carmichael popularized "Black Power" in 1966, they spoke to the particular frustrations, concerns, and idealism of movement activists at a specific historical moment. Further, while individuals such as James Forman, Floyd McKissick, Queen Mother Audley Moore, and Detroit's Reverend Albert Cleage, Jr., attest to Black Power's cross-generational appeal, the slogan nonetheless had its greatest appeal among younger militants.

Yet, as many scholars have noted, "Black Power" lacked real definition, and therefore was broad enough to embrace a wide range of framing processes and diffuse activities. "Negroes" became "Black." The "white power structure," "crackers," "honkies," and "pigs" emerged as negative condensation symbols that sought to explicitly reveal, and delegitimate, the institutions and practices of white racial control. Many black people adopted the "afro" and other African-derived hairstyles and clothing, assumed new names, and engaged in new social practices and symbolism, as in learning Swahili and raising fists in the "Black Power salute." The black urban working-class rebellions that shook most major U.S. cities between 1963 and 1968 spoke even more dramatically to these tectonic political shifts. St. Louis often escaped national attention in the media coverage of "riots" because of the relatively small scale of its disturbances; yet, recovering the many narratives of revolt in midsized and small cities like St. Louis illustrates how truly widespread the phenomenon was. In early July 1964, police, responding to a fight between two siblings, touched off an hour-long civil disorder on the near north side of the city. Officers dispersed a crowd of rock- and bottle-throwing black youth with tear gas, and arrested three people. Thirty minutes after the clash ended, about forty-five demonstrators marched to the nearby Lucas Avenue police district station, whose officers were particularly known for violent treatment of black citizens in their custody. After someone hurled bricks through two station windows, officers drove the protesters away with police dogs.[24]

Scattered neighborhood disturbances again occurred in June 1965, following the shooting death of a seventeen-year-old burglary suspect, Melvin Cravens. The black community reacted in outrage over the news that the youth, unarmed and with his hands cuffed behind his back, had died from a gunshot to the back of the head. In October 1965, nearly 100 black youth ran along Delmar Boulevard—a street which marked the north–south dividing line between black and white St. Louis—smashing automobile and store windows. A similar outbreak occurred in September 1966, following a CORE demonstration at the St. Louis Police Department's downtown headquarters. A group of teenagers, shouting "Black Power," tossed garbage cans in the streets and broke car windshields. One group smashed the plate glass windows of a laundry. Firefighters responding to false alarms were pelted with flying glass and stone, as were uniformed police.[25]

Civic officials prided themselves on the fact that St. Louis did not experience the mass uprisings that shook Kansas City, Chicago, Detroit, and most other major U.S. cities following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968. This was not altogether true, for minor disturbances did occur in several black neighborhoods. Yet, several factors intervened on the side of the status quo. Local news media, fearing the spread of disturbances, avoided coverage. Meanwhile, leading members of CORE and the Mid-City Community Congress (discussed below) worked to quell further unrest. Also, St. Louis Mayor Alfonso J. Cervantes—seeking to direct the anger of the black populace, and drawing on the city's culture of "civility"—helped craft an interracial, ecumenical coalition that sponsored what became a 30,000-person eulogy procession and prayer service under the auspices of city hall.[26]

More serious rebellions occurred immediately east of the Mississippi River in neighboring East St. Louis. In early September 1967, SNCC Chairman H. Rap Brown spoke before a crowd of 1,500 people at East St. Louis's Lincoln High School. Following the speech, he gave another, more impromptu presentation atop a police cruiser outside the school. That evening, disturbances erupted in the city's downtown. At least 200 people were involved in white-owned property destruction and looting, as well as firebombings. Several residents were arrested, and a nineteen-year-old was shot to death as he fled police in a stockyard parking lot just outside the city limits. The following day, thirty people marched to police headquarters; looting continued sporadically into the following evening, requiring the intervention of more than one hundred state and city police officers.[27]

But reducing Black Power to black rebellion against police, and other symbols of white authority and power, buttresses its oversimplification as unorganized, violent rage. To the contrary, Black Power had institutional moorings. Certainly, it transformed CORE and ACTION. By 1965, most of St. Louis CORE's mainly white founding members were gone as a result of organizational schisms, both local and national. A year later, the national CORE, like SNCC, formally endorsed a version of "Black Power." In 1966, when the region's Bi-State Transit System purchased a local service car company with the intention of dismantling it, CORE began a boycott. Less expensive than Bi-State fare, and more extensive in its routes, service car companies had served a disproportionately African American clientele. CORE subsequently organized its own network of "Freedom

Cars" to transport black patrons. Negotiations with Bi-State Transit ended the boycott in March. Not surprisingly, the Gateway City became a test site in 1967 for CORE's national program, "Black Power, a Blueprint to Success and Survival," which focused on strategies of black control of community institutions.[28]

ACTION's history committee, chaired by Luther Mitchell, became another vehicle for institutionalizing Black Power. A veteran of Chicago's South Side Community Art Center, Mitchell coordinated the production of weekly questionnaires on African American history, which were delivered along routes in black neighborhoods. At a moment when the Black Studies movement was developing in many college and university communities, residents eagerly consumed the pamphlets, and waited for the answers to run in the following week's edition. These experiences provided the entrepot for Mitchell's involvement in a community-driven mural project that would bring art and history to the public. Working with activists and artists, Mitchell helped oversee the painting of the "Wall of Respect" at the intersection of Leffingwell and Franklin avenues, near the Pruitt-Igoe projects. Initiated in the summer of 1968, the mural featured a color collage of faces that included Jomo Kenyatta, W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Muhammad Ali. Marcus Garvey's famous appeal, "Up You Mighty Race," underscored the images. After its completion, the wall became a popular gathering space for political speakers, organizers, and cultural workers.[29]

Black Power Organized: A Local View

Besides transforming existing groups, Black Power also inspired new institutions, networks, and organizational forms. The opening of the black-owned Gateway National Bank in 1965 simultaneously refuted the endemic racism in St. Louis's banking industry, provided a source of credit and loans for working-class African Americans, and announced the arrival of a burgeoning new black entrepreneurial middle class. The Committee for Africa, also founded in 1965, mainly attracted students and faculty from St. Louis University and Washington University, both private schools. The committee's goal lay in connecting black St. Louisans to other people of African descent, mainly through educational forums and cultural programming, and providing aid to African liberation movements. *Proud*, a monthly publication also established in St. Louis during this period, was consistent with numerous periodicals around the nation geared to audiences of the new Black Nationalism. Similarly, the Association of Black Collegians, which staged building takeovers in 1968 at St. Louis and Washington universities, and Forest Park Community College, was part of a wave of militant black student unions that emerged at historically white institutions of higher learning when, following the urban riots after King's death, African Americans were first admitted in substantive numbers. In St. Louis, as elsewhere, campus-based black insurgency led to the creation of Black Studies curricula and programs, among other reforms.[30]

Southern Illinois University's Experiment in Higher Education (EHE), located in East St. Louis, likewise became a regional hub of Black Studies and Black Arts

ferment. The EHE contained the Performing Arts Training Center, helmed by the internationally renowned choreographer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham; and enjoyed ties to poet Eugene B. Redmond, whose Black River Writers Press was central to popularizing the new aesthetic through chapbooks, published fiction, and spoken-word recordings. As scholars like Benjamin Looker and James Edward Smethurst have reminded historians, the Black Arts movement was not confined to the East and West Coasts, but also blossomed in the nation's interior. According to Looker, the Black Artists' Group (BAG), founded in St. Louis around 1968, was particularly illustrative of this point. Heavily influenced by Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, the collective sought to raise a black social consciousness through multimedia works of poetry, dance, theater, visual arts, and free-jazz music; at its peak in 1969–1970, BAG had over fifty members. Headquartered in a renovated industrial building in the city's declining midtown area, the group staged performances in churches, storefronts, public housing centers, public schools, and sidewalks of black working-class communities, and ran a free youth arts academy.[31]

In some instances, anti-poverty programs provided bases for Black Power organizers. Certainly, the EHE, as well as East St. Louis's Project IMPACT—geared toward cultural and recreational outlets for black youth—were beneficiaries of federal funds. Another was St. Louis's Jeff-Vander-Lou (JVL) Community Action Group, which was formed in 1966 in the heart of the black neighborhood bounded by Jefferson, Vanderventer, St. Louis Avenue, and Natural Bridge Road. The JVL focused mainly on housing rehabilitation, and the corollary opportunities of black employment and homeownership these projects generated. The group also developed a medical clinic. The Mid-City Community Congress (MCC), established that same year, similarly promoted black community control. The MCC's autonomous youth "action arm," the Zulu 1200s, took shape in November 1967 under the leadership of Vietnam veteran Clarence Guthrie. The group's name spoke clearly of an agenda of reconnecting to the African past and raising black cultural consciousness. Its members, operating out of the MCC's Delmar Boulevard office, were involved in initiating the Wall of Respect project and other educational programming.[32]

The Black Liberators, formed in 1968 soon after King's assassination, were perhaps the city's most daring new organization. Charles Koen, the Liberators' founder and "prime minister," had, at sixteen, been chairman of the Cairo Nonviolent Freedom Committee, a SNCC affiliate in southern Illinois. Sometime after graduating from McKendree College, he had moved to the East St. Louis area, where he led school protests. Although new to the area, he had become a spokesman for East St. Louis's Black Economic Union, an umbrella organization made up of antipoverty, youth, and cultural organizations, and the Imperial Warlords and Black Egyptians, two local gangs. An experienced and dynamic organizer, Koen had recruited heavily from the Egyptians and Warlords to build the Liberators, and envisioned the new group as a vehicle for a metropolitan-wide black militant youth alliance. The Liberators, in fact, developed a statewide influence in Illinois, though its actual membership ranged between 150 and 300 people. At the invitation of the Reverend William Matheus, a white ACTION member, the newly

formed organization, in addition to maintaining a headquarters near Pruitt-Igoe, used St. Stephen's Episcopal Church as a regular base of operations.[33]

In appearances, the paramilitary Liberators patterned themselves after Oakland, California's Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, which had formed two years earlier. Members sported black berets and leather jackets, held weekly military drills, published a short-lived newspaper, *The Black Liberator*, ran a free breakfast program for children, and worked closely with white antiwar student activists at Washington University. (The Liberators supplied draft counseling to black youth fighting military conscription.[34]) Curiously, female recruits did not belong to the organization, per se, but rather to a women's auxiliary. This fit the group's self-image as a band of warriors, an identity centered largely on a masculinist vision of heroism. The Liberators' platform, a manifesto of radical Black Nationalism, demanded an end to black police violence and capitalist exploitation, and called for black pride and draft resistance to the war in Vietnam. Like the Panthers, they also drew immediate media attention through well-publicized and audacious acts. In August 1968, the Liberators approached the mainly white Franklin Avenue Businessmen's Association about making donations to the group, as well as hiring its members as night watchmen. The protection plan, which the merchants rejected, was both an obvious fundraising ploy and a step toward the group's other goal of supplanting police authority in the black Franklin Avenue area they patrolled. That same month, the Liberators provided an armed escort to the embattled black Congressman from New York, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., whom they had invited to town for a speaking engagement. A standoff between police and Liberators occurred as Powell attended a rally at the Wall of Respect. As the situation threatened to erupt into gunplay, Powell's aides spirited him away, and the small Liberator delegation dispersed. Police arrested two members on weapons violations charges.[35]

Other black militant leaders, like Green, deemed the Liberators' activities "adventurist," a reckless invitation to a police showdown for which its young, relatively inexperienced rank-and-file were ill prepared. Such criticism reflected more than just the fact that Green was a movement veteran who viewed such tactics as politically immature, or regarded the upstart Liberators as competitors. While Green regarded nonviolence in purely practical terms—and though he had played a role, locally, in the shift to what became labeled "Black Power"—his discomfort with the Liberators' activities speaks to how Black Power initiatives could differ dramatically from their Civil Rights antecedents. It is telling, moreover, that while the Liberators were a source of frustration for someone like Green, they apparently provided a model for *younger* African Americans. The Black Nationalist Party (BNP), which formed in 1969, was a similar avatar of black revolutionary politics. Like the Liberators, the BNP conducted separate community patrols of police. With funding from the city's HDC, the group also ran a short-lived Community Variety Store.[36]

Although organizations such as the Liberators and BNP were regional and local in character, they have broader significance in understanding the crosscurrents of Black Power. For instance, given Koen's preexisting ties to SNCC, one may view the Liberators as consistent with SNCC's earlier, abortive effort to form

organizations under the insignia of the Black Panther in Philadelphia and other cities. (This was conceived as an outgrowth of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, or Black Panther Party, organized by SNCC activists in Alabama in 1965–1966.) It is notable, also, that the Liberators developed at a time when SNCC and the Oakland-based Panthers had been attempting to forge an alliance. To the extent that the Liberators imitated the Black Panthers (who experienced explosive growth in 1968), it suggests that historians cannot evaluate the impact of a national organization like the Panthers simply on the basis of its chapters and known members. Rather, in localizing Black Power, we must also factor in the other numerous community groupings that readily adapted Panther platforms, programs, and stylizations to their specific conditions.[37]

The close ties between the Liberators and Zulus are also historically revealing. At the outset, both organizations shared members and engaged in joint activities. These multiple connections between the Liberators and the Zulus call into question the long-running bifurcation between "revolutionary" and "cultural" nationalists that have characterized descriptions of the encounters between nationally known groups like the Panthers and the US Organization. The Liberator–Zulu relationship supports the arguments, made by historians such as Komozi Woodard and Scot Brown, that the two Black Nationalist "camps" were not as diametrically opposed as the national Black Power narrative—told primarily through the deadly Panther-U.S. feud—suggests. Clearly, real ideological differences existed, as on the question of forming coalitions with white radicals; and police agencies had different evaluations of the respective threat each tendency posed to the status quo. Still, revolutionary nationalists were not dismissive of cultural work, just as cultural nationalists were not glibly "apolitical." In the relatively tight-knit activist community of a midsized metropolis like St. Louis, it was common for Black Freedom workers to participate simultaneously in "political" and "cultural" organizations, including ACTION, the Zulu 1200s, CORE, BAG, and the Liberators. Certainly, this overlap did not necessarily make organizational relationships harmonious—the small geographical space and density of interactions in a small city like St. Louis could in fact exacerbate battles over "turf," and differences of personality and ego among titled leaders. Yet, the frequency and multiplicity of relationships among African Americans here may equally have mitigated the sort of intense intra-movement conflicts that elsewhere turned deadly.[38]

The Black United (Liberation) Front

The Liberators and Zulus were part of a larger bloc of local organizations known as the Black United Front (later renamed the Black Liberation Front). Other members included CORE, ACTION, the Mid-City Community Congress, the Jeff-Vander-Lou action group, and after its formation, the Black Nationalist Party. In the spring of 1968, soon after King's murder, the alliance presented Mayor Cervantes with a fifteen-point mandate calling for upgrades of black municipal workers, city contracts for black businessmen, greater efforts to recruit

black police officers, and a massive restructuring of the Model Cities program. That fall, students at the predominantly black Vashon High School rioted after administrators eliminated a prom queen candidate because of her afro hairstyle. Students, and members of ACTION, the Liberators, and Zulus, met with school officials to negotiate a series of student demands, including the adoption of Black Studies curricula and the creation of a student advisory committee.[39]

The mainly male leaders of this local Black Power bloc, however, soon found themselves supporting players in the increasingly militant activity of black women and mothers receiving public assistance and living in St. Louis public housing. Signs of their growing dissatisfaction had been evident in 1967, when nine women and their children staged a ten-day, round-the-clock sit-in at the HDC offices. Having recently completed an HDC training program in electronics assembly, the women were frustrated by their inability to find employment—the result, they claimed, of racial discrimination practiced by McDonnell and fourteen other firms, as well as the HDC's hollow promises of job placement. That same year, sixty demonstrators, the majority of them black women, picketed the offices of the St. Louis Housing Authority, calling for rent reduction, better janitor services and pest control, and greater tenant representation on the housing authority board. These rumblings of discontent had turned thunderous as these women, drawing on their identities as mothers, public housing tenants, and aid recipients, more assertively voiced their right to social citizenship, autonomous households, and lives with dignity. In laying claim to entitlements independent of any male breadwinner, they implicitly rejected masculinist discourses that assigned them a secondary or entirely passive place in the Black Freedom Movement—and projected a new one rooted in "welfare rights."[40]

In May 1968, 200 public housing residents had marched to city hall to dramatize the need for jobs at a minimum wage of two dollars, a reduction in public rents, reforms in Missouri's means-tested welfare system, and the investigation of seventy-six caseworkers accused of unethical practices. Organized by the locally formed League for Adequate Welfare, the marchers walked twelve abreast with the Zulus and ACTION's Guerrilla Force serving as parade marshals. Holding signs with such pronouncements as "Idle Hands, Empty Stomachs, Hot Weather = Riots," demonstrators played on the white public's anxieties about urban rebellion to further goad city officials into action.[41]

The breaking point came in February 1969, though not in the form of a street uprising. When the housing authority announced its second rent increase in two years, more than 1,000 tenants of the city's six public housing developments launched a general rent strike. Their central argument, articulated by leaders like Jean King, was that rents should not exceed a quarter of a family's income. Initially, the protest did not constitute even half of the Gateway City's 7,800 public housing residents; yet, it became the largest of its kind in the nation ever, effectively commanding the attention of housing authority staff, the mayor's office, and even the White House. While the St. Louis Housing Authority faced the prospect of bankruptcy, the strikers picketed city hall. Federal officials, anxious about the directions the insurgency could take, intervened to settle the crisis. Not since the 1930s, when African American women laborers staged

strikes in St. Louis's food-processing industry, had black working-class women so boldly demonstrated their autonomy from the male-centered leadership that had characterized most periods of local activism. ACTION, the Liberators, and the Zulus all lent support to the strike, and St. Stephen's Episcopal Church (the stronghold of Matheus, a prominent ACTION member, and a hub of Liberator activity) became the strikers' headquarters. Community organizer Buck Jones, the St. Louis Legal Aid Society, and the Teamsters Local 688 also aided the strikers. A settlement with city officials, reached in the fall of 1969, acceded to the strikers' main demands, which included rent reductions, the establishment of tenant management boards, and better upkeep and policing of the housing developments. Nationally, the rent strike helped influence the passage of the Brooke Amendment to the 1969 Housing Act, which placed a ceiling on public housing rents and provided subsidies for rent reductions.[42]

Black Power activists' involvement in women's struggles for fair public housing rents and adequate welfare payments illustrates the grassroots organizing that defined local Black Power initiatives, which historians like Matthew J. Countryman and Yohuru Williams have described. Consistent with Rhonda Y. Williams's work on black female public housing activists in Baltimore, this episode also contradicts narratives of a Black Power movement that was thoroughly masculinist and anti-woman. This is not to say that male organizers like Green or Koen were pro-feminist, or that they did not idealize the patriarchal, male-centered household (or even that female public housing and welfare rights activists did not harbor the same ideals). The point, rather, is that viewing Black Power mobilizations on the ground reveals that the actual praxis of both were more nuanced than any public pronouncements from national, or even local, figures.[43]

Police and FBI Repression of Black Power Militancy in St. Louis

As is well known in national narratives of Black Power, activists were also targeted by police agencies. The Liberators, arguably the city's most radical Black Power organization, weathered the brunt of this harassment locally. A long history of police abuse in black St. Louis communities directly influenced the formation of the Liberators, and authorities frequently harassed, provoked, and arrested members through discriminatory uses of existing ordinances. Yet, the Liberators' own tendencies toward "adventurism" may have further inflamed the harassment. In early September 1968, a violent series of incidents unfolded after Koen and four other young men were arrested following a dispute with police about an unlaminated license plate. Gunmen fired shots through the front window of the infamous Lucas Avenue police station, where the five had been taken. Gunshots were also fired into the home of Fred Grimes, a black police lieutenant and Lucas Avenue station watch commander. Assailants, too, firebombed the office of a black realtor who served on the Board of Police Commissioners.[44]

In rapid succession, a barrage of gunfire destroyed the window of the Liberators' headquarters, and unknown assailants ransacked their office and set their patrol car

ablaze. (A witness later claimed to have seen Lieutenant Grimes fire a shotgun blast through the Liberators' office window.) That same evening, police rounded up twenty-one people affiliated with the Liberators, as well as the Zulus, for questioning. Claiming that the spate of shootings and firebombings was the result of a Liberator–Zulu feud, the president of the police commissioner board, Mayor Cervantes, and Missouri governor Warren Hearnes, endorsed a police crackdown on both groups. The chain of events reached a crescendo on September 13, 1968 when Koen and Leon Dent, another key Liberator, were seriously injured while again in custody at the Lucas Avenue station (Police had arrested them on traffic charges). Dent suffered facial lacerations, while Koen's skull and both hands were fractured. Disputing charges that they had assaulted officers, the two activists claimed that police had beaten them with brass knuckles and clubs in the basement of the station house. A broad coalition of Black Power, student and antiwar organizations came to the Liberators' defense. Congressional hopeful William Clay, a veteran of the Jefferson Bank boycott and the 1957 charter fight, telegrammed U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark to investigate the police station incident. In October, Koen, Green, and Joel Allen of the Washington University Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) were plaintiffs in a lawsuit seeking an injunction against the police harassment of local black and antiwar activists.[45]

Public criticism of police actions made the department more circumspect in its dealings with Black Power organizers, but it did not qualitatively change police activities. Nor did the outcry even begin to address the larger campaign of state terror directed at St. Louis's Black Liberation Front by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had updated his anticommunist crusade in August 1967, when the Bureau launched its Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) to undermine Civil Rights, Black Power, and New Left organizations. Expanded in March 1968, COINTEL operations instigated police raids, arrests, and assassination, bankrolled informants, maintained surveillance of individuals and groups, and fed negative stories about activists to cooperative newspapers. The *Globe-Democrat*, a consistent foe of Civil Rights and Black Power activism, had in fact been one of the five newspapers selected by the FBI to spread propaganda about local and national movement figures.[46]

The Bureau also circulated phony correspondence and seemingly anonymous cartoons to spread distrust and paranoia, and exploit the latent friction within, and between, organizations like the Liberators and Zulus. In October 1968, the FBI distributed an unsigned flyer praising the Zulus and criticizing the Liberators for, among other things, "work[ing] with white college honkies" and dressing like "honkie truck drivers and motersycle cats [*sic*]." The circular, noted an internal Bureau memorandum, "is purposely slanted to give the impression that the Zulus may have had a key role in its preparation although this is not stated." The widely disseminated flyer fed claims by St. Louis police that the two groups were engaged in a war. The FBI similarly weighed the possibility of promoting animosity between the Liberators and ACTION. Observing

that the two organizations were drawing closer together, an FBI memorandum, dated January 8, 1969, declared that the Bureau was looking into plans that would "frustrate any strong degree of cooperation" between the groups. However, a succession of costly arrests in 1968, and the indictment of Koen and Dent on charges of assaulting police, had effectively hampered the Liberators' ability to function as an organization by the end of 1969, despite its publicized merger with SNCC the previous fall. The group faded steadily from the St. Louis scene—as did the Zulu 1200s, who were largely defunct by the spring of 1969.[47]

The Bureau concentrated its attention on ACTION, which according to a September 1969 memorandum, was "the only Black group of any significance other than the NOI [Nation of Islam]." FBI documents reveal that by early 1970, the agency was developing a plan against an unnamed white female active in ACTION. Through apparent surveillance, agents learned that her husband, who was uninvolved in the group, was threatened by the woman's close interactions with black men. The Bureau mailed him a phony letter, signed by "A Soul Sister," intimating that his wife had had multiple affairs with ACTION members. The couple soon separated and divorced, and Bureau correspondence noted approvingly that the woman's political involvement waned. In localizing the story of FBI counterinsurgency, scholars may recognize how these operations were symptomatic not only of the harassment of thousands of little-known local individuals and organizations around the nation, but also of the FBI's monitoring of entire black communities. It was not until November 1975 that the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence disclosed the full extent of these tactics against the progressive social movements of the period.[48]

Conclusion

Considered over time, and on the ground, the Black Freedom Movement has shown a durable continuity. But it has also been marked by change, in terms of leadership, constituencies, dominant ideologies, and strategies and tactics—as well as shifting structures of U.S. capitalism and modes of racial control. As anticommunist harassment during the early cold war, and FBI counterinsurgency during the late 1960s attest, Black Freedom workers have encountered moments of political rupture that disabled radical tendencies while promoting, or at least sparing, others. What is striking about the black radical tradition is not its impermeability to repression, but rather its ability to reemerge at different historical junctures, despite attempts to suppress it.

While Black Power followed numerous antecedents, including a long history of Black Nationalism, it nonetheless represented the agendas of a particular generation who experienced the successes and failures of postwar, popular black struggles. Black Power Studies has expanded historians' knowledge and appreciation of this period of the late twentieth century—the weaknesses and

setbacks, as well as the triumphs and enduring legacies. As Black Freedom scholars retrieve more local narratives of Black Power (and their precursors), the richer will be our engagement with past, and present, transcripts of African American resistance.

Notes

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BETWEEN CIVIL RIGHTS AND BLACK POWER IN THE GATEWAY CITY: THE ACTION COMMITTEE TO IMPROVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEGROES (ACTION), 1964–75

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Introduction

When construction began on the federally assisted Gateway Arch project in the early 1960s, St. Louis, Missouri's civic, business and government elite viewed it as a means of revitalizing the blighted downtown riverfront area. Located near the banks of the Mississippi, this tourist attraction would be the centerpiece of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial park, symbolizing through formidable public art St. Louis's importance as the gateway city to the American west. Many local Civil Rights activists, however, saw the Arch project as indicative of continuing racial discrimination. African Americans worked as laborers at the site, but held no positions in the skilled building trades involved in the construction. During the midsummer of 1964, members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) picketed the Old Courthouse, which housed the downtown offices of the superintendent of the construction project. Then on July 14, one black and one white member of CORE staged a dramatic demonstration that became legend in St. Louis's Civil Rights struggle. While construction workers lunched, and protesters gathered for a press conference at the Old Courthouse, Percy Green and Richard Daly used a partially enclosed steel surface ladder to scale 125 feet up the north leg of the unfinished structure. Workmen returning to the scene found the two men perched above them, sitting on rungs of the ladder. Feet dangling, Green and Daly ignored orders by workers, National Park Service officers, and the project's assistant superintendent to disembark. A group of demonstrators, gathered at the base of the Arch leg, demanded that black workers receive at least ten percent of the jobs at the site. Four hours after making their ascent, the two Civil Rights activists climbed down the fixture to a reception of news media and police. Authorities charged them both with trespassing, peace disturbance, and resisting arrest.[1]

The incident focused attention on construction contractors, and black St. Louisans' longstanding grievances about the racially exclusive nature of the building trades in this strongly unionized city. It also forced the federal government to assay its nondiscrimination policies toward government contractors and federally assisted construction projects. The protest became part of a chain of events that led the U.S. Justice Department to file a "pattern or practice of discrimination" suit against the St. Louis AFL-CIO Building and Construction Trades Council, and four of its member unions. This was the first such action un-

der Title VII of the newly implemented 1964 Civil Rights Act, which governed equal employment opportunity.[2]

The demonstration at the Arch occurred under the auspices of St. Louis CORE, but it marked the beginnings of an offshoot group—the Action Committee to Improve Opportunities for Negroes (ACTION). Active between 1964 and 1984, the organization offers entry into several tributaries of social history on the black experience. First, ACTION's history adds to revisionist treatments of the Civil Rights struggle of the 1950s and '60s that address the intersection between the movement, black labor/working-class insurgency, and the locally-oriented nature of these activities.[3] Such narratives decenter national black protest organizations and their local branches, lending greater attention to indigenous, unaffiliated groupings. This "New" Civil Rights Studies also gives greater weight to local struggles than to the initiatives of the federal government. Third, a study of ACTION further challenges portrayals of the Civil Rights struggle as elite-driven and focused on a symbolic, narrowly conceived "integration." Rather, investigating such an organization illuminates how the fight for the right to vote and enjoy public accommodations on par with white citizens was wedded to strategies for expanding employment and other economic opportunities for black people. Fourth, this work augments new historical interpretations asserting that Civil Rights and Black Power were not dichotomous political projects, as historians have claimed in the past. That is, no impenetrable line of demarcation existed between the strategies, tactics and goals often attributed separately to either "Civil Rights" or "Black Power." ACTION's membership exhibited qualities one could ascribe generically to either liberal integrationism or black nationalism. However, the organization did not fit neatly in either category. Instead, it straddled an enigmatic line between the two, serving as a visible bridge between the Civil Rights and Black Power phases of this period of African American social movement activity.[4]

This paper argues that ACTION's "inbetween" character was not at all contradictory, which calls into question continuing efforts to mythologize Civil Rights and vilify Black Power in the popular memory. But while they are not sharply discontinuous, neither are Civil Rights and Black Power collapsible historical constructs. To completely obliterate any distinguishing traits between the two effectively removes the black experience from the fluid patterns of continuity and change that undergird historical inquiry. Using ACTION as an illustration, this project contends that Civil Rights and Black Power drew adherents from similar, overlapping constituencies. Yet, Civil Rights and Black Power were identifiable *phases* of an evolving Black Freedom Movement. Proceeding from this conceptual grounding, this paper locates ACTION within the changing character and membership of CORE, and the contradictions of the Civil Rights struggle of the early 1960s. Second, this project discusses ACTION's own development, rank-and-file, and political agenda. This work then moves to a description of ACTION's major organizational campaigns, its interactions with crosscurrents of Black Power in St. Louis during the late 1960s, and its gradual decline. Finally, this work offers a fuller interpretation of the organization's legacies, and its overall significance within Civil Rights and Black Power scholarship.

African Americans in St. Louis

St. Louis was a unique crossroads—the "Gateway City." Historically, it had been a strategic center of riverboat commerce, and a midcontinental link between eastern centers of finance and the developing territories west of the Mississippi. On a vertical axis, the city embodied a "mutual checkmating of Northern and Southern influences." During the Civil War, St. Louis was split between pro-Union and Confederate sympathies; like Kentucky and Maryland, two other border states, Missouri avoided secession. Like its midwestern neighbors to the immediate north, St. Louis became both heavily industrialized and unionized. The city similarly became a terminus for southeastern European and Lebanese immigrants, though culturally it bore the marks of its more numerous German and Irish population. A smoky, noise-ridden manufacturing center, St. Louis was neither a small town nor a big city. It may have been "commercially Yankee," but it was a southern metropolis in its racially proscriptive laws and practices, though unevenly so. Missouri law forbade interracial marriage and integrated schooling, though open seating prevailed on public conveyances. Department stores welcomed black shoppers, but their lunch counters refused them service. Separate, and fewer, public recreational facilities existed for black children in the city. Theaters, municipal swimming pools, and restaurants were also segregated, but public libraries were not. Because black St. Louisans could vote, they held political office early on, and used their strength in district elections to gain lower-level patronage jobs and services. This included the building of the first, and one of the finest, black high schools west of the Mississippi; and much later, construction of the full-service Homer G. Phillips Hospital. Yet, the franchise did not translate into equal participation at the bargaining table, where white political and business leaders still made the major decisions affecting black communities.[5]

In the realm of work, most black St. Louisans earned their livelihoods as personal servants, and as unskilled and common laborers in packing, steel, iron, glass, brick and railroad industries where unionization was weakest. A handful of black people worked in the city's declining shoe, clothing and textile industries, and toiled on the riverfront levee. Black women, additionally, found work in marginal food and rag processing industries. While employed as construction helpers, Black men were excluded from the skilled building trades, as they were from most AFL unions. Jim Crow norms also were manifest in the city's housing patterns. Following the example of citizens in Baltimore and Louisville, white voters in St. Louis passed a residential segregation ordinance in 1916. Efforts by the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and a U.S. Supreme Court ruling, overturned the law, but realtors and homeowners' groups found private restrictive covenants adequate for achieving the spatial containment of St. Louis's swelling black population after the Great War. Although scattered in pockets across the city, most African Americans occupied the city's Central Corridor, where they crowded the northern fringes of the downtown business district and the three wards nearest the central riverfront. Mill Creek Valley, located in this area, was a maze of cheap

tenements and hotels, pawnshops, churches, factory-lined streetcar tracks, and dilapidated shacks without indoor plumbing. West of the downtown-midtown area, Elleardsville, known as the "Ville," similarly became an African American enclave, and the center of black St. Louis's dense social, cultural and educational institutions.[6]

St. Louis CORE and the Postwar Black Revolt, 1948–60

During the 1930s and '40s, these conditions helped ignite black community struggles around recreational space, federal relief, better schools, and expanded employment opportunities. Unemployed Councils, the American Workers Union, the St. Louis Negro Workers Council, and the March on Washington Movement were among the organizations and citizens' committees that pursued these goals, backed by the *St. Louis Argus* and *St. Louis American*, the city's two major black newspapers.[7] ACTION was historically continuous with these periods of activity, but it had its most immediate origins in the St. Louis Committee of Racial Equality. Established in 1942, CORE was an offshoot of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a small Christian-pacifist group. Rooted in a Gandhian worldview and the spirit of interracialism, the committee sought to apply the philosophy of nonviolence directly to racial problems. Formed in 1947–48, St. Louis CORE was a bi-racial assemblage of World War II veterans, students, teachers, professors, labor lawyers, and organizers with the United Wholesale and Distribution Workers of America (later Teamsters Local 688).

The committee participated in a broad interracial campaign to desegregate St. Louis's public swimming pools in 1949–50, though its main focus was desegregating lunch counters at downtown department stores, drugstores, and dimestores. Through sit-in campaigns, members forced Woolworth's, Walgreen's, and other five-and-dimes to end lunch counter restrictions on black patrons. By 1955, even the major department stores had opened all of their eating accommodations to black St. Louisans, and desegregation of the city's midtown movie houses and theaters soon followed. A series of Supreme Court decisions, meanwhile, chiseled at the edifices of legal racism, culminating in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision. Bus boycotts in Baton Rouge, Louisiana (1953–54) and Montgomery, Alabama (1955–56) also propelled black civil rights to the forefront of the national agenda. This set the stage for an active, mass-based challenge to segregation rooted in nonviolent resistance—methods FOR and CORE had pioneered.[8]

Following a brief period of quietude, St. Louis CORE revived itself in 1957–58 around the fight against a proposed new city charter, and a campaign for improved black employment in supermarket chains, department stores and other consumer goods industries. Much of this occurred in joint action with the St. Louis NAACP's Job Opportunities Council, whose members had negotiated agreements with Kroger's and National Tea in 1957, and picketed an A&P store. The NAACP-CORE collaboration around changing existing employment policies brought numerous successess in 1958–59, while members of CORE and the NAACP's militant Youth Council continued to picket the White Castles, Howard Johnsons, and other eateries that still practiced Jim Crow. In 1960,

Theodore McNeal—a former leader of the St. Louis March on Washington Movement, and chairman of the NAACP Job Opportunities Council—became Missouri's first black state senator. Pressured from below by young demonstrators, the Missouri Restaurant Owners Association also began a voluntary desegregation program. In 1961, St. Louis aldermen passed a hard-won public accommodations ordinance ending segregation in all stores, theaters, hotels, restaurants and playgrounds. Following a split with the senior NAACP branch, most Youth Council members left to join the growing ranks of St. Louis CORE.[9]

St. Louis CORE in Transition at the Height of the Civil Rights Struggle, 1961–64

The "Freedom Rides," begun in May 1961 to test the integration of interstate terminals, catapulted the organization to national prominence. In the three-year period that followed, CORE assumed a larger role in voter registration in the South. However, job discrimination in northern and border states became its central emphasis. The mass nature of these campaigns allowed CORE to enlist, for the first time, substantial numbers of working-class blacks. Circa 1960, an estimated 214,337 African Americans lived in St. Louis, many of them recently migrated from Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas and Alabama. Some 98 percent resided mainly in three locations cutting through the central city, including the area directly adjacent to the downtown business district, and midtown. With the explosion of mass direct action, many of these black St. Louisans sought to align themselves directly with protest organizations. By 1962, CORE nationally had grown from a group with predominantly white, northern, middle-class membership to one more evenly balanced between blacks and whites, workers and professionals, and northerners and southerners. Among those who joined St. Louis CORE during this period were Ivory Perry, a Korean War veteran, and Percy Green, a skilled radio and electrical mechanic at McDonnell Aircraft. At the suggestion of a white co-worker, Green began attending CORE meetings, and became a regular on a picket line at a local Kroger's grocery store.[10]

This was a scant six months before the organization began a massive 1963–64 boycott against the Jefferson Bank and Trust Company. Most African Americans deposited their money at the bank, yet the financial institution employed none in clerical work. Demonstrators mounted their protests with missionary zeal, literally putting their bodies "on the line" in front of bank entrances, teller's windows, department stores, City Hall, and even the tires of police cars. Nine high-profile demonstrators were arrested, and several more arrests followed. Regular CORE meetings skyrocketed from ten people to a staggering 300. With much of the experienced leadership behind bars, Green assumed responsibility for coordinating the picket line at the bank. Shortly thereafter, he became chairman of CORE's employment committee. The Urban League and NAACP, initially supportive of the boycotters' aims, turned against them when they continued to defy a court injunction prohibiting disruptions of the bank's business. Even old militants like State Senator McNeal upbraided the protesters for violating the restraining order. But many working-class African Americans like Green who joined CORE during this period were skeptical of the tactics of polite noncoop-

eration. As this new constituency became more engaged, CORE's thrust became both more creative and militant, with many chapters actively organizing mass arrests.[11]

Thus, the Jefferson Bank boycott reflected the many changes occurring in CORE nationally. A tension existed between tactics of economic coercion and social disruption, and the organization's philosophical commitment to pacifism. Other tensions involved a tug-of-war between those who counseled gradualism, and others who questioned the organization's "tea and doughnuts" strategy of civility, interracial negotiation and demonstrations that adhered to the law. The growing working-class, black and mass character of CORE's activities also were increasing demands for African American leadership. "By 1963, CORE had a more nationalistic approach to civil rights," Marian Oldham, a founding member of St. Louis CORE, remembered. "Blacks said let's do it ourselves—'Black Is Beautiful' ... We didn't have as many white members. The group was more restive—they wanted more immediate results." When the Jefferson Bank boycott ended with the placement of four black bank tellers in January 1964, members of St. Louis CORE immediately fell into a dispute over what some considered the protest's limited gains. This internal conflict mirrored similar debate about the need for a more confrontational, though still nonviolent, strategy. Advocates viewed the prospect of more forceful methods as a way to win more than just a handful of jobs. Nationally, the successes and failures of the 1961–64 period led many members of CORE and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to search for new organizational visions. Passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, further undermined the shaky consensus they had shared with moderate organizations like the NAACP and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).[12]

The landscape of black political activity and consciousness also was shifting in response to several economic and social processes at work since the late 1940s. New industries in electronics, chemicals and aerospace defense prospered in the St. Louis area, but manufacturing in the city declined overall, as did retail trade. This degeneration in St. Louis's industrial vitality and downtown commerce only reinforced a growing joblessness among the local black population. Government-sponsored highways enabled firms like McDonnell Aircraft, Monsanto Chemical, and Emerson Electric to locate in developing suburban sites. Many of these firms were reputed to hire African Americans only in the most marginal job categories. As early as 1962, Ernest Calloway—a former St. Louis NAACP president, a Teamster, and then president of the local division of the Negro American Labor Council—was issuing warnings about the adverse effects of automation on young black workers just entering the labor market. The 1964 Economic Opportunity Act further acknowledged the changing economic topography: Programs like the Job Corps, and St. Louis's Human Development Corporation, focused on skills training, services, and job placement for inner-city youth and other "unemployables." Concomitant to this, policy changes in the federal Aid to Dependent Children program coincided with the increase in black women receiving assistance, but it further stigmatized them in their poverty and poorly substituted for meaningful employment.[13]

St. Louis mayor Joseph Darst, and his successor Raymond Tucker, were representative of the city officials across the nation who faced the uncertain urban-

industrial future by fashioning pro-growth alliances to strengthen downtown, build expressways, and remove urban "obsolescence." Tucker helped consolidate Civic Progress, Inc., a small consortium of the city's top business and civic figures—men such as department store owner Howard F. Baer, aircraft titan William A. McDonnell, brewer August A. Busch, and Boatmen's Bank executive Tom K. Smith. Created in 1952 during the Darst administration, this loose coalition molded land-use policy alongside City Hall. The group heavily promoted civic improvement bond issues to underwrite new urban development. Downtown St. Louis, Inc., another consortium of business executives, boasted a similar mission of resuscitating the Central Corridor, and the chairman of the local City Plan Commission was among its conveners. Gathering momentum in the 1950s, "downtown revitalization" and "urban renewal" framed the thinking of mayors, business leaders, realtors, the daily press, development agencies, and even trade unions. Ironically, this pro-growth orientation, coupled with the effects of federal highway and housing acts, only contributed to the Gateway City's continuing woes. Highway construction eviscerated St. Louis's central-city areas, and facilitated an on-going white suburban and business exodus west of downtown. Private banks, and the Federal Housing and Veterans administrations, favored homeowner loans to single-family dwellings in the "new homogeneous" neighborhoods sprouting to the west, and redlined older areas of the city. Simultaneously, federally assisted slum clearance expedited black residential displacement and new forms of ghettoization. Mill Creek Valley became the major target of local urban renewal initiatives. Beginning in 1959, demolition of the area dislocated an estimated 20,000 black people, ten percent of St. Louis's African American population. Redevelopment plans included new housing, industrial parks, commercial buildings, and an expansion of the St. Louis University campus; yet much of the 460 acres of property lay barren, earning it the apt moniker "Hiroshima Flats."[14]

Many of the "Mill Creek exiles" beelined to Carr Square Village, the Pruitt-Igoe homes, Darst-Webbe, and other low-rent federal housing projects on the city's near North and near South sides, both directly adjacent to the devastated urban renewal area. Mainly constructed during the 1950s as high-rises, these projects lacked adequate playground space and proximity to social amenities. Shoddy doorknobs, locks, window frames and water pipes underscored the buildings' overall makeshift structures. Other black refugees from St. Louis urban renewal settled in the midtown area, whose growing reputation for crime became fodder for the daily media. The neighborhoods north of Delmar Avenue also became solidly black as white St. Louisans quit their homes in the city for residences at the western suburban fringe. In 1960, the St. Louis Urban League reported, 70 percent of the city's 214,337 African Americans lived in or near deteriorating housing stock, much of it built prior to 1939. Through the 1948 *Shelley v. Kraemer* Supreme Court ruling, and the efforts of the Greater St. Louis Committee for Freedom of Residence, many black families of means relocated to nearby St. Louis County suburbs. But continuing employment discrimination, particularly in the skilled trades, affected workers' ability to secure lives outside the deteriorating urban core. At the zenith of the Civil Rights struggle, then, two St. Louis metropoles were coming into stark form: a central hub, mainly black and poor; and a western suburban crescent, largely white and more affluent.[15]

This growing racialized poverty undermined the promises of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, and as in other urban centers seeded the soil for a revivified black nationalist upsurge.[16] The volatile Civil Rights consensus clearly disintegrated as battle-fatigued activists divided over such matters as whether African Americans should have privileged, or sole, leadership in Civil Rights organizations; whether whites should remain part of such organizations; and whether activists should focus more clearly on the problems of the black urban poor. This proposed strategy of inner-city community organizing, which became CORE's official policy around 1964, reflected an ethos that would become known as "Black Power." By 1966, both SNCC and CORE had endorsed interpretations of this slogan. ACTION emerged from these economic travails, mounting tensions within CORE, and the overall schisms altering the Civil Rights struggle.

"More and Better Paying Jobs for Black Men": ACTION's Program and Strategic Thrust

The Action Committee to Improve Opportunities for Negroes began its nascent development in January 1964, when the results of the Jefferson Bank boycott split the ranks of St. Louis CORE. Direct action dissidents soon began consolidating a separate infrastructure, though as the Gateway Arch demonstrations illustrated, they continued to organize protests under the recognizable name of their parent group. By December 1964, the formal split with CORE had occurred and the dissidents stepped fully out of the shadows. ACTION established headquarters at 2906 Union Boulevard, in St. Louis's black-populated Ville area. In one of their first public acts, members publicized a Civil Rights Benefit Program featuring jazz, folk music, and dramatic performances. The fundraiser took place in early June, and members announced plans to share the monies with SNCC's upcoming summer Southern Voter Registration Project. The newborn group's name easily evoked the image of an old-guard Civil Rights organization, particularly the use of the term "Negro," which was falling out of usage among younger activists, who viewed themselves as "Black." But the group's acronym, ACTION, betrayed a far more militant essence. Its twenty-five initial members reflected the more grassroots and action-oriented forces who had gravitated toward CORE's employment committee. The presence of political radicals, liberal integrationists, and peace activists all enabled the organization to tap a vast array of talents and skills. Program, not ideology, was primary. A number of internal councils formed, including a finance committee that coordinated the sale of organizational memberships and one-cent "freedom stamps." Both projects provided needed revenue, while regular Sunday meetings open to the public helped the organization maintain contact with a variety of potential cadre and supporters.[17]

Some members, like former CORE chairman and Jefferson boycott organizer Robert Curtis, were black professionals. Curtis shared radical leanings with members like Hershel Walker, an Unemployed Council veteran and the former chair of the National Negro Labor Council who had led a 1952 boycott of a local Sears store. Other members were college-educated whites of liberal stripe who had connections to Washington University, St. Louis University,

and other prestigious institutions of higher education. Sister Cecilia Goldman, who chaired ACTION's religious committee, was a Maryknoll nun. The Reverend William Matheus, another member, was assistant rector at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, a bulwark of progressive social causes. Doris Gammon, the organization's accountant, was a young wife and mother. Green, the organization's chairman, was a skilled worker who nonetheless spent many years in the ranks of the "hardcore unemployed" because of his political involvement. Luther Mitchell, a World War II veteran newly relocated from Chicago, brought to the organization an interest in black history and community art that would prove vital to expanding its support base. Ivory Perry, typical of some ACTION members, maintained direct ties to CORE. As a volunteer organization with high turnover, ACTION drew into its orbit as many as seventy people beyond an active membership of thirty. Overall, the organization's membership combined a cross-section of three constituencies. The first was a black and white petty elite, who hailed from established ecumenical and pacifist backgrounds. These were the interracialist networks that had formed CORE's early bedrock, followed by those who had joined CORE from the NAACP Youth Council. The second constituency was the larger number of black working-class people, whom the NAACP had been unable, or unwilling, to mobilize since the 1950s. A few had been politically active for decades, but most had been inspired to action by the southern Civil Rights struggle and the Jefferson Bank boycott. This stratum had become CORE's most vital component, giving the organization its mass base. The third, and most numerous, constituency was an emerging cohort of black youth between the ages of 20 and 30. Faced with diminished job opportunites, dislocated by urban renewal, and isolated by postwar ghettoization, this membership was most receptive to the appeals of Black Power.

When the organization first became public, its literature announced a program of securing more and better employment opportunities for black St. Louisans, specifically good working-class jobs with ample benefits. Unemployment among African Americans in St. Louis was nearly three times greater than among whites. Black workers' wages also lagged. In 1959, black St. Louis families earned an annual median income of $3,718, as compared to $6,300 for white families. In 1960, some 11 percent of all black families in St. Louis city had annual incomes of less than $1,000. Twenty-five percent had annual incomes of less than $2,000, while 29 percent had incomes of between $2,000 and $4,000. Occupationally, only 22 percent of African Americans employed in St. Louis city and St. Louis County (16,791) were employed in professional, technical, managerial, clerical, sales, and skilled jobs. Summarized the Urban League: "One of every three Negroes that are employed works either in private households or as service workers."[18] Black people's concentration in this small range of job classifications persisted because big businesses denied African American workers opportunities outside of menial, low-paying labor. Refuting claims that black workers did not possess the necessary skills for better jobs, ACTION members contended that in well-paying blue-collar occupations like gas meter reading, telephone installation and repair, and baked goods delivery, skills were learned on the job, and workers needed only a basic formal education. While not excluding African American women from its purview, the organization rallied members around the slogan "More and Better Paying Jobs for Black Men," which made

evident a focus on achieving better male employment. Publicizing an ACTION informational meeting, one early handbill read:

> ACTION is spearheading a project to obtain *good paying* jobs for Negro men, both unskilled and skilled—with main emphasis on those jobs requiring little or no formal education and little or no previous experience. Good paying jobs of this type are found in Big Business, who can afford ON-THE-JOB TRAINING for their employees.[19]

As was evident in this statement, ACTION's leadership understood its purpose through the lens of the "male wage-earner," thus equating social citizenship for African American workers with the attainment of black "manhood." Such reasoning drew from the black folk wisdom that companies hired African American women in prestigious, though minor, positions to preempt meaningful employment of black men. This racialized, gendered dimension to ACTION's working-class program overlooked the particular ways in which racism affected black women. Granted, the phone company employed a select number of educated black women as telephone operators, which bestowed respectability and "ladyhood." Most black women in St. Louis, however, remained in domestic-oriented work, subject to low wages and irregular hours. Arguments privileging black manhood also shared the same discursive space as "War on Poverty" arguments blaming "matriarchy" for the poverty and cultural dysfunction in black communities. Such viewpoints fed a conviction that black women acted, through no fault of their own perhaps, as a barrier to black men assuming their rightful place as the heads of households and communities.[20]

While it may have skewed the picture of racism's effects on black men and women, ACTION's organizational platform recognized that improving the quality of black life hinged on lifting the boats of the community's working class. Better wages, activists believed, would translate into more consumer spending in the city's declining black neighborhoods, and enrich black-owned businesses. Holding a good job, from this perspective, also created opportunities for workers to learn how to start and manage their own businesses. To fight for their ideal of the black wage-earning "family chief breadwinner," members targeted several major employers—McDonnell Aircraft Company (which became McDonnell-Douglas Corporation following a 1967 merger), Southwestern Bell Telephone Company, Laclede Gas Company, and Union Electric Company. ACTION's leadership argued that black men and women should make up ten percent of all hires at Southwestern, Laclede, Union, and McDonnell, based on the total number of employees at each firm. The organization also demanded the General Contractors Association in St. Louis admit 1,000 black men into on-the-job training programs, and place them in all construction crafts. While mindful of the fact that many industrial unions colluded with management in discriminating against black employees, ACTION leaders understood that outside the building trades, where craft unions wielded control over the hiring process through apprenticeships, management held the reins of hiring and promotions. The city's utilities were central objects of ACTION's attention: Because they enjoyed franchises granted by the city, they presumably bore a special obligation to practice fair employment. Yet, figures painted a pattern of discrimination. A 1958 study of the phone company had revealed that out of a workforce of 7,000,

African Americans comprised only 121 employees, and 92 percent of these were in custodial positions. By July 1963, the company had 9,000 employees, 123 of whom were black. Consistent with the earlier numbers, eighty-four of these were custodians.[21]

In early negotiations with ACTION, these firms hedged on disclosing the number of their black employees, or attributed black workers' absence in many classifications to the preferences of white customers. Echoing common white anxieties about black male criminality, company representatives claimed that many St. Louis residents did not want unfamiliar black men entering their homes to install phones or read gas meters. McDonnell Aircraft, the city's largest single employer, refused even to meet with ACTION representatives to discuss matters of black hiring and upgrading. Despite such resistance, these large firms were vulnerable to negative publicity if their discriminatory practices were exposed. In the end, ACTION's leaders calculated, these were the firms that could grant real concessions to St. Louis's black working class.

Major Organizational Campaigns, 1965–67

Along with its male-centered and working-class focus, the character of its tactics thrust ACTION into the local spotlight. Because they belonged to a purely indigenous organization, members were able to chart a course independent of any national office. During the spring and summer of 1965, when ACTION first exploded in a flurry of motion, members frequently grabbed news headlines through unorthodox, though tightly structured, activities that transformed civil disobedience into guerrilla theater. On April 18, ACTION workers assembled at the telephone company building on Tenth and Pine Street. Interlocking their arms, they walked into the middle of the street and blocked evening rush-hour traffic. Green and another ACTION member, Hamid Khalil, lay down in the street in front of the building, while other demonstrators ignored police orders to disperse. Homeward-bound motorists were stalled for almost thirty minutes before authorities arrested Green and Khalil for peace disturbance and obstructing traffic.[22]

Downtown demonstrations continued weekly. Militant Civil Rights workers experimented with another gimmick on August 10, when they staged a "splash-in" at the phone company. Using paint buckets and dippers, men and women spent a full hour hurling black-tinted white paint at doors and windows. Always handy with an explanation for their flamboyant contrivances, they explained they were showing that Southwestern Bell executives' gestures toward hiring black workers were nothing more than "an integrated whitewash." Plainclothes police with walkie-talkies observed the demonstration from strategic positions around the building, but made no arrests. Later that same month, as downtown protests continued, ten ACTION members gathered in front of Laclede Gas's main office, chanting and carrying signs that castigated the firm for its lack of black meter readers. They marched for forty minutes under a construction scaffold in drizzling rain, and as employees left the building for home, demonstrators began dipping sponges into the rain puddles on the asphalt. Moistening sheets of ACTION "freedom stamps," they stuck them to the office building's windows and doors. Crossing Olive Street and shortcutting through a parking lot, they

resumed the demonstration and "freedom stamping" in front of the telephone company as employees began to leave.[23]

In a concurrent thread of activity, the organization fought the formidable McDonnell Aircraft Corporation over its noncompliance with the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The aircraft giant had a poor image among many black St. Louisans, who referred to the company as "Daddy Mac"—both an acknowledgment and a derision of its paternal image as the St. Louis area's largest industrial employer. Green's own troubles with the company extended back to August 28, 1964, when the firm fired him as a radio and electric mechanic, a position he had held for seven years. Coming a month and a half after his televised exploits on the beams of the Gateway Arch, he had ample reason to believe his dismissal stemmed from his well-known political work. Protesting his own dismissal, and McDonnell's hiring and upgrading procedures, Green and a group of activists had staged an automobile "stall-in" in October 1964, tying up employees' cars near the plant. In July 1965, Civil Rights workers hit McDonnell again, this time with a "lock-in" at the company's downtown offices on Twelfth and Delmar Boulevard. The organization had, that same day, filed charges of employment discrimination with the new Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, alleging that of the 500 African Americans employed among McDonnell's 35,000 workers, ninety percent did menial and janitorial labor. The charges also claimed that personnel administrators discouraged black workers at the company from participating in on-the-job training programs and other vehicles of promotion. ACTION's demands centered on the immediate hiring of 1,700 black men and women at McDonnell, the upgrading of black McDonnell employees into all job categories, and Green's own reinstatement to his former position with back pay. The ACTION chairman recently had applied for a mechanic position when the corporation began rehiring laid-off employees, but was not rehired. As this theater of action evolved, Green's personal quarrel with the corporation became inseparable from the larger organizational drive to break the color line in many of the company's job classifications.[24]

ACTION's campaign against these local businesses had a powerful point of convergence in members' protest against the city's annual Veiled Prophet parade and ball. Melding city boosterism, secret society ritual, Mardi Gras carnival, and debutante soiree, the affair also harkened back to the city's French-Creole origins. Both the public parade, and the exclusively private ball, revolved around the masked, enigmatic Veiled Prophet of Khorassan, selected from St. Louis's business elite. The Mystic Order of the Veiled Prophet of the Enchanted Realm, the organization coordinating the yearly events, provided civic leaders an avenue through which to advance careers and introduce their daughters into St. Louis's "high" society. This further consolidated the already dense relations among the city's brahmin class, most of whom already worked together in Civic Progress and Downtown St. Louis, Inc., and shared membership on the same corporate boards of directors. To militant Civil Rights workers, the Veiled Prophet Organization embodied the governmental, business and civic forces that denied African Americans a humane quality of life, either by active discrimination, indifference, or "lip-service liberalism" bereft of deeds. For most ACTION members, historian Thomas Spencer maintains, "the Veiled Prophet celebration symbolized racism and white control of St. Louis's economy," especially because this ex-

clusive, whites' only organization held its gala ball at the Kiel Auditorium, a public tax-supported institution. Because many of the local Civic Progress elite also belonged to the Veiled Prophet organization, activists viewed disrupting the celebration as a way to hit all of the major business executives at once in their campaign for better-paying jobs.[25]

Its confrontational style notwithstanding, ACTION's program fit within a general Civil Rights jobs focus combining nonviolent protest, legal action, and appeals to federal bodies. St. Louis NAACP representatives, for instance, had undertaken attempts in 1963 and 1964 to improve black employment at Lever Brothers Company, a manufacturer or soaps and detergents. "Full Employment Plus Civil Rights Mean Freedom" had been a slogan among the Jefferson Bank boycotters, which revealed how activists perceived both economic justice and political representation as central to black citizenship.[26]

"Integrationist" Strategy, "Black Power" Adaptations

On a plane parallel to its sorties against the utilities, McDonnell, and the Veiled Prophet, ACTION interfaced with an emergent black nationalist groundswell evident by 1966. A renaissance occurred with the transformation of SNCC and CORE, and the development of new organizations like the Revolutionary Action Movement, US Organization, and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Similar sentiments supported the formation of militant black union caucuses, and propelled demands for Black Studies curricula on college campuses and universities. The northern-based character of these organizations and activities was evident of how the movement's center had shifted to the urban areas of the Midwest, Northeast, and West Coast. Indeed, many veterans of the southern campaigns sought to develop programs that matched conditions in northern ghettoes. This new spirit reflected a general militancy among black youth, one that disputed the hegemony of nonviolent action in the Civil Rights struggle.

St. Louis was part of a national "riot cluster" that exploded in the late summer of 1964 in Harlem, North Philadelphia, and Paterson, New Jersey. In early July 1964, what began as a sick call to police on St. Louis's near North Side snowballed into a civil disorder when officers attempted to break up a fight between two siblings. During an hour-long confrontation, a large group of mostly black teens and young adults lobbed rocks and bottles at a gathering force of 40 policemen and 25 cruisers on Leffingwell Avenue. The skirmish ended when police scattered the crowd with tear gas grenades. Nine officers were injured, and three people arrested. In June 1965, following the police shooting death of a young burglary suspect, angry crowds of black St. Louisans shouted epithets and jostled police during scattered neighborhood disturbances. By early September, when St. Louis policemen shot another black youth during an alleged school break-in, many feared the outbreak of civil violence on the magnitude of Watts barely a month earlier.[27]

Threats of Black Power insurrection hovered, too, at the edges of many nonviolent demonstrations. Following an ACTION protest against the Veiled Prophet Parade in October 1965, some 100 black youth took to Delmar Avenue, smashing automobile and store windows. Police dispersed them as they moved west along

the street. As another "long hot summer" loomed in May 1967, black St. Louis activists made preparations for a protest rally against the lack of trash removal from a neighborhood near Compton Avenue and Caroline Street. Twenty-five ACTION workers raked debris from a vacant lot into Compton Avenue, partially obstructing late afternoon traffic. When police responded to motorists' complaints about the blockage, area residents pilloried them, and passing cars, with bottles, brickbats and verbal taunts. During the four-hour melee, police attempted to clear Compton by throwing the trash at sidewalk bystanders, and two ACTION members—Precious Barnes and John McClain—lay in the street to further block traffic. Three drivers were injured, and seven vehicles damaged, by missiles. One rioter was hurt, and three others arrested. Even many of ACTION's own protest tactics revealed how thin the line was between nonviolent action and urban rebellion. A month after the clash on Compton Avenue, police arrested Green and three other ACTION members at the group's headquarters after two Wonder Bread delivery men reported the tires of their trucks deflated. Neither could identify any of the four Civil Rights workers as the vandals, and they were not charged. Yet, ACTION members at the time had been distributing leaflets urging readers: "Let the air out of the tires of all Wonder Bread trucks, Southwestern Bell trucks, Laclede Gas trucks, Union Electric trucks and Krey Packing Co. trucks. These companies just will not give Negro husbands and fathers decent-paying jobs to provide for their families."[28]

Still, the new black nationalism amounted to more than simply unharnessed rage without foundation or substance. Downtown growth schemes, the "sub-survival" living conditions of many African Americans, and the Lyndon Johnson administration's declared War on Poverty, were all part of the framework in which Black Power was articulated. Completed in the 1960s, three expressway routes connected downtown with outlying St. Louis County. Mayor Alfonso J. Cervantes, along with the presidents of the city's three largest universities and the chairman of the St. Louis Regional Commerce and Growth Association, were all ex-officio members of Civic Progress whose outlook shaped local land-use policy. Between 1967 and 1969, the Cervantes administration declared as blighted five city blocks downtown, making the area ripe for redevelopment. The soaring, 630-foot Gateway Arch opened to the public in 1967–68, and the vaunted riverfront renaissance proceeded with several other construction projects, including Busch Memorial Stadium, the Pet Incorporated Building, the Stouffer Riverfront Inn, and the Ralston Purina Building and Checkerboard Square.[29]

But by 1968, St. Louis also had one of the highest concentrated ghettoes among the major northern and border cities, and the nation's highest infant mortality rate. The Gateway City was one of the few major cities that had not experienced serious rioting, though on the basis of statistics, observers noted, it could yet become the nation's most riot-scarred city. Because of their intent on clearing blighted property for high-priced renewal, officials were lax in the enforcement of building codes. One consequence was the underreported problem of lead poisoning among black children, who often ate flecks of peeling plaster and paint. The metropolitan area also had one of the nation's worst cases of black "hardcore joblessness," with 60,000 African Americans fitting this description. The low rates of job placement by the Human Development Corporation, the

city's main antipoverty agency, also dashed expectations of a comprehensive remedy to their problems. Public assistance benefits, moreover, ranked among the lowest in the country, while inner-city residents paid six percent more for groceries than suburbanites at the same chain supermarkets. St. Louis's Freedom of Residence committee, and the Open Housing Act of 1968, may have broken many barriers to fair housing, but a growing number of black St. Louisans literally could not afford to take advantage of these new opportunities, which intensified urban grievances.[30]

Further, Great Society-linked neighborhood organizations like St. Louis's Mid-City Community Congress (MCC) and the West End Community Conference gave many would-be Black Power advocates an institutional foothold beyond mere rhetoric. Younger activists addressed varied issues of chronic unemployment, inadequate housing, black electoral power, and economic development. The city's black-owned Gateway National Bank opened in 1965, while the Supreme Court ordered a reapportionment of Missouri's congressional districts. The ruling boosted North St. Louis's electoral power, creating the conditions for William L. Clay—a former alderman, Jefferson Bank boycotter and ward committeeman—to become the state's first black U.S. Congressman in 1968. All of these developments embodied the nationalist self-assertion of the period.

Because ACTION was born at the pregnant moment when the slogan "Freedom Now" was transforming into "Black Power," its members, too, were informed by the movement's political and cultural trajectory. In fact, several core elements of "Black Power" already were embedded in ACTION before Willie Ricks and Stokely Carmichael uttered the phrase for a new generation of movement workers. From the outset, the organization kept its headquarters in St. Louis's solidly black Ville area, and its agenda revolved around building the community's own internal reserves. As the decade proceeded, many ACTION workers also cultivated a stylistic presence more akin to Black Power than Civil Rights. Many black male members often wore dark berets decorated with stars, army field jackets, denim jeans, work boots, or African-print vests and dark sunglasses. Some of these accessories may have been nothing more than the leisure wear of the working-class members and ex-army veterans who formed part of the organization's base. Still, this sartorial style was also popular among the young urban black nationalists influenced by revolutionary guerrillas in Latin America and Africa. The organization, in fact, developed a youth auxiliary whose membership sported dark T-shirts emblazoned with the words "A.C.T.I.O.N. Guerrilla Force."

Culturally, the organization also sponsored a Black Veiled Prophet Ball, and while it was conceived as a lampoon of the regular Veiled Prophet soiree, it nonetheless served as an affirmation of black culture. First held in 1966, the ball reflected a new "Black is Beautiful" ethos that flaunted African robes, headwraps, and natural hairstyles. Female attendees particularly rejected European standards of physical loveliness. During the late '60s, Mitchell's interest in Black history became the basis for forming an ACTION history department, which he chaired. The committee distributed weekly questionnaires on African American history, delivering them on routes primarily in black neighborhoods. This interaction, along with Mitchell's prior involvement with Chicago's Southside Community Art Center, were the geneses for a community-driven mural project to bring

art and history to the public, and serve as a motivational tool for black youth. Assembling a small group, Mitchell coordinated the "Wall of Respect" painting at the intersection of Leffingwell and Franklin. Begun in the summer of 1968, the mural featured a collage of sixteen famous faces, including Jomo Kenyatta, W.E.B. DuBois, Muhammad Ali, Ray Charles, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Marcus Garvey's famous quote, "Up You Mighty Race," underscored the images. A potent cultural symbol, the Wall of Respect became, after its completion, a popular meeting place for young black artists, political speakers and organizers.[31]

ACTION's organizational rhetoric evinced a similar fusion of certain liberal and black nationalist influences. The strongly masculinist leadership style of many Black Power proponents, and their keenly felt need to "reassert" black manhood, meshed with ACTION leaders' own liberal-derived convictions that African American men had been emasculated, making their communities vulnerable to a culture of poverty. And while not eschewing a Civil Rights label, members defined ACTION in much broader terms as a "human rights protest organization" seeking to elevate economic justice above Big Business concerns. ACTION's stance on "armed self-help" was similarly enigmatic. SNCC and CORE publicly endorsed activists' right to self-defense in 1966. Taking theoretical cues from Algerian revolutionary Frantz Fanon, other movement workers viewed violence, turned against one's oppressors, as a necessary catharsis for the oppressed. This rhetoric became a pronounced feature of the Black Power militancy, though ACTION members remained committed to their nonviolent roots. Nevertheless, members periodically participated in survival training in wooded areas outside the city. "I don't belittle those who talk violence," Green said of the new generation of young black militants. "I don't condemn or condone them. But the way to deal with them is by rectifying the system." Consistent with many ACTION founders' earlier involvement in CORE, adherence to nonviolence was strategic, not philosophical.[32]

The presence of whites, who comprised about 40 percent of ACTION's membership, also confused the outside observer who may have imagined it the stereotypical black nationalist group disdainful of white participation. At a time when white members resigned from CORE and SNCC amid internal strife, or were expelled, ACTION remained stridently interracial. This position was not without controversy among some black members, who viewed the strategy as outdated. "I joined ACTION in 1965 because it was the most militant group in St. Louis," complained Precious Barnes, a postal worker who led many of ACTION's demonstrations in 1968. "Now there are groups that ... look a littler farther." Others were unapologetic about the organization's membership policy, arguing that white members—many of them professors, doctors, lawyers, even workers—possessed valuable information and resources otherwise unavailable to working-class black insurgents. While rebuffing the racial insularity of many younger black militants, ACTION's leadership simultaneously served notice to white members that they would participate in ACTION on terms defined by African Americans. Black activists occupied all top positions of leadership in the organization, which gave them the central role in their own struggle, reinforcing their efficacy as agents of social change. "[O]ur concept," Green later

recalled, "was that black people deserve the right to make mistakes for black people, rather than white people make mistakes for us."[33]

Involvement with St. Louis's Black Liberation Front

This approach to interracialism was consistent with ACTION's cooperation with the nationalist Black United Front (later renamed the Black Liberation Front). A loose coalition formed around 1968; it included CORE, ACTION, the Mid-City Community Congress, the Jeff-Vander-Lou Community Action Group, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Ministerial Allance, and New Voice, a collective based at the Pruitt-Igoe projects. Two other organizations became visible participants in and around the front. The Zulu 1200s, formed in November 1967, was an arm of the Mid-City Community Congress, and though it functioned autonomously, the group operated out of the MCC's Delmar Boulevard headquarters. Many of its members had been involved in the Wall of Respect project. A second group, the Black Liberators, formed in early 1968 with close ties to the Zulus. Liberators founder Charles Koen, a dynamic young organizer from southern Illinois, patterned the organization after the Black Panthers. Like them, the Liberators wore black berets and leather jackets, and ran a "Feed the Children" program. At the invitation of Rev. Matheus, the Liberators frequently used St. Stephen's Episcopal Church as a base of operations. They also published a newspaper, *The Black Liberator*, printed in East St. Louis. Privately, many ACTION members were critical of the Liberators, whose gun-toting exploits brought them to the verge of armed confrontation with St. Louis police. But as with other organizations in the Black United Front, the basis for the ACTION-Liberators collaboration lay in their overlapping constituency among disaffected and energized black youth, and their common antiwar work with black and white students at the city's universities and community colleges.[34]

As plans unfolded for the SCLC's Poor People's March in the nation's capital, members of the front threatened a smaller scale gathering at the upcoming Gateway Arch dedication ceremonies. They presented Mayor Cervantes with a fifteen-point mandate that included upgrades for black municipal workers, city contracts for black businessmen, greater recruitment of black police officers, and a restructuring of St. Louis's federally funded Model Cities program. No march occurred at the ceremonies, however, and neither does its appear that the Cervantes administration took the protesters' demands seriously. Against the backdrop of a massive St. Louis public housing rent strike, the abandonment of the War on Poverty, and the urban neglect by the new administration of Richard Nixon, the Black Liberation Front entered another theater of struggle. James Forman, SNCC's former executive secretary, garnered national attention in May 1969 when he interrupted services at New York City's Riverside Church to present a co-authored "Black Manifesto." Published by the Detroit-based Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC), the document called for white national-level Christian church organizations to render $500 million in reparations for the funding of a southern land bank, business cooperatives, and other ventures. The BEDC steering committee called for a widespread campaign of civil disobedience that would expose organized Christianity as a source of black

oppression, and as an institution that owed a debt. Beginning in the summer of 1969, ACTION and the Black Liberation Front launched separate series of disruptions at St. Louis's major churches. Performed during weekly services, these "Black Sunday" demonstrations were similarly geared toward exacting millions of dollars in reparations from wealthy Christian institutions. Protesters distributed copies of the "Black Manifesto," castigated white clergy and their congregants for turning a blind eye to urban poverty, and directly implicated the churches in the ownership of slum properties. ACTION workers called on the Missouri Episcopal Diocese and the St. Louis Catholic Archdiocese to, among other things, publicly list all their property holdings, and end any investments in Laclede Gas, Union Electric, Southwestern Bell, and McDonnell-Douglas.[35]

ACTION militants also targeted for harassment local black ministers who criticized the church interruptions, yet remained mute about the racism of St. Louis's secular and religious institutions. In August and September 1970, members of the ACTION Guerrilla Force invaded services at two black churches, where they carried signs and distributed pamphlets attacking several ministers. Invoking cultural-religious discourses of Black Power, the youth criticized the white imagery dominating the scenery of most African American churches. On a second visit to the New Bethlehem Baptist Church, an 18-person phalanx stood along the center aisle while a Guerrilla Force leader walked to the back of the altar and painted a statue of Jesus with black paint. Dual issues of clerical social responsibility and black religious representation merged in November 1970, when the nation's only African American bishop, Harold Perry, visited St. Louis's Old Cathedral downtown. Mitchell, Matheus, and four Guerrilla Force members—entering despite efforts to lock the doors—surprised attendees at evening mass. The four youth carried on their shoulders, mounted upright on a board, a black department store mannequin adorned with an afro wig, jewelry and green cape. A sign around the statue's neck read "Black Madonna." "We want to present this to Bishop Perry as a symbol for black Christians to join in the fight for human rights in St. Louis," Mitchell explained, then the group quickly departed. Ultimately, neither the local nor the national reparations campaign fully realized its goals. Yet, activity in St. Louis and elsewhere was successful in the much more significant goal of bringing the issue of reparations to a national audience in the early 1970s, and spotlighting the structural nature of black inequality and white privilege. ACTION's work with the Black Liberation Front, including its efforts around the issue of reparations, demonstrated how the organization's energies were simultaneously focused and diffuse. That is, ACTION's reformist goal—improving employment opportunities vis-a-vis the '64 Civil Rights Act—provided a foundation for members' deepening commitment to challenging concentrations of power held by a small local elite.[36]

The Decline of Black Insurgency, and ACTION's Dissolution

By the early 1970s, ACTION members were organizing determined campaigns against slum-owning landlords, and intensifying efforts against the utilities. Obstinate efforts against McDonnell-Douglas also continued. ACTION had issued a four-page report in July 1969 detailing the extent of racial discrimination practiced by the corporation. Drawing on his own federal statistics, Congressman

Clay wrote the firm's president, James S. McDonnell, urging him toward reform. Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts also entered the fray, calling for a review of a $7.7 billion fighter contract the U.S. Department of Defense had recently awarded the company. In January 1970, while his own lawsuit against McDonnell-Douglas moved through the courts, Green testified before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. He used the opportunity not only to air many black workers' grievances with the corporation, but also to blast the Defense Department for giving the firm lucrative contracts. ACTION's campaign against the Veiled Prophet also reached an apotheosis. During the December 1972 ball, Gena Scott, "disguised" in full evening dress, used a spotlight cable to slide from the balcony rafters and land near the masked icon. Despite injuring herself, she managed to rush the figure and remove both his veil and crown before being ushered away and arrested. The caper ignited a scandal in the press and an outcry among civic and corporate leaders. Maintaining their deference, most of the major local media withheld the name of the exposed prophet, though the *St. Louis Journalism Review* revealed his identity as Tom K. Smith, an executive vice president of Monsanto and a Civic Progress alumnus.[37]

If ACTION did not achieve all of its members' aims, the organization nevertheless accomplished more than critics admitted. The 1964 Gateway Arch demonstration helped spur the creation of minority apprenticeship and outreach programs in construction, creating a standard for similar efforts in Philadelphia, New York City, and San Francisco. In 1967, the Justice Department dropped its charges against St. Louis's Building and Construction Trades Council and two of its unions; a judge dismissed the remaining charges a year later. Nevertheless, new affirmative action mandates helped black construction workers win access to skilled trade jobs. ACTION also helped secure the hiring of more African Americans in meter reading and telephone installation jobs. The combined pressure of ACTION-led work shut-downs, and an EEOC suit, forced Laclede Gas to announce, in August 1976, a plan for hiring minorities for 40 percent of new job openings. In challenging a federal contract to McDonnell-Douglas, the organization's efforts helped pressure the corporation into changing its hiring and upgrading policies. Through a series of appeals, Green's suit also made its way before the U.S. Supreme Court. In *Green v. McDonnell-Douglas Corporation* (1973), the Court ruled that plaintiffs in a racial discrimination suit need only establish "minimum proof" that they were denied employment, or discharged, due to racism; the burden of proof then fell on employers. Like the Arch controversy, the *Green* case became the model for subsequent employment discrimination suits. In harassing the Veiled Prophet Organization, moreover, ACTION attacked a hegemonic symbol of financial, governmental, and corporate influence over the city's affairs, and black workers' lives. In masterminding the Veiled Prophet's exposure, the organization stripped the seemingly omnipotent idol of its mystique, and symbolically undermined the rituals of power the affair embodied. On the heels of a successful class-action suit instigated by ACTION, the Veiled Prophet Organization had to relocate its annual ball to a private venue in 1974.[38]

At the same time these victories occurred, the wave of mass-based ferment, which had buoyed movement organizations like ACTION, was ebbing. The War on Poverty—which rested on an assumption of black cultural pathology, and

never received the funding commensurate to its ambitious goals—succumbed first to war in Vietnam, then reaction at home. Political repression by local, state and federal authorities also fed the movement's decline. Like a number of national organizations, ACTION, the Zulus and the Black Liberators were targets of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), which director J. Edgar Hoover launched to subvert Civil Rights, Black Power, and antiwar activity. ACTION weathered this harassment more effectively than the Liberators and the Zulus, which both faded out of existence in 1969. On many fronts, Nixon's electoral triumphs in 1968–72, and construction worker riots against anti-war demonstrators in St. Louis and New York, signaled a decided shift to the right in American social and urban policy. Ironically, the success of the African American revolt also contributed to political demobilization. A black middle class, molded in the crucible of Civil Rights and Black Power, emerged in the professions, the corporate elite, and municipal politics. As early as 1970, the local St. Louis press gave favorable publicity to the private business ventures of militant-talking blacks, and even President Nixon could endorse a "Black Power" construed as business development.[39]

Opposition to affirmative action employment policies grew amid declining economic conditions, decreasing union membership, and heightened competition for work. When ACTION's leadership chose to disband around 1982, the decision reflected both a dispersion of members and a reassessment of its effectiveness in the changed conditions of the post-1975 period. Margaret Phillips, a white former member, attributed ACTION's end to an inability to develop a program beyond "jobs." Thus, while the organization helped expand employment opportunities for black working people, its leadership never formulated a sustainable response to central-city decline, which eviscerated many of the breadwinner jobs advocated by Civil Rights militants. As in other old urban centers, unemployment and means-tested welfare programs placed greater demands on St. Louis's budget. At the same time, industrial-commercial flight, and tax abatements granted to downtown developers by Cervantes and subsequent mayors, shrank the city's tax base and constricted vital social services. By 1975, the Pruitt-Igoe complex was destroyed, the first high-rise public housing project in the nation to face the wrecking ball. While new corporate headquarters scraped the downtown sky, City Hall closed Homer G. Phillips Hospital, which had been a source of pride and identity among black St. Louisans. At decade's end, St. Louis epitomized, for many residents in the surrounding St. Louis County, the danger and dysfunction inherent in urban life. In 1980, two urban sociologists ranked the Gateway City the nation's second most depressed city, on the basis of housing stock, per capita income, and degree of population decline. By the early '80s, when black St. Louisans comprised 46 percent of the city's 453,000 residents, the African American working class that undergirded the Civil Rights and Black Power struggles had become a "subproletariat" consigned to menial service jobs at the margins of a new postindustrial urban economy—one oriented toward recreation, tourism, corporate capital and private universities.[40]

Just as ACTION had been continuous with previous threads of social insurgency, other protest organizations followed in its wake. In 1980, a group of Black Power veterans formed the Organization of Black Struggle (OBS), and invited Green to sit on its advisory committee. Although OBS worked most di-

rectly around the issue of police brutality, its members were part of a progressive coalition committed to electing a black mayor. These grassroots efforts paid off in 1993, when St. Louisans elected Freeman Bosley, Jr. the city's first African American mayor. Green accepted an appointment as the head of the city's minority-participation program, charged with monitoring and enforcing racial minority and female access to city contracts. Bosley's election, and Green's position, demonstrated the remarkable progress achieved by the black revolt, though most black St. Louisans remained mired in deteriorating conditions that neither an African American mayor, nor the fair vetting of business contracts, could ameliorate. By 2001, St. Louis ranked as the nation's ninth most segregated city, riven by high black unemployment and low household income. The building trades, meanwhile, remained a segregated as ever: in 2002, only 5.5 percent of construction workers were black.[41]

Between Civil Rights and Black Power

An assessment of ACTION's origins, its own independent development, and its participation in Black Power politics, reveal that differences among periods of black social ferment, while certainly real, are not as clear as previously assumed.[42] Younger historians' turn away from "discontinuity" and "spontaneity" as overriding themes in black popular movements augurs well for studies of the twentieth-century African American Freedom Movement. Among other benefits, the new historiographical emphasis on "continuity" offers a better view of the complex traditions of black political and intellectual thought that formed the scaffolding of Civil Rights and Black Power struggles of post-World War II America.

One supposed difference between Civil Rights and Black Power is that the latter was interested in broader issues than the former. In this depiction, Civil Rights was concerned primarily with the (middle) "classes," and Black Power with the "masses." But "Black professionals in Baton Rouge and Montgomery did not ride the city buses," Civil Rights veteran Julian Bond admonished historians in 1988, reminding them of the female domestic workers who formed the Montgomery Bus Boycott's base. "Blacks in the middle class in Oklahoma City and Greensboro did not eat at Woolworths and Kresge's, but blue-collar blacks did."[43] The concrete racial-class concerns of working people were not unfamiliar territory to Civil Rights workers. Activists were raising questions about institutional racism, employment, and poverty well before the late 1960s. Some CORE affiliates targeted police brutality and slum housing as early as 1963. SNCC's southern organizing efforts around voter registration and public accommodations, begun in the early 1960s, were part of an overall assault on the abject poverty, indebtedness and political powerlessness that kept many rural black workers in a state of peonage. "Civil Rights" clearly constituted more than middle-class blacks' efforts to ingratiate themselves to whites.

Another purported difference between Civil Rights and Black Power was that the first was nonviolent, while the second advocated forms of violence. This view rests on the assumption that nonviolence was organic to black culture—particularly the black church, which many identify as the source of the southern Civil Rights struggle. In reality, nonviolent direct action was introduced from

without by organized pacifists, principally from FOR. For most Civil Rights protesters, nonviolent direct action was not a philosophy, but instead a strategy. The final, overarching assumption about the two periods is that Civil Rights was interracial, and therefore "integrationist," while Black Power was anti-white and "separatist." While it is true that some black nationalist organizations actively opposed coalitions with whites, others helped build multiracial alliances. "Black Power" was not a unified ideology, but rather an umbrella covering diverse, often contradictory, nationalist tendencies. Some involved interracialist practices that upheld the interests of poor and working people across lines of race and nationality. Certainly, Black Power militants during the '60s and '70s offered discourses from which radical white feminists, antiwar, and peace activists borrowed freely. The integrationist/separatist dichotomy also confuses the meanings of "integration" and "assimilation," which are often used interchangeably. In fact, they are quite different terms. "Assimilation" evokes a cultural negation, in this case of black institutions and identity. "Integration," on the other hand, can best be understood as desegregation, or the abolition of legal and structural barriers to black citizenship in the United States. It does not preclude the building of separate black institutions. Thus, "integrationism" might describe not only the provisions of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, but also many of the aims of public officials and avowed black nationalists who sought greater representation in local government and administration during the '70s.[44]

ACTION embodies a conjuncture of these many issues. First, its interracial membership was not contradictory to a black leadership. Second, in their campaigns, members employed methods of nonviolent direct action, though in a more confrontational manner than the Civil Rights moderates who had once dominated CORE. ACTION's nonviolence also served strategic, rather than ideological, purposes. Third, ACTION's goal of expanded black employment and economic development was consistent with mainstream Civil Rights activism, as well as certain trends of Black Power. In this vein, attacking racial discrimination was not in conflict with the goal of black institution-building. In fact, the latter has often required the former as a precondition. Fourth, while its reputation was that of a "Civil Rights" group fighting to implement equal opportunity provisions of federal law, ACTION's members also viewed themselves as a "human rights" organization attempting to undermine institutional racism and economic inequality at their most fundamental level. One can view ACTION's reparations campaign, and its battle against the Veiled Prophet, in this light. Fifth, while the organization's name included an antiquated term, "Negro," suggestive of its Civil Rights origins, ACTION participated in local Black Power politics.

Likewise, the organization drew its personnel from a variety of demographics: white clergy, peace activists and university liberals; black skilled professionals; black working-class activists who had gained their formative political experiences during the Jefferson Bank boycott; and black youth steeped in the popular idioms of Black Power. Grappling with ACTION's history helps make the case for why a dichotomous view of Civil Rights and Black Power obscures more than it illuminates. Ultimately, it reduces black political culture to a secession of strategic and tactical opposites—"integrationism" versus "separatism," "nonviolence" versus "self-defense," or "peaceful" versus "militant." Drawing such

contrasts tends to confirm popular fables about a non-threatening Civil Rights movement that united blacks and whites around a color-blind dream of individual opportunity, and an atavistic Black Power movement that drove them apart through unfair demands for black group rights. A bifurcated approach focused on strategies also evades any real engagement with the substance of black political and intellectual thought, which has informed any number of seemingly contradictory methods.

In understanding "Civil Rights" and "Black Power" as unstable categories, however, scholars must resist the temptation to dissipate them, or collapse them into the same entity. Some, like Timothy B. Tyson and Charles M. Payne, have attempted to transcend the notion of "Civil Rights" altogether, protesting that it is too narrow a label, and says so little about the much longer movement for political, social and economic justice that African Americans have waged. They would put in its place the "African American Freedom Struggle," arguing that it casts the black popular struggles of the 1950s, '60s and '70s in terms broader than simple legislative initiatives, and places its origins before Montgomery. Others, like Tyson and Peniel E. Joseph, favor "Black Power" as a concept enveloping the decades before and after World War II, including the early Cold War of the 1950s.[45]

Such perspectives have powerful appeal, and open vital new avenues of investigation. Yet, the tendency to collapse, or disintegrate, "Civil Rights" and "Black Power" dispenses with historical periodization, and the sense of the motion and change central to comparing and contrasting different moments in time. Without periodization, scholars of the Black Freedom Movement blind themselves to developments that are "new," as well as "old," and efface the evolving nature of movements and movement activists. Folding "Civil Rights" and "Black Power" into a monolith—or obliterating them—oversimplifies African American social movements, the black experience in general, and the shifting economic and political terrain on which both have unfolded. This recreates the same error social historians have made in the past about black popular movements, but this time in reverse: Continuity replaces discontinuity as the central reality of black struggle. Civil Rights and Black Power may indeed have grown "out of the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom," as Tyson argues.[46] But this is so generically true as to have little real analytical meaning. Granted, African Americans have fought conditions of racial degradation across time, but those conditions have not been the same over the span of U.S. history. Similarly, black responses to racial oppression and discrimination, while sharing a certain continuity, have been specific to a given historical moment. And while the ideologies that have informed these movements have certain consistencies, ideas are articulated in concrete ways that speak to the needs of a contemporary period.[47]

Thus, in the 1955–65 period, when de jure racism existed, its elimination became critical to achieving political, social, and economic parity. The predominant black movement strategy became nonviolent mass direct action aimed at the edifices of U.S. racial apartheid and disfranchisement. This activity took the form of demands for desegregation, with liberalism as the dominant ideological paradigm. Although these struggles occurred in cities around the nation, the South formed the epicenter of this activity, for it was here that legal racism was

most sharply articulated. Strategically, the Civil Rights mainstream crafted a counterhegemonic patriotism, celebrating putatively American national values while simultaneously struggling to transform them. More radical tendencies did exist at this time, but they remained "underground," or were silenced. The 1965–75 period, though it had some continuity with the preceding years, developed in a qualitatively different context. The locus of movement activity shifted from south to north. This reflected both the demise of de jure racial discrimination in the South, and the black migration into urban areas of the Northeast and Midwest that continued into the mid-'60s. By this period profound economic realignments, underway since the '50s, began to register socially, spawning both federal War on Poverty programs and a wave of black urban revolts. Black insurgents therefore confronted a historical moment in which their efforts had outlawed legal racism, yet joblessness and underemployment, police abuse, and similar structures of de facto racial oppression persisted. Activists adopted strategies that were more self-consciously nationalist and radical in ideology, form, and content. Not only did many Black Power advocates see themselves as engaged in revolutionary struggle in the United States, but they also viewed this as a constituent part of the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements being fought at the time by other Third World peoples. In this context, once "subterranean" political trends fully surfaced aboveground as black nationalist ideas reached the broad audiences they had lacked during the previous period. These two periods, then, confronted different typologies of racial subjugation. Still, Civil Rights and Black Power are best understood not as distinctly separate entities, or even the same entity, but rather as phases within a broader Black Freedom Movement covering the sweep of African American history.[48]

Conclusion

Nevertheless, it is encouraging that revisionist historians are discovering more instances of continuity between the "Civil Rights" and "Black Power" phases of the Black Freedom Movement. Other studies of black political activism in Philadelphia, New Haven, and Baltimore already have unearthed local protest activity strikingly similar to ACTION's. These indigenous-centered narratives challenge the ways in which historians in the past have conceived of Civil Rights as generically "integrationist," and Black Power as uncomplicatedly "separatist." Black movement scholars' new emphasis on constancy is significant, as it contrasts sharply with an African American historiography, advanced in the past by scholars like August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, that viewed black social insurgency as fragmented and discontinuous. Yet, documenting the theoretical and strategic continuities between "Civil Rights" and "Black Power" should not become an avenue for reducing them to a singular, indivisible existence, or disintegrating them.[49]

More than just historiographical issues are at stake in reassessing the history of the Civil Rights and Black Power struggles of the 1960s and '70s. In the popular American imagination, the call for "Black Power" is still associated with inchoate rage, violence, and the absence of coherent political objectives. Many still lament Black Power as a nihilistic turn toward "separatism" that sparked the urban rebellions of the period and created a culturally pathological and

un-employable black "underclass" dependent on federal programs. While "Civil Rights" has fared better in the collective national memory, popular presentations have nonetheless emptied it of its substantive meaning—dislodging it from the demands for group rights made before and after 1965, the working-class character of many of these demands, and the unfinished business of the Civil Rights struggle at this historical moment.

A revised, more critical scholarship also offers a yardstick against which to measure contemporary black politics, and a signpost of how contemporary activists have either continued, or sublimated, previous transcripts of struggle. Exactly thirty-five years after Percy Green and Richard Daly dramatized the demand for black skilled construction jobs at the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, 900 people converged at Goodfellow Boulevard in North St. Louis, near the ramps leading to and from Interstate Highway 70. A contingent of 300 marched onto the highway. As television news broadcast live from the scene, they fanned across I-70's five lanes. Chanting "No justice, no peace!" and sitting in the highway, the throng of mostly black protesters stopped rush hour traffic for an hour. The coalition that organized the demonstration was broad-based in character, but its guiding nucleus was a consortium of minority-owned firms. Hence, the protest stemmed from a dispute with the Missouri Department of Transportation about the lack of state highway construction contracts to minority businesses. The contrast between the demand for better-paying jobs in 1964, and business contracts in 1999, speaks to the shifting meanings of economic justice, parity, and opportunity for African Americans in the post-Civil Rights/Black Power era. It falls to historians of the Black Freedom Movement, in part, to deal with these paradoxes in the twenty-first century.[50]

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ENDNOTES

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