

STRAPPED:
A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF BLACK WOMEN AND ARMED RESISTANCE,

1959-1979

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Strapped: A Historical Analysis of Black Women and Armed Resistance, 1959-1979

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“Strapped: A Historical Analysis of Black Women and Armed Resistance, 1959-1979” is an intellectual and cultural study that broadens our understanding of the Black freedom movement by analyzing Black women who engaged in armed resistance from 1959 to 1979. I argue Black women increasingly embraced the tactic of armed resistance as a tool to achieve full freedom in post-World War II America. This work is significant because it offers a departure from previous scholars who have overwhelmingly assumed that armed resistance was the primary domain of Black men including Tim Tyson and Lance Hill. My doctoral project offers a different interpretation by separating armed self-defense from masculinity. I draw from and build on the histories of Black women, gender theories, and social movement scholarship to show that armed resistance was prevalent among Black women. Using a vast array of primary source materials such as newspapers, interviews, organizational documents, and government surveillance records, I analyze how the government's response to citizens' demands for civil and human rights shaped the tactics Black women employed, including armed resistance. I trace the evolution of the philosophy of armed resistance in the mid-twentieth century.

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This study is dedicated to my ancestors. To all of those who have come before me-- striving for Black liberation. I am particularly indebted to all the Black women who fought for freedom, who maintained faith that a new world was indeed possible, and strove to make it a reality.

“It is our duty to fight for our freedom.
It is our duty to win.
We must love each other and support each other.
We have nothing to lose but our chains.”

-Assata Shakur

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Introduction

Armed Black women are hidden in plain sight. One need only say the names of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Mary “Stagecoach” Fields, and Angela Davis to evoke images of Black women armed and fighting to achieve full freedom in the United States.¹ “Strapped: A Historical Analysis of Black Women and Armed Resistance, 1959-1979” is an intellectual and social study that broadens our understanding of the Black Freedom Movement by analyzing Black women who engaged in armed resistance from 1959 to 1979. I argue Black women increasingly embraced the tactic of armed resistance as a tool to achieve full freedom in post-World War II America. This work is significant because it offers a departure from previous scholars who have overwhelmingly assumed that armed resistance was the primary domain of Black men, including researchers Tim Tyson and Lance Hill. My doctoral project offers a different interpretation by separating armed self-defense from masculinity. I draw from and build on the histories of Black women, gender theories, and social movement scholarship to show that armed resistance was prevalent among Black women. My work charts this development as the Black Freedom Movement’s goals and objectives changed from integration and interracialism to self-determination and community control. Using a vast array of primary source materials such as newspapers, interviews, organizational documents, and government surveillance records, I analyze how the government’s responses to citizens’ demands for civil and human rights shaped the tactics Black women employed – and pushed some women to adopt armed resistance.

¹ These women demanded what historian Kim Butler calls “full freedom,” the ability to exercise all rights and privileges of first class citizenship. They were especially concerned about Black women’s rights, and specifically bodily integrity. Butler, *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition, São Paulo and Salvador*.

Finally, I consider the examples of women who hoped to orchestrate a revolution in the United States. These activists imagined themselves as Black revolutionary women and sought to overthrow the government and implement a more democratic system.

I offer three interdependent explanations for women's growing participation in armed activity. I argue that a Black woman's understanding of the goals and objectives of Black liberation informed her acceptance or rejection of armed resistance. I further contend that as non-violent tactics were met with increasingly violent acts from police and white vigilantes, women consciously looked for alternative strategies to liberation. The United States government's neglectful and reluctant actions pushed women to embrace armed resistance, and mounting state repression further validated some women's perspective that a revolution would ensure full freedom for everyone.

*Strapped: a Historical Analysis of Black Women and Armed Resistance, 1959-1979*² focuses specifically on the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, and draws attention to the distinctness of the two eras.² Undoubtedly interrelated, these two waves of the modern Black Liberation struggle share many commonalities, including a fundamental goal of obtaining "freedom."³ However, "the meaning of freedom and its articulation reflected the

² See Chu-Jua and Lang for a well-articulated critique of the Long Movement thesis that has joined Civil Rights and Black Power together, pushing the temporal boundaries of the dominant narrative, but obscuring the differences within these two waves of the Black Liberation Movement. Cha-Jua and Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire". Although not a new concept, Hall's article most poignantly articulates the "Long Movement" thesis. Hall's article is especially useful for considering the political (mis)uses of the dominant Civil Rights Movement narrative, particularly by right-wing conservative politicians, neoliberals, and scholars. Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past"; Also see Theoharis, "Black Freedom Studies"; Theoharis and Woodard, *Freedom North*; Payne, *Groundwork*; Joseph, "The Black Power Movement"; Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*; Joseph, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*.

³ I borrow the waves concept from Vincent Harding. In *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*, historian Harding uses the metaphor of a river with many currents to symbolize the diverse ideologies informing Black resistance struggle. Harding argues that, by the beginning of the 18th Century, "many basic currents in the black river had been formed." He identifies the emergence of three major currents, namely: survival; protest and resistance; and radicalism (which includes forms of revolutionary struggle and armed

specifics of particular historical moments,” argued Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang. These scholars remind us, that “just as ‘Negro’ gave way to ‘black,’ ‘freedom’ gave way to ‘liberation’ in the era’s lexicon.”⁴ Cha Jua and Lang’s assertion contextualizes the dissertation’s argument that movement objectives dictated tactics and strategies. Whereas gaining “freedom” was the objective for both Civil Rights and Black Power activists, their conceptions of freedom differed, and thus the strategies they employed reflected these divergent perspectives.

This history has remained unexplored for several reasons. First, the experiences of armed Black women complicate prevailing notions of violence and masculinity. The gun, in particular, has constantly held symbolic meaning in a nation where violence is a marker of male citizenship rights.⁵ Second, on the surface, it can seem difficult to reconcile women’s armed resistance with the dominant rhetoric of nonviolence, a discourse which existed prior to the modern Civil Rights Movement but certainly gained traction and prominence after the Second World War. Third, scholars have been reluctant to look at armed Black women for fear of further stigmatizing them.⁶ Indeed, for generations Black women have sought to protect their image, reputation, and dispel myths of inferiority. They strove to defend themselves against dangerous stereotypes, slanderous images, and racist and sexist policies.

revolt.) Black people’s experience in the U.S. was not only one of oppression, but also a history that bears witness to a continuum of individual and collective resistance. This continuum, or movement toward liberation, has always consisted of many different impulses. Harding, *There Is a River*; Also see Carson, “Civil Rights Reform and the Black Freedom Struggle”; Theoharis, “Black Freedom Studies.”

⁴ Cha-Jua and Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire,” 278.

⁵ Browder, *Her Best Shot*.

⁶ Kali Gross makes a similar argument. See Gross, “Examining the Politics of Respectability in African American Studies”; Gross, *Colored Amazons*.

Until very recently, writers of twentieth century Black women's activism have almost exclusively focused on the church, women's clubs, and the Garvey movement.⁷ This also reflects a broader trend of Black women's history which heretofore spotlighted respectable women. I am indebted to this new body of work, which (re)imagines Black women with a range of human emotions and complex experiences.⁸ These histories, however, are important because they "serve to highlight the contours of both freedom and democracy in a much larger sense" as Kali Gross argues.⁹ Investigating armed Black women benefits our historical understanding of American citizenship by creating a more holistic view of how race and gender shape citizenship.

Moreover, examining Black women's armed activity serves to bring the historical roots of present day activism to light. Currently, the American public is engaged in a national conversation about which tactics are "acceptable" for a marginalized group to employ when addressing their concerns to the state. Our political landscape has continuously required Americans to consider what "acceptable" tactics are and when they should be used. Stakeholders have generally taken different perspectives on tactics, goals, and objectives. These issues cannot be understood without accounting for the historical roots of the problems we face.

"Strapped" presents the historical roots of Black women's armed activity and activism. The key figures in this story are activists, writer-intellectuals, and ordinary women

⁷ For exceptions see McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*; McDuffie, "I Wanted a Communist Philosophy, but I Wanted Us to Have a Chance to Organize Our People"; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*; Harris, "Running with the Reds"; Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem"; Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*.

⁸ The growing body of literature includes Gross, *Colored Amazons*; Haley, *No Mercy Here*; LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence*; Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935*.

⁹ Gross, *Colored Amazons*.

who had multiple affiliations with Black Nationalist and feminist organizations, from the NAACP to the Black Panther Party and from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to the Third World Women's Alliance.¹⁰ To understand Black women's practice of armed resistance, this monograph weaves together archival research, secondary sources, feminist theories, and social movement scholarship and places these into conversation with one another "Strapped" demonstrates how Black women progressively embraced armed resistance between the 1950s and 1970s. In-depth evidence of Black women's use of guns and purchase of firearms or other weapons for the propose of protection or protest, is frustratingly evasive. Public opinion surveys such as those conducted by Roper serve to provide a glimmer of insight into prevailing attitudes about nonviolence and the upheavals of the late 1960s. Still, this data only begins to illuminate Black women's ideas about the use of tactics and movement goals, as few National polls centered on Black women. Therefore, I gauge Black women's growing approval of armed resistance by examining their voices in public spaces where they could be heard, mainly, Black newspapers and Black feminists' periodicals.

Writing Black women's history of armed resistance has required assembling fragments of historical evidence and interpretations (some familiar to readers) into a new pattern. The research provides new insights into the past and provokes fresh thinking about the subject and its relevance for the present. Sources for this dissertation also include oral histories, illustrations, poems, newspapers, organizational papers, diaries, prison letters,

¹⁰ For a discussion on Black women and Nationalism see Taylor that characterizes Garvey women's relationship to this ideology as Community feminism. Taylor, *The Veiled Garvey*; White provides a brilliant assessment of Black women and Black feminism. White, "Africa on My Mind"; Other works also include: Blain, "We Want to Set the World on Fire"; Ashley D. Farmer, "Mothers of Pan-Africanism"; McClintock, "No Longer in a Future Heaven"; Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*.

personal correspondences, and government surveillance documents; together, these produce an unprecedented account of the dilemmas that racial brutality, state violence, and sexism generated for armed female activists.

The research centers on Black women's responses to violence. The study refers to anti-Black violence perpetrated by white vigilantes and state officials (who were at times one and the same). Here I refer to state violence as premeditated attacks on Black civilians, for the purpose of maintaining the political status quo (which feminist critic bell hooks referred to as "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy") committed by representatives of the government (i.e. law enforcement and military personnel). State violence can take on many forms; in this work, I am mainly concerned with the physical force of police brutality and government repression.¹¹ However, it is relevant to note that many of these women understood the political, social, and economic context of violence against them as reason enough to defend themselves. For instance, in 1970 Angela Davis refashioned the US government's domestic policies as a form of violence against Black families when she contended "...the state is designed to protect [capitalist] property, because that's what [President Richard] Nixon's doing, that's what [Governor Ronald] Reagan's doing, that's what they're all doing. And so every time a black child in this city dies, we should indict them for murder because they're the ones who killed the black child."¹² Likewise, the Third World Women's Alliance saw blocked access to education, poor housing conditions, limited access to healthcare and medical facilities, and narrow employment opportunities all as violent attacks against Black women and the Black community writ large.

¹¹ Gross, *Colored Amazons*, 5.

¹² "The Making of a Fugitive."

“Strapped” moves Black women from the margins to the center of narratives about Black armed resistance, Civil Rights, and Black Power. Nevertheless, Black women’s applications of armed resistance did not differ entirely from those of Black men. Some reasons Black women gave for practicing armed resistance were similar to those given by men: resisting Klan intimidation, police brutality, night rides, and lynchings. Some Black men, however, used masculinity as a justification for this position, whereas Black women typically reasoned that they had a right to armed resistance. To analyze their claims for armed resistance, I first examine their understanding of freedom. Distinct from men’s, Black women’s “freedom dreams” were informed by an interplay of gender, race, and class.¹³ Black women envisioned a freedom that was inclusive and expansive, as opposed to the exclusionary liberation offered by some of their male or white counterparts. Because oppression was pivotal to all aspects of Black women’s politics, they concluded that radical Black feminism was “fundamental to any truly revolutionary ideology.”¹⁴ They drew on a variety of strategies to address the “multiple jeopardy” of gender, race, and class including armed resistance.¹⁵

Thinking of Armed Resistance as a Philosophy

How do we understand the presence of armed resistance throughout the Black experience? What explains the persistent use of this tactic over time? The overwhelming majority of studies on Black armed resistance have assumed the act of arming oneself as a

¹³ To borrow Robin D.G. Kelley’s term. See Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*.

¹⁴ Kelley, 149; Also see Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

¹⁵ Many of the women featured in this work were not self-identified feminist, although I use the term to describe them. In fact, after the rise of second wave feminism, some Black women vocally rejected the term. Nonetheless naming them as feminists makes sense because they took a particular interest in Black women, and understood gender, race, and class in intersectional and interlocking terms. King, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness.”

given, instinctual and commonplace. Historian Lance Hill, for example, reasoned everyday resistance was “nothing more than common sense and instinct.”¹⁶ Hill’s assessment is analytically limited and narrow. When we assume people’s automatic reaction we miss the opportunity to theorize about why Black people embraced the practice of armed resistance for so long, we also miss the chance to evaluate their rationalizations for using this approach.¹⁷ After all, there were persuasive reasons to comply with white supremacy and not resist. In fact, some people never missed the chance to argue that Black people should comply with white supremacy—noting the potential bloodbath or race war that could arise from individual or collective Black armed resistance. For instance, in 1917 Fred R. Moore, a close associate of Booker T. Washington, claimed, “No man, or woman either, for that matter, is a friend to the race, who publicly advises a resort to violence to redress the wrongs and injustices to which members of the race are subjected in various sections of the country.”¹⁸ For Moore, the adoption of armed resistance was dangerous and even fatal. Moore recommended a strategy to convince the United States and white America to enforce the law, thereby ensuring that Blacks received equal protection. He was not alone in his assessment and approach.¹⁹ Years later in 1966, Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the

¹⁶ Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 26 n 4.

¹⁷ The literature on this topic is fresh and unquestionably growing. However, scholars interested in the topic are not entirely in agreement about what constitutes armed resistance. This lack of definition is, in part, representative of the missed opportunity to theorize Black armed resistance in the Black freedom struggle. Herbert Shapiro was one of the first scholars to document Blacks' resistance to white violence, yet thoughtful and thorough discussion of armed resistance is lacking. My thinking on this takes shape within broader conversations about conceptions of resistance. See Jocelyn A. Hollander and Rachel L. Einwohner, “Conceptualizing Resistance,” *Sociological Forum* 19, no. 4 (December 2004): 533–54.

¹⁸ New York Amsterdam News, July 12, 1917.

¹⁹ For other examples see Cha-Jua, ““A Warlike Demonstration””; andj King, “Ready to Shoot and Do Shoot.”

NAACP warned that the adoption of anything other than nonviolence could “lead to white counterforce, lynching and widespread police actions of repression of the Negro people.”²⁰

I argue armed resistance was a powerful philosophy undergirding the Black liberation struggle. A Consideration of people like Malcolm X helps us contextualize armed resistance as a philosophy. Undoubtedly, Malcolm X was one of the most preeminent voices in the twentieth century advocating armed resistance. Yet, there is no evidence that he actually used armed self-defense (e.g., shot someone). The distinction here is crucial. An individual could be a major proponent of Black armed resistance, like Malcolm, and yet have never fired a weapon. Malcolm X’s contribution to the Black liberation struggle was ideological, as a significant theorist of the practice.²¹ Conversely and interrelatedly, individuals who practiced armed resistance did not always articulate this position, or may not have been recorded as supporting armed resistance. My study focuses on women who, like Malcolm, endorsed armed resistance (but may not have wielded a weapon) and women whose practice of armed resistance was not announced but demonstrably felt.

The philosophy of Black armed resistance embraced self-love, freedom, and self-determination. This philosophy had several core elements. The first is an acknowledgment of Black humanity. Black people have always known they were human beings despite the established systems of oppression, litigation, customs, and practices that historically denied them this very position – including enslavement, Jim Crow legislation, and mass incarceration.²² In resisting institutional violence and racial terrorism Black people affirmed

²⁰ Handler, “Wilkins Assails CORE and SNCC, Hints Full Break”; Also see Handler, “Wilkins Says Black Power Leads Only to Black Death.”

²¹ See Breitman on Malcolm’s speeches Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*; See Marable for a biography of his life and activism. Marable, *Malcolm X*.

²² This is not a new theory. Scholars have asserted Blacks affirmed their humanity from the moment they were taken from the shores of Africa. For some of the best scholarship on this matter see Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*; Harding, *There Is a River*; Johnson, *Soul by Soul*; Johnson, “On Agency.”

their dignity; armed resistance, then, was the assertion of one's humanity and an assertion of self. Those that advanced this position also knew that the odds were not in their favor. Still, they thought it better to fight and die, rather than die "like a dog or a rat in a trap," as Ida B. Wells wrote in 1892.²³ A core belief, then, was that armed resistance held its own emancipatory value.²⁴ In the face of brutal attacks—in which Black bodies were commodified and sold, mutilated, used and abused – armed self-defense outlined the contours of freedom. In a world in which others laid claim to Black women's sexual and reproductive capacities, the ever-present aspiration to be free by any means necessary was the essence of freedom. Blacks who embraced a philosophy of armed resistance, who asserted Black humanity, and fought for freedom had a burning desire for Black self-determination – of being autonomous, determining for themselves their own destinies and futures. Proponents of the philosophy would argue that self-determination was fundamentally essential to Black freedom.

Finally, Black armed resistance represented both a symbolic and literal challenge to the pseudo-democratic government. Historically, racial violence against Blacks had a profound impact on the political landscape, with extraordinary economic benefits for those in power. This history of brutality was rooted in slavery and grounded in Jim Crow. For those who advanced a political philosophy of armed resistance, this position proffered a critique of US democracy that failed to institutionalize provisions for full Black citizenship and participation. They were not alone in this assessment, as undoubtedly Black people who did not embrace armed resistance offered a similar analysis. Nonetheless, the target of Black

²³ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors*.

²⁴ Frantz Fanon made a similar argument in his ground-breaking book. See Fanon, Sartre, and Bhabha, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

armed resistance was institutional anti-Black violence: the use of the police and the law to repress Black freedom, to protect capitalist interests, to dominate Black reproduction, and to exploit Black production in the name of American democracy.²⁵

Historiographical Significance

The historiography on Black women's political activism remains silent on militant women's use of weapons to defend their person and their community. Since slavery, Black women have wielded Bibles, pens, and bodies to fight against racial and gender injustice. But they have also used weapons in their pursuit of freedom. Despite their overwhelming participation in every struggle, protest, movement, and rally for Black liberation, Black women are often depicted as bystanders or helpmates in the historiography on armed resistance in the Black freedom struggle. While these two historiographies have grown immensely, very little is known about the Black woman who lived and struggled at the intersection of political activism and armed resistance.

One of the most visible places armed Black women appear is in their own writing. Women have written their own histories, offering salient details and analysis of what it meant to be an armed Black woman. Although autobiographies of militant women existed before the modern Civil Rights Movement, there was a proliferation of Black Power women writing narratives about armed struggle in the last three decades of the twentieth century. Activists such as Assata Shakur, Angela Davis, Elaine Brown, Afeni Shakur, and Safiya Bukhari published manuscripts describing their lives as young Black girls, their political awakening, and their ideological commitments.²⁶ Most importantly, these texts convey their rationales

²⁵ Berry, *Black Resistance, White Law*.

²⁶ These women were all members of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense or affiliated with the organization. They were high-ranking women in the group or high-profile women in the movement. Because of

for taking up arms and communicate their perspectives on why armed struggle was essential to Black liberation.²⁷ If women progressively embraced armed resistance throughout the twentieth century, the publication of Black women's armed memoirs is further proof that scholarly attention is necessary.

Outside of memoirs and autobiographies, several books and articles offer useful treatments of armed Black women, but tend to be limited and narrow in focus. For instance, in 2008, Robyn C. Spencer shattered the scholarly silence surrounding Black women and armed resistance.²⁸ Her article "Engendering the Black Freedom Struggle: Revolutionary Black Womanhood and the Black Panther Party in the Bay Area, California" explores Black women who joined the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, a Revolutionary Nationalist organization that, among other things, advocated armed resistance. Spencer's study surveys the experiences of rank-and-file Panther women who were active participants in the group. She details their involvement in militant activities such as police patrols and weapons training. Among other things, Spencer's work demonstrates that women were as attracted to calls for armed self-defense as Black men and joined the organization for many of the same reasons.²⁹

the notoriety of the Panthers and their armed political activity, they have warranted critical inquiry from scholars. See LeBlanc-Ernest, "The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job"; Matthews, "No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution Is"; Lumsden, "Good Mothers with Guns"; James, "Black Revolutionary Icons and 'Neoslave' Narratives"; James, *Shadowboxing*; James, *Imprisoned Intellectuals*; James, *Resisting State Violence*; Perkins, *Autobiography As Activism*; Williams, "'Don't No Woman Have to Do Nothing She Don't Want to Do.'"

²⁷ Shakur, *Assata*; Davis, *Angela Davis-An Autobiography*; Brown, *A Taste of Power*; Bukhari's *The War Before* is not an autobiography but rather a collection of her work, edited by her dear friend. Bukhari and Whitehorn, *The War Before*; See Afeni Shakur's autobiographical piece in Balagoon, *Look for Me in the Whirlwind; the Collective Autobiography of the New York 21*.

²⁸ Spencer, "Engendering the Black Freedom Struggle."

²⁹ Also, see Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*.

Spencer documented the experience of the Panthers' first female member, Tarika Lewis, to prove her point. "One day sixteen-year-old Lewis boldly walked into the Panthers' office near Merritt College and declared: 'Ya'll have a nice program and everything. It sounds like me. Can I join? 'Cause ya'll don't have no sisters up in here.'" Chairman Bobby Seale responded favorably. Lewis's next question was: 'Can I have a gun?' Again, Seale responded yes. As a member, Lewis was required to learn the Panther ideology and study political literature, before getting a gun: "I had to earn it [her weapon] ... I learned safety, I learned to respect it, I respected other people, I never pointed a weapon at anybody, and I followed the rules."³⁰ Spencer reveals women's desires to join the Panthers, attraction to guns, and adherence to the tactic of armed resistance to be similar to Black men's.

Women who joined the Panthers also had to contend with narrow and sexist definitions of their role in the movement and work. According to Spencer, however, constricting gendered ideas did not deter Panther women. Instead, they claimed their strength "at a time when this very attribute was being demonized as dysfunctional." Likewise, women played a pivotal role in the promotion and practice of community defense; this was a direct rebuttal of narrow definitions placed on them. "Strapped" documents similar trends with activist women throughout the late twentieth century. Like Spencer, I have found Black women attracted to calls for armed resistance in the same ways as Black men. Demands for Black people to protect themselves made sense given the long trajectory of violence against Black Americans. Building on Spencer's scholarship, I expand her analysis by examining women who promoted and practiced armed resistance before the Panthers rose to fame.

³⁰ Spencer, "Engendering the Black Freedom Struggle," 94; Angela LeBlanc-Ernest also notes Lewis' membership with the Party. LeBlanc-Ernest, "The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job."

I also juxtapose the Third World Women's Alliance campaign to cultivate armed Black women with that of the Black Panther Party. Both organizations embraced Revolutionary Nationalism that sought to overthrow the United States government. The Panthers constructed propaganda promoting Black women as armed warriors. Emory Douglass, Minister of Culture, produced the most enduring images of Black women armed as guerrilla soldiers and revolutionaries.³¹ Between 1972 and 1974 Gayle Dickinson (Asali) was the only female artist published in the Party paper; she, together with Douglas, produced images that conveyed Black women as capable, critical, and committed to the revolutionary struggle. The Panther's 10-Point Platform informed the artwork that appeared in the paper. One of their organizing premises was that Black people had a right to self-defense.³² The publication was an important Black Power text, and through the dissemination of images of armed women, they encouraged and praised Black women as revolutionaries.³³ While the scholarship on the Panthers is robust, more research on Black Power women is needed. My dissertation helps to fill this void by considering Black Revolutionary women who, like the Panthers, created propaganda that promoted and celebrated armed Black women. Analyzing a Black Feminist Revolutionary Nationalist organization serves to underscore how Black women envisioned what outcomes the revolution would bring.

Armed Resistance in the Black Freedom Struggle Literature: A Historiographical Assessment

Armed Black women appear in several foundational Civil Rights texts but are rarely the subject of analysis. Acknowledging armed women then has not necessarily led to

³¹ Douglas, Seale, and Durant, *Black Panther*; Doss, "“Revolutionary Art Is a Tool for Liberation”’.””

³² Jones, *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)*.

³³ Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers*.

assessing their impact on the movement at the local or national level, a critical intervention this dissertation makes. It is likely that researchers perceive Black women's armed activity as less impactful and essential than men's. In a gender-stratified society, "what men do is usually valued more highly than what women do because men do it, even when their activities are very similar or the same," writes Judith Lorber and Farrell, two gender studies scholars.³⁴ Scholars have reluctantly accounted for the importance of Black women's armed protection as an essential component to the success of the Black Freedom Movement.

Despite Black women's significant contributions to Black liberation, they remain nearly nonexistent in the historiography on armed resistance, no matter the type of resistance (self-defense, rebellions, uprising, etc.). Early scholars on armed self-defense during the Civil Rights Movement have vigorously insisted that "black" people's use of armed resistance was a means to affirm manliness.³⁵ For instance, as historian Simon Wendt maintains, "it is difficult to comprehend the *black* response to white violence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries without acknowledging this struggle over manhood."³⁶ Scholars of armed self-defense have a propensity for casting the "black response to white violence" in terms of a struggle between men. But as the activism of women such as Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Queen Mother Moore, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and many others suggests, the opposition to anti-Black violence extended beyond the restoration of Black manhood to combat white supremacy. I argue that it is difficult to comprehend Black women's response to white violence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries without acknowledging their conceptions of freedom.

³⁴ Lorber and Farrell, *The Social Construction of Gender*, 115.

³⁵ Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*; Wendt, "They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men"; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*.

³⁶ Emphasis mine. Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 11.

The literature on armed self-defense and Civil Rights has bloomed since the publication of John Dittmer's *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* and Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, two seminal texts that acknowledge the role of armed self-defense in the local Mississippi Civil Rights Movement.³⁷ Timothy Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie*, a biography of Robert F. Williams illuminates the use and role of armed resistance in the 1950s and 1960s.³⁸ In the 2000s the field gained considerable momentum with the publication of several books. First came Lance Hill's *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* in 2004 and Christopher Strain's *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era* in 2005. Following close behind was Simon Wendt's 2007 publication *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, and more recently Akinyele Umoja's *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* in 2013 and Nicholas Johnson's *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms* a year after that.³⁹ Additionally, several articles have contributed to this new wave of scholarship on armed self-defense. These studies have collectively helped to establish the significance of this tactic during the movement and challenged presumptions that the Civil Rights Movement was a "nonviolent movement."⁴⁰ Still, much work remains.

This turn towards Black women holds significant implications for future scholarship on Black liberation studies and Black women's history. For instance, armed Black women can tell us more about Black Nationalism and the struggle for freedom in the United States,

³⁷ Dittmer, *Local People*; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*.

³⁸ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*.

³⁹ Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*; Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*; Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*.

⁴⁰ Cha-Jua, "'A Warlike Demonstration'"; Crosby, *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up*; Wendt, "God, Gandhi, and Guns"; King, "Ready to Shoot and Do Shoot"; Strain, "We Walked like Men"; Umoja, "1964"; Umoja, "The Ballot and the Bullet: A Comparative Analysis of Armed Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement"; Wendt, "'They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men'"; Courtright, "Rhetoric of the Gun."

particularly, because they rejected the “promise of protection.” According to Farah Jasmine Griffin, the “promise of protection” describes the commitment Black Nationalist men had to protect Black women. This notion, Griffin writes, “addressed two important concerns of black nationalism: it restores a sense of masculinity to black men while granting black women at least one of the privileges of femininity.”⁴¹ Black men’s desires to protect Black women emerged out of a sincere concern for their emotional, psychic, and physical safety, notes Griffin. But it also grew out of a power struggle between Black men and Black women. To be clear, protection in itself is not a bad thing. And yet, within a racist patriarchal society, the promise of protection could potentially confine a woman’s agency and freedom, because the promise rests on the assumption that women lack the ability and capacity to defend themselves and that women will obey their male protectors. An armed woman, then, ran the risk of running afoul of Black Nationalist conceptions of womanhood. An individual could want protection and also want to defend herself—both are possible, and sometimes co-existed.

In 2011, Laurie Green introduced the concept of a “politics of protection,” which adds greater texture to Farah Jasmine Griffin’s notion of the “Promise of Protection.” Green’s model is an insightful understanding of a complex set of struggles between Black men and women, which often included competing claims to manhood and bold assertions of responsibility by women. The politics of protection denoted a struggle among “African Americans about who bore the responsibility for safeguarding black women and communities; women’s investments in their own roles as protectors, not just as dependent

⁴¹ Griffin, “Black Feminists and Du Bois,” 35.

recipients of protection, against racial violence and other hardships; and the impact of conflicting beliefs about race, gender, and protection on the civil rights movement.”⁴² Green argued, “gendered conflicts among various organizations, leaders, and individuals, including women, about black self-defense and protection of families and communities significantly impacted the course of the civil rights movement.”⁴³ “Strapped” utilizes these two concepts in its an analysis of armed Black women during the Civil Rights Movement.

To be sure, Black men took their roles as protectors very seriously, and scholars working on these subjects have followed suit by defining armed self-defense as a “male prerogative.” Simon Wendt’s work is particularly notable in this regard. In writing about the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, he argues, “In both phases of the black freedom struggle, activists regarded their armed actions as an affirmation of black manliness.”⁴⁴ Lance Hill provided a similar assessment of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, an armed self-defense group that protected civil rights organizations. He wrote, “freedom for black men depended on manhood, and manhood meant the willingness to use force to defend one’s family and community. Black men could not attain manhood through the strategy of nonviolence since nonviolence prohibited the use of force. And without manhood status, rights were meaningless.”⁴⁵ Christopher Strain, too, argued that for the Deacons, the organization became “an expression of manhood.”⁴⁶

From this line of thinking, several unfounded assumptions follow. Many scholars have assumed that only men were willing and ready to defend themselves. “To the primarily

⁴² Green, “Challenging the Civil Rights Narrative: Women, Gender, and the ‘Politics of Protection,’” 55.

⁴³ Green, 68.

⁴⁴ Wendt, ““They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men.””

⁴⁵ Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 261–62.

⁴⁶ Strain, “We Walked like Men,” 54.

working-class men who joined the Deacons,” Simon Wendt insisted “Martin Luther King’s idea of nonviolence was degrading to their notion of male identity.” Hill goes even further in this line of thinking. He posited, “the physical and emotional risks that black men assumed when they joined a nonviolent protest far outweighed what black women and children suffered.” Continuing, he reasoned, “black men had *much more to lose* than women and children: what was at stake was their pride, their manhood and very likely, *their life*.”⁴⁷ The problem with this line of thinking is that it takes for granted many assumed truths. Of course, women feared for their lives when they joined protests and certainly had just as much to lose as their male counterparts, including their life, dignity, pride, housing, job, and/or friends. Moreover, a glaring contradiction arises when we assume that women were less likely to be victims of racial violence. The presumption is rooted in the assumption that the cult of womanhood protected Black women as it did white women or that Black women were seen by white aggressors as less threatening than Black men.⁴⁸ The reality was that some Black women believed they were just as likely as Black men to be the victims of racial terror and were also susceptible to sexual violence.⁴⁹ Two movement women offer a prime example. Dr. Joyce Ladner and her sister, Dorie Ladner, both participated in the Civil Rights Movement as SNCC workers. Joyce served as the SNCC representative for the March on Washington organizing committee and Dorie worked with SNCC in Natchez, Mississippi. In a 2011 interview, the sisters were interviewed together for the Civil Rights History Project.

⁴⁷ Emphasis mine. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 28.

⁴⁸ On the cult of womanhood see Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood”; For a discussion on how Black women were not protected by the cult of true womanhood see Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*.

⁴⁹ Even a cursory look at the activism of Rosa Parks, Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer demonstrate women were threatened with brutal force, lost their jobs, homes, and lived in a constant state of danger. Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*; McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*; Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*.

As Joyce recalled her anger surrounding the racist killing of young children, including Emmett Till, she claimed, “I never thought they would kill me,” she was however concerned they would kill her brothers. Dorie, on the other hand immediately countered her sister, declaring, “I always felt they would kill me... Very deeply. Very deeply.”⁵⁰ These two perspectives demonstrate that women held different ideas about their proximity to violence.⁵¹ Additionally, their different perspectives denote that the role a woman played in the movement and her location shaped her perceptions about her potential for experiencing violence. Dorie may have felt she was in more danger given her SNCC work in Natchez, Mississippi than Joyce, who was in college. Like Dorie, some women did not believe their womanhood would protect them from racial terror—they assumed the same risk as men.⁵² Furthermore, the evidence reveals that not all women supported or believed in the nonviolence philosophy, its effectiveness as a tactic, nor its primacy in the movement as described throughout the dissertation.⁵³

The neglect of Black women in self-defense studies may very well be a conceptual problem as much as it is an erasure of the historical record.⁵⁴ Scholars of self-defense have been reluctant to contemplate armed resistances outside the paradigm of manhood and

⁵⁰ Dorie Ann Ladner and Joyce Ladner oral history interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier in Washington, D.C., 2011-09-20.

⁵¹ Payne notes that initially women were assigned office work because it was perceived to be less dangerous than field work. Payne, “‘Sexism Is a Helluva Thing’ Rethinking Our Questions and Assumptions.”

⁵² For a detailed discussion of Black women’s experiences of sexual and racial violence during and after slavery see, White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*; Holsaert, *Hands on the Freedom Plow*; McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*; Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*; Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West”; Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*; Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*; Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935*; Feimster, *Southern Horrors*; Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*; Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*; Morgan, *Laboring Women*.

⁵³ Crosby, “‘It Wasn’t the Wild West’ Keeping Local Studies in Self-Defense Historiography.”

⁵⁴ The white feminist movement attempted to project women “by nature and nurture, [as] more nonviolent, less aggressive, and more peace-loving than men.” White feminists saw “the Black Power Movement as a male invention.” Therefore, militant women, both Black and white, were considered “brainwashed into accepting male models of confrontation.” Thompson, *Promise And A Way Of Life*, 130, 237.

masculinity and have tended to downplay or failed to incorporate Black women's commitment to self-defense within alternative theoretical frameworks.⁵⁵ In their studies, the practice of armed self-defense is synonymous with asserting manhood and a well thought out response to continued domination or the inalienable right of all citizens. For instance, Simon Wendt does not erase women from his narratives on armed resistance. Instead, he incorporates them into his analysis of Black masculinity.⁵⁶ Rationalizing women's practice of armed resistance, he offered the following explanation: "white supremacy had traditionally impeded the ability of black men to defend themselves and their community. Since self-defense often resulted in brutal retaliation against the black community, many black women might have been *forced* to rely on their own protection against white attacks, in particular against the sexual advances of white men."⁵⁷

From this perspective, women's participation in self-defense is a reaction to the failures of men, which obligated women to rely on themselves. In this equation, Black women's advocacy or commitment to self-defense falls outside the limits of activism, and is beyond Black women's quest for Black liberation; it is a reaction to Black men's limitations. The distinction is important because it assumes women accepted the terms of the "promise of protection." My study troubles this estimation. We know some men felt it was their duty and right to protect 'their' women, but we also need to understand women who rejected the promise and the ways they complicated the terms of the promise. "Strapped" offers an analysis of both.

⁵⁵ Theoharis' work on Parks is an excellent example of this assumption. Despite countless examples throughout the book that self-defense was central to Park's politics the general public and scholars refuse to envision a rebellious or militant Rosa Parks. Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*.

⁵⁶ Wendt, "They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men," 9.

⁵⁷ Emphasis mine. Wendt, 9.

Why Study Black Women's Armed Resistance?

A study on armed Black women has much to teach us about Black women's history. Historians of Black women have demonstrated the political, economic, and sexual vulnerability of Black women during and after slavery, which forced Black women to develop a multitude of strategies to protect themselves, their families, and their communities. In 1984 Paula Giddings' seminal work, *When and Where I Enter*, on Black women's activism appeared. Giddings maps how Black slave women, abolitionist, suffragist, club women, civil rights activists, and feminists addressed issues of sex and race simultaneously. The opening pages of *When and Where I Enter* illustrate the story this dissertation tells. Giddings begins with the narrative of Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell, both affected by the lynching of a friend, Thomas Moss, in 1892. While both had a "spirit of defiance;" Terrell and Wells approached lynching from divergent points of view. Terrell organized a group of activists to petition the United States President, while Wells documented the lynching of hundreds of men, women, and children in the south that year. She also urged Blacks to pick up the gun in self-defense.

The brutal murder of Moss characterized the post-Reconstruction era sentiment—a general diminished hope that racial violence had become a thing of the past. Instead, racial terrorism was on the rise. Black leaders advocated competing strategies and tactics to address the most pressing issues including legal intervention and armed self-help. According to Giddings "...the rude awakening sent Wells and Terrell on a course that changed both their lives. Their approaches were different—symbolized by Wells purchasing a pistol...while Terrell, no doubt wearing her accustomed white gloves and expensive strand of pearls, went

to the White House.”⁵⁸ Giddings’ artful juxtaposition of Wells and Terrell illuminates the multitude of approaches Black women adopted to address Jim Crow.

Until very recently, scholarship on Black women’s activism has focused on club women, church women, and the Garvey movement.⁵⁹ These works have offered a rich, complex history of Black women’s contributions to efforts for freedom and powerful institution building capacity. Focusing on mostly upwardly mobile women, middle-class ladies, and highly educated women, these studies show how Black women challenged the sexism of Black male spokesmen and saw themselves as leaders of the race.

In *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894-1994*, Deborah Gray White similarly asserts that women approached activism from various perspectives.⁶⁰ White persuasively reveals how Black women persistently spoke out and organized on their own behalf. They sought to defend themselves against stereotypes, negative images, slanderous policies, racism and male chauvinism. When it came to protecting themselves and their names, Black women believed they were the best candidates for the job. Building upon White’s thesis that Black women did organize in defense of themselves, my study considers a very similar question: When did Black women arm themselves in self-defense?

In reviewing women’s activism throughout the twentieth century, it is clear they often held competing strategies for liberation. Many scholars have studied the impact the politics of respectability had on expressions of Black women’s activism during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s influential work on Baptist

⁵⁸ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 25–26.

⁵⁹ The field of Black women’s history is slowly incorporating accounts of women who fall outside of these categories. See for example Gross, *Colored Amazons*; Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935*; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*.

⁶⁰ White, *Too Heavy a Load*.

women defines the “politics of respectability” as a race strategy used by many Black churchwomen. In *Righteous Discontent: Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* Higginbotham argues that church women used the politics of respectability as a liberation strategy: through respectable politics, these women stressed morals and middle-class notions of outward behavior.⁶¹ As such, they promoted and advocated a gendered form of protest aligned with ideas of respectability, proper femininity, and true womanhood. While this did not restrict women’s activism or lives to the private sphere or household as it did their white counterparts, it did mean that their activism often conformed to Victorian notions of womanhood.⁶² The politics of respectability, then, held that only some forms of protest ideology and reform were appropriate for women, such as petition, boycotts, and verbal appeals to justice.⁶³ Other modes of activism were shunned, especially those considered confrontational and masculine. Certainly, Ida B. Wells’ demand for a Winchester rifle in every Black home fell outside of the purview of appropriate female activism.⁶⁴ Scholarship has equally obfuscated this form of protest.

A study on armed Black women can teach us about women who operated simultaneously within and outside of conventional notions of womanhood because they were women who pushed the boundaries. Black women and men consistently negotiated the terms of masculinity and femininity, and as such renegotiated what were and were not appropriate

⁶¹ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*.

⁶² For an excellent discussion of Black women operating outside of the private sphere see, Brown, “To Catch the Vision of Freedom”; Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices*; Also see essays within Bay et al., *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*.

⁶³ Also, see Hicks for a discussion of women who were not middle class or respectable but the subject of reformers’ efforts. Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935*.

⁶⁴ Wells-Barnett, *Selected Works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett*.

forms of activism.⁶⁵ According to LaShawn Harris, external factors contributed to the terms on which these types of negotiations took place. Harris' work on respectability demonstrates how women, particularly during the New Deal period, reshaped, manipulated, and departed from preexisting liberation strategies that used respectability as a condition for gaining civil rights.⁶⁶ The economic challenges many Blacks faced in the 1930s and 1940s led women to create new tactics that better addressed the experiences of the masses instead of a select few middle-class people. As a result, the reconstruction of respectability politics inspired new forms of protest and gave rise to a host of new female activists who took part in activism that was masculine, unbecoming of a woman, and outside the notions of female civility.

The above-mentioned scholarship support new frameworks for understanding broader conceptions of Black women's activism, radicalism, and resistance.⁶⁷ The collection of essays in *Want to Start a Revolution?* explain the vital contributions and radical political perspectives of Black women.⁶⁸ The editors Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard argue "Second-wave feminism" and other analytical frameworks typically used to examine radical feminist activism obscure the intersectional understanding of power that many Black women brought into movement circles and as members of organizations.⁶⁹ The consequence, the editors explain, is that the scope of Black radicalism continues to be limited to a 'leading man' master narrative such that models of male leadership remain intact.

⁶⁵ For scholarship on the politics of proper activism, womanhood, manhood, and uplift ideology see Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*; Carlson, "Black Ideals of Womanhood in the Late Victorian Era"; Griffin, "Black Feminists and Du Bois"; Harris, "Gatekeeping and Remaking the Politics of Respectability in African American Women's History"; Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*; Also see Lorber and Farrell, *The Social Construction of Gender*; Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

⁶⁶ Harris, "Reconstructing Respectability."

⁶⁷ Collier-Thomas and Franklin, *Sisters in the Struggle*; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*; Taylor, "Read [ing] Men and Nations"; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*.

⁶⁸ Gore, Theoharis, and Woodard *Want to Start a Revolution?*

⁶⁹ Echols, *Daring To Be Bad*.

Figures of revolutionary resistance are rarely Black women. Curiously, even this collection has scant analysis on revolutionary Black women who engaged in armed resistance.

Finally, an examination of armed Black women shifts our understanding of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. On the local level, Black women were the face of the Civil Rights Movement.⁷⁰ Drawing on scholarship that emphasizes the importance of local studies and theories on “bridge leadership” within Black communities, I contend local Black women helped to shape the Civil Rights Movement’s ideological position on nonviolence.⁷¹ Both Barbara Ransby’s *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* and Belinda Robnett’s *How Long? How Long?* illuminate how Black women succeed at recruiting, mobilizing, and sustaining support for the Civil Rights Movement. These studies reveal the importance of a layered tier of leadership whose task included bridging potential constituents to the movement and articulating movement goals.⁷²

Bridge leaders and local women also performed the task of protecting movement participants. This is a far less explored component of the scholarship on Black women’s activism and armed resistance. “Strapped” considers how local women’s use of armed self-defense shaped movement objectives and movement volunteers.⁷³ I argue Black women were

⁷⁰ Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*; Payne, “‘Sexism Is a Helluva Thing’ Rethinking Our Questions and Assumptions.”

⁷¹ Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 19, 191; Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 114; Payne, *Groundwork*; Crosby, “‘It Wasn’t the Wild West’ Keeping Local Studies in Self-Defense Historiography”; Crosby, *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up*.

⁷² Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard’s anthology challenge the “bridge leadership” framework that defines Black women civil rights activists primarily as behind the scenes organizers. But I find the framework useful for evaluating the growing support of armed resistance in the movement. Gore, Theoharis, and Woodard *Want to Start a Revolution?*

⁷³ Umoja’s work here is an essential jumping off point for this argument. He does not specifically survey women but argues that local people in Mississippi’s armed activity shaped the movement. Umoja, “1964”; Umoja, “The Ballot and the Bullet: A Comparative Analysis of Armed Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement.”

instrumental in articulating movement goals, recruiting, and protecting participants. Bridge leaders' efforts undoubtedly saved lives but also conveyed the importance and the efficient use of the principles of armed resistance for a younger generation.⁷⁴ In the following decades, these very same youth would further develop the principles of armed resistance as they built the Black Power Movement.

Expanding upon these many contributions, "Strapped" also contributes to the broader literature on women and guns. This body of scholarship is growing but largely centers on white women's capabilities for violence, rights as citizens, and relationship to the nation. At the core of these studies is the ongoing question of (white) women's rights to firearms: how they are used in relation to the state (to defend the state in the case of female soldiers; to dismantle it in the case of left- and right-wing revolutionary women; or to take over the functions of an ineffectual government, in the case of the NRA).⁷⁵ Furthermore, literature in this area points to the deep connections between masculinity, citizenship, and violence. Women who pick up guns have complicated the frequent association of guns and masculinity. This body of literature is developed mainly around whiteness and leaves much to be desired for inquiries on armed Black women, citizenship, and their capacity for violence.

Laura Browder's *Her Best Shot: Women and Guns in America* conclusively establishes the symbolic significance of gun-toting women to American culture. Browder

⁷⁴ Scholars have debated the effectiveness of armed resistance see Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*; Also see Umoja, "From One Generation to the Next."

⁷⁵ The scholarly work on armed women in the US, in general, tends to center on white women and the NRA. See Browder, *Her Best Shot*; Rudd, *Underground*; Stern and Browder, *With the Weathermen*; Carlson, "Carrying Guns, Contesting Gender"; Carlson, "From Gun Politics to Self-Defense Politics A Feminist Critique of the Great Gun Debate."

considers the ways that iconic gun-wielding women produced public discussions and often discomfort around questions of women, citizenship, violence, sexuality, and race. For instance, early gun manufacturers targeted white women as trap shooters and hunters at the turn of the nineteenth century.⁷⁶ However, in doing so, manufacturers made every attempt to divorce the guns from warfare, making it clear that women were not soldiers.⁷⁷ Images of armed women often conveyed larger social meaning and depended heavily on race and class. Browder writes, while “newspapers were documenting the dangers posed by armed Blacks in the South and armed Indians in the West, white women shooters used the gun as a concrete symbol of their alliance with white men, implicitly against people of color.”⁷⁸ This was emblematic of the nature of gun-toting women in the United States. Whereas an armed white woman might pose a threat to the state in one moment and uphold white supremacy in another, an armed Black woman was only a threat to the state.⁷⁹ Nonetheless, armed women of any race or ethnicity disrupted the popular association of guns and masculinity.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Interestingly, Browder argues gun manufacturers publicized trapshooting for women as yet another feminine activity, not far removed from shopping or club work. Unfortunately, in Browder’s study, race falls off at times as a category of analysis. Trapshooting as an extension of femininity was arguably tied to white ladyhood. Browder, *Her Best Shot*, 65.

⁷⁷ Browder, 65.

⁷⁸ Browder, 59.

⁷⁹ Historian Clayton Cramer provides compelling evidence that racism underlies gun control laws throughout much of American history. Laws designed to keep the Black population unarmed and ‘in their place’ functioned to calm the racial fears of whites. In his paper, “The Racists Roots of Gun Control,” Cramer provides a summary of how gun control advocates in early American history made every attempt to control weapons when they were in the hands of Blacks prior to Black emancipation. The end of slavery in 1865 did not eliminate the problems of racist gun control laws but propelled them. Fearful, aggressive whites dreaded an empowered Black populace, and the arrival of the Black Codes of the 1860s, which served to restrict the social, economic, and political lives of America’s newest citizenry are a clear indication. The enactment of Black Codes and private terror were attempts to continue slavery in a different form. These depredations included peonage contracts, denial of the right to assembly, denial of access to courts, and confiscating private firearms through discriminatory legislation or government-sanctioned robbery. Still, these studies exclude Black women and how they were impacted by this legislation. Unfortunately, race and gender are not simultaneously considered in these studies. Cramer, “The Racist Roots of Gun Control”; Cramer, Johnson, and Mocsary, “This Right Is Not Allowed by Governments That Are Afraid of the People.”

⁸⁰ Browder, *Her Best Shot*; Carlson, “Carrying Guns, Contesting Gender.”

Outside of the United States, the literature on armed women is far more plentiful and compelling. When women joined revolutionary movements for independence in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, scholars and the general public were forced to reconcile their presumptions about women's capacity for political violence and their revolutionary propensities. Frantz Fanon broke new ground in the 1960s by suggesting that revolutionary violence held transformative potential for women as well as for men. He claimed that Algerian women's participation in the armed struggle altered their feminine colonized identities and family relationships in positive ways that challenged feudal, patriarchal traditions.⁸¹ Women's participation in Third World revolutionary movements—on the front lines, as spies and intelligence specialists, guerrilla soldiers, and cadre leaders—sparked both passionate interest in the feminist possibilities of political violence and narrow interpretations about women's motivations.⁸²

Conservative perspectives adopted the state's classification of revolutionary women as "terrorists," and referred to them as such.⁸³ This view used limited and sexist interpretations to frame revolutionary women's roles. In *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism* Robin Morgan argues that "female terrorists are rare, almost always 'tokens' ...and invariably involved [in revolutionary organizations] because of their love of a

⁸¹ Fanon, Sartre, and Bhabha, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 99–120.

⁸² See Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, Reprint edition (New York: Grove Press, 2005); Numerous scholars have taken up this question in their studies of Algerian women and women in African Liberation struggles overall. See Meredith Turshen, "Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle and the Civil War: From Active Participants to Passive Victims?," *Social Research*, 2002, 889–911; Aaronette M. White, "All the Men Are Fighting for Freedom, All the Women Are Mourning Their Men, but Some of Us Carried Guns: A Raced-Gendered Analysis of Fanon's Psychological Perspectives on War," *Signs* 32, no. 4 (2007): 857–84, doi:10.1086/513021.

⁸³ Just two examples that use this approach are Morgan, *The Demon Lover*, 2001; Third, "Mediating the Female Terrorist."

particular man, a personal demon lover who draws them in.”⁸⁴ According to Morgan, (American) women are involved in an armed organization through what she calls ‘couple’s terrorism.’ Her reference points are her own experience and that of other white women, such as Patricia Hearst, an heiress to the Hearst fortune who was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974 and later joined their organization.⁸⁵ Armed women, then, are motivated by sexual desire. Morgan would argue that political, economic, and social justice were secondary concerns. Morgan’s line of thinking is replicated in several texts by scholars who mention Black American women in relation to their male lovers but do not consider or accept women on their own political terms.⁸⁶ This dissertation examines Black women as political actors, not as appendages of men, and as activists in their own right.

Scholars of armed women outside the United States have offered several counters to Morgan’s theory of ‘couple terrorism.’⁸⁷ They have found that women’s motivations for

⁸⁴ Morgan distinguishes terrorist women and other women who participate in uprisings. She writes, “Perhaps the most common misapprehension is the one that blurs together women who participate in general uprisings and “terrorist” women. For the record, then. Women taking to the streets banging pots and pans during food-shortage riots are not engaged in terrorist activity. Women marching in a public demonstration against a colonial government are not engaged in terrorist activity. Peasant women agitating for land rights, squatting on their small sharecropped farms, are not engaged in terrorist activity.” Morgan, *The Demon Lover*, 1989, xviii, 196.

⁸⁵ Morgan, 180–215; Also see Third, “Mediating the Female Terrorist.”

⁸⁶ I am not suggesting these texts adopt the same conservative view of political violence. Instead, they employ a similar line of thinking when it comes to their treatment of Black women concerning Black men, seeing them as appendages. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*; Also see Joy James in Gore, Theoharis, and Woodard, *Want to Start a Revolution?*

⁸⁷ The literature on armed women abroad is rich and robust. Mostly focused on women fighting in liberation struggles in the Third world, this body of work reflects the collective challenge to theories that argue women are naturally pacific. Carrie Hamilton, *Women and ETA: The Gender Politics of Radical Basque Nationalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Karen Kampwirth, *Women and Guerrilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba* (Penn State University Press, 2002); T. David Mason, “Women’s Participation in Central American Revolutions A Theoretical Perspective,” *Comparative Political Studies* 25, no. 1 (April 1, 1992): 63–89; Karen Gottschang Turner, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam* (New York: Wiley, 1999); In the US the focus on white women and gun ownership reflects a similar trend. See Carlson, “From Gun Politics to Self-Defense Politics A Feminist Critique of the Great Gun Debate.”

joining liberation struggles rarely differed from their male counterparts.⁸⁸ Like men, they wanted to end dictatorships and exploitation and aimed to create a more just country for their children. For studies that focus on women's politicization outside of romantic coupling, several questions arise: Did women gain new roles in society because of armed struggle? Did women achieve 'emancipation' through active participation in armed conflict?⁸⁹ There is little consensus in this regard. In some cases, women's issues remained secondary to the Nationalist struggle for independence even when high ranking women or those in leadership positions pushed against the narrow boundaries of Nationalist ideology.⁹⁰ Scholar Stephanie Urdang reminds us that how society views women after revolutionary struggle reflects the political ideology of the movement, which led to armed conflict in the first place.⁹¹

In the United States, Black women did not join armed organizations for reasons drastically different than those of men – and their participation in armed struggle rarely meant achieving emancipation, personal or otherwise. In part, this is because the overarching Black Nationalist ideology focused on the restoration of Black manhood as a central component to opposing white supremacy and bringing about a real revolution.⁹² This

⁸⁸ The following text takes up this question in one form or another. See Kampwirth, *Women and Guerrilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba*; Mason, "Women's Participation in Central American Revolutions A Theoretical Perspective"; Jordan and Denov, "Birds of Freedom?"

⁸⁹ Across the board, these questions are addressed when it comes to armed women. See Turshen, "Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle and the Civil War"; Jordan and Denov, "Birds of Freedom?"; White, "All the Men Are Fighting for Freedom, All the Women Are Mourning Their Men, but Some of Us Carried Guns"; Jaquette, "Women in Revolutionary Movements in Latin America."

⁹⁰ For an excellent discussion of women and Nationalism see Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*; Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, *Woman-Nation-State*; McClintock, "Family Feuds"; and McClintock, "No Longer in a Future Heaven."

⁹¹ This argument is also presented in Jaquette. She argues "there appears to be a link between female participation in guerrilla movements and the development of political statements and platforms directly aimed at feminist issues." Jaquette, "Women in Revolutionary Movements in Latin America."

⁹² White, "Africa on My Mind."

ideology has overwhelmingly governed Black struggles for liberation in the twentieth century.⁹³

Chapter Outlines

I offer five chronological chapters detailing women's involvement in armed resistance from the late 1950s to the 1970s. Chapter One, "A Historical Look at Black Women and Armed Resistance," provides the historical significance of this work by mapping women's armed activity before the modern Black Freedom Movement. Chapter Two, "Women's Thoughts on Nonviolence & Armed Self-Defense (1959-1962)," delineates the philosophies of armed resistance and nonviolence as defined by two activists, Diane Nash and Mabel Williams. Drawing on Mabel Williams' newspaper articles from 1959 to 1962 and Nash's speeches and writing from 1960-1962, the chapter offers an analysis of nonviolence and armed self-defense in the early years of the Civil Rights Movement. This chapter examines Nash and Williams' political lives to illuminate further both nonviolence and armed resistance as strategies and philosophies employed during the early years of the Civil Rights Movement.

Chapter Three, "Women's Leadership and Armed Resistance in the CNAC Movement," analyzes Gloria Richardson and the Cambridge movement from 1962-1963. Richardson was one of the only women to lead a local Civil Rights campaign, and the frequency of violent clashes between Blacks and whites in the Eastern coastal city made headlines and caught the attention of the federal government. Richardson never repudiated Blacks who armed themselves against white segregationists, to the chagrin of her counterparts. Richardson saw nothing wrong with movement participants joining nonviolent

⁹³ White; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 2000.

direct-action demonstrations in the daytime and, in the evening, arming themselves against night riders. This position was not favored among disciples of nonviolence. Even more problematic for top Civil Rights leaders, Martin Luther King Jr. among them, was Richardson's approach to civil rights legislation in the city. Under her leadership, the Cambridge movement emphasized economic justice, housing reform, and self-determination over and above voting rights concerns and public accommodations issues, the foremost goal of the National movement. Using Richardson's political activism, this chapter reveals the importance of Black women's leadership to armed resistance.

Chapter Four, "Political Repression and the End of Nonviolence in the Civil Rights Movement (1964-1966)," argues that Black women's experiences of state violence between 1964 and 1966 further shifted their views on the practicality of tactical armed resistance. The summer of 1964 was a turning point in the southern movement, because of the influx of volunteers, mostly white and northern. In response, white segregations planned and executed several anti-Black attacks on the movement. That summer the disappearance and death of three civil rights workers (Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman) and the killing of four young girls in Birmingham, Alabama shook movement workers to the core. This chapter surveys how Black women embraced armed resistance as a strategy to combat the increasingly dangerous levels of anti-Black violence.

By 1966, various segments of the Black freedom struggle had fully embraced the philosophy of armed resistance and the need for a revolution in America. Nonviolence was out of vogue, and the Black Power Movement was in full swing. Chapter Five, "Revolutionary Black Women (1968-1979)," examines the SNCC caucus, the Black Women's Liberation Committee (BWLC) established in 1968. The BWLC evolved into the

Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) by the 1970s. These women believed the goal of the Black Power movement should be to seize state power from the white capitalist ruling class. Their conclusion was not unlike that of other Revolutionary Nationalist organizations, including the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and the Revolutionary Action Movement. While they did not use the gun as an organizing tool, like the Black Panthers, the TWWA sought to achieve this goal through armed struggle and Black women's armed engagement. They conceptualized themselves as Revolutionary Black Women and used their newspaper to promote and cultivate Revolutionary Black women. This final chapter explores their vision for a revolution in the United States.

A Note on Terminology

Few scholars agree on the nature and scope of armed resistance during the Black Freedom Movement, rarely can one find a single definition of the term "armed resistance."⁹⁴ This lack of specificity leads me to define precisely the terms used in this document. I refer to armed resistance as a strategy, tradition, philosophy, and tactic because Black people's relationship to armed resistance reflects these precepts in both the literature and evidence. I define the act of armed resistance as the individual and collective use of force for protection, protest, or revolution in defense of human rights.⁹⁵ Broadly conceived, "armed resistance" does not exclusively involve a firearm such as a pistol or a rifle, but includes any instrument or weapon that can be used to defend, protect, or protest, such as a knife, stone or missile, fist, foot, or firebomb. In this dissertation, I use "armed resistance" as a broad term that

⁹⁴ Crosby, "'It Wasn't the Wild West' Keeping Local Studies in Self-Defense Historiography," 201; Akinyele Umoja is one of the few Social Scientists of self-defense studies to define these terms with clarity; Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*.

⁹⁵ Crosby and Umoja have influenced my thinking on the lack of specificity around the term armed resistance. Crosby, "'It Wasn't the Wild West' Keeping Local Studies in Self-Defense Historiography"; Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*.

includes “armed self-defense,” “retaliatory violence,” “rebellions,” and “uprisings,” and “revolutionary violence.”

Drawing from Akinyele Umoja, I define “armed self-defense” as the protection of human life, dignity, and property, through the use of force, against violence.⁹⁶ In his work on the Civil Rights Movement, Chris Strain does not offer a definition but argues self-defense is a traditional American ideal that is “to strike back at those who kept swinging at them, or shoot back at those who kept shooting at them.”⁹⁷ He also contends that justifiable self-defense can never be force used “too soon” nor force used “too late.” In my work, I venture away from this conception of “too soon” versus “too late” because in the age of night rides and well-advertised lynchings, Black people could not afford to strike at the “right time;” they had to prepare in advance for potential assaults and night terror.⁹⁸

“Retaliatory violence,” on the other hand, is not armed self-defense. Retaliatory violence is a planned or spontaneous act to avenge white terrorism.

“Rebellions” and “uprisings” also fall under the umbrella of armed resistance. Uprisings and rebellions are important factors to consider in a study on armed resistance because they represent collective rational responses to communal oppression.⁹⁹ I have intentionally avoided using the familiar refrain of “riot” to describe Black people’s acts of resistance and rebellion or revolt. In surveying the historiography on the urban upheaval of the late 1960s Heather Ann Thompson asked, whether these moments stem from “reckless ‘riots,’ which served primarily to undermine postwar political stability and erode the existing

⁹⁶ Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 7.

⁹⁷ Strain, *Pure Fire*, 2.

⁹⁸ Strain, 6.

⁹⁹ Thompson, “Urban Uprising: Riots or Rebellions.”

possibilities for inner-city-vitality? Or were they reasonable ‘rebellions’ intended to call attention to the continuing inequality in these same urban centers?”¹⁰⁰ An examination of Black women’s grievances and their individual and collective responses to oppression compels me to adopt the “rebellion” interpretation of sixties urban upheaval. Nonetheless, scholars have found that Black women were less likely than Black men to participate in the uprising of the sixties. For instance, Wayne Santoro and Lisa Broidy regard the gendered character of uprisings as an under-analyzed and under-theorized aspect of riot participation. To account for this gender-violence link, Santoro and Broidy use survey data taken in 1968 and conclude men reported higher levels of police mistreatment as a strong predictor of riot participation.¹⁰¹ Their observations are rooted in the fact that Black men were more likely than women to be pulled over by police, as evidence of men experiencing more significant levels of police mistreatment than women. Being pulled over by police may seem like a gender-neutral occurrence until we consider how many women owned or had access to cars in the 1960s. If the average American family owned one car, who was likely to do most of the driving? Examining women when and where they encountered authorities yields a different set of factors. While this study does not fully account for Black women’s participation in urban uprisings, it does analyze women’s experiences of police mistreatment as an indication of their use of armed resistance.

Finally, “Revolutionary violence” includes the use of political violence by a group or individual to achieve state power, by overthrowing and replacing the established government or political systems by the people governed. This type of armed resistance frequently

¹⁰⁰ Thompson.

¹⁰¹ Santoro and Broidy, “Gendered Rioting.”

operated underground (i.e. below the radar of the general public), was intricately bound to visions of freedom and liberation for all.¹⁰² “Political violence” and “revolutionary violence” are used interchangeably in this dissertation. This dissertation centers on women’s promotion of revolutionary violence rather than their participation in revolutionary violence. I have chosen this approach because Black Power activists are still currently under government surveillance and attack.¹⁰³ I have attempted to analyze and theorize Black women’s thoughts on revolutionary violence without potentially and inadvertently endangering their lives and the lives of their families.

The women featured in this dissertation employed and promoted all forms of armed resistance as defined above

¹⁰² Faraj notes that Black women played a much larger role in the underground aspects of the Black liberation movement than they have been given credit for. One chapter of Faraj’s dissertation is dedicated to women in the underground. The chapter focuses on Charlotte O’Neal, Assata Shakur Sandra Pratt. Faraj, “Unearthing the Underground,” 237.

¹⁰³ The harassment, rearrests and arraignment of the San Francisco 8, on trumped up charges with no new evidence thirty years later is only one example; the two-million-dollar bounty on the head of Assata Shakur is another (as of May 2013 she was added to the FBI Most Wanted Terrorist List). Joseph, “Why Is FBI Going After Assata Shakur Now?”

Chapter 1

A Historical Examination of Black Women Advocating Armed Resistance

For generations, Black people have advocated competing strategies to combat racial terror. This arsenal has included legalism, petition writing, moral suasion, appeals for international interventions and armed resistance.¹ Throughout African American history, activists, intellectuals, and everyday Black people have employed one or more of these strategies when faced with anti-Black violence and police brutality. This dissertation explores one approach in particular: armed resistance. I argue that women steadily embraced armed resistance as a philosophy and tactic. Unfortunately, there is limited statistical data to prove this assertion. Instead, I gauge its development by observing a slow but steady increase in women's public opinions in support of armed resistance. In addition to Black women's verbal and written statements, I consider their participation in militant activities from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century as an indication of women's growing acceptance of armed resistance as a tool to achieve freedom. This chapter offers a view of the period prior to the Civil Rights and Black Power era. While seemingly episodic, these moments provide insight into how Black women's political, economic, social, and cultural agency (re)produced

¹ For more on these tactics see Lee W. Formwalt, Robert Crumley, and Philip Joiner, "Petitioning Congress for Protection: A Black View of Reconstruction at the Local Level," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (July 1, 1989): 305–22; "Human Rights Violations Subject of U.N. Petition," *New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993)*, December 9, 1978; For a discussion of international intervention see Carol Elaine Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); On strategies employed in Illinois to address lynching see Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, "'A Warlike Demonstration': Legalism, Violent Self-Help and Electoral Politics, in Decatur, Illinois, 1894-1898.," *Journal of Negro History* 83, no. 1 (January 1998): 52; and for a northern take see Shannon King, "Ready to Shoot and Do Shoot," *Journal of Urban History* 37, no. 5 (2011): 757–774.

a strategy, tactic, and philosophy of armed resistance designed to achieve racial and gender equality.

To ascertain how and why Black women increasingly adopted armed resistance in the twentieth century, we must take a broad approach. Black women's use of armed resistance was both individual and collective, and this project is concerned with their use of force for protection, protest, and revolutionary goals. I use *armed resistance* as a comprehensive term that includes armed self-defense, retaliatory violence, rebellions and uprising, and revolutionary violence. From the 1830s to the 1930s Black women employed all of these forms of armed resistance.

In the 1800s Maria W. Stewart encouraged slave rebellions, and women were actively involved in insurrectionary plots. After emancipation, Black women armed themselves to defend their labor and land. During Reconstruction, women were armed guards while Black men exercised the right to vote, and in the 1880s Black women such as Ida B. Wells endorsed retaliatory violence against a mounting number of lynch victims. Finally, the rise of Black Nationalism during the early decades of the twentieth century resulted in unprecedented opportunities for New Negro women to articulate their views on armed resistance and freedom.

This analysis necessitates a liberal understanding of the term "armed resistance." Unlike their male counterparts, Black women historically have had limited access to traditional arms (i.e., guns, rifles, pistols). Men gained access to guns as a result of serving in the military and artillery was typically passed down patrilineal to family members. And although rural women were more likely to be socialized into gun culture, according to Robert

L. Young, gun ownership amongst women was lower than men.² Nonetheless, women armed themselves with knives, hatpins, sticks, fists, feet, or any instruments they could use to defend, protect, or protest. Black women's advocacy and practice of armed resistance differed from men's in fundamental ways. These differences evolved over time as the gendered political and social landscape changed for Black women.

To understand this change we can turn to Judith Lorber who contends that gender, as a process, creates "the social difference that defines 'woman' and 'man.'" Therefore, individuals learn and see what is expected of them, and act in expected ways to simultaneously construct and maintain the gender order.³ To that end, men imagined themselves as the sole protectors of the race, because gender constructions of 'man' dictated their responsibility as guardians. But over the course of history, many Black women have envisioned themselves as equally-capable freedom fighters, thus challenging and troubling the gender order. They contended with the sexism of Black men and the racism of white women while combating anti-Black violence from white vigilantes and police.

Battling America's Slave System

There is limited evidence available regarding Black women's thoughts on armed resistance during slavery; Maria Stewart is perhaps one of the few women recorded in history as supporting slave rebellions in the United States. Similarly, Black women's participation in slave revolts has only recently come to the attention of scholars. There is more evidence of Black men discussing and debating the merits of slave insurrections; and historians have

² Robert Young accounts for socialization, and region in terms of gun ownership. A deeper analysis would identify ownership, familiarity, and use. A woman could be familiar with a gun and know how to use one but still not own a gun. Young also notes a difference among gun owners rationales for owning a gun, some cited sporting activities (like hunting) whereas non-hunters owned guns for protection. Young, "Gender, Region of Socialization, and Ownership of Protective Firearms."

³ Lorber and Farrell, *The Social Construction of Gender*.

overwhelmingly focused on men as leaders of slave revolts, celebrating Gabriel Prosser, Demark Vessey, and Nat Turner. An understanding of the Victorian culture of the nineteenth century, which created and upheld separated, gendered private and public spheres, helps to explain this scholarly gap. But Black women moved through both the public and private spheres, advocating and practicing armed resistance. Scholars in the field, however, have not incorporated this reality into their work nor taken women's armed activity seriously.

Maria Stewart was one of the first women in the early 1800s who publically expressed her ideas about violence, slavery, and freedom, delivering speeches to a mixed gender crowd in the New England area. Stewart emphasized the notion that God made Black people in God's image. Such an opinion countered slave owners' perception that enslaved Blacks were destined to be slaves. Stewart reasoned that Black people should be free immediately—not in Heaven but on Earth.⁴ Stewart condemned the institution of slavery and the slaveholding class while prophesying God's coming judgment upon America for its sins of slavery.⁵

In the summer of 1831, she published an essay "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality," in *The Liberator*, the abolitionist newspaper founded by William Lloyd Garrison. She wrote, "stand still, and know that the Lord he is God. Vengeance is his, and he will repay. It is a long lane that has no turn. America has risen to her meridian. When you begin

⁴ Stewart foreshadowed Black Nationalist thought, particularly Black liberation theology. Theologian James Cones described liberation theology as "a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the Gospel, which is Jesus Christ." James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th Anniversary edition (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2010).

⁵ Stewart's liberation theology predated and prefigured James Cone. See Burrow, *James H. Cone, and Black Liberation Theology* (McFarland, 2001).

to thrive, she will begin to fall.”⁶ Stewart did not encourage Blacks to love their enemy. Instead, as scholar Christine Henderson noted, “Stewart essentially urges African Americans to love each other in order to unite and overthrow white oppressors.”⁷ She stressed God’s wrath, using biblical examples of God’s fury to justify enslaved people’s violent battle against slavery. Over a century after Stewart wrote these words; Black women during the Civil Rights Movement wielded their Christian beliefs to oppose the use of force and armed resistance, arguing God’s universal love should compel Black people to use nonviolence to combat segregation. Unlike her successors, Stewart saw armed revolt as an essential component to gaining freedom. Her message was layered and timely, evinced by the infamous rebellion in Southampton County involving Black men, women, and children both free and enslaved, led by preacher Nat Turner in August of 1831 – the same year “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality” was published.⁸

As an abolitionist and Black Nationalist, Maria Stewart, a self-educated woman born free in Hartford, Connecticut in 1803, advanced a position on Black equality and women’s rights that laid the theoretical foundation for Black Nationalist women in later years.⁹

Although she is rarely the focus of scholarly attention on the subject of armed self-defense or Black Nationalism, her intellectual contributions are noteworthy.¹⁰ Stewart’s position on

⁶ Stewart, Maria, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build,” accessed May 16, 2016, <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/wwm9722/>.

⁷ Henderson, “Sympathetic Violence,” 54.

⁸ For more on this rebellion and women’s involvement see Vanessa Holden’s work. Holden, “Reexamining a Community.”

⁹ Marilyn Richardson, ed., Maria W. Stewart, America’s First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches, 4th Printing edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

¹⁰ For instance, John H. Bracey, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, say nothing about Maria Stewart in their nearly 600-page book on Black Nationalism. The book almost exclusively focuses on the ideas of men. John H. Bracey, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, eds., *Black Nationalism in America*, 1st edition (Indianapolis: MacMillan Publishing Company., 1970); Moses included Maria Stewart in his collection. Wilson J. Moses, ed., *Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey* (New York: NYU Press, 1996).

resistance and violence stood outside of the typical pacifist perspective of late nineteenth century women. More common amongst her counterparts was an emphasis on sympathy and nonviolent forms of protest.¹¹

Perhaps because of Stewart's gender or precarious status as a widow, she did not explicitly advance armed resistance, insurrections, or slave rebellions in the same ways that her male counterparts advocated for these tactics. Stewart knew very well that speaking out as a Black woman was dangerous, but she was not entirely silent. Instead, she used her public voice to endorse the ideas of the late David Walker: "Though Walker sleeps, yet he lives, and his name shall be had in everlasting remembrance," she reminded her audience.¹² Born free and in the South, David Walker published his appeal to Black people entitled *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America, Written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829.*¹³ The document encouraged Black people to vigorously fight against slavery using any tactics available including violence to achieve liberation. He provocatively wrote, "...they want us for their slaves, and think nothing of murdering us. . . therefore, if there is an *attempt* made by us, kill or be killed. . . and believe this, that it is no more harm for you to kill a man who is trying to kill you, than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty."¹⁴ While some of his contemporaries objected to Walker's approach, including the white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison,

¹¹ Henderson, "Sympathetic Violence."

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal: An African American Anthology* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

¹⁴ For the full text see "David Walker, 1785-1830. Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America, Written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829.," accessed May 19, 2016, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/walker/walker.html>.

Stewart approved of and favored his stance. By evoking Walker's memory in her public speeches, Stewart allowed the *Appeal* to do for her what conventional social mores of the period prohibited her to do, particularly in an era when women's public speaking centered on temperance.¹⁵

Black men, however, debated the merits of armed resistance more publically than Black women. For instance, in 1843, minister Henry Highland Garnet made a compelling argument for the moral justification of violent resistance to slavery. "Neither God nor angels or just men, command you to suffer for a single moment," he told the National Convention of Colored Citizens in Buffalo, New York. He implored enslaved people to "use every means, both moral, intellectual, and physical that promises success..." Death in resistance was better than life in bondage.¹⁶ At the same gathering, abolitionist Frederick Douglass countered Garnet's position on slave insurrection. Douglass, who had used armed resistance to gain his freedom, named moral suasion as the proper course of action for enslaved people. Advocates of moral suasion believed that appealing to the humanity of white people to reform the social and economic system of slavery was the best method to advance freedom. Men convened the meeting, and only a select few were present to witness the nation's leading Black intellectuals, Garnet and Douglass, consider the moral, political, and practical uses of armed resistance and moral suasion.

¹⁵ See "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build" appeared first as a pamphlet in 1831. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (The New Press, 1995), 25–33; In a speech in 1833 Stewart again evoked the memory of Walker. See "What if I am a Woman?" Marable and Mullings, *Let Nobody Turn Us Around*, 43; Martha S. Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

¹⁶ Steven Shiffrin, "The Rhetoric of Black Violence in the Antebellum Period Henry Highland Garnet," *Journal of Black Studies* 2, no. 45 (1971): 45–56, <http://jbs.sagepub.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/content/2/1/45.full.pdf>.

These early advocates of armed resistance, both men and women, spoke to the necessity of the tactic. Notably, these advocates did not couple armed defense and Black masculinity in the early 1800s. This makes sense given the fact that manliness during the Victorian era stressed strong character, a powerful will, and sexual self-restraint as the highest conception of manhood. In the twentieth century, advocates of armed resistance—primarily men, tied notions of Black masculinity to the tactic of armed resistance.¹⁷

According to Gail Bederman, this was the same era in which a new definition of masculinity arose which defined males as aggressive, physical, and sexual.¹⁸ Men also had greater access to public spaces because of the gendered private/public dichotomy. Therefore, it is difficult to assess just how much Black women debated the merits of armed resistance and slave rebellions. As Mia Bay writes, “Throughout the nineteenth century, only a relatively small number of black women could read and write, and a smaller number committed any of their thoughts to paper.”¹⁹

While it may be challenging to recapture Black women’s thoughts on slave insurrections, we know women were involved in them. Historian Herbert Aptheker’s *American Negro Slave Revolts* is one of the earliest studies on slave rebellions. His seminal work on slave revolts estimated approximately 250 planned insurrections took place in North America from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century.²⁰ Historian Thavolia Glymph has documented the central role women played in slave insurgencies, in the years leading up

¹⁷ Wendt charts this process. See Wendt, “They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men.”

¹⁸ Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*.

¹⁹ Mia Bay, “‘If Iola Were a Man’: Gender, Jim Crow and Public Protest in the Work of Ida B. Wells,” in *Becoming Visible: Women’s Presence in Late Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Janet Floyd et al. (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2010), 110.

²⁰ Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 1993; Also see Aptheker, “American Negro Slave Revolts,” 1937.

to the Civil War. Glymph's study on Rose, a rebel leader of "armed negroes" in South Carolina in the spring of 1865, is just one example.²¹ For her leadership in the Pineville insurrection, Rose was captured and executed along with 27 other outlaws. Glymph's work reflects the growing scholarship on the multitude of ways women participated in slave rebellions and practiced armed resistance.²²

Perhaps the most famous example of a woman participating in armed rebellion was in the heroic efforts of Harriet Tubman during the Civil War. In 1863 Tubman organized an insurrection that led to the freedom of more than 750 enslaved women, men, and children in a raid along the Combahee River in South Carolina. Tubman's guerrilla campaign is the only revolutionary guerrilla act in U.S. history conceived and directed by a woman. Her example held a powerful meaning for Black women in the twentieth century who looked for a model of militancy. Scholar Joy James has argued, "Tubman's distinct archetype for a black female warrior belies conventional narratives that masculinize black history and resistance. Although males remain the icons for black rebellion embattled with white supremacy and enslavement, women also engaged in radical struggles, including the strategy of armed self-defense." Although sporadic, the examples of women such as Harriet Tubman laid a foundation for women's armed activity in the twentieth century. As women in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements sought to foster an explicit Black female militancy, they look back to capture the heroic stories of Tubman and other examples of armed Black women.²³

²¹ Thavolia Glymph, "Rose's War and the Gendered Politics of a Slave Insurgency in the Civil War," *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 3, no. 4 (2013): 501–32, doi:10.1353/cwe.2013.0077.

²² Holden, "Reexamining a Community"; Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*; For a perspective outside the U.S. see Landers, "Founding Mothers."

²³ For instance, the Combahee River Collective takes their name from Tubman's insurrectionary action. James, *Shadowboxing*.

“A Black woman fighting back--A Force so Strong”

Historian Catherine Clinton argued, “it is difficult to fathom the fear created by a black woman fighting back—a force so strong...such vocal and direct black female resistance... fueled white hysteria during the post [Civil] war era.”²⁴ In the decades following the war, there are two key places where we witness women “fighting back”: during labor and land disputes; and against police and other state officials. Similar to the decades before Reconstruction, Black women's voices on the subject of armed resistance are minimal, but examples of their participation in armed self-defense are plentiful.

For newly emancipated Black women, the promise of freedom was bustling with hope and anticipation; it offered the opportunity to create for themselves meaning in life after slavery: autonomy, marriage, family, work, and access to new educational opportunities. They also realized the necessity of arms to protect these newfound rights. For freedwomen, the lawful right of self-protection held the elements of freedom, because in their former status as slaves they were allotted no such power. As the dissertation demonstrates, Black women's conceptions of freedom often dictated the tactics they employed to achieve it.

In the years following the Civil War, the boundaries were blurry regarding what privileges were afforded to citizens. In 1866, the House of Representatives debated what became the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. This Amendment declared that Blacks were full citizens entitled to equal protection and due process under the law.²⁵ In the debates about the Fourteenth Amendment legislators expressed concerns about its effect on interpretations of the Second Amendment, and one's right to bear arms— a primary interest

²⁴ Clinton, Catherine, “Bloody Terrain Freedwomen Sexuality and Violence During Reconstruction Catherine Clinton,” 323.

²⁵ Cramer, Johnson, and Mocsary, “This Right Is Not Allowed by Governments That Are Afraid of the People.”

for some white people and lawmakers.²⁶ These debates were not confined to the hallways of Congress. *The Christian Recorder*, one of the first Black periodicals, published an article in 1866, which detailed citizens' Constitutional right to keep and bear arms, "We have several times alluded to the fact that the Constitution of the United States, guaranties to every citizen the right to keep and bear arms...this right, 'shall not be infringed'...All men, without the distinction of color, have the right to keep arms to defend their homes, families or themselves."²⁷ The paper emphasized that Freedmen "have as good a right to keep fire arms as any other citizens." The editorial both illuminated the concerns Blacks had about arms for self-defense and highlighted what freedom meant to formerly enslaved Blacks—the ability to protect oneself, home, and family. The Freedmen's Bureau Act passed into law on July 16, 1866, explicitly declared, "the constitutional right to bear arms, shall be secured to and enjoyed by all the citizens of such State or district without respect to race or color or previous condition of slavery."²⁸ The Act did not, however, mention women or sex, specifically.²⁹ Perhaps this was the junction in which the idea of the right to bear arms and citizenship were coupled with manhood. But freedwomen read themselves into the provisions outlined in the legislation, and used weapons, including guns, to protect themselves, their labor, families, land, educational institutions, and the vote. It appears that they did not wait for Congress to

²⁶ In the summer of 1866, Congress voted to override President Andrew Johnson's veto of the second Freedman's Bureau Bill and to approve for ratification the Fourteenth Amendment. See Cramer, Johnson and Mocsary for a discussion of the meaning of the Second Amendment at the time of the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment: Ibid.; Clayton Cramer, "The Racist Roots of Gun Control," accessed March 30, 2012, <http://www.firearmsandliberty.com/cramer.racism.html#T8>.

²⁷ "The Right to Bear Arms."

²⁸ Halbrook, *Freedmen, the Fourteenth Amendment, and the Right to Bear Arms, 1866-1876*, 41.

²⁹ More work on Black women and the constitution could yield more significant consideration of the questions laid out in this dissertation, particularly around Black women and the Second Amendment. In the twentieth century, this issue has been considered by Scales-Trent, who examines how the Constitution defines and protects Black women after the passages of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Judy Scales-Trent, "Black Women and the Constitution: Finding Our Place, Asserting Our Rights," in *Women and the American Legal Order*, ed. Karen Maschke (Routledge, 2013).

determine this right for them. They understood themselves as America's newest citizens and acted accordingly.³⁰

The right to bear arms was undoubtedly a newfound freedom. Under slavery, most states prohibited enslaved people from having, owning, or purchasing firearms. According to historian Clayton E. Cramer, even free Blacks were systematically excluded from keeping and bearing arms. He noted, “the North Carolina Supreme Court recognized a right to bear arms in 1843—then a year later declared that free blacks were not included—the Georgia Supreme Court did likewise before the 1840s were out.”³¹ This law arose from the most profound fears of white slave owners, who shuddered at the prospect of Black people with guns or other weapons, intent on revenge for the crimes of slavery. This concern, Cramer contended, “has been recurrent throughout American history, and the origin of many of America’s first gun control laws.”³² While the Freedman's Bureau Bill and the Fourteenth Amendment gave Blacks a right to bear arms, the barrier to exercising this freedom came with the adoption of Black Codes.³³ These ordinances required Blacks to obtain a license before carrying or possessing firearms, ammunition, dirks or knives. They also prohibited white persons from selling, lending or giving a Black person such armaments.³⁴ Still, some

³⁰ Halbrook notes that the debate about newly-freed slaves right to own firearms was disputed in 1866. This comprehensive study focuses on the framers of the Fourteenth Amendment and Reconstruction-era legislation to protect the right to keep and bear arms. Halbrook shows the intent of the Fourteenth Amendment to guarantee equal rights to Blacks, including the right to bear arms but his analysis is confined to Black men. Halbrook, *Freedmen, the Fourteenth Amendment, and the Right to Bear Arms, 1866-1876*.

³¹ Cramer, “The Racist Roots of Gun Control.”

³² Cramer.

³³ Many Black veterans left military service with their issued weapons or war prizes.

³⁴ In 1865 Mississippi required all Blacks "not in the military service of the United States Government" to obtain a license from the county's board of police to "keep or carry fire-arms of any kind, or any ammunition, dirk, or bowie knife." The same law made it illegal for any white person to sell, lend, or give a Black person, any firearms, knife, or ammunition. A month after Mississippi passed its statute, Alabama enacted a similar restriction on Black peoples' right to bear arms save for no provisional license. Florida followed shortly thereafter, passing a law that mirrored Mississippi's restriction for a license. Black women have not been explicitly discussed in these studies, nor have these scholars considered the impacted of this legislation. Cramer,

freedpeople found ways to arm themselves for protection. When traditional weaponry such as a gun or rifle was unavailable, women found other means.

Black women armed themselves with axes, sticks, and poles particularly while attempting to hold on to land and reconfigure labor practices. These conflicts were intense, and women fought hard to claim their labor and land, perhaps because they had experienced severe sexual and economic exploitation under slavery. Plantations in the low country offer a prime example of the various struggles of freedpeople to reappropriate land. In 1866 the Keithfield plantation witnessed the most intense uprising. Nearly a dozen freedwomen helped to defend their land when the landowner asked the former slave driver to help her regain control of the plantation. When the former slave driver and his son attempted to deliver work orders, freedwomen and men turned their work tools into weapons. Armed with “axes hatchets hoes and poles” they attacked the former slave driver, threatening to kill him.³⁵ However, the historical record obscures and conceals women’s participation in these violent scrimmages. As historian Leslie Schwalm writes, “Freedwomen’s opposition to restoration and their involvement in even the most violent confrontations with planters and agents of Reconstruction have sometimes been obscured by the tendency of observers to describe participants as undifferentiated crowds of freedmen or “negroes.” But, Schwalm noted “the records of freedwomen who were arrested and jailed for their resistance to restoration reveal their active role.”³⁶

"The Racist Roots of Gun Control"; Cramer, Johnson, and Mocsary, "This Right Is Not Allowed by Governments That Are Afraid of the People."

³⁵ Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*, 192.

³⁶ Schwalm’s assessment is instructive. Not only does it point to the erasure of Black women and their efforts to hold land it also reveals the silences of the archive and historical memory in general. One wonders what similar episodes have gone misreported, of freedwomen subsumed in the terms ‘negroes’ or wholly dismissed by observers who only record Black men as active participants. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham clarifies this problem when she suggests that race functions as a metalanguage in Western culture and tends to subsume and

During Reconstruction, Black women resorted to self-defense to protect themselves from white violence perpetrated by agents of the state, especially law enforcement officers. For instance, shortly after the presidential election of 1868, violence erupted on a plantation operated by Mr. Middleton, whose laborers had formed a Black Union League. Angered with this new development, Mr. Middleton wanted the league disbanded. After former employees allegedly stole several bushels of rice, the planter had a handful of disgruntled employees arrested, including the president of the Union League. Two hundred Blacks appeared at the railroad depot demanding the release of these Black prisoners: “the men were armed with guns, and the fifty or so women present carried sticks,”³⁷ The women, however, wanted more than just the release of the prisoners, they also wanted the sheriff, and his deputies shot. At least one Black man tried to thwart their demands. According to one of the victims, “The negro women appeared particularly anxious to have [the overseer] murdered.”³⁸ The intensity of Black women’s attempts at retribution during this uprising reflected the depth of their oppression under slavery. Their demands to murder the overseer and shoot the lawmen who represented and maintained this system, were significant. Black women’s experiences of violence under chattel bondage differed from men’s.³⁹ Women had fresh memories of the demands on their labor that consumed their lives, threatened their health, dismembered their families, abused their bodies, and devoured their joy. There is no full recording of the

obscure gender, class and other social relations. Furthermore, Higginbotham contends that scholarly work in African American history, and women’s studies that are premised on the assumption of racial, gender, and class homogeneity “preclude recognition and acknowledgment of intragroup social relations as relations of power,” and overlook important intraracial political struggles in Black communities. Intraracial power struggle shaped the Black tradition of armed resistance and specifically shaped Black women’s tradition of armed resistance. Schwalm, 191; Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race.”

³⁷ Drago, “Militancy and Black Women in Reconstruction Georgia.”

³⁸ Drago.

³⁹ See White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?* and; Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*.

intra-racial political struggle that ensued between the Black man and the Black women at the train depot.⁴⁰ What we do know is that the women's demands were louder and more vehement than the men's, but, since the overseers and lawmen lived to recount the story, Black men were successful in rejecting the women's plans.

Myrta Lockett Avary recorded a similar occurrence. Lockett, a white Virginian writer, published several books featuring eyewitness accounts of the Civil War and Reconstruction mostly from the Confederate perspective. Avary noted, in Richmond, at a gathering a policeman pushed a Black man who was in the way. "The Black man struck the officer, and a brawl ensued. "Negroes of all sizes, sexes and ages, some half-clad, many drunk, poured into the street; brickbats flew; the officer was knocked down, his prisoner liberated. Screams of "dem p'licemens shan't 'res' nobody, dat dee shan't!" "Time done come fuh us tuh stan' up fuh our rights!" were heard on all sides."⁴¹ Avary's narrative further demonstrates the interactions Black women had with police, as she noted Blacks of "all sexes" present during the encounter. This episode showcased Black women's willingness to adopt armed resistance during moments of police brutality.

Women's practice of collective and individual self-defense denotes their belief in equal citizenship. Long before Black women could officially cast ballots, they participated in the electoral process in critical ways.⁴² As self-proclaimed Republicans, they openly sported

⁴⁰ This idea of intra-racial political struggle is drawn from Higginbotham. Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race."

⁴¹ Avary, *Dixie after the War: An Exposition of Social Conditions Existing in the South, during the Twelve Years Succeeding the Fall of Richmond*, 232.

⁴² Despite the restriction of suffrage to adult men, Black women played a central role in Republican Party politics. In her work on political activism in Richmond, Virginia, scholar Elsa Barkley Brown concluded that African Americans viewed the franchise as the collective property of the whole family so that women and children were present at Republican conventions in and around Richmond. In Brown's work, she reveals the early formation of two political arenas: one external and the other internal. The external political sphere that Black men, as well as white men, participated in was the traditional political landscape. Simultaneously

campaign buttons for their favorite candidates, supported political agendas, and were willing to put their bodies on the front line to defend their political rights. In South Carolina, women took off from work and went to the polls to influence male family members and friends in casting their ballots; they monitored voting fraud perpetrated against Blacks and shunned Black Democrats.⁴³ White vigilantes punished Black women for their political activities. Their womanhood afforded them no protection.⁴⁴ Still, believing that voting was their willfully earned right, Black women continued to participate in these political activities. They were typically armed to protect themselves and their communities from white terrorists, like Mrs. Keeling who carried a little pen-knife, even though her “husband didn’t even have a pocket-knife,” which she noted in her 1889 testimony before Congress.⁴⁵

Black women also performed the task of protecting voters, officiants, and rallies. Their presence at the polls is illustrative of the ways they saw themselves as political actors and their commitment to realizing the promises of freedom. Reconstruction elections were

operating was the internal sphere, which was primarily made up of Black women, men, and children who participated in rallies, parades, conventions, and mass meetings where they discussed and voted on political issues. Black women understood themselves as politically engaged citizen. Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere,” 120; Holt, *Black over White*; Gillin, *Shrill Hurrahs*.

⁴³ Reviewing the Joint Select Committee hearing offers further evidence. Editor Samuel Pointer testified that two days before election day of 1870 disguised men took “two white men, and three negroes, one of them a colored woman and whipped them most brutally.” The woman was beat, because she helped to run the elections, she and the others were responsible for the ballot box. Along with the beating, the hooded men warned that if they “dared to hold an election at that box they would return and kill them.” Another Black woman, Lucy McMillan, testified that she was forced to run to the woods after a Black man told known Ku Kluxers she had attended a political meeting. They accused her of “bragging and boasting that I wanted the land.” When the men could not find her, they burned her house. The attack was a direct result of her political activity. “Testimony of Mrs. Violet Keeling, 1883,” accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.yale.edu/glc/archive/1150.htm>; “The Result of Radical Teaching,” *Georgia Weekly Telegraph*, October 8, 1872, sec. 15; Testimony of Lucy McMillan *Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States*, vol. 2, Testimony, North Carolina, accessed March 20, 2015, <https://archive.org/details/reportofjointsel02unit>.

⁴⁴ *Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, Made to the Two Houses of Congress February 19, 1872*, 2: Vol 2 Part 1, 25-28.

⁴⁵ “Testimony of Mrs. Violet Keeling, 1883,” *Senate Report No. 579*, 48th Cong., 1st Sess.; testimony dated February 18, 1884.

violent affairs—Blacks and their white allies were shot, stabbed, hung, drowned, mutilated, and tortured beyond recognition. Paramilitary groups like the Ku Klux Klan broke up public meetings, assassinated Republican leaders, and attempted to prevent Blacks from voting.

Myrta Lockett Avary described the social conditions in the South after the Civil War noting, “The negroes were armed with ballots and bayonets, and the bayonets were at our breast.”⁴⁶ Avary’s exposé is a significant artifact that reveals the armed activities of Black women, particularly during elections. She noted, Black women were seen “carrying axes or hatchets in their hands hanging down at their sides, their aprons or dresses half-concealing the weapons,” during the campaign of 1876.⁴⁷

Observers of Republican rallies frequently reported the presence of rifles at political meetings. Participants were asked to leave their weapons at the door when they arrived, and Black women present would guard the arsenal.⁴⁸ While observers did not recognize women standing out front of meetings as “participants,” their duty acting as guards during the hostile environment of Reconstruction was a critical task. The political violence of the time necessitated weapons as a necessary accompaniment to rallies; Black women posted with the guns, suggest they knew how to use them and prepared for the task.⁴⁹ Women’s presence at political meetings as armed guards and participants in the collective franchise suggests the fluidity of gender notions among Blacks in the early years of emancipation. It suggests Black women and men were responsible for protecting the freedom they cherished, and that armed protection was not precisely a man’s job. Furthermore, it demonstrates the nature of Black

⁴⁶ Avary, *Dixie after the War: An Exposition of Social Conditions Existing in the South, during the Twelve Years Succeeding the Fall of Richmond*, 292.

⁴⁷ Avary, 362; Drago, “Militancy and Black Women in Reconstruction Georgia”; Williamson, *After Slavery*.

⁴⁸ Holt, *Black over White*, 31; Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere”; Gillin, *Shrill Hurrahs*, 47.

⁴⁹ Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere,” 122.

women's involvement in the public sphere, their expanding knowledge base as a result of attending political meetings, and the vital role they possessed as guardians of the franchise. A freedwoman's use of weapons, including guns, axes, and sticks were an assertion of her newly earned citizenship and an exercise of her Constitutional right to bear arms.

Unfortunately, Black men, encouraged by white men, attempted to limit women's political participation. This was the case on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina. After several political meetings, Laura M. Towne, a white northerner and teacher wrote the following account in her diary dated June 1, 1867, "two or three white men...got up and said women and children ought to stay home on such occasions...the idea took." When advertising the next meeting, a man asked, "'The females must stay at home?'" and the response was "'The *females* can come or not as they choose...but the meeting is for men voters."⁵⁰ Bearing in mind the role Black women played as guardians and protectors on Election Day and at rallies and meetings, one wonders how Black men's patriarchal stance of excluding women ultimately shaped their eventual disenfranchisement.

Despite Black women's best efforts to safeguard their Reconstruction gains, the enemies of Black freedom partially reestablished white supremacy.⁵¹ This period marked the vicious siege of lynching—extralegal execution by shooting, burning, hanging or torture, that was often mob driven; and the legal fortification of racial segregation. Between 1880 and 1930, an estimated 2,400 Black men, women, and children were killed by lynch mobs.

⁵⁰ Towne, *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne*, 183.

⁵¹ Du Bois termed the Reconstruction period a "splendid failure." Black men and women obtained the education that had been denied them under the laws of slavery. Nearly 2000 Blacks served in nearly every level of government from Senate to the local sheriff. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1999); Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

Amongst themselves, Blacks debated the appropriate course of action given the hostile political, social, and economic landscape. Some Black women advocated armed resistance.

“Almost Advised Murder”

In the 1890s a journalist and editor, Ida B. Wells shared her thoughts on anti-Black violence and self-defense with a broader audience than Maria Stewart had available in the 1830s. She advised Blacks to protect themselves from would-be lynchers; she also suggested retribution was a useful way to curb future offenses. Violent retaliation was not the same as armed self-defense, and Wells' support of revenge for acts of white terrorism made her an outlier amongst her peers, both male and female. Wells also practiced armed resistance when white Memphians sought to quiet the editor indefinitely. She dubbed her stance: “self-help.” For Wells, “self-help” included unity, self-determination, and armed resistance. Her idea of “self-help” coalesced as the major tenets of the philosophy of armed resistance throughout the twentieth century.

Wells' earliest advocacy of retaliatory violence appeared in an 1887 article published in Kansas City's Black organ, the *Gate City Press*. A Black woman accused of poisoning her white employer was arrested and housed in the county jail in Jackson, Tennessee while awaiting trial. “The mob had worked itself to the lynching pitch,” noted Wells and the woman “was dragged out of jail, every stitch of clothing torn from her body, and she was hung in the public court-house square in sight of everybody.” As if the hanging was not enough, her body was riddled with bullets to complete the lynching process.⁵² Wells'

⁵² Ida B. Wells, “Lynch Law in All Its Phases,” February 13, 1893, Wells, Ida B. Papers Box 8, Folder 8, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, <http://www.blackpast.org/1893-ida-b-wells-lynch-law-all-its-phases>.

September 4, 1887, diary entry illuminated her visceral reaction to this grave injustice.⁵³ The brief entry does not elaborate on the type of justice she sought, but the description of her article gives some indication. "Wrote a dynamic article to the G[ate] C[ity] P[ress] almost advising murder!" she reflected in her diary. In the article, Wells advised the Black community to retaliate for the murder of the Black woman. Then, in 1892 Wells published a pamphlet, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, in which she made a case for the importance of self-defense. Wells urged Blacks to protect themselves from lynchers and mobs. For her readers, she outlined one lynching after another across the country, in the South and the North, noting the only time someone "got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense."⁵⁴

Wells urged Blacks to purchase Winchester repeating rifles for protection.⁵⁵ One of the most advanced rifles of its time, the Winchester rifle was the ideal remedy for anti-Black brutality. Advising her people to protect themselves, she wrote, "The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give."⁵⁶ Wells studied brutish attacks on Black communities nationwide, and from all her work she concluded: "When the white man who is always the aggressor knows he

⁵³ The Free Speech was destroyed in 1892 by enraged whites after the publishing of an editorial that suggested white women were willingly involved with Black men. See Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (Hill and Wang, 2010), 104–5 After the destruction of the Free Speech many of Wells' writings appeared in the New York Age. Unfortunately, there are many missing issues of the New York Age for the year 1892. Wells' writings are quoted from other papers that reprinted them.

⁵⁴ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, 2005.

⁵⁵ One formal review of the Henry Model Winchester reported, "187 shots were fired in three minutes and thirty seconds and one full fifteen shot magazines was fired in only 10.8 seconds. A total of 1,040 shots were fired and hits were made from as far away as 348 feet at an 18-inch square target with a .44 caliber 216 grain bullet." Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*, 111.

⁵⁶ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors*.

runs as great [a] risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life.”⁵⁷ Wells encouraged more militant forms of activism and discouraged Blacks from yielding to the whims of violence and intimidation.⁵⁸

Her position on armed resistance was not rhetorical nor reckless; it was a calculated, well thought out remedy to combat racial and gender violence. In response to Wells’ charge that Blacks purchase a firearm for protection, scholar Nicholas Johnson argued, “It was a bold prescription, perhaps even foolhardy.”⁵⁹ Johnson’s criticism did not stop there. Regarding the rifle, Johnson wrote, “Wells ... found the idea of the Winchester simply a potent rhetorical tool.” Johnson's perspective is unfounded especially when we consider the growing affinity amongst nineteenth-century women for guns. According to scholar Laura Browder, in the mid to late nineteenth century, a growing number of women took an interest in hunting and gun culture. The increasing numbers of middle and upper-class women who had an affinity for guns and hunting contrasted with existing ideas about women's delicacy, personal safety, and political freedom.⁶⁰ As one contemporary periodical stated, “Ladies are rapidly becoming interested in rifle and pistol shooting, and why should they not?”⁶¹ More than likely, the *Rifle* had white women in mind when they wrote of the “ladies” enjoying target practice, hunting, and shooting. The paper billed white women “as skilled at using firearms, yet not violent... emphatically white and domestic.”⁶²

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Wells also advised Blacks to move out of the South. Giddings, *Ida*; Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely*.

⁵⁹ Nicholas Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms* (Prometheus Books, 2014), 110.

⁶⁰ For more on this see Laura Browder, *Her Best Shot: Women and Guns in America* (UNC Press Books, 2006); Mary Zeiss Stange, “Women & Hunting in the West,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 55, no. 3 (September 2005): 14–21.

⁶¹ “Ladies Day at the Rifle Range,” *Rifle*, May 1888 pg 519 As quoted in Browder, *Her Best Shot*.

⁶² Ibid., 75.

While manufactures publicized hunting and trap shooting as feminine activities no different than shopping or club work, they also made every attempt to divorce guns from warfare and notions of women as soldiers.⁶³ Wells' advocacy of armed resistance, then, was a rejection of the idea that an armed woman was nonthreatening. Scholar Laura Browder noted, "newspapers were documenting the dangers posed by armed blacks in the South and armed Indians in the West" at the same time that gun manufactures were targeting white women as trapshooters and hunters. White women shooters "used the gun as a concrete symbol of their alliance with white men, implicitly against people of color."⁶⁴ Despite not being the intended audience, Wells, an avid reader, would have been well aware of the gun advertisements that targeted women. A Black woman promoting armed resistance as a tool for freedom was exactly what gun manufactures sought to avoid. One wonders how many other Black women were influenced by the advertisements or Wells' recommendation to have a Winchester in their home. Wells continued to express her belief that Blacks should arm themselves against white vigilantes.

Four years after Wells almost "advised murder," another case caught her attention, in which a town took justice into their own hands after the murder of Frank Dudley, a Black man, was accused of killing J. Frank Hughes, a white "Prominent Kentucky Man" and "excellent citizen," of Georgetown, Kentucky.⁶⁵ Judge Bates presided over Dudley's case where he "waived examination and was remanded to jail to await the action of the grand jury."⁶⁶ Before Dudley could have his day in court, a wild racist mob entered the jail, hauled off and lynched Frank Dudley. The Black townspeople learned about the lynching and were

⁶³ Browder, *Her Best Shot*, 65.

⁶⁴ Browder, 59.

⁶⁵ "A Load of Slugs."

⁶⁶ "A Load of Slugs."

angry. The *New York Times* reported that the general attitude of Blacks, was “that some act of retaliation was necessary to bring the whites to a realization of the extent to which the negro race was being imposed upon, while the law itself seemed to fail reaching white offenders charged with the same offenses.”⁶⁷ These threats came from “negro women...[who] were much wrought up over the mob murder.” Journalists also noted, “a great crowd of negroes went out to the scene and made many threats of vengeance, but the authorities are prepared to preserve order at any hazard.”⁶⁸

More than likely, Wells appreciated the masterfully executed reaction of the townspeople: it was unified, prompt, and well organized.⁶⁹ Although the whites of Georgetown prepared themselves for the potential uprising—having an alarm to sound at the moment of threat, they were unable to thwart the upheaval. *The New York Times* reported that just after eleven o’clock, the warning sound rang loud, as Judge George V. Paine’s place was set afire. A second alarm rang out after Pauline Hall, a domestic of Georgetown Baptist College, set a fire in the basement of one of the College buildings. Just after extinguishing that fire another distress call was given, flames rising from a rear room of Judge Bates’ house.⁷⁰

After she learned about the lynching and retaliatory actions of the townspeople, Wells produced a fiery editorial in the *Free Speech* commended the Black residents of Georgetown who set fire to the town in response to the lynching. For Wells, the Black folks’ actions were

⁶⁷ “Citizens Called to Arms.”

⁶⁸ “Negro Murderer Taken from a Kentucky Jail and Lynched by a Mob.”

⁶⁹ It is unclear from the historical record why these particular men of status were the target of these women's retribution. Judge Bates had of course been the arbitrator of Frank Dudley, but the record does not indicate Judge Paine's significance or why Georgetown Baptist College was a target. Nonetheless, what is clear is that these were not isolated incidents or random targets. More than likely, the women (including domestic worker Pauline Hall) who participated in the plot knew the targets and their homes very well.

⁷⁰ “Citizens Called to Arms.”

a prime example of how Blacks should respond to lynching and mob violence, as a well-organized unit.

Resistance was not always felt from the barrel of a shotgun; sometimes a fire created the right spark of indignation. Wells praised the avengers, and white periodicals noted her vengeful recommendation. But Wells did not back down from her original perspective. According to Wells, retribution was in order. Instead, she boldly restated her position on retaliation as a form of self-defense in “The Lynchers Wince,” an article published in the *New York Age*. She noted the white newspapers were angered by “the outspoken sentiments of the ‘Memphis Free Speech’ commending [sic] the retaliatory [sic] measures adopted by the Afro*Americans [sic] of Georgetown, Ky., in revenge for the lynching of one of its members... Fundamentally [sic] men have an inherent right to defend themselves, when lawful authority refuses to do it for them.”⁷¹ Gallantly standing by her previous editorial lauding the events of Georgetown, Wells affirmed Black people’s inherent right to defend themselves, a fundamental principle of armed resistance. At the same time, she criticized the authorities for failing to do their job and placed white communities on notice. Her message was clear: “The way to prevent retaliation is to prevent the lynching.”⁷²

Wells' support of retribution went hand in hand with her understanding of "self-help" ideology. She believed Blacks had the power to end segregation and curtail racial brutality, rapes, and lynching. In her first published pamphlet, Wells outlined her position on self-help in three ways: unity, self-determination, and self-defense.⁷³ As violence continued to be the

⁷¹ Wells, “The Lynchers Wince.”

⁷² Wells.

⁷³ By the time of its publication, segregation laws had begun to populate cities and states across the nation. In Wells estimation, there was no need to petition the legislature to repeal segregation laws. Instead of fighting against legislation that restricted Black passengers to Jim Crow railway cars, a boycott would be far more

cornerstone of the Black experience in the United States, Ida B. Wells' voice on armed resistance was a powerful call for Black people to protect themselves. Forgoing the ideas that proper demeanor could curtail racial violence, Wells insisted on Blacks' inherent right to self-protection.

She not only advocated armed resistance but also practiced it. Whites in the South found her witty editorials unnerving and Wells found herself in grave danger. She was keenly aware that she could not hide behind the pen, and feared white men would lynch her. Wells reflected on her editorial in her diary: "It may be unwise" she wrote, "to express myself so strongly but I cannot help it & I know not if capital may not be made of it against me but I trust in God."⁷⁴ In hindsight, Wells questioned her forceful tone. She understood that "her sex" would not protect her. There was great risk for Black women drawing attention to themselves in print or public places. Mary Church Terrell, a contemporary of the time, explained the peril perfectly; "Colored women know all too well if they make themselves conspicuous or objectionable . . . they are courting disaster and ruin."⁷⁵ Unfortunately,

effective, she reasoned. She argued Blacks should join together to stay off of the segregated cars, at which point there would be no "need to petition the Legislature to repeal the law or raise money to file a suit. The railroad corporations would be so effected they would in self-defense lobby to have the separate car law repealed." Wells astutely reasoned that as long as Blacks continued to ride, the corporations "will always have plenty of money to fight all the suits brought against them." Money motivated companies like the railroads, not a moral compass. Her understanding and ability to link the viciousness of capitalism and racism to the Black experience were grounded in her position on self-help. The concept also meant using power to determine one's destiny. For many Blacks that power was tied to their labor and labor capacity. Wells understood the import of manual labor to the south, and she urged Blacks to use their labor power to assuage Jim Crow. The dollar was the white man's god, Wells penned, and so she concluded, "the appeal to the white man's pocket has ever been more effectual than all the appeals ever made to his conscience." Her assessment defied conventional Black protest ideology that was rooted in an appeal to white people's conciseness for equality. Instead, she understood Black working class people as power-players, "By the right exercise of his power as the industrial factor of the South, the Afro-American can demand and secure his rights, the punishment of lynchers, and a fair trial for accused rapists." For Wells, there would be no lifting up the race, the poor or illiterate among them. Instead, she saw working Blacks as the most critical industrial factor in the Southern economy; they did not need uplifting from the elite of the race, instead they needed to understand themselves as change-agents. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, 2005.

⁷⁴ Wells-Barnett and DeCosta-Willis, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, 101–2.

⁷⁵ Terrell, *A Colored Woman In A White World*, 288.

historians have failed to adequately account for the threat to Black women's lives and how that influenced their ideas about armed resistance.⁷⁶ For example, W. Fitzhugh Brundage concluded Black women had “greater leeway” to “voice their opinions and anger without suffering extralegal violence themselves,” than Black men. Wells, however, knew very well that she had no such latitude.⁷⁷ In discussions about women and extralegal violence throughout history, Brundage’s assessment is far too common. However, scholars of women's history such as Glenda Gilmore rightly argued that the ideals of southern womanhood never protected middle-class Black women.

Wells’ concerns about being the victim of racial and gender violence were not unfounded. For her position on retaliation and lynching, “the Sun [newspaper] insists that the people of Memphis should proceed to muzzle the ‘Free Speech.’”⁷⁸ Wells continued to pen articles but she also took decisive action: she purchased a pistol in preparation for a counterattack.

“I had been warned repeatedly by my own people that something would happen if I did not cease harping on the lynching ...I had bought a pistol ... because I expected some cowardly retaliation from the lynchers.” The white newspaper demanded someone muzzle her like a wild animal—a negation of her humanity. Wells opted to fight back. “I felt that one had better die fighting against injustice than to die like a dog or a rat in a trap. I had already determined to sell my life as dearly as possible if attacked. I felt if I could take one lyncher with me, this would even up the score a little.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Some historians have considered the brutality Black women faced. See White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*; Tera W. Hunter, *To “Joy My Freedom”: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Harvard University Press, 1997); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁷⁷ Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 81.

⁷⁸ Wells, “The Lynchers Wince.”

⁷⁹ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 62.

However, being armed did not always result in victory, and Wells knew that. Sometimes murderers were successful even when someone fought back. The point, then, was that fighting against injustice held its own emancipatory value. In the face of brutal attacks in which bodies were dismembered and sold; burned and paraded around; tortured and mutilated; self-defense was the embodiment of one's humanity—to fight and die as opposed to dying “like a dog or a rat in a trap.” For Wells, armed resistance outlined the contours of freedom.

New Negro Women Building a Black Nation

The rise of the New Negro Movement in the twentieth century brought a vibrant, militant energy to Black women's activism – one in which female members of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) embraced armed resistance as a necessary component to building a Black Nation.⁸⁰ Despite the masculinized nature of the organization, Black women feminized their tactics in several ways—by demanding to learn how to defend themselves, by joining pseudo-paramilitary groups, and by mobilizing Black men into action by representing themselves as warriors. These efforts denoted the growing appreciation of armed resistance amongst Black women particularly during a heightened moment of Black Nationalism.

Founded in 1914 in Kingston, Jamaica by Amy Ashwood and Marcus Garvey, UNIA used different strains of Black Nationalism to unite the Black race. Through its efforts, the UNIA attracted an estimated six million members in more than forty countries around the world. One of the organization's primary goals was to create a Black nation in Africa, and a

⁸⁰ For an overview of the Movement see Jarrett and Gates, Henry Louis, *The New Negro*; Locke, *The New Negro*.

government that would stand up for the rights of Black people worldwide.⁸¹ The idea of Africa as the natural homeland of people of African descent resonated with various Black Nationalist women.⁸²

The principles of armed resistance permeated the culture of the UNIA—in its newspaper, parades, and national conventions—and functioned as a space for the philosophy of armed resistance to be debated, discussed, and advocated. According to scholar Michael Hunt, ideologies survive through "carriers and repositories" of cultures such as families, schools, clubs, churches, and places of work.⁸³ Examining repositories of culture within the New Negro Movement reveals how women feminized armed resistance, despite the organization's masculinist and patriarchal orientation. Moreover, Garveyite women found unique ways to lead the UNIA and to articulate "community feminism." Ula Taylor described this perspective as a feminist politics that incorporated Black Nationalism. Community feminism recognized the unequal gendered relations of power and promoted Black women's empowerment.⁸⁴ This framework best describes how Black women position themselves as nation builders during the New Negro Movement.⁸⁵

Black Nationalist women operated within a male-dominated sphere, which upheld subordinate roles for women, but they pushed against constraining and sexist viewpoints. For instance, in the late summer of 1922, the UNIA hosted its annual convention, which provided a platform for members to deliberate on the merits of self-defense. Women attended and

⁸¹ "Constitution of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, 1918."

⁸² White, "Africa on My Mind"; Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*.

⁸³ Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*.

⁸⁴ Taylor, "Negro Women Are Great Thinkers as Well as Doers," 105.

⁸⁵ This was a part of the new identity Black women forged by merging the ideals of the "New Negro" and "New Woman" to create their own space: "New Negro Womanhood." See Lindsey on how a cadre of Black women accomplished this. Treva Blaine Lindsey, "Configuring Modernities: New Negro Womanhood in the Nation's Capital, 1890-1940" (Duke University, 2010), <http://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/handle/10161/2409>.

spoke out in this massive gathering. The impetus for this discussion was the cresting wave of recent lynchings and mass mob violence. The UNIA dedicated two days to the topic of “Lynching and how to correct it.” According to the *Negro World*, “a spirited discussion ensued on this subject.”⁸⁶ The overwhelming consensus of participants was that force was necessary in moments of racial violence. There were, however, a few outliers who believed such a policy would be disastrous. Mr. Robert Poston, the chairman of the meeting, for example, reminded the audience that Blacks were a minority in the United States. Others echoed his concern including H.F. Carroll of Indiana, who claimed it was okay to advocate for self-defense but ultimately concluded that “the Negro had nothing to fight with,” and such actions would end in “calamity to the race.”⁸⁷ For Carroll, self-defense was not a viable option. He recommended that they focus on building a mighty Black empire, with a government that could demand justice and freedom for Black people worldwide. Mrs. A. J. Robertson of Georgia, on the other hand, completely disagreed. She contended “lynching could be stopped if they would organize themselves,” and “meet force by force.”⁸⁸

Mrs. Robertson argued Black people should organize to fend off would-be lynchers. She also contended that Garveyites needed to rethink their position on excluding women from armed resistance. She urged the men in the room to “pay more respect and attention to their own women, teaching [them] how to defend themselves in time of trouble.”⁸⁹ Robertson’s stance on self-defense challenged Garvey and the UNIA’s conception of Black men as the sole protectors of the race. The UNIA’s structure was patriarchal, with designated

⁸⁶ “Lynching in America and How to Correct It.”

⁸⁷ “Lynching in America and How to Correct It.”

⁸⁸ “Meet Force with Force.”

⁸⁹ “Meet Force with Force.”

and specific roles for men and women.⁹⁰ Garvey assumed women's "natural" roles as mother and wife, however, they were not powerless in these positions. He envisioned women wielding considerable influence over men as wives and over children who would grow up to be citizens of the Black nation. Garvey expected men to be providers and defenders. UNIA men declared themselves "the protectors of the honor and virtue of our women and children." These designated roles did not go unchallenged. Robertson claimed self-defense as a place for women as well as men, and therefore feminized armed resistance. Her demand echoed other Nationalist women that used their constrained platforms within the organization to reimagine women's place within nation-building efforts—that is, women's ability to both create and protect the *imagined* nation.

Some scholars, such as Chris Strain, have suggested self-defense was an automatic response to violence, one that any person regardless of race or gender would employ. This notion disregards the specific social, cultural, and political realities of Black people in the United States. The proceedings of the UNIA convention reveal that members did not view self-defense as an automatic response always available to them. The convention exposes an exchange of ideas about the utility of armed resistance. Members of the UNIA theorized about armed resistance and debated potential outcomes of action and inaction. For those participants like Mrs. Robertson, who advocated for self-defense, the debate went further than who should be organized (just men, or men and women), it also encompassed a conversation about how organized effort should function (i.e., collective or individual defense). Mr. Williams, a New Yorker, advised individuals to arm themselves and framed his position within the law, which "gives to every individual this remedy." The bloody riots in

⁹⁰ Bair, "True Women, Real Men," 155.

Chicago, Tulsa, East St. Louis, and Houston were points of reference for the speakers that urged Blacks to organize collectively.⁹¹ Lynchers did not come as individuals; they came as a violent mob. Therefore, Mrs. Robertson reasoned, “however armed we may be as individuals, the only way to meet those who seek to lynch the Negro is for the Negro to meet them as a group.” Collective armed resistance, as opposed to individual self-defense, would “do away forever with the evil of lynching.”⁹² Her call for a defense unit foreshadowed the emergence of protective units like the Deacons for Self Defense and Justice of the Civil Rights Movement.

While the proceedings offered one space for members to debate armed self-defense, the UNIA parades offered a spectacular visual illustration of the empire Garveyites hoped to build. In the 1921 Convention Parade of the UNIA, 30 women of the Motor Corps dressed in their blue uniforms, trailed 75 men of the African Legion and led 100 Black Cross Nurses.⁹³ The *Negro World* reported these men and women were “a unique spectacle, their military bearing eliciting great applause from the crowds as they passed by.”⁹⁴ The Women Motor Corps and the African Legions provided protection for the UNIA and the Black community

⁹¹ McLaughlin, “Ghetto Formation and Armed Resistance in East St. Louis, Illinois.”; Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*; Broussard, “New Perspectives on Lynching, Race Riots, and Mob Violence.”

⁹² “Lynching in America and How to Correct It.”

⁹³ The African Legions dressed in dark blue military uniforms, with a red stripe down the trouser legs. Legion officers were armed with either a dress swords or wooden rifles. Some men marched with real rifles. The purpose of the African Legions was to teach men military skills and discipline. They provided protection for the UNIA and the Black community against racist and unjust physical aggression. Established in 1920 in Philadelphia by national leader Henrietta Vinton Davis. Davis modeled the African Black Cross Nurses after the Red Cross. Their specific purpose was to provide health services to the community. Although some members had formal medical training, most worked with practical training in first aid and nutrition. Amnifu R. Harvey, “Black Community Development Model: The Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League 1917-1940,” *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 21 (1994): 113.

⁹⁴ Marcus Garvey, *The Marcus Garvey, and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 3 (University of California Press, 1983), 566.

against racist and unjust aggression.⁹⁵ According to the UNIA charter, the African Motor Corps was designed to assist “Universal African Legion in the performance of their duties.”⁹⁶ Recruiting young women between the ages of 15 and 45 the Motor corps were military trained and organized, and led by a woman brigadier general. The brigadier-generals, however, reported to the commanders, who were men, which reflected the patriarchal structure of the Garvey movement.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, the African Motor Corps represented real and symbolic militarization of Black women and reflected their capacity for protecting the Black community.

Another space in which women feminized armed resistance was in the pages of the *Negro World*. The paper was brimming with articles and poems that propagated the principles of armed resistance. In its heyday, the *Negro World* may have been the most widely distributed newspaper worldwide. At its height, circulation reached 200,000, with distribution throughout Africa, the Caribbean, Central America, the United States, Europe, and Canada. The paper created such an uproar that it was “banned in every British possession in the Caribbean, at one time or another, between 1919 and 1920.”⁹⁸

Black Nationalist women’s writings, editorials, and poems articulated a global vision of Black freedom and promoted armed resistance as a legitimate response to racial discrimination and global white supremacy.⁹⁹ Black women championed the establishment of a Black nation-state in Africa as a legitimate response to racial brutality and white

⁹⁵ Rules and regulations for the governance of the Motor Corps passed into law at the 1921 Convention. Garvey, 3:669.

⁹⁶ Garvey, I:769.

⁹⁷ For a discussion of the roles of women within the UNIA see Keller, Ruether, and Cantlon, *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*.

⁹⁸ James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 74.

⁹⁹ Blain skillfully examines the political ideas of Black Nationalist women in the 1940s. Similar themes on armed resistance and force are presented in this work, and point to a growing militancy among women in print culture. Blain, “We Want to Set the World on Fire.”

supremacy. More importantly, they saw themselves as nation-builders, a model that Black Nationalist women during the Black Power era would also adopt. Amy Jacques Garvey imagined Black women as liberators of the race who would fight for freedom. She boldly articulated her frustration with Black men who failed to lead. In the *Woman's Page*, Jacques Garvey lamented, "Be not discouraged black women of the world, but push forward... A race must be saved, a country must be redeemed... We are tired of hearing Negro men say, 'There is a better day coming,' while they do nothing to usher in the day. We are becoming so impatient that we are getting in the front ranks and serve notice to the world that we will brush aside halting, cowardly Negro leaders." Jacques Garvey's editorial may have played on racialized notions of Black men's inherent weakness. To be sure, women at times used patriarchal concepts to their advantage. Consequently, her writing could have mobilized men to take up arms, especially if they felt they had failed to fulfill their patriarchal duty to protect women. Jacques Garvey wrote, "Mr. Black Man, watch your step!" She threatened, "Ethiopia's queens will reign again, and her Amazons protect her shores and people. Strengthen your shaking knees and move forward, or we will displace you and lead on to victory and to glory."¹⁰⁰ At the same time, her rally to fight force with force undermined the patriarchal notion of men as the sole defenders of the race by reimagining women as warriors.

Black Nationalist women in the Communist Party and leftist organizations also employed similar tactics by playing on patriarchal notions of manhood. For instance, Ruby Weems' poem "The Murder of Ralph Gray" appeared in the socialist magazine the *Liberator* in 1931.¹⁰¹ Weems' final stanza reads:

¹⁰⁰ Amy Jacques Garvey, *Negro World*, October 24, 1925.

¹⁰¹ The *Liberator* (later became the *Harlem Liberator*) was the magazine of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights (LSNR). The LSNR was organized by the Communist Party in 1930 as the successor to the American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC). Naison, *Communists In Harlem During The Depression*.

His muscles swelling into a mighty challenge
 Mounting into a vision of a million clenched fists.
 He wears his death like a joyous banner of solidarity,
 A specter of militant Negro manhood.
 He lies still and silent—but under his unmoving form
 Rise hosts of dark, strong men,
 The vast army of rebellion!¹⁰²

Weems' poem was strikingly different from Mrs. Robertson's demand for Black women to be taught self-defense tactics. Weems depicted a masculine image of armed resistance (i.e. "a specter of militant Negro manhood") and called for a Black man's revolt. Weems wrote the poem to memorialize Ralph Gray, an organizer and sharecropper in Alabama. Gray was murdered on July 15, 1931, when a shootout between a white mob and the Alabama Share Croppers Union occurred. Weems' memorializing poem fit nicely with the strong male-centered version of radicalism generated by Black Nationalists men. Her radical call for Black sharecroppers and tenant farmers to organize and form a vast army of rebels with swelling muscles conjured up historical images of dark and strong Black men.

Conclusion

The examples of armed resistance in this chapter demonstrate Black women's growing appreciation for the tactic of armed resistance. Scholar Akinyele Umoja wrote, "from one generation to the next armed resistance has played a significant role in the survival and development of the Black liberation movement in North America."¹⁰³ Indeed, women were essential to the tactic passing from one generation to the next.

After World War II Black people made numerous demands on the federal government for full citizenship. Black women and men participated in the war efforts and took seriously

¹⁰² Weems, "The Murder of Ralph Gray."

¹⁰³ Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 56; Also see Umoja, "From One Generation to the Next."

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's proposal that people everywhere should enjoy four fundamental freedoms: Freedom of speech. Freedom of worship. Freedom from want. Freedom from fear. Building on President Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" the Pittsburgh Courier initiated the "Double Victory Campaign." The campaign was twofold—one victory abroad against fascism and one victory at home against racism and exploitation. The campaign gained momentum and probably benefited from the efforts of the March on Washington Movement spearheaded by A. Philip Randolph. The thought of hundreds of thousands of Black Americans marching on Washington was enough to compel President Roosevelt to sign Executive Order 8802, which prohibited segregation in the defense industries. Black people viewed the Executive Order as a win and proof that their demands for greater government oversight could yield positive gains.

Despite the political advances of the early 1940s, many Black activists were frustrated with the slow pace of political change in the United States. The 1950s brought a surging spirit of defiance. Civil Rights groups like the NAACP used legal methods (i.e., legalism) to attack Jim Crow, and battles in the courts earned significant victories such as the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. the Board of Education*. In 1955, Rosa Parks and other Black women organized a mass-base attack against segregation in Montgomery, Alabama.¹⁰⁴ The Montgomery bus boycott revealed Black women's ability to mobilize large numbers of people to dismantle segregation. But even in these efforts, Black women were armed. As Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, president of the Women's Political Caucus, recalled, "I got my weapon, too. And the cartridges! I was afraid to shoot the pistol, but it was a comfort to have it there. I could not 'load' the weapon, because I was afraid I would shoot myself, but

¹⁰⁴ On Rosa Parks' long activist career see Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*; Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*.

somebody loaded it for me. If anybody had attempted to break in, I am sure I would have used the gun.”¹⁰⁵ Although Robinson oscillated between fear of loading the weapon and understanding the necessity for the gun, she like, countless other women, was ready to shoot if she needed to protect herself and others. In the subsequent chapters, I explore two contemporary waves of the Black liberation movement—the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements—and examine how women progressively deepened their embrace of armed resistance as a philosophy and tactic. .

¹⁰⁵ Robinson and Garrow, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*.

Chapter 2

Women's Thoughts on Nonviolence & Armed Self-Defense (1959-1962)

In 1961 Diane Nash, a student activist, delivered a speech at the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice in Detroit, Michigan. The gathering was a national interfaith conference on religion, race and Catholic involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Nash, a Christian freedom fighter, unequivocally told her audience that “The purpose of any nonviolent demonstration is to focus the attention of people on how evil segregation really is and then to change their hearts.”¹ Nash, a disciple of the philosophy of nonviolence, sought to achieve racial integration and regarded segregationists as a “human being instead of somebody to fight.” Her ideas complimented the notion that appealing to the humanity of white people, who as powerbrokers, could reform the social and economic system of oppression was the best method to advance freedom—or a tactic known as moral suasion. Nash’s position on nonviolence, integration, and segregationists was dramatically different than that of Mabel Williams, a southern activist from North Carolina. As an advocate of armed resistance as a philosophy, Mabel held no such belief in moral suasion as an effective tactic to combat segregation or secure racial justice. By contrast, Mabel regarded segregationists as humans reduced to “raging beasts,” by their “hatred and prejudice.”² This chapter presents the philosophies of nonviolence and armed resistance as outlined by two women, Diane Nash and Mabel Williams.

There is no evidence to suggest that Diane Nash and Mabel Williams ever met.

Nash was a northern-born college student when she joined the movement, while Mabel

¹Nash, “Inside the Sit-Ins and Freedom Rides: Testimony of a Southern Student.”

² I have chosen to use the first names of Mabel and Robert Williams throughout the dissertation. I have made the same decision for other couples featured in the manuscript to avoid confusion that may arise from using surnames when referring to one or the other.

was a southern-born organic intellectual who never attended college. Nash was a committed follower of the principles of nonviolence, and as a national leader, she was a significant tactician for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Nash reached celebrity status, having graced the cover of *Jet Magazine*, the nation's most famous and well-circulated Black weekly publication.³ Moreover, Nash had a level of status, power, and access that Mabel lacked.⁴ Mabel, on the other hand, enjoyed no such fame, and, unlike Nash, did not have the listening ear of Martin Luther King Jr. Even more so, she stood in the shadow of her well-known husband, Robert F. Williams.

These two movement leaders illuminate the divergent perspectives of Black women regarding the use of armed resistance during the early years of the Civil Rights Movement. This topic remains unexplored by scholars of the Civil Rights Movement and in histories of women's activism. Unfortunately, researchers assume (all) women were naturally pacifists and therefore exclude women's militant activity from their studies on armed self-defense in the Civil Rights era.⁵ Far more focus centers on Black men who practiced and advocated armed resistance repeatedly.

Likewise, it is necessary to explore nonviolence and armed resistance through the experiences, ideas, or politics of Black women and to interrogate how the tactic of nonviolence is gendered. Scholarship on women, however, interrogates gendered misconceptions about women's natural propensity for nonviolence. According to scholar

³ "Coed Who Gave up College to Fight for Rights."

⁴ To assess these two leaders, I used the framework offered by Robnett on formal local bridge leaders and indigenous bridge leaders. See Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*.

⁵ For one example see Wendt, "They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men"; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*.

Karen Beckwith, there is an apparent relationship between women's rights movements and nonviolence.⁶ But the connection between the two is more of a social, political, and historical constructed rather than a natural occurrence.⁷ Beckwith rightfully argues that nonviolence is gendered, through negotiation and action, in specific political movements. While this body of literature considers the gendering process of political activism, rarely have scholars incorporated Black women's historically rifted relationship to women's rights movements into their analysis. Therefore, I build on these theories to examine the philosophies of nonviolence and armed resistance.

In this chapter, I first examine Nash's arrival to the philosophy of nonviolence as a young college student. Because of its importance of Nash's development as an activist and intellectual, the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC pronounced "Snick") is interwoven throughout my analysis of Nash's politics. SNCC's dramatic transformation over the course of the 1960s offers a valuable narrative of Black women's relationship to nonviolence and armed resistance in the Black freedom struggle. As the rest of the dissertation shows, this relationship is indelible to the conflicting ideologies of nonviolence and armed resistance. From Nash's convictions on nonviolence, I then turn to assess Mabel Williams' opposition to the philosophy of nonviolence that was so important to the Civil Rights Movement. She was deeply critical of the philosophy of nonviolence and articulated the limits of nonviolence in a climate of intense and brutal opposition to the expansion of civil rights. Interlaced with Mabel's

⁶ Beckwith, "Women, Gender, and Nonviolence in Political Movements"; Costain, "Women's Movement and Nonviolence."

⁷ The question of why women's movements in particular rely primarily upon nonviolent collective action, Beckwith contends can be answered several ways--"socialization (women are socialized away from violence) political learning (women have often been the victims of violence), historical factors (the pacifist roots of the U.S. women's rights movement), [and] male-female differences in public opinion concerning peace and war." Beckwith, "Women, Gender, and Nonviolence in Political Movements," 75.

story is that of other militant activists, mainly her husband Robert Williams and Malcolm X, whose views on armed resistance differed from hers. While Robert and Malcolm X helped to craft a philosophy of armed resistance during the Civil Rights Movement their perspective almost always was gendered. This section examines how Mabel disrupted that gendered process. Proponents of armed resistance, both male and female, faced immense opposition, not only from white racists but by the massive political machine generated by advocates of nonviolence, which Nash embodied. By 1963, those who endorsed nonviolence included President John F. Kennedy and several religious organizations, helping to make the philosophy of nonviolence the dominant ideology of the Civil Rights Movement from 1955 to 1964.⁸

“The Beloved Community”: The Philosophy of nonviolence as outlined by Diane Nash

A native Chicagoan, Diane Nash enrolled at Fisk, a historically Black University, in 1959, where she joined the movement for civil rights. Nash was skeptical at first of nonviolence as a tactic: “I kind of reserved judgment. I remember thinking after attending several [nonviolent] workshops, that this stuff is never going to work. But it was the only game in town, and so I said, ‘Well, I’ll go with it because my choice is either to do

⁸ I use *ideology* and *philosophy* interchangeably. Defined as a system of political thought, necessary for social-political groups organized to achieve strategic goals, the theory of nonviolence was central to the Civil Rights struggle and the dominant ideology of the movement. Following World War II, the philosophy gained traction in the United States and was the central system of political thought behind major civil rights organizations including the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Founded in 1942, CORE was the first organization committed to “interracial, non-violent direct action” to challenge racial segregation. For over a decade, CORE employed non-violent direct action in early desegregation efforts. But it was the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott that introduced the broader American public to the organizing strategy and philosophy of nonviolence. Because of the success of the boycott, many people saw the validity and potency of nonviolence as a strategy to combat segregation.

nothing about segregation or to work with them.”⁹ Her desire to participate in the movement and effect real change outweighed her apprehension about the effectiveness of nonviolent tactics.¹⁰ Nash's uneasiness was more common than scholars have previously considered.¹¹ Despite her trepidation, she continued to attend workshops hosted by James ‘Jim’ Lawson, a student at Vanderbilt’s Divinity School.

Lawson served as the southern secretary for Fellowship Of Reconciliation (FOR) and ran workshops on nonviolent civil disobedience for Black students. Formed in Europe at the outbreak of the First World War, FOR strove to create everlasting peace through Christian Fellowship. Since the end of the Second World War, its American branch encapsulated integration and racial harmony. In this, Lawson found an organization that matched his faith with his activism. He had traveled throughout India studying Mahatma Gandhi’s principles of nonviolence and moved to Nashville to usher in a civil rights struggle in the city.

Nash attended Lawson’s seminars on the tactics of nonviolent direct action. The strict instructions were two-fold in purpose. First, they were designed to protect demonstrators. Second, they were devised to preserve the integrity of their cause. The rules included: “Don’t strike back or curse if abused. Don’t laugh out. Show yourself friendly and courteous at all times. Sit straight and always face the counter. Remember the teaching of Jesus Christ, Mohandas K. Gandhi, and Martin Luther King.”¹² These

⁹ Fred Powledge, *Free at Last?: The Civil Rights Movement and the People Who Made It* (Boston: Little Brown & Co, 1991), 208.

¹⁰ In my research, I’ve noted other women in the Civil Rights Movement who had a similar commitment to change and skepticism around tactic of non violence.

¹¹ Costain, “Women’s Movement and Nonviolence”; Beckwith, “Women, Gender, and Nonviolence in Political Movements.”

¹² John Lewis and Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, 1st Harvest ed edition (San Diego: Mariner Books, 1999).

rules, under Lawson's instruction, helped prepare Nash for her role as activist and leader of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Student Central Committee in Nashville, of which Nash was a member, organized sit-ins in a local department store in late 1959. These activities gained momentum the following year. The demonstrations in Nashville coincided with a wave of sit-ins occurring across the South. First with the Greensboro sit-in on February 1, 1960, and a series of nonviolent protests after that. These activities also overlapped with Mabel Williams' desegregation efforts in Monroe, NC in 1959 and 1960. The movement gained momentum in April 1960 when Nash along with 125 other student demonstrators attended a gathering in Raleigh, North Carolina. The meeting, called by veteran activist Ella Baker, gave birth to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

SNCC was one of the most groundbreaking organizations of the 1960s and would ultimately help usher in a new wave of the Black Freedom Struggle—the Black Power Movement. By the time Willie Ricks and Stokely Carmichael marched in Greenwood, Mississippi and called for “Black Power” in June of 1966, SNCC had already begun to accept the principles of Black Power—emphasizing self-determination, Black political power, economic justice, and armed self-defense. But when Nash helped to found SNCC in 1960 it was wholly committed to the tactic of nonviolence, integration, and multi-racialism. Comprised mostly of college students, SNCC adopted direct-action methods—that set it apart from other civil rights groups. In addition, SNCC's community organizing work—living and working with local people, facilitating the emergence and development of strong grassroots leaders throughout the rural South—separated it from more topdown

organizations such as the NAACP, which focused on legal approaches to dismantle Jim Crow legislation.

Initially founded as a vehicle to facilitate communication between various southern student protest areas, SNCC became the driving force for the Civil Rights Movement. The structure of the organization was decentralized, with rotating chairs, executive secretaries and an executive committee, which helped facilitate an egalitarian organizing style. Initially, SNCC's organization mirrored other groups in its leadership composition. Men were three times as likely as women to hold an official position. We know from movement scholar, Belinda Robnett, that men dominated, but women in SNCC were more visible and held more power than those in other organizations.¹³ Women in SNCC were essential to the development of the organization, and women like Diane Nash served in a leadership position early on. Ella Baker, was particularly instrumental in the groups structure and organizing philosophy regarding leadership and activism. Baker's biographer, Barbara Ransby, observed that Baker approached radical societal transformation as a vision and process that "had to involve oppressed people...[and] ordinary people" redefine/re-imagine democracy and empower the individual and the group to engineer their lives as well as the destinies of the nation and the world.¹⁴ It was perhaps this visions, adopted by SNCC, that allowed many committed and capable women organizers to find the "expression of their political ambitions in SNCC, in ways that were simply not possible in SCLC or even the NAACP."¹⁵ It is my contention that women's visibility and proximity to exercising power was essential to the

¹³ Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 100–101.

¹⁴ Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 1.

¹⁵ Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*.

organization's later transition in the mid-1960s from Civil Rights to Black Power, a theory explored further in the subsequent chapter.

At the onset, SNCC published a newsletter, *The Student Voice*, that kept student activists abreast of protest work across the country. In June 1960, the first published issue stated that the purpose of SNCC was to coordinate activists, analyze the state of the movement, and map plans for the future. Jim Lawson was one of *The Student Voice*'s first writers. Within the pages of the newsletter, he urged "all local state or regional groups to...diligently understand the depths of nonviolence."¹⁶ The first issue offered a political statement that affirmed SNCC's "philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the purpose, pre-supposition of our faith, and the manner of our action."¹⁷ Indeed, while Nash may have been apprehensive about the tactic in the beginning, after a few weeks of training she claimed nonviolence became more than just a tactic for her; it was an "applied religion," and a way of life.¹⁸

According to Julian Bond, a movement leader, there were two types of activists that participated in the movement. In a 1963 *Freedomways* article, a leading theoretical, political and cultural journal, he wrote:

The adherents of nonviolence as a means to achieve social change fall into two categories. One group, containing most of the activists working in the South today, believes in and has seen the proof of nonviolent direct action as an effective means of protest and as a method of achieving change; the other group, smaller in number, believes in nonviolence not only as a tactic but as a way of life and a philosophy of living.¹⁹

¹⁶ Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, "What Is SNCC?"

¹⁷ Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

¹⁸ Nash, "Inside the Sit-Ins and Freedom Rides: Testimony of a Southern Student."

¹⁹ Bond, "Nonviolence: An Interpretation."

Nash certainly embodied the latter category. For students like her, nonviolent protest served two purposes. The method and technique of nonviolence could integrate a lunch counter, movie theater or some other public space. But the philosophy of nonviolence afforded those involved in the struggle and those opposed to it something more: a chance to participate in a civic engagement of ideas. The hope was that with the powerful force of Christ-like love the latter would be converted. For Nash, nonviolence was not merely a direct action to integrate lunch counters; she aimed to develop the "beloved community."

As Nash explained it,

The purpose of the movement and of the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides and any other such actions, as I see it, is to bring about a climate in which all men are respected as men, in which there is appreciation of the dignity of man and in which each individual is free to grow and produce to his fullest capacity. We of the movement often refer to this goal as the concept of the redeemed or the 'beloved' community.²⁰

The community of which she spoke was rooted in love not hate, in kindness and not struggle, in care and not violence. John Lewis, a fellow Nashville activist who would soon lead SNCC as the Executive Secretary, further elaborated on this concept. He said, the beloved community was "an all-inclusive, truly interracial democracy based on simple justice, which respects the dignity and worth of every human being."²¹

Nonviolence, then, was not merely a tactic for desegregation, it was a guiding principle shaping Nash's vision of the world she hoped to create. It was her understanding of freedom. Nash in many ways resembles the women often discussed in scholarship on armed resistance. While women like Nash existed, she hardly represents the crux of women's feelings about the philosophy of nonviolence.

²⁰ Nash, "Inside the Sit-Ins and Freedom Rides: Testimony of a Southern Student," 45.

²¹ Carson, *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*.

Nash was a part of a cohort of staunch students who believed in the integrity of nonviolence. For advocates of the philosophy of nonviolence, segregation was not just a legal or social issue but a moral and spiritual one. Decades later, Nash recalled, “We felt we were right and rational.”²² Rooted in truth and honesty, Nash’s position was a righteous one, “I think, on some level, most people, really deep-down, know that segregation was wrong, just based on race,” Nash said.²³ She unquestionably believed in the goodness of her fellow man. Her vision set the tone for the strategies adopted by members of SNCC.

Equally as important as the integrity of nonviolence was the essential notion of love. That is, followers of the philosophy of nonviolence believed that loving your opponent was necessary for creating the beloved community. Nash on several occasions emphasized the importance of love. Reflecting on her understanding of nonviolence, she said, “we really tried to be open and honest and loving with our opposition.”²⁴ To create a just society, Nash believed love was indispensable and a guiding principle for the philosophy of nonviolence. In this sense, Nash was among a very modest group of people who courageously loved their enemy. Among those people was Martin Luther King Jr. In his first book *Strides Towards Freedom*, King reflected on his journey to nonviolence. He wrote “true pacifism,” or “nonviolent resistance,” was “a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love” for King and other supporters of pacifism it was “better to be the recipient of violence than the inflicter [sic] of it, since the latter only multiplies the existence of violence and bitterness in the universe, while the former may develop a

²² Interview with Diane Nash.

²³ Interview with Diane Nash.

²⁴ Interview with Diane Nash.

sense of shame in the opponent, and thereby bring about a transformation and change of heart.”²⁵ Like Nash, King believed that “the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.”²⁶ In the early 1960s, Nash and King held the same commitment to nonviolence, and both emphasized the importance of transforming the hearts and minds of segregationists as a primary goal of the movement.

Nash’s stance on segregation represented her view that Christian morality should lend itself to being naturally opposed to Jim Crowism. In her Detroit speech of 1961 at the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, Nash described her most recent experience of being arrested for protesting. She posed the following questions to her audience, “If the policeman had acknowledged the God within each of the students with whom I was arrested [that] night, would he have put us in jail? Or would he have gone into the store we were picketing and tried to persuade the manager to hire Negroes and to treat all people fairly?” Nash’s logical leap between one’s belief in God and one’s actions further highlight her understanding of Christian morality as tied to nonviolence as an “applied religion.” She continued along this line of thinking, further illustrating her point even more clearly when she asked: “If one acknowledges the God within men, would anyone ask for a ‘cooling off period,’ or plead for gradualism, or would they realize that white and Negro Americans are committing sin every day they hate each other and every

²⁵ King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 80; Nash made a similar remark when she said, “We have decided that if there is to be suffering in this revolution (which is really what the movement is-- a revolution), we will take the suffering upon ourselves and never inflict it upon our fellow man, because we respect him and recognize the God within him.” Nash, “Inside the Sit-Ins and Freedom Rides: Testimony of a Southern Student.”

²⁶ King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 79.

day that they allow an evil system to exist without doing all they can to rectify it as soon as they can?"²⁷ These questions illuminate the earnest nature of Nash's view on nonviolence and segregation. For her, segregation was a sin.

Finally, the philosophy of nonviolence, as outlined by Nash, was the application of these beliefs by refusing to cooperate or comply with the unjust system. We can best see this in her adoption of SNCC's 'jail no bail' policy, a coordinated effort in which arrested protesters refused to pay fines or put up bail and, instead, remained in prison. Nash and her cohort put this tactic into practice in Rock Hill, South Carolina where students staged several protests including a sit-in at a lunch counter on January 31, 1961. After being arrested, they refused to pay the \$100 fine issued by the judge and opted to serve the thirty days in jail. Four SNCC members, including Nash, traveled to South Carolina to join them in jail.²⁸ The point of this action was to demonstrate the moral principle of noncooperation with evil—or a system that incarcerated citizens for demanding their civil rights. This was a fundamental aspect of the philosophy of nonviolence for Nash.²⁹

When she faced jail time again, she maintained her position of noncooperation. Nash had moved from Nashville to Jackson with her soon to be husband, civil rights activist Reverend James Bevel.³⁰ Her husband worked for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and she was a SNCC Field Secretary, conducting

²⁷ Nash, "Inside the Sit-Ins and Freedom Rides: Testimony of a Southern Student."

²⁸Hoskins, "'Jail, No Bail' Is Riders' Vow"; "Food Reasonably Clean and Edible. Jailed Girls Say."

²⁹ It is worth noting that Nash and King differed on this point, at least in application. For instance, when SNCC asked King to remain in jail after he was arrested he was bailed out almost immediately. This contributed to the issues between SNCC and King. For more on this see Carson, *In Struggle*; Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*.

³⁰"Judge Halts Diane Nash Bevels Jail Try."

workshops on nonviolence for Jackson youth preparing to take Freedom Rides.³¹ In the summer of 1961, she was convicted and sentenced to two years in jail and given a \$2000 fine; the charge was “contributing to the delinquency of minors” after instructing Black youth in the philosophy of nonviolence. As *The Student Voice* reported, “She [initially] appealed the conviction, but in late April decided to abandon her appeal, saying that her philosophy of nonviolence prohibited her from cooperation with ‘the evil court system’ of the state.”³²

Nash’s decision to forfeit her appeal and serve her sentence became an opportunity to propel the philosophy of nonviolence forward and set an example for other civil rights workers. By 1962 she was a civil rights leader willing to serve jail time, she was also one of the few recognized women in leadership in the movement and cast in the limelight. What made this moment quite remarkable was that Nash was expecting her first child and would potentially give birth to her baby in a Mississippi prison.³³ As any good strategist would do, Nash used her pregnancy to her advantage, by exemplifying and spreading the tenets of nonviolence.³⁴ On April 30, 1962, she released a two-

³¹ “SIT-IN ROUNDUP: Public Aid Asked in Augusta Trial,” *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; *Baltimore, Md.*, June 2, 1962; Her job was to coordinate the Freedom rides, make arrangements ahead in Montgomery, to keep the Justice Department advised, to stay by the phones to hear from the riders as often as they could call. Ahmann, *The New Negro*, 53–54.

³² “Judge Halts Diane Nash Bevels Jail Try.”

³³ Several newspapers carried the story including the Baltimore Afro-American, Chicago Defender, The Atlanta Constitution and the Cleveland Call and Post. “Mississippi Jail To Be Birthplace?,” *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*; *Atlanta, Ga.*, May 18, 1962; “Judge Halts Diane Nash Bevels Jail Try”; “BEGS FOR MISSISSIPPI JAIL TERM: But Judge Says ‘No!’,” *Call and Post (1962-1982)*, *City Edition*; *Cleveland, Oh.*, June 2, 1962; “Convicted Woman Having Trouble Getting To Jail,” *Atlanta Daily World (1932-2003)*; *Atlanta, Ga.*, June 2, 1962; E. M. Burrus, “CORE Group to Hold Mother’s Day Protest,” *Cleveland Call and Post (1934-1962)*; *Cleveland, Oh.*, May 12, 1962, sec. SEC. 1.

³⁴ Nash describes how she launched her own support campaign and contacted all the major national civil rights organizations and some of their local chapters. See Nash, “They Are the Ones Who Got Scared.”

paragraph press release and a separate three-page letter to members of the movement to make clear her perspective and the purpose of her actions.

In the press release, she offered a pithy rationale for her decision writing, "I subscribe to the philosophy of nonviolence; this is one of the basic tenets of nonviolence—that you refuse to cooperate with evil." She also spoke to her condition as an expecting mother, stating, "This will be a black child born in Mississippi and thus wherever he is born he will be in prison. I believe that if I go to jail now, it may help to hasten that day when my child and all children will be free..."³⁵ Nash's position was an important one. She did not differentiate between the overarching system of violence against Black Americans and the prison as a physical structure. In either case, Black people were unfree, and it was due to white supremacy.

In her eloquently written and compelling message to civil rights workers, she offered three reasons for her actions. First, she wanted to reinvigorate SNCC's commitment to "jail-no-bail" policy; which she believed was a powerful force within the movement, to "convert the opposition and redeem society."³⁶ She then argued that when organizations posted bond after massive arrests, the movement lost an opportunity to reach the community and society with a sweeping moral appeal. And on a more practical

³⁵Lindal Buchanan, *Rhetorics of Motherhood* (SIU Press, 2013), Appendix: "A Message from Diane Nash Bevel to Individuals and Organizations Working for Civil Rights" (30 April 1962).

³⁶ When Nash attempted to surrender herself to Hinds County Court, in Jackson Mississippi on April 30, 1962, it was not the first time she faced a jail sentence. She had spent time in jail before. As a founding member of SNCC, Nash took part in their "Jail– No– Bail" strategy --not bailing activists out of jail after mass arrest which deplete the funds of the organization. In 1961 Nash volunteered to travel to Rock Hill, South Carolina to join the campaign to desegregate lunch counters and work alongside the "Rock Hill Nine," which consisted of local South Carolina students. Nash, alongside Charles Sherrod, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, and Charles Jones, sat-in and committed to serving a 30-day jail sentence. These young activists also served time on the chain gang. SNCC's approach to mass arrest differed from other civil rights organizations that bailed out their activists, specifically notable leaders. Samuel Hoskins, "'Jail, No Bail' Is Riders' Vow," *Afro-American* (1893-1988); *Baltimore, Md.*, June 3, 1961; "Arrests Touch Off Student March Plan," *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)* (1960-1973); *Chicago, Ill.*, February 8, 1961.

note, Nash noted that cash-strapped organizations were struggling to make bond for everyone and that the money could serve greater purposes in the integration movement.³⁷ Although Nash arrived at Hind County Court to surrender herself, the judge denied her request to withdraw her appeal and did not remand her because she was pregnant, presumably.³⁸ As a result, Nash continued her civil rights efforts, by publicizing the philosophy of nonviolence, and fostering more considerable discussion about the movement's strategies and commitment to policies she thought were worthwhile pursuits. These two documents circulated widely and reinvigorated the movement's commitment to the principles of nonviolence.

Using Nash's writing and the example she set we can summarize the philosophy of nonviolence as having several principles: a strong commitment guided by Christian love, a willingness to see your opponent as a human capable of change, and a belief that your actions could transform the hearts and minds of segregationists. And finally, it included an unwillingness to cooperate with the evil system. Nash's perspective on nonviolence certainly reflected the main thrust of the movement as well as that of most Blacks.

In the summer of 1961 *Jet Magazine* polled its readers on several issues in the movement including their view on non-violence. The magazine reported:

Belief in non-violence and passive resistance as a technique for gaining civil rights for Negroes in the South has been preached across the length and breadth of the nation by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., but there is still a large segment of unbelievers. Here is how the question was put to JET'S readers: 'Do you believe that the non-violence and passive resistance movement is the best way to win civil rights in the South?' Results:

³⁷ Buchanan, *Rhetorics of Motherhood*, Appendix: "A Message from Diane Nash Bevel to Individuals and Organizations Working for Civil Rights" (30 April 1962).

³⁸ She did serve a shorter time in jail for being in contempt of court. She refused to sit in the "Black section" of the courtroom. Nash, "They Are the Ones Who Got Scared."

Yes....73.4%

No.....23.1%

No opinion...3.5%³⁹

For the 23 percent of readers who did not regard nonviolence and passive resistance as “the best way to win civil rights in the south” Nash challenged them to put forth a better alternative to nonviolence. “From those who say they approve the ends, not the means, I would be interested in suggestions for a means which would yield freedom without delay,” she said. Nash reasoned, “the students have chosen non-violence as a technique; there is no reason why they couldn't have taken up guns,” and argued, “it was a responsible choice.”⁴⁰

While many agreed with nonviolence, a growing presence in the Black Freedom Struggle saw another path, as indicated by the 23% of readers that objected in the poll. The publication did not provide a breakdown of pollers by gender, but one southern woman absolutely would have been amongst the minority had she taken the survey.

Critique of nonviolence offered by Mabel Williams

While Nash was evolving in her appreciation for nonviolence at the end of the 1950s, Mabel Robinson Williams worked with her husband and other activists to help desegregate Monroe, NC. Despite participating in nonviolent actions, she developed a robust critique of the philosophy of nonviolence. A popular misconception would have one believe that practitioners of nonviolence were ardent supporters when in reality,

³⁹While 23% of pollers said ‘no’ to using passive resistance as the best way to win civil rights; it is unclear how many of the pollers would have said armed resistance was a better tactic. The poll’s findings are an indication of Jet’s readers views on nonviolence rather than arm resistance. “Negroes Distrust Dixie Police, Want Kennedy to Speak and Act (Jet Poll of Readers).”

⁴⁰Nash, “Inside the Sit-Ins and Freedom Rides: Testimony of a Southern Student,” 58–59.

some participants maintained a critique of the philosophy of nonviolence. Women simultaneously participated in nonviolent direct action and practiced armed resistance. To be sure, the philosophy of nonviolence was the dominant ideology of the Civil Rights Movement, and Mabel was among a minority of people who boldly pushed back against this philosophy. Diane Nash's capacity to evangelize the principles of nonviolence far outreached Mabel's ability to spread her criticisms, nonetheless, her perspective is worth examining in detail because it represents many Black women activists critique of nonviolence.

Mabel Williams grew up in a house learning both the utility of armed resistance and how to navigate Jim Crow. Raised in a family that honored the tradition of armed resistance, Mabel was well acquainted with handguns from a young age. She was born to David and Emma Perry Robinson on June 1, 1931, in Monroe, North Carolina. Her parents, like many other Black families in the Jim Crow South, taught their children to show deference to whites.⁴¹ However, they also attempted to insulate them from whites by creating close-knit, protective Black communities. Black parents' concern for their children's lives was legitimate and continuous because white racists directed their rage at the young and old alike. Mabel recalled, her parents "tried to teach us to protect ourselves because they were in constant fear that we would run afoul of the law or the white community and get killed."⁴² Her stepfather slept with a "pearl-handled pistol under his pillow," because he intended to protect his family from the nightriders who had

⁴¹ For a wonderful discussion on how children in the South learned racial etiquette and race consciousness see Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow*.

⁴² Cecelski interview with Mabel Williams.

threatened their lives.⁴³ The gun was strategically placed there because of the potential danger her family faced, she said, “that pistol was there for the protection of our home.”⁴⁴ These early lessons on armed self-defense and deference were not lost on Mabel, who eventually defended her own family when white terrorists attempted to retaliate for their civil rights activities in the 1950s and 1960s.⁴⁵

Mabel attributed her political awakening to her time doing menial work in a segregated hospital, where she observed the systematic mistreatment of Black patients, where the treatment of newborns was especially indicative of white abuse of Black people.⁴⁶ She recalled, “Black patients were in the basement of the hospital, and the basement was unfinished with the pipes running along the walls, that kind of stuff. The newborn babies were in the utility room where we sterilized the instruments - and emptied the bedpans.”⁴⁷ In a 1999 interview Mabel noted, it was her time as an employee at this segregated hospital that was the beginning of her political education—her “consciousness started to develop.” In hindsight, she realized the hospital administration “didn’t care whether we [Blacks] lived or died...they were just thinking of us as non-human beings.”⁴⁸ Mabel’s time as an employee helped to shape her understanding of racial and economic injustice in America, and more than likely informed her advocacy of armed self-defense. For women, the philosophy of armed resistance rested on the

⁴³ Cecelski interview with Mabel Williams.

⁴⁴ Cecelski interview with Mabel Williams.

⁴⁵For an important recent study on Mabel Williams see Dagbovie, “‘God Has Spared Me to Tell My Story’ Mabel Robinson Williams and the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement.”

⁴⁶Mabel Williams O.H. 1694; Sabir, “The Political Awakening of Mabel Williams, Wife of Author of ‘Negroes with Guns.’”

⁴⁷Sabir, “The Political Awakening of Mabel Williams, Wife of Author of ‘Negroes with Guns.’”

⁴⁸Sabir.

affirmation of Black humanity. This perspective differed from Black men who typically sought to affirm their manhood.

It is unclear from the record when Mabel exactly joined the NAACP chapter in Monroe, but by 1957 her husband was serving as chapter President, and she as its Secretary by 1959.⁴⁹ Together they grew the chapter, and within two years the membership had grown to over 100 members.⁵⁰ They recruited “laborers, farmers, domestic workers, the unemployed,” and the chapter's leadership included college-educated and working class Blacks in Monroe.⁵¹ Mabel had worked earnestly to build the local chapter of the NAACP along with her husband.⁵² She reported she spent her Saturdays “distributing the CRUSADER for hours, canvassing from door to door, chatting with the people and walking for miles...usually covering a thirty-mile radius...” to build the membership of the NAACP.⁵³ Her efforts paid off. Black women, mostly domestics, constituted the largest group of new members.⁵⁴ The chapter’s targets for integration included public facilities in Monroe and Union County. Namely, the local public library, school, and swimming pool. In these efforts, they used petitions to the

⁴⁹Mabel was in Monroe while Robert was away. It’s possible that she could have joined first and he thereafter but it’s unclear. Robert received an undesirable discharge from the Marines in 1955. He returned to Monroe thereafter. By March 1957 Robert wrote to the NAACP as president of the local chapter. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*; “Robert Williams Suspension, Including Reactions to Williams’ Statement Advocating Violence, NAACP Disavowal of Williams’ Statement, and Address by Roy Wilkins at Statewide Rally of Branches in Jackson, Mississippi.”

⁵⁰Pascoe, “The Monroe Rifle Club: Finding Justice in an ‘Ungodly and Social Jungle Called Dixie,’” 400.

⁵¹Williams, “1957: The Swimming Pool Showdown”; Mayfield, “Challenge to Negro Leadership”; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*.

⁵²Robert F. Williams wrote to the national office that he, “painstakingly recruited from the beauty parlors, pool halls, and street corners, building a cadre of some two hundred members by 1959.” Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 81.

⁵³ Mabel Williams, “The Night We Rode in a KKK Motorcade,” *Correspondence*, September 26, 1959; Mabel Williams, *Crusader*, Vol. 1. No. 7, August 8, 1959.

⁵⁴Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 81.

local authorities and nonviolent direct tactics such as ‘standing in’ at the local swimming pool.

As a result of the NAACP’s efforts, the local Ku Klux Klan, in the words of Robert, “came out in the open.” Newspapers covered KKK gatherings, and according to the press, participation grew from “a few hundred” to a few thousand.”⁵⁵ At one point, the *Monroe Inquirer* estimated that 7,500 Klansmen had gathered in a field to discuss how to deal with the integrationists, described by the Klan as the ““Communist Inspired National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.””⁵⁶ The Klan launched a counterattack, intimidating and terrorizing NAACP members and the Black community.

Klan tactics were all-encompassing. They petitioned to run the officials of the NAACP, including the Williams family, out of town. They held several rallies followed by a motorcade through the Black section in the city honking their horns and firing their pistols. And “on one occasion, they caught a colored woman on an isolated street corner, and they made her dance at pistol point.”⁵⁷ Robert and Mabel Williams regarded these actions as violent. And after receiving no help from city officials, who refused to stop the Klan, Mabel and Robert decided to check the Klan themselves, because as Mabel noted, “law and order had completely vanished,” and they sought to defend themselves.⁵⁸ The Klan counterattack was the catalyst for the formation of a defensive unit in Monroe.

⁵⁵According to Williams the total population of Monroe was 12,000 people. He determined that many Klan people came in from South Carolina, because Monroe was only 14 miles from the state border. Williams, “1957: The Swimming Pool Showdown.”

⁵⁶Williams.

⁵⁷Williams; Mabel Williams O.H. 1694; Cecelski interview with Mabel Williams; Cecelski interview with Mabel Williams.

⁵⁸Cecelski interview with Mabel Williams; Williams, *Negroes with Guns*.

Mabel helped to found the Union County Rifle club in 1957.⁵⁹ She explained, “We organized a rifle club. And got a charter through the American Rifle Association [NRA]...We were all members.”⁶⁰ The club trained women, men, and children to shoot.⁶¹ She said this was “all for the protection of our homes and ourselves when the Klan and other rabble-rousers decided that they wanted to come in and invade our homes and our neighborhoods.”⁶² The rifle club and the growth of the NAACP chapter occurred at about the same time. Although they remained two separate organizations, their membership overlapped.⁶³ The rifle club, according to Robert, had over 60 members after its first year and many of them were veterans. But the rifle club was not comprised of just male veterans as Robert and scholars have depicted.⁶⁴ If we only depend on Robert’s account of the defensive unit we miss women. But looking to observations made by eye witnesses reveals a fuller story. For instance, in 1959 Constance Webb, a reporter for the radical leftist *Correspondence*, traveled to Monroe and witnessed men and women’s involvement in the armed self-defense group. In her article “I Went Behind Iron Curtain-in USA,” Webb recounted how she sat in NAACP Vice President Dr. Perry’s home, as guard members prepared for a potential Klan attack. She wrote, “Members of the guard, both men, and women, began to come to the house. For my benefit, each was asked, ‘Did

⁵⁹Pascoe does not mention Mabel’s involvement in the rifle club or any other women in Monroe. But Mabel recounts that she was involved. Other sources corroborate her involvement in this founding. Pascoe, “The Monroe Rifle Club: Finding Justice in an ‘Ungodly and Social Jungle Called Dixie.’”; Cecelski interview with Mabel Williams; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*; Dagbovie, “‘God Has Spared Me to Tell My Story’ Mabel Robinson Williams and the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement.”

⁶⁰Cecelski interview with Mabel Williams; Mabel Williams O.H. 1694.

⁶¹Cecelski interview with Mabel Williams.

⁶²As quoted in Dagbovie, “‘God Has Spared Me to Tell My Story’ Mabel Robinson Williams and the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement,” 79.

⁶³Pascoe, “The Monroe Rifle Club: Finding Justice in an ‘Ungodly and Social Jungle Called Dixie.’,” 402.

⁶⁴Pascoe, “The Monroe Rifle Club: Finding Justice in an ‘Ungodly and Social Jungle Called Dixie.’”; Williams, *Negroes with Guns*.

you bring something?’ and the coat was flicked back exposing the guns.”⁶⁵ While nothing happened that night, Webb’s observations provide space to consider how gender relations operated within the rifle club.

Although it is unclear from the record how many women were initially members, it is clear that eventually, men excluded women from the club. At the outset, women were critical participants in the rifle club. According to scholar Craig Pascoe, the rifle club organized three-man defense teams; and implemented a “snowball system” of telephone alerts.”⁶⁶ Given the gendered division of labor, it is reasonable to assume women were involved in establishing and maintaining a communications network or snowball telephone system to inform members of the rifle club about potential risk occurring in the neighborhood. They also worked as gatherers of intelligence. Men perhaps dug foxholes and trenches, and collected weapons and ammunition; and both may have helped to stockpile Molotov cocktails.

Perhaps the clearest example of how nonviolence and armed resistance are gendered is evident in Robert Williams refusal to teach Black women to shoot despite their request to learn. By his own volition, Robert said, “They had volunteered. . .and they wanted to fight. But we kept them out of most of it.”⁶⁷ Because he believed the protection of the Black community was a man’s job he prohibited women from fully participating in the rifle club. This gendered culture of exclusion in which activists are excluded because of their gender, led scholar Akinyele Umoja to contend that “when the function of armed

⁶⁵Webb, “I Went Behind Iron Curtain-in USA.”

⁶⁶ Pascoe, “The Monroe Rifle Club: Finding Justice in an ‘Ungodly and Social Jungle Called Dixie.’”

⁶⁷As quoted in Tyson. See Tyson, “Robert F. Williams, “Black Power,” and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle”; Williams, *Negroes with Guns*.

Black resistance became more organized and specialized, it seems that it also became more patriarchal,” where defending the community became equated with ‘manhood’ and women’s exclusion from what was considered a man’s responsibility.⁶⁸ This was true in other southern cities, as well, where groups such as the Deacons for Defense, excluded women from specific positions that were deemed outside of their gendered sphere in the Black community.⁶⁹ The fact that armed resistance during the Civil Rights era was foreclosed to women does not negate their desire to participate in these organized and formal efforts. Instead, it reveals women’s rejection of nonviolent philosophy and the patriarchal structures that limited their ability to tap into a repertoire of collective and individual actions.

Yet, it is evident, although rarely interrogated by scholars, that women pushed back against this culture of exclusion and defended their communities’ despite being banned by Black men from formalized armed groups. It is worth examining how Mabel pushed against the idea of armed defense as a man’s responsibility in word and deed.

In 1959, Mabel, her husband Robert and their friend Ethel Azalea Johnson collaborated to publish a newsletter, *The Crusader*. The paper’s purpose was to win national support for the Monroe movement and to advocate the position of armed self-defense. At its peak, distribution of the newsletter reached 40,000 copies and circulated throughout Black neighborhoods across the country.⁷⁰ Mabel was a significant

⁶⁸Umoja, “Eye for an Eye,” 188–89; Crosby also noted, when “self-defense was more organized and formal...men dominated and typically worked together to patrol black communities, monitor lawmen, guard mass meetings, and protect the most visible leaders.” Crosby, “‘It Wasn’t the Wild West’ Keeping Local Studies in Self-Defense Historiography,” 197.

⁶⁹Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*; Wendt, “‘They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men.’”

⁷⁰Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 290.

contributor to the paper's success, and she took a decisive role in framing its content. According to a letter Robert wrote to Fidel Castro, the paper's analysis of nonviolent direct action helped to make the paper "popular throughout the world and [is] being used [as] a manual of armed self-defense by freedom fighters throughout the United States."⁷¹ As a guidebook, it provided practical information about gun carrying laws, including legal restrictions on carrying a firearm in a car or on one's person.⁷² The paper also featured cartoons drawn by Mabel that depicted Black people practicing armed resistance.⁷³

If Diane Nash identified four components to the philosophy of nonviolence, Mabel Williams offered just as many criticisms of those principles. Mabel's own column in *The Crusader*, "Looking Back," articulated her criticisms of nonviolence, foreshadowing the analyses of Black Power theorists in the late 1960s. For instance, when Mabel wrote "Liberty and the Choice of Weapons" in 1960, she offered several critical counters to the philosophy. She did not subscribe to the belief that segregationists were good-hearted people. Instead, she wrote that the time was over when "so-called moralist[s] who falsely claim that oppression can be ended by peaceful persuasion and conversion of insensate oppressive brutes."⁷⁴ Mabel unquestionably dismissed the belief "that a lov[ing] appeal can bring out the latent goodness of an oppressive brute." Going so far as to suggest these individuals were in fact not human but a beast, she wrote, "hatred and prejudice reduces homo sapiens [sic] to the level of raging beasts."⁷⁵ Very

⁷¹ Robert Williams to Fidel Castro, August 28, 1966, 5, Reel 2, Black Power Movement Part 2: The Papers of Robert F. Williams.

⁷² "Crusader," n.d., Reel 10: 00440, Black Power Movement Part 2: The Papers of Robert F. Williams.

⁷³ Mabel Williams O.H. 1694.

⁷⁴ Williams, "Liberty and the Choice of Weapons."

⁷⁵ Williams.

clearly, we see how her perspective differed from Diane Nash, James Lawson, and Martin Luther King, Jr. who advocated for a supreme love. Although she did not explicitly or brassily support armed resistance in the same ways her male contemporaries did, as discussed further below, her writing evidenced a rejection of confining gendered notions about a Black woman's place in the Black Freedom Struggle. Mabel believed Black women were capable and should be participants in armed self-defense.

Differentiating between the philosophy and tactics of nonviolence, Mabel argued that nonviolence in a society run by brutes amounted to masochism. "To shout to a raging maniac driven by a passion of hate that one is committed to a nonviolent policy [or the philosophy of nonviolence] toward him is tantamount to suicide." Unlike Nash who maintained a strong commitment to the policy of nonviolence no matter what, Mabel argued movement people should develop situational tactics. She reasoned nonviolent tactics were fitting and proper in a civilized society "that will respect the oppressed's right to protest and seek redress."⁷⁶ However, in a society ruled by violence, Mabel contended, the oppressed had three options: "Submission, non-violent suicide or violent self-defense." She concluded that the attitudes and actions of the oppressor (i.e., segregationists or white authorities) dictated which of the three options people in the movement would use, not the other way around. Therefore, she contended that the philosophy of nonviolence was a dead end because American society was not civilized. She placed her assessment squarely within a critique of the failures of U.S. democracy to accurately institutionalize provisions for people to seek redress and participate as full citizens.

⁷⁶Williams.

Mabel touched a central nerve of the Civil Rights Movement when she lambasted white liberals and the goal of interracialism or the establishment of equality and cooperation between Blacks and whites. Mabel's critique came from her experiences of trying to organize and work with whites in her hometown of Monroe in the 1950s. "At that time[,] most of our efforts were aimed [at] the so-called liberals in the community since they were supposed to represent the most enlightened local citizens, but now it is quite clear that there are many people in Monroe who pose as liberals for the sake of appearing lettered."⁷⁷ Mabel's statement is telling. For her, white liberalism was merely performative and disconnected from a politics that could reach across the color line. As an influential advocate for civil rights, she was not willing to put her body on the line to persuade whites that Blacks were equal. Her analysis of white liberalism prefigured similar condemnation made by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and foreshadowed Black Power activists' critique of white progressivism by nearly a decade.⁷⁸ Although her column was short-lived, Mabel's message was clear: she was not striving for a "beloved community." Scholars have missed these moments by solely focusing on Black men.

⁷⁷ Mabel Williams, "Looking Back" *Crusader Newspaper*, August 22, 1959, Vol.1 No. 9 Reel 10: 0312, Black Power Movement Part 2: The Papers of Robert F. Williams.

⁷⁸ In "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" King wrote, "I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963, AU, University of Alabama (University, AL) The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>.

Despite her firm convictions and grassroots politics, Mabel Williams stood in the shadow of her notable husband Robert, an outspoken advocate of armed resistance who gained global notoriety for challenging the viability of nonviolent direct action.⁷⁹ Robert, who actively excluded women from the rifle club, also insisted that protection of Black communities was a man's job. In debating Martin Luther King Jr. in 1957 Robert argued it was time for men to protect "their women, their children, and their home," and that it was obvious that "we cannot rely on the law. We can get no justice under the present system."⁸⁰ He said nothing about women equally needing to protect their men, their children, and their homes. In short, women were to be protected. This reveals the gendering of the philosophy of armed resistance. For Robert Williams, the philosophy of armed resistance stood against the effeminate philosophy of nonviolence. Robert and others equated the beliefs of King, Lawson, and Nash with acquiescence and weakness.⁸¹

Malcolm X approached armed resistance similarly to Robert as evidenced by his discussion of the police brutality experienced by Fannie Lou Hamer, a field organizer for SNCC. In the summer of 1964, Hamer testified before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention on how police in a Winona, Mississippi jail mercilessly beat her. Hamer suffered severe injuries, but after recovering, she traveled across the US telling her story with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). On December 20, 1964, Hamer, along with other members of the MFDP spoke at William Institutional CME Church in Harlem. Malcolm X introduced Hamer and commented on the injustice

⁷⁹ "NAACP Leaders Urges 'Violence,'" *New York Times*, May 7, 1959.

⁸⁰ "NAACP Leaders Urges 'Violence.'"

⁸¹ For more on gender, nonviolence and armed self-defense see Simon Wendt, "'They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men': Violence, Non-Violence and Black Manhood in the Civil Rights Era," *Gender & History* 19, no. 3 (November 2007): 543–64; Strain, *Pure Fire*; Simon Wendt, "God, Gandhi, and Guns: The African American Freedom Struggle in Tuscaloosa, Alabama 1964-1965," *Journal of African American History* 89, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 36–56; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*.

she experienced. He said, “When I listen to Mrs. Hamer, a black woman—could be my mother, my sister, my daughter—describe what they had done to her in Mississippi, I ask myself how in the world can we ever expect to be respected as men when we will allow something like that to be done to our women, and we do nothing about it?” Malcolm X’s introduction missed the point. Instead of looking to the issue of police brutality that Black people of all genders experienced across the United States, which Hamer fought against, Malcolm X saw a woman who needed the protection of Black men. To be sure, Malcolm had previously and boldly critiqued racist police brutality, but in presenting Hamer, he saw the failings of Black manhood in allowing “their women” to be abused by white men.⁸² Malcolm argued, “we don’t deserve to be recognized and respected as men as long as our women can be brutalized in the manner that this woman described, and nothing being done about it, but we sit around singing ‘We Shall Overcome.’” He then issued a call to action—presumably directed at men, “We need a Mau Mau. If they don’t want to deal with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, then we’ll give them something else to deal with.”⁸³ The Mau Mau was an armed group fighting British colonial powers in Kenya.

According to scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin, Malcolm’s position was rooted in the idea, that the “protection of black woman guaranteed black men their manhood.”⁸⁴ The relationship between the gendered culture of exclusion that Robert Williams practiced and the “promise of protection” offered by Malcolm is palpable. The promise of protection was premised on the notion that women either lacked agency or should not

⁸² See Marable, *Malcolm X*.

⁸³ Malcolm X and George Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (Grove Press, 1965), 107.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

exercise the agency to protect themselves or others. This promise coupled with the actual exclusion of women from armed units in the late 1950s and early 1960s helped to reinforce the view that armed self-defense was an extension of masculinity. Malcolm's concerns were formed from *reacting* to violence against women and not toward a politics that responded to the common issue of police brutality, as evident in his introduction of Hamer. Thus, his call for self-defense and armed resistance were fundamentally concerned with manhood.⁸⁵

To disrupt the male-centered thinking on armed resistance, Mabel looked to female activists outside of the United States who were armed and fighting for liberation. She highlighted the principal role Black women in Africa played in anti-colonial battles. While she did not identify which movement she was referring to in her articles, her reference point could have been the uprising of Kenyan Mau Mau women or the armed Algerian women fighting the French colonizer.⁸⁶ She observed, in a 1959 article “what I gather from all reports is the fact that women are the chief protagonists in this sad story of desired liberation and brutal revolution.”⁸⁷ One wonders if she also believed women in the U.S. were the chief protagonist.⁸⁸ By acknowledging that worldwide Black “women shoulder the burden of the struggle,” to demand the right of self-determination, Mabel pointed to the unique position in which women found themselves as guerrilla soldiers engaged in armed revolutionary struggles in the late 1950s. Her observation certainly

⁸⁵ Griffin, “Ironies of the Saint,” 120–21.

⁸⁶ Presley argues research has ignored an important aspect of Kenyan nationalism: the development of nationalist sentiment and activity among women since the 1920s; and the colonial state's response to women's nationalism. Cora Ann Presley, “The Mau Mau Rebellion, Kikuyu Women, and Social Change,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 22, no. 3 (January 1, 1988): 502–27, doi:10.2307/485952; Originally published in 1958, Fanon's work was a favorite amongst Black militants in the United States. Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (Grove Press, 1967).

⁸⁷ Williams, “Looking Back: The Pitifully Oppressed Africans Are Rebelling against Tyranny.”

⁸⁸ Robinson and Garrow, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*.

differed from those of her male counterparts who looked to and celebrated internationally known men such as Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Patrice Lumumba of the Republic of the Congo. She praised African women's efforts in the anti-colonial struggle and their determination for liberation. African women were the subject of her commentary not as helpmates, but as capable warriors, freedom fighters, and protectors of their own lives. She effectively disrupted the overriding Black masculinist discourse about armed resistance, protection, and revolution.

Mabel's turn towards armed activist women internationally reflected the growing necessity to look to global events to make sense of the local racial and gendered politics within the United States. She publicized African women armed "with sticks and stones" fighting for their liberation as a model for Black American women. Mabel imagined a female readership who could relate to the parallel between Black women in Africa and America. She suggested there was "no doubt [that the Africans] caste system of race is similar to ours to the point that black women are regulated [sic] to the bottom of the scale. They are least respected and most exploited," Throughout the twentieth century, Black feminists argued Black women's position in society at "the bottom" uniquely positioned them to achieve full freedom.⁸⁹ In her article, Mabel framed this argument from a Pan-African perspective by arguing worldwide Black women were the most oppressed because of their race, gender, and social standing.⁹⁰

The connection she drew was not merely symbolic, but a call to action. Having recruited Black women into the NAACP, Mabel more than likely knew her readership

⁸⁹ See Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*; White, *Too Heavy a Load*; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 2000; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*.

⁹⁰ Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*.

could relate to or learn from stories of African women fighting for liberation, for they too faced grave danger for merely signing up to join the organization.⁹¹ She did not shy away from the brutal realities of revolution—noting both “the sticks and stones against steel,” and “the red blood of black Africans stains the Virgin soil of the motherland.” Her sentiments marked her awareness of the technological imbalances between white colonial powers and Black freedom fighters while noting the deadly cost of revolution and self-determination. Still, she implored her Black female readers to “[cast] off their old ideas of passive resistance for the more effective forceful resistance that may accelerate their day of liberation.”⁹² This was a nod toward her disapproval of the philosophy of nonviolence. She praised female soldiers, implicitly suggesting Black women should emulate the African revolutionary. Her encouragement to adopt more ‘forceful resistance’ was undoubtedly a signal to embrace armed resistance. As a strategy employed by women was capable of refiguring but not dismantling gendered relations within movements and communities. She had picked up the gun and defied the gendered culture of exclusion her husband hoped to enforce.

While Robert may have liked to exclude women from the Rifle club, he still benefited from Mabel’s armed prowess. In June of 1961, Mabel, Robert, and the NAACP carried out their fourth yearly protest against the segregated pool in Monroe. On Sunday, June 25, 1961, as Robert made his way to the pool for the rally he was rear-ended by a car of white men. Mabel traveled in a separate vehicle with Mrs. Asa Lee, a member of the NAACP and close friend. The women could see a significantly sized mob forming

⁹¹By the mid-1950s, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia all initiate court cases or pass laws aimed at eliminating the NAACP.

⁹²Williams, “Looking Back: The Pitifully Oppressed Africans Are Rebellious against Tyranny.”

around Robert's car. According to Mabel, she was not worried because she knew Robert was armed and could defend himself. Meanwhile, he managed to get out of the car jam and reached the other protestors at the pool. Mabel joined him and helped him to protect the protestors against the white mob. Mrs. Lee held the vivid memory of Robert standing there with his wife: “*She stood there by him with a gun.*”⁹³ Her armed activity was not only essential but crucial to the efforts in Monroe, where white nationalists operated with immunity. According to Mabel she “knew that we couldn’t depend on the police to protect us...my feelings then were that if I must die, I’m going to take’em with me...And so I got my gun in my hand and I determined...I was going to kill [the chief of police].”⁹⁴ While Robert may have attempted to enforce a gendered culture of exclusion, the stakes were far too high to bar armed women from protecting the movement.⁹⁵

Not only was Mabel armed but Mrs. Asa Lee was also armed that Sunday at the pool. These moments indicate that a culture of exclusion may have taken hold of the formalized defense units, but men could not police armed women outside of the club. These women were committed to the philosophy of armed resistance.

These women’s perspectives on the anti-Black violence are insightful for assessing their understanding of the ideologies grounding the Civil Rights Movement. Lee condemned the United States for its racial politics that undermined its claims for law and order. For her, the United States truly “needed a complete overhaul.” She said, “we

⁹³Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 180.

⁹⁴This story was recounted by Asa and Mabel to Forman. Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*.

⁹⁵ There are several parallels here between women in the U.S. and global revolutionary movements that jettisoned the exclusion of women from combat once it became clear that the struggle could only be won by everyone, including women. Turner, *Even the Women Must Fight*; White, “All the Men Are Fighting for Freedom, All the Women Are Mourning Their Men, but Some of Us Carried Guns.”

hope that no violence occurs. But if violence does occur, we are not gonna take it with the other cheek. I often wonder whether the Negro in every hamlet and village and town will have to go through these procedures.”⁹⁶ Lee articulated a vision of a new society in which Blacks fought for their natural born rights as she and Mabel had done at the pool. For her, her femininity or womanhood did not preclude her from practicing armed resistance. Mabel saw the same vision. The summer of 1961 she emphatically said, “the way I feel now, all of the law enforcement officers are my enemies. All of the white people who would deny me my rights are my enemy. And to kill them would be no more to me than kill a snake who was threatening to bite me.”⁹⁷ Mabel’s assessment of the police was not uncommon among proponents of armed resistance. Scholarship has overly focused on men, and have missed women’s similar frustration with police brutality.

Unfortunately, Mabel and her family were forced into exile, settling in Havana, Cuba after she, her husband, and several other civil rights workers were accused of kidnapping a white couple. It was in Cuba during the height of the movement that Mabel’s public reach expanded with her radio broadcasting, “Radio Free Dixie,” which she produced with her husband. Radio Free Dixie, “brought the message of collective armed self-defense to the African-American masses that were battling the racists in America’s streets,” recalled Max Stanford (Muhammad Ahmad), a young revolutionary who founded the Revolutionary Action Movement in 1963 and helped to articulate and spread revolutionary nationalist ideology.⁹⁸ The ideology aligned with Mabel’s vision for a new world. She believed that Black liberation was only possible by overthrowing the

⁹⁶ Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 182.

⁹⁷ Forman, 182.

⁹⁸ Ahmad, *We Will Return In The Whirlwind*, 17. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*.

white supremacist capitalist government. Her ideas on this continued to take shape while living abroad but certainly were present during her days in Monroe and informed her critique of nonviolence. In her efforts to secure self-determination for Blacks living in Union County, she and her cohort of militant activists increasingly embraced confrontational political action, including nonviolent direct action and armed self-defense. They employed a full range of tactics.

Conclusion

The philosophy of nonviolence held a strong allure during the Civil Rights Movement, particularly in the early 1960s. After the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956, in which King popularized the language of nonviolence, freedom activists saw the power and effectiveness of nonviolence as a strategy to combat segregation. There were, however, some people who saw nonviolence as not just a strategy, but also a philosophical way of being. Diane Nash was one of these people. Using Nash's writings and activism, this chapter outlines the ideology as she saw it. The purpose then is to understand the difference between one's ability to practice a tactic and one's commitment to a philosophical mode. As the next chapter will demonstrate, one could participate in nonviolent direct actions—like a sit-in, stand on a picket line or boycott a store—and not hold a philosophical commitment to nonviolence.

Indeed, Mabel Williams is emblematic of this fact. Her efforts to desegregate Monroe, NC were met by a hostile police force that often collaborated with Ku Klux Klan to disrupt movement efforts. Even while picketing the pool—which should have been a nonviolent direct action---she was armed and ready to defend other freedom fighters. Moments such as these complicate our understanding of the “nonviolent

movement.” They demonstrate that the ideology and strategy of nonviolence were challenged and not wholly accepted. And while we know that men, most notable among them Robert F. Williams and Malcolm X, dared to question the dominant ideology of the movement, women like Mabel Williams similarly criticized the movement. We see in Mabel’s writing and her actions the inklings of the philosophy of armed resistance come to life. Although Malcolm and Robert framed their perspective on armed resistance regarding masculinity and manhood, Mabel took a different approach. She looked at anticolonial struggles and women’s roles in them to justify her view on armed resistance and made them accessible to others. Although subtle it was useful. Even as she wrote about women armed and ready to fight against European adversaries she picked up her gun and was prepared to go to combat with US officials who failed to protect Black American citizens.

To be sure, both Nash and Mabel lived out their philosophical beliefs. While scholars have written on nonviolent women, this dissertation examines women on the other side.⁹⁹ Women who were armed (with guns, knives, fists, or any other instrument they could lay their hands on). As the movement gained further momentum, in part because of the visionary work of student activists, anti-Black violence became increasingly more brutal. White mobs formed, cars were damaged, the Klan beat several people, and threatened their jobs and home, as activists faced the risk of death or physical injury large. Although activists consistently lobbied for federal intervention—the government was slow to act and frequently refused to become involved in local affairs. And just like Mabel experienced in Monroe, other activists noted law enforcement in

⁹⁹ Costain, “Women’s Movement and Nonviolence”; McAdam and Tarrow, “Nonviolence as Contentious Interaction.”

cahoots with or indistinguishable from white vigilantes. The following chapter examines these themes (state violence and armed resistance), in greater detail as they played out in Cambridge, MD. It also picks up on a salient topic discussed throughout this chapter--- women's idea of freedom as it relates to movement goals and tactics.

Chapter 3

Women's Leadership and Armed Resistance in the CNAC Movement (1962-1964)

In 1961, the philosophy of nonviolence still held sway and prominent segments of the Civil Rights Movement still believed in building a “beloved community.” However, in 1962 we see a change in at least one local movement’s objectives, in Cambridge, Maryland. The Cambridge movement was unusual as the first major Civil Rights grassroots movement led by a woman, Gloria Richardson. As a leader Richardson, emphasized that the Black community needed to decide what they wanted for their neighborhood—she promoted self-determination. The movement was comprised of working class constituents who had a stake in how the movement operated and its goals. As such, this local movement’s objectives and demands were focused on employment and housing as opposed to public accommodations, distinguishing them from the norms of the time. Moreover, under Richardson’s leadership the Cambridge campaign deviated from the mainstream movement, by using armed methods of self-protection against anti-Black violence. This chapter exposes the importance of Black women’s leadership to armed resistance through an analysis of Richardson and the Cambridge movement.

While scholars have noted Richardson’s distinct leadership style and the unusualness of a woman running a local civil rights campaign, few researchers have fully examined her political stance on armed resistance.¹ Jenny Walker is perhaps the

¹ See Giddings account of the Cambridge movement and Richardson in Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*; Levy is mostly concerned with the social, political, and economic conditions in Cambridge that shaped the movement. Levy, *Civil War on Race Street*; Drawing on Giddings Brock states that Cambridge was one of the first campaigns where “nonviolence was questioned as a tactic” but says very little beyond this observation in her twenty-three-page article. See Brock, “Gloria Richardson and the Cambridge Movement”; Harley points to the use of armed resistance as an indication of the death of Civil Rights, a

exception with the publication of “The ‘Gun-Toting’ Gloria Richardson: Black violence in Cambridge, Maryland.” According to Walker, Richardson never fired a gun and was an “unflinching advocate of nonviolent direct action.”² Richardson’s own accounts on the use and importance of armed resistance to the Cambridge struggle is ignored by Walker.³ Moreover, the scholar’s sparse analysis of the use of armed resistance and nonviolent direct-action obscures more than it reveals because both tactics were used in an overwhelming number of Civil Rights campaigns throughout the south. In an attempt to recapture Richardson as a “nonviolent hero,” Walker contended that feminist historians, such as Paula Giddings, “distorted the portrayal of Richardson and her role in the Cambridge campaign.”⁴ Walker’s contention that Giddings portrayed a more “militant Richardson than ever existed,” is unfounded. Thinking of armed resistance as a philosophy exposes Richardson’s contribution to the movement more clearly than simply viewing armed resistance as a tactic used or not used. While there may be no evidence of Richardson ever “firing a gun,” the same is true for Malcolm X, one of the most vocal advocates of armed resistance of the era. The importance then, is not in who fired a gun and who did not, but rather how Richardson’s leadership allowed for the community to practice collective armed self-defense.

theory historians and other scholars have debunked. Harley, “‘Chronicle of a Death Foretold’: Gloria Richardson, the Cambridge Movement, and the Radical Black Activists Tradition.”

² Walker, “The ‘Gun-Toting’ Gloria Richardson: Black Violence in Cambridge, Maryland,” 169.

³ Walker’s article was originally published in hardback by Garland Publishing Inc., in 1999. Richardson’s interview with Szabo appeared in the Maryland Historical Magazine five years before. Walker cites the interview but ignores Richardson’s contribution to armed efforts in Cambridge. Szabo, “An Interview with Gloria Richardson Dandridge.”

⁴ Walker, “The ‘Gun-Toting’ Gloria Richardson: Black Violence in Cambridge, Maryland,” 184.

Gloria Richardson, the Lady General of the Civil Rights Movement

Born on May 6, 1922, Gloria St. Clair was raised in Cambridge, Maryland. A coastal shore city, Cambridge is the county seat of Dorchester County and the county's largest municipality. Making up about one third of the town's population, Blacks living in Cambridge mostly resided in the Second Ward, one of five wards which divide the city. Richardson's family, the St. Clair's, were among the most prominent Black families in Cambridge. Richardson's grandfather Herbert Maynaidier St. Clair owned numerous properties in the Second Ward including a grocery store, butcher shop, and funeral parlor. Cambridge was also unique in its racial history, in that Cambridge never passed Jim Crow voting laws like other cities in boarder states. Blacks in Cambridge were not disenfranchised in the same ways other African Americans across the south experienced post-Reconstruction disenfrachishment. In fact, Blacks held a swing vote as one-third of the city's voting population.⁵ Since the mid-1800s Blacks in Cambridge had elected at least three Black city councilmen, including Richardson's grandfather, who served for about fifty years. Despite her family's clout, Richardson knew that her grandfather still faced racial segregation. In his position as city councilman, he was afforded no real power to make real change on behalf of Blacks, and Richardson would later refer to him as "a gradualist."⁶

Yet growing up Richardson learned valuable lessons from her family about leadership and her responsibility to their Black community. She also learned from example, watching her grandfather give money and land to the church, and her

⁵ Dandridge Richardson, "The Energy of the People Passing through Me," 271.

⁶ Szabo, "An Interview with Gloria Richardson Dandridge."

grandmother help to distribute food and clothing that the segregated Red Cross offered to the poor communities in and around Cambridge.⁷ In this environment, she was prepared to follow the example of high achieving Black women and to take on a similar mantle of a race woman: to speak in public, to be of service to the poor and downtrodden, and most importantly, to advocate for the rights of Black people. The message she received from her family was that race men and women built upon and supported Black Nationalism and race consciousness, and she should do the same.⁸

Throughout her life, Richardson would be reminded of her obligation to the Black community. Her family expected her to go to college and return a doctor, pharmacist, or teacher. “My grandfather was insistent that you come back and help the town and the community,” she said in a 2011 interview with Joseph Mosnier.⁹ In 1938 Richardson enrolled in prestigious Howard University. While at Howard, she studied under historian Rayford W. Logan, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, theologian Howard Thurman and literary scholar Sterling Brown. Throughout the twentieth-century, Howard was the center of Black intellectualism. According to historian Jonathan Scott Holloway, Howard University emerged as a nexus for political and intellectual activity as Abram Harris, E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche articulated a class-based critique of race politics and leadership in the 1930s.¹⁰ Based on the teachings of these eminent Black scholars, Richardson wrote that she “gained insight into the world I was living in, not only

⁷ Gloria Hayes Richardson oral history interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier.

⁸ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*.

⁹ Gloria Hayes Richardson oral history interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier.

¹⁰ Gloria Hayes Richardson oral history interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier in New York, New York, 2011-07-19., interview by Joseph Mosnier, 5 video files of 5 (HD, Apple ProRes 422 HQ, QuickTime wrapper) (92 min.): digital, sound, color. 1 transcript (49 pages), n.d., Civil Rights History Project, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2010039_crhp0035/.

regarding the evils of its racism, but also about black culture and achievements—increasing my pride in the heritage of black people.” As an undergraduate at Howard, Richardson noted “the political, moral and cultural foundation I received at home was reinforced and expanded.”¹¹ Most important was Frazier’s harsh criticism of the Black middle and professional class for its conservatism, which would become a hallmark of Richardson’s activism in the Cambridge movement.¹²

The political fervor of Washington D.C. activism also reached some activist minded students. In the early 1930s, the New Negro Alliance (NNA) organized the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign at the height of the Great Depression and called for boycotts and pickets of white owned businesses in Black neighborhoods. And student-led protests over racial discrimination, judicial malfeasance, and social deterioration shaped the political and social landscape of D.C. so much so that Richardson participated in some of the protests happening on and around campus. She recalled “picket[ing] at Woolworth’s to protest the segregation in their stores,” and joined student-led “demonstrate[ions] about conditions at Howard.”¹³

After graduating in 1942 with a bachelor’s degree in Sociology, Richardson remained in Washington D.C. working as a social worker for two years during World War II. Thereafter she returned to Cambridge and married a teacher named Harry

¹¹ Faith S Holsaert, *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 276; While at Howard, Richardson studied under historian Rayford W. Logan, theologian Howard Thurman and literary scholar Sterling Brown. Anita K. Foeman, “Gloria Richardson: Breaking the Mold,” *Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 5 (May 1, 1996): 604–15.

¹² Regarding Frazier, Richardson said, “I suppose some of his rebellion and radicalism rubbed off on me.” John Britton, “Woman Behind Cambridge Racial Revolt: Female Dynamo Had City at Point of Explosion before Truce,” *Jet Magazine*, August 8, 1963.

¹³ Dandridge Richardson, “The Energy of the People Passing through Me,” 276; For more on Black student activism see Kendi. Ibram X. Kendi, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972*, 1st ed, Contemporary Black History; Contemporary Black History (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Richardson. With her husband, she had two daughters, Donna and Tamara. Despite her college education and her respectable and affluent family, Richardson experienced job discrimination. For most Blacks, jobs were limited to factory work, teaching in a Black school, shucking oysters, and farming. Richardson opted to forego these options, and went to work in her grandfather's pharmacy. As an employee working there, her class consciousness developed as she learned about the plight of working class Blacks who frequented the pharmacy. These experiences influenced her leadership style during the Cambridge Movement and led her to believe that social justice could only be achieved if Black Americans were given equal employment opportunities.

Forming the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee (CNAC) in 1962

In December of 1961, two SNCC field representatives, Reginald "Reggie" Robinson and William Hansen arrived in Cambridge to organize a massive demonstration in protest of the town's many segregated eateries and bars.¹⁴ "The *Cambridge Daily Banner* described Hansen as a 'professional integrationist' who was ignorant of the town's progressive racial record and warned that the protests 'jeopardized... four decades of biracial progress.'"¹⁵ The established white leaders of Cambridge were not looking for integration, rather they believed they had a relatively progressive record on race. Because

¹⁴ Originally from Baltimore Maryland, Robinson became active in the civil rights movement through the Civic Interest Group (CIG) of Baltimore while he was a student at Cortez Peters Business School, and was CIG's representative to SNCC. In August 1961, he was hired as a field secretary for SNCC. Joining the staff in McComb, Mississippi for SNCC's first voter registration project. After leaving McComb, he directed projects in Alabama, North and South Carolina helping student groups to organize protest. He returned to Maryland to coordinate protest against discriminatory public accommodations in the upper south. Mary E. King, "King--SNCC Staff Biographies, 1964 (Mary E. King Papers, 1962-1999; Z: Accessions, M82-445, Box 1, Folder 13)," 1964, Mary E. King papers, 1962-1999; Z: Accessions, M82-445, Box 1, Folder 13, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁵ Peter B. Levy, "The Black Freedom Struggle and White Resistance: A Case Study of the Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland," in *The New Left Revisited*, ed. John Campbell McMillian and Paul Buhle (Temple University Press, 2008), 74.

of this belief both Black and white leaders in Cambridge would attempt to dissuade SNCC activity in the town. Despite the local leaderships' attempt to dissuade Robinson and Hansen, a significant sit-in occurred on January 13, 1962.

After a series of demonstrations, Hansen and Robinson helped develop the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee (CNAC) and coordinated Freedom Rides into Maryland's Eastern Shore. During these demonstrations, Richardson's seventeen-year-old daughter, Donna, became involved as an organizer, which led her mother to likewise join the movement. Richardson and nineteen-year-old Enez Grubb, a Cambridge native, became co-chairs of CNAC when Freddie St. Clair, Richardson's cousin had to step down.¹⁶

Upon being selected as CNAC's leader, Richardson used the skills she learned under the tutelage of E. Franklin Frazier to assess the needs of the community. She put her sociological training to good use and designed a 20-minute interview style survey to be distributed throughout the Second Ward. First, she gave the survey to "noted sociologists" from Swarthmore who "validated the instruments in terms of its effectiveness."¹⁷ Then, CNAC members used the survey to canvass Black households. Richardson recalled they asked each participant about their "priorities in the Movement...the condition of the house you live in, [and] are you employed[?]"¹⁸ Additionally, the survey asked interviewees to rank in order of importance five demands (public accommodations, housing, schools, employment, and police brutality). A report

¹⁶ Szabo, "An Interview with Gloria Richardson Dandridge."

¹⁷ Szabo.

¹⁸ Gloria Hayes Richardson oral history interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier; Cambridge Non-Violent Action Committee (Md.), "Report, 1963," September 1963, 3, 0.1 c.f. (1 folder), University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries.

written by CNAC in September of 1963 indicated that “almost universally, those interviewed felt that all were important, with an occasional negative response on public accommodations or police brutality.”¹⁹ Of the 519 persons who showed definite preferences, according to the report, the following patterns emerged:

- 42% said that employment demands were most important;
- 26% said that housing demands rated highest;
- 21% said that schools deserved greatest attention;
- 6% said that public accommodations was the high priority goal;
- 5% said that police brutality should be dealt with first.²⁰

Prior to this survey, public accommodations had been the major focal point of civil rights activity, an indication that former movement leaders may have been out of touch with the community’s true needs. But after the survey it was clear that the Black community designated employment as their overwhelming concern. This examination allowed Richardson to set the agenda for the movement. She noted, “it became clear that public accommodations [were] really at the bottom of their list.” Using the survey as an indication of the Black community’s desires, the movement’s centered on employment and housing as their primary focus.

From the survey’s findings Richardson constructed a list of demands for the city to meet. She understood the need to improve the economic situation in Cambridge where “over 29 percent of the town’s blacks were chronically unemployed, and more than one-third of these blacks who held jobs worked less than thirty weeks of each year. Two-thirds of all the families living in the town’s huge black ghetto had incomes of less than three thousand dollars a year. And more than 60 percent of all the homes located in that

¹⁹ Cambridge Non-Violent Action Committee (Md.), “Report, 1963,” 53.

²⁰ Cambridge Non-Violent Action Committee (Md.), 53.

area did not have hot water.”²¹ The CNAC report described the meeting Richardson and two executive board members, Mrs. Grubb and Mrs. Garrison, had on Monday, March 25, 1963. The ladies went before city officials with their list of demands including jobs, housing, and complete integration immediately or CNAC would stage public protests.²² The city officials did not comply with their demands; in fact, according to the report, Mayor Mowbray and Mr. Charles Cornish (the city councilman who replaced Richardson’s grandfather) “rebuffed the group with vague statements, indignation, and an occasional joke.”²³ Mowbray and Cornish claimed they held no power over the schools, public accommodations or housing and “denied that unfair employment practices existed.” The women left immediately and informed the men that they would never have the Black vote again and that demonstrations would commence. Spearheaded by Richardson, protests were planned for April and early May.

The Turbulent Summer of 1963

Under Richardson’s hand, CNAC’s executive board reflected the overall Black community of Cambridge and was particularly well staffed with women. She intentionally staffed the executive committee with people who had a long-term investment in Cambridge, who sought to bring about economic, political, social, and educational change in the town. These members were not only the well-off but welfare recipients, factory workers, and other working-class citizens and members of CNAC, including young children in primary school, college students, and the elderly. The

²¹ Cleveland Sellers and Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC*, Reprint edition (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990).

²² Darlene Clark Hine, ed., “Gloria Richardson,” *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1994), 980.

²³ Cambridge Non-Violent Action Committee (Md.), “Report, 1963,” 47.

Cambridge movement was not the only grassroots movement during the Civil Rights era but Richardson's feminist leadership style and conception of freedom made it unique.

Richardson approach was inclusive rather than exclusive. In one interview Richardson explained why she was committed to grassroots leadership stating, "the one thing we did was to emphasize that while you should be educated, that...college degrees were not essential [here]. If you could articulate the need, if you knew what the need was, if you were aware of the kinds of games that white folk play, that was the real thing."²⁴

Richardson's style was very similar Ella Baker, who advocated participatory democracy. Baker believed radical social change would grow out of a collective imagination – a community project. Like Richardson, Baker approached radical societal transformation as a vision and process that "had to involve *oppressed people...[and]* ordinary people," to redefine/re-imagine democracy and empower individuals to collectively engineer their lives, and ultimately chart the destiny of the nation and the world.²⁵

Richardson's critics, however argued that she recruited uneducated men and women so that she could dominate the committee by manipulating the poor. Journalist Murray Kempton, wrote, "she is one of the few militant integrationists who has deliberately made the poor Negro her resource and this choice peculiar to her nature has given her what power she retains."²⁶ However, scholar Sandra Millner has convincingly

²⁴ As quoted in Brock. Emphasis in original. Brock, "Gloria Richardson and the Cambridge Movement."

²⁵ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*, New edition (The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 1.

²⁶ Murray Kempton, "Gloria, Gloria," *New Republic* 149, no. 20 (November 16, 1963): 15.

argued, and I agree, that her real motive was the belief that lower-class Blacks had the capacity to steer the group towards their collective goals.²⁷

From the outset, Richardson's leadership style came under fire from both the established white and Black leadership in Cambridge.²⁸ There is little doubt that gender bias played a part in how she was perceived. Take for instance, one of the first demonstrations she led, in which a group of community members, and students from Brown, Swarthmore, Harvard, Morgan State and Maryland Universities marched downtown to the theater and skating rink. Some 50 protesters were met by a large mob of angry whites. Richardson's mother, Mrs. Mabel St. Clair Hayes Booth and her daughter were among the demonstrators arrested for trespassing and disturbing the peace. When she employed SNCC's strategy of "Jail, No Bail,"—a commitment to serve jail time in lieu of paying bail—critics castigated her approach. In late April, she came before Judge W. Laird Henry Jr., for the offense. After finding them guilty of disorderly conduct, Henry fined all the demonstrators one penny and then chastised Richardson's leadership, claiming that she was a disgrace to her family's good name. He also noted she, a middle-class Black woman, had nothing to demonstrate about, a criticism volleyed at Richardson throughout the movement, particularly by her white critics. Black men in leadership positions rarely contended with such remarks. The assumption was that Richardson's middle class standing and sex should have tempered her militancy.²⁹

²⁷ Sandra Y. Millner, "Recasting Civil Rights Leadership: Gloria Richardson and the Cambridge Movement," *Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 6 (July 1, 1996): 668–87; Kempton, "Gloria, Gloria."

²⁸ Ben A. Franklin, "Negroes Say U.S. Pledges Help To Avert Maryland Violence: Negotiations Fail Men Given Bail," *New York Times*, June 1, 1963.

²⁹ Gloria Hayes Richardson oral history interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier.

In response to the growing number of demonstrations, Judge Henry and a group of liberal white businessmen formed a committee to negotiate with CNAC. These efforts yielded little fruit. According to CNAC, “the City Council refused to negotiate with ‘anyone other than duly elected officials of the 2nd Ward,’ i.e. Charles Cornish.”³⁰ But CNAC regarded Cornish as an Uncle Tom and enemy of the movement. Protests continued through May and June.

Tensions ran high that summer and violence occurred from all sides—white terrorists attacked demonstrators (both Black and white), in self-defense Black citizens armed themselves against white segregationists, and representatives of the state who (e.g. police officers) failed to protect Black civil rights workers, they also engaged in acts of brutality against freedom fighters. The summer’s multifaceted violence foreshadowed ruptures to come in the Civil Rights Movement. Between May and June of 1963 several incidents brought conflicts to a climax including the arrest of fifteen-year-old Dinez White for praying outside a segregated bowling alley. At nearly every demonstration, contemptuous crowds of white people formed counter protests. Fearing the worst, Richardson appealed to Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy requesting “urgent action.” *The New York Times* reported on the telegram Richardson sent Kennedy which read “Failure to act...may bring about the very violence we are trying to prevent.”³¹ The telegram would be the first of many attempts Richardson would make for federal intervention. The federal government’s failure to act certainly made the violence Richardson predicted appear inevitable—anti-Black violence from whites and armed self-

³⁰ Cambridge Non-Violent Action Committee (Md.), “Report, 1963,” 48.

³¹ Franklin, “Negroes Say U.S. Pledges Help To Avert Maryland Violence.”

defense from Blacks willing and ready to protect themselves came to characterize the Cambridge movement, and ultimately the Civil Rights Movement at large, after 1964.

When Dinez White was arrested again with Dwight Cromwell and charged with juvenile delinquency for participation in demonstrations on June 10, 1963, the Black community responded. The two teens were given indeterminate sentences in juvenile facilities. In reaction to this harsh punishment and rumors that Black children were being beaten, the Black community marched in protest and white mobs gathered, following the marchers into the Black section of town. That night, a gun battle between Blacks and whites left two white men shot, and “three business establishments...damaged by fire.”³² These businesses were white owned, but located in the Black section of Cambridge. According to a report authored by CNAC, “Pine Street was riddled with bullets, and despite the non-violent stance of CNAC, every house, including those of CNAC leaders, was protected by guns at the window.”³³ Some demonstrators arrested that evening complained of police brutality, among them was Lester Green who said two policemen beat him with nightsticks.³⁴

Again, Richardson petitioned Kennedy for federal intervention, stating, “‘The State Police have proven as intolerable and prejudiced as local police,’ the telegram said ‘They are no longer neutral arms of the law...’ Again[,] I emphasize that violence has and most likely will occur. The prevailing climate is such that a state of riot could occur

³² MARJORIE Hunter, “NEGROES PARADE IN CAMBRIDGE, MD.: Troopers on Patrol After Racial Riot and Fires ‘We Shall Overcome,’” *New York Times*, 1963; “Maryland Faces New Tension,” *Boston Globe (1960-1985)*; *Boston, Mass.*, June 13, 1963.

³³ Cambridge Non-Violent Action Committee (Md.), “Report, 1963,” 49.

³⁴ “Racial Talks Break Down In Cambridge: 25 Negroes Are Held As Demonstrations Are Renewed,” *The Sun (1837-1991)*; *Baltimore, Md.*, June 11, 1963.

at any second, without warning.” She said, “I hope that you will find it more expedient to act on this request than you did on my previous request concerning the detention of two juveniles. This is urgent. Please send immediate reply.”³⁵ But no reply was forthcoming.

When Richardson wrote to Kennedy imploring him to intervene, she indicted the state police and local law enforcement with misconduct. Both, she asserted, were intolerable and prejudicial. Her telegram spoke to an urgent concern of the Civil Rights Movement—ending police brutality, which initially was low on Cambridge’s priority list.³⁶ As she called out the local and state police, who had failed to be “neutral arms of the law,” she beseeched Kennedy for federal intervention. Kennedy offered none. In fact, leaders of the movement had continuously asked for federal involvement, often to no avail. Scholar Mary France Berry has concluded the response of the government to requests for federal action and to aid in the protection of Black lives during the Civil Rights era was subpar, and only partial in nature.³⁷ Richardson’s telegram also subtly hinted at another concern—that of state violence. We may define “State violence” as terrorism carried out, funded, or supported by a government, which involves deliberate attacks on civilians. Both police brutality and state violence are examined more closely in the following chapters but suffice it to say that these issues were evident during the turbulent summer of 1963 and helped to shape how Richardson articulated movement objectives and her conception of freedom.

³⁵ “3 Fires Set In Cambridge; Over 200 Parade; Tawes Urges ‘Restraint’ By All Residents: Demonstrators Hear Appeal To Reject Retaliation,” *The Sun (1837-1991); Baltimore, Md.*, June 13, 1963.

³⁶ Cambridge Non-Violent Action Committee (Md.), “Report, 1963,” 53.

³⁷ Mary Frances Berry, *Black Resistance, White Law: A History of Constitutional Racism in America* (A. Lane, Penguin Press, 1994).

As Richardson wrote to Kennedy asking for federal intervention, state and city officials met to address the violence between Blacks and whites by attempting to reach an agreement on the city's integration plan with Richardson. These officials blamed Richardson for the continued unrest in the city. They saw her refusal to denounce violence as a fulcrum to the problem and her uncompromising stance difficult. They proposed a resolution, the *New York Times* reported, that included a "passage of a Cambridge city public accommodations law in return for a commitment from Negro leaders not to demonstrate for a specific period."³⁸ The city officials demanded a yearlong moratorium on all public demonstrations. These were all points of contention.³⁹ The leaders of the Cambridge movement, including Richardson, SNCC field secretary Reginald Robinson, and Stanley Branches of the NAACP turned down this offer because the public accommodations amendment would be subject to a public referendum and public vote, which they did not think could pass.

Governor J. Millard Tawes also informed Mayor Mowbray that he was calling in the National Guard to quell the tension. The troops arrived in Cambridge on June 14, 1963.⁴⁰ The presence of 400 troops patrolling the streets of Cambridge did little to subdue the anti-Black violence or squash Black armed self-defense. The guards initially stayed in the city for about two weeks but returned because violent clashes between angry whites and the Black community continued. Ultimately, they remained in the city for

³⁸ Ben A. Franklin, "Cambridge Plans an Equality Law: Ordinance Studied as Way to Racial Stability Year's Moratorium Sought Word Was Reversed," *New York Times*, June 20, 1963.

³⁹ Franklin; Brock, "Gloria Richardson and the Cambridge Movement," 131.

⁴⁰ Ben A. Franklin, "Cambridge Seizes 3 in New Violence: Racial Demonstration Held After Guardsmen Leave Women Hiss Seaman," *New York Times*, July 10, 1963, 3.

over eighteen months—one of the longest occupations of an American city since Reconstruction.⁴¹

By July tensions were boiling. On July 10, 1963 Gloria Richardson made another trip to Washington D.C. to confer with attorneys of the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department. Justice officials said a department attorney would arrive in Cambridge ‘within three days’ to attempt to mediate the racial deadlock.⁴² While Richardson met with justice officials, violence on the streets of Cambridge escalated. Three white men were arrested, one for punching a white demonstrator. When the police arrested James T. Thomas for punching Michael Manove, a graduate of Swarthmore College, “a crowd of about 75 whites--many of them young women--chanted ‘Let him go’ and ‘Arrest the niggers.’”⁴³ Neither white nor Black demonstrators were spared from anti-Black violence and white women were formidable participants in these clashes. Richardson made yet another trip to the White House two days later. Again, white officials attempted to persuade the Black leader to comply with the terms of the proposed agreement.

In Cambridge, the Maryland Guard occupied the city, with orders to prohibit demonstrations and institute a ban: “a 9pm curfew; stores closed at 7pm and no guns or liquor.”⁴⁴ On the night of July 12, Blacks and whites exchanged gunfire, leaving six

⁴¹ Levy, “The Black Freedom Struggle and White Resistance: A Case Study of the Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland,” 77.

⁴² Franklin, “Cambridge Seizes 3 in New Violence.”

⁴³ Franklin. “Demonstrator Slugged in Cambridge Parade: Police Act Swiftly When White Marcher Is Grabbed, Punched by White Bystander,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 10, 1963.

⁴⁴ Cambridge Non-Violent Action Committee (Md.), “Report, 1963,” 50.

white persons injured.⁴⁵ Later it was discovered that three of the men were uniformed National Guards who drove down the Black section of town in a civilian car.⁴⁶ The Chicago Tribune, reported that one of the “guardsman was shot in the shoulder and arm and was hospitalized. Another’s temple was grazed by a bullet, and the third’s hand was nicked.”⁴⁷ The fact that national guardsmen were involved in terrorizing the community was not lost on Richardson, and this may have solidified her beliefs that Black armed resistance was both necessary and useful. After all it was the movement’s armed activity that spurred greater federal involvement.

Two days after the gun battle, Governor Tawes met with Richardson and other leaders to persuade them to stop the protests, in hopes that the violent clashes between the races would subside. White officials believed that the demonstrations were the real issue that needed to be addressed, and not the segregationist that attempted to use violence to dissuade freedom fighters. Richardson rejected Tawes’ proposal, describing the offer as too vague. She recognized that a ban on demonstrations would diminish national attention to the Cambridge movement. Richardson was a high-profile and controversial leader, and her movement garnered a great deal of media attention.

Newspapers noted the violent clashes and paid particular attention to the counter-attack Black people waged against white aggressors. The *Saturday Evening Post* ran an article on Richardson entitled, “Who Can We Surrender to?” by Robert Liston.

According to Liston, Cambridge was relatively integrated, and Blacks in the city fared

⁴⁵ “6 Shot in Maryland Riot: 3 Guardsman Wounded in Cambridge Race Mobs Roam City,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 12, 1963, sec. 1. “Finds Race Crisis In Cambridge ‘Dynamite,’” *The Chicago Defender*, July 13, 1963.

⁴⁶ “6 Shot in Maryland Riot.”

⁴⁷ “6 Shot in Maryland Riot.”

better in comparison to those residing in Washington D.C. and Baltimore. He could find little justification for a movement in the town. Liston concluded that the levels of violence seemed unfitting for the city. Perplexed, he wrote “the prolonged violence didn’t figure.”⁴⁸ Liston’s reflection on the violence was a direct reference to “the shooting of 10 white men,” and not the broader anti-Black violence that had, by this point, characterized the national Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, by October 5, 1963 when Liston’s article appeared civil rights workers had endured a series of brutal attacks across the country, from the Freedom Rider that rode segregated buses across state lines, encountering the brute force of white mobs; to the murder of NAACP leader, Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi. Liston was most concerned with the violence white people experienced as a result of Blacks protecting themselves, and seemed genuinely confused by white men being shot.

Murray Kempton made a similar assessment about the number of white men who had been shot, in his article for the *New Republic*, “Gloria, Gloria.” He wrote, “more white people were shot here last summer than in any of the hundreds of other towns where the Negro’s aspirations have brought him into the streets.”⁴⁹ Liston and Kempton both pointed to Richardson’s influence. “Twice,” *Newsweek* reported, the Cambridge situation “had passed the flash point, [and] erupted into rioting, and . . . was now drawing dangerously close to the brink again—because of her [Richardson’s] toughness, some people thought.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Robert A. Liston, “Who Can We Surrender To?,” *Saturday Evening Post* 236 (October 5, 1963): 78–80.

⁴⁹

⁵⁰ “Gloria Richardson,” *Newsweek*, August 5, 1963.

The Black media also pointed to the importance of Richardson's role as a leader of the movement. *Ebony Magazine* noted "Unlike other civil rights fighters, talking big and praying softly, Gloria and her followers have been preparing for war with local police, the National Guard and federal troops, if necessary, in an all-out battle for their rights."⁵¹ As Sandra Millner noted, "Richardson apparently had no ideological conflicts concerning the retaliatory violence that occurred during the protests."⁵² Richardson was a firm believer in armed self-defense.

Unlike other Civil Rights leaders who avowed their commitment to nonviolence Richardson had no objection to Black people defending themselves.⁵³ In a 1994 interview with Peter Szabo, Richardson recalled non-violence was "purely a tactical thing. There were some people at SNCC that saw [non-violence] really, almost as a religion, and that whole Gandhi concept. I never saw it as that. I saw it as a tactic... to create as much chaos as you could ... and if violence was perpetuated against you...you had the right to defend yourself."⁵⁴ Richardson rejected the notion that nonviolence was the only strategy for civil rights protest, much to the chagrin of the established Civil Rights leadership.⁵⁵ Richardson and CNAC's endorsement of the right to self-defense paled in comparison to the rhetoric that would emerge just a few years later, but in 1963 her refusal to publicly condemn Black armed self-defense set her apart from mainstream civil rights leaders.

⁵¹ "Lady General of Civil Rights," *Ebony*, July 1964, 24.

⁵² Millner, "Recasting Civil Rights Leadership," 682.

⁵³ Levy, *Civil War on Race Street*; Szabo, "An Interview with Gloria Richardson Dandridge."

⁵⁴ Szabo, "An Interview with Gloria Richardson Dandridge," 353.

⁵⁵ "'Radical' Integrationist: Rejects Friend's Advice A Busy House, Now," *New York Times*, July 13, 1963; "Lady General of Civil Rights"; "Gloria, The Leader," *Chicago Daily Defender*, July 17, 1963; Kempton, "Gloria, Gloria"; Liston, "Who Can We Surrender To?"

Organized Against White Terror

Looking closer at the Cambridge movement, at least two types of armed resistance were at play, preemptive armed self-defense and retaliatory violence. We may define “armed self-defense” as the protection of human life, dignity, and property, through the use of force, against violence,⁵⁶ and “retaliatory violence” as a planned or spontaneous act to avenge racists’ actions perpetrated against Blacks or other allies of the movement. Although distinct, both “armed self-defense” and “retaliatory violence” are forms of “armed resistance.” As stated before, in this dissertation, *armed resistance* is broadly conceived, and does not exclusively involve a firearm such as a pistol or rifle, but can include armament with a knife, stone, stick, fist, or firebomb: any instrument or weapon that can be used to defend, protect, or protest.

In terms of armed self-defense, Richardson clearly supported these actions. While she recognized the utility of armed self-defense in the success of the movement, she attempted to draw a line between maintaining strict expectations of nonviolence within demonstration actions, with openness to the use of armed self-defense in other circumstances. Richardson noted “the people that committed themselves to at least tactical non-violence would never fight someone with violence if there were demonstrations.”⁵⁷ However, she asserted, “sometimes it was a fine line, because by the time we would get back...into our community...something [violent] would break out...”⁵⁸ These reflections illustrated how she attempted to separate armed resistance from nonviolent demonstration, while still using both tactics during the movement.

⁵⁶ Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement*, 2013, 7.

⁵⁷ Szabo, “An Interview with Gloria Richardson Dandridge.”

⁵⁸ Szabo.

Richardson's approach differed from Mabel Williams', who was often armed while protesters picketed the segregated pool in Monroe, N.C. as aforementioned in the previous chapter.

Richardson's attitude on nonviolence and armed self-defense shaped and informed how the movement operated in Maryland. When night riders repeatedly rode through the Black section of town firing weapons in an attempt to dissuade movement participants and evoke fear, Richardson's community organized an armed collective to protect the neighborhood.⁵⁹ When men in the community got home from work, Richardson said they "would change clothes and go and lay in the yards and in the fields, around the perimeter of the second ward, with guns."⁶⁰ According to Richardson, folks dug trenches and fashioned an alert system so that anyone passing through the Black neighborhood at night who failed to give a specific signal was considered an intruder and ran the risk of being shot.⁶¹

Armed self-defense in Cambridge does not appear to have been formalized into a defensive unit or rifle club, like in Monroe. Although not formalized it was no less effective in ensuring the safety of the community. More importantly, there is no indication that women were excluded from protecting the community, which exposes the

⁵⁹ Jenny Walker contends there is no evidence that Richardson or any CNAC member participated in armed action, or even carried weapons. However, the evidence does not support this claim. By Richardson's own accord, they defended themselves during the movement. Walker, "The 'Gun-Toting' Gloria Richardson: Black Violence in Cambridge, Maryland"; See Szabo, "An Interview with Gloria Richardson Dandridge"; Dandridge Richardson, "The Energy of the People Passing through Me"; Levy, *Civil War on Race Street*; "6 Shot in Maryland Riot." Ibid.;

⁶⁰ Szabo, "An Interview with Gloria Richardson Dandridge."

⁶¹ See interview in which Richardson discusses a secret whistle. On one occasion her daughter, Donna had to pass through the guarded area. Richardson stated, "If she had not known that [code] or been like me and not been able to whistle, then she may very well have been shot. But she was trying to make it back, because my mother was in the house alone. But they had, because it's a hunting country, and so they both had been out hunting at one point or another. And so, she went up there, and they got on the guns and on the second floor." Gloria Hayes Richardson oral history interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier.

importance of Black women's leadership to armed resistance. It seems that when it came to collective armed protection there may have been a division of labor, in which men laid in trenches with weapons protecting the streets of the Black community while women protected the houses with weapons. Richardson's mother, Mrs. Mabel St. Clair Hayes Booth and her eldest daughter Donna, practiced armed resistance by guarding their home from the second floor of their three-story house with rifles. "Everybody...was familiar with guns," asserted Richardson.⁶² The absence of a culture of exclusion may be explained by the informal nature of armed self-defense in Cambridge. But it can also be attributed to Richardson's leadership as a woman.

It was Richardson's governance that made these counterattacks against white vigilantes possible and successful. As *Ebony Magazine* remarked in 1964, "No one really talks seriously about practicing non-violence in Cambridge,"⁶³ especially not the "Lady General" of the movement. Richardson summed up the reality concretely: "there was always a tension between the violence and the nonviolence."⁶⁴ She struggled with the discipline required of nonviolent activists, after her first demonstration she remarked that she "was not nonviolent enough." She said she could not "stand there passively going up and down while the white onlookers were saying all kinds of hateful things..."⁶⁵ Instead, Richardson "tried to trip them as they were going to harass the demonstrators." As a result of her actions she was removed from the demonstration line by her own daughter, Donna.

⁶² Liston, "Who Can We Surrender To?"; Kempton, "Gloria, Gloria"; Brock, "Gloria Richardson and the Cambridge Movement"; Foeman, "Gloria Richardson"; Millner, "Recasting Civil Rights Leadership"; Walker, "The 'Gun-Toting' Gloria Richardson: Black Violence in Cambridge, Maryland"; Holsaert, *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 292.

⁶³ "Lady General of Civil Rights," 24. "Lady General of Civil Rights," 24.

⁶⁴ Dandridge Richardson, "The Energy of the People Passing through Me," 292.

⁶⁵ Holsaert, *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 277-78.

“Although I believed in the need to hold nonviolent demonstrations,” Richardson acknowledged, “I did not believe that we were supposed to let people come in and shoot up or fire bomb our houses or shoot us and not defend ourselves because then, the white attacks would just keep on.”⁶⁶ Richardson’s understanding of the limitations of nonviolence and the reality that anti-Black attacks would continue if unchecked, reflected the ideas of other activists in the movement. For instance, Rosa Parks made a similar assessment in an interview given two months after the Detroit Rebellion of 1967. She noted, “I can’t say how useful [nonviolence] is...because during the time nonviolent technique was rather popular and in use, if it had been received for what it was it would still work.” While the nation implored Black citizens to be peaceful and embrace nonviolent civil disobedience, Parks rebuffed notions that the onus should be on Black people to practice nonviolence: “my belief is that if we are going to have non-violence and love and all that, it should be on both sides; it should not be met with violence because you actually can’t remain nonviolent too long with the kind of treatment that would provoke violence.” Continuous assaults on Black civilians provoked retaliation, and a sentiment amongst Black people that they should protect themselves. Parks herself was of the mind that Black self-defense was necessary in these situations, she stated, “to me... if we can protect ourselves against violence it’s not actually violence on our part.”⁶⁷ Although mainstream historical narratives remember Rosa Parks as a reserved, passive, and non-violent leader in the Civil Rights Movement, scholar Jeanne Theoharis’ challenges this narrative by reconstructing Parks as a revolutionary advocate of self-

⁶⁶Dandridge Richardson, “The Energy of the People Passing through Me,” 291.

⁶⁷ As quoted in Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 213.

defense.⁶⁸ Like Parks, Richardson understood that nonviolence was only a tactic, and one that rarely saved lives. Armed self-defense, by contrast, did ward off trouble on several evenings in Cambridge during the summer of 1963.

The other form of armed resistance practiced in the Cambridge movement was retaliatory violence. This form of armed resistance was sometimes useful for ensuring the success of movement goals despite the best efforts of people who sought to uphold the white power structure. This tactic was also used against Uncle Toms who chose self-interest over the collective needs of Black people. CNAC members regarded at least three members of the Black community as Uncle Toms: City Councilman Charles Cornish, school principal Edythe Jolley, and Helen Waters, owner and operator of a beauty parlor that catered to a white clientele. These individuals worked to thwart protests and demonstrations in town, and they publicly touted the white establishment's line that Cambridge had a progressive racial record.

Retaliatory violence was used against Helen Waters that summer. Waters was the first Black woman to be appointed to a school board on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, just two years after the famous *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which made segregation in public schools unconstitutional. She was also a member of the advisory committee to Dorchester County School Board on integration of schools.⁶⁹ Perhaps the label Uncle Tom was solidified after she voted along with other school board members against accelerating school desegregation in the county.⁷⁰ The unanimous vote occurred

⁶⁸ See Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*.

⁶⁹ "Beautician Named On Maryland School Bd.," *Philadelphia Tribune* (1912-2001); *Philadelphia, Penn.*, June 23, 1956.

⁷⁰ "Nat'l BPW Convention To Laud Helen Waters," *Philadelphia Tribune* (1912-2001); *Philadelphia, Penn.*, October 12, 1957.

on Monday, June 10, 1963. On Tuesday night, unnamed persons threw bricks into the front windows of her house. On Thursday, culprits struck again, this time, setting a fire behind her home.

Richardson, however, did not support these retaliatory measures and spoke to a crowd of approximately 350 people Thursday evening. The Baltimore Sun reported her as saying: ““We must control our emotions. Retaliation is no good... I ask you not to attempt retaliation for any of the things that come from the white community or will come from the white community.””⁷¹ Whether she felt the same way about retaliation against Black people or Uncle Toms is unclear. As a leader, Richardson did not advocate this form of armed resistance. She compelled the community to resist retaliation against whites. Regardless of these incidents, Richardson vowed that the marching and demonstrations would continue, and armed self-defense continued as well.

“The Cambridge Treaty” of 1963-- The Referendum

At a press conference on July 17, 1963 President John F. Kennedy brought the Cambridge movement further into the spotlight. He admonished, that “there is no peace” in the movement, and demonstrators “have almost lost sight of what the demonstration is about.” President Kennedy argued that it was becoming “increasingly dangerous” with potential for violence every night. The President then blamed the violence in Cambridge on demonstrators, stating, “they go beyond information, they go beyond protest, and they get into a very bad situation where you get violence, and I think the cause of advancing equal opportunities only loses.”⁷² Notably, the President did not mention the violent

⁷¹ “3 Fires Set In Cambridge; Over 200 Parade; Tawes Urges ‘Restraint’ By All Residents.”

⁷² “President Kennedy’s News Conferences,” July 17, 1963, JFK Library, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/Press-Conferences/News->

counterattack waged by white people in the city, perhaps because he thought the onus was on freedom fighters to remain nonviolent. Kennedy also juxtaposed Cambridge with the pending March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, set for August of that year, which, he promised the press, would remain peaceful.

Richardson immediately responded, informing the President that her movement had not lost sight of their goals at all. She wrote in a telegram, “The demands of the Negro citizens of Cambridge have been, and will remain desegregation of public and private facilities, merit employment for Negroes, and the release of two juveniles from a juvenile home.”⁷³ Several days later in front of hundreds of Blacks, Richardson invited the President to Cambridge to give a speech, arguing that he needed to “remind the angered Negroes of Cambridge of the difficulty white people have in adjusting to integration.”⁷⁴ Instead of rebuking armed resistance and retaliatory violence, she explained that Kennedy needed to understand that the violence was “provoked by generations of segregation—by countless indignities—and now by uncontrollable white mobs in the streets.”⁷⁵ She added that the violence was a result of “white men who have power” but “sit in their comfortable houses, undisturbed by events until it is too late.” Things would not improve, she warned, until white people understood the “mood of the

Conference-58.aspx.“Kennedy Again Warns Against Racial Strife,” *The Hartford Courant (1923-1991)*; *Hartford, Conn.*, July 18, 1963.

⁷³ “Cambridge, Md. Leader Views Kennedy Criticism,” *Atlanta Daily World (1932-2003)*; *Atlanta, Ga.*, July 20, 1963; Also see the NAACP’s statement “NAACP Says,” *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; *Baltimore, Md.*, July 27, 1963.

⁷⁴ “Warns of Civil War: Pleads for Early Action Primary Concern,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1963. “Gloria Richardson in D.C. Sun., July 21,” *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; *Baltimore, Md.*, July 20, 1963.

⁷⁵ “Warns of Civil War.”

Negro community” and that impeding progress might lead to the destruction of “their house and ours.”⁷⁶ She predicted that “Civil War” was impending upon the city.⁷⁷

Perhaps because of the violence, the President’s well-publicized statement, or Richardson’s growing public stature, U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy personally convened a meeting to address segregation in Cambridge. In attendance were Richardson, Reggie Robinson and John Lewis of SNCC, and various Cambridge and Maryland officials. After 9 hours of intense negotiation they announced the “Treaty of Cambridge,” an agreement that met most of the demands that CNAC had presented to the city the previous March. In return for a moratorium on protests, those in power agreed to end segregation in public accommodations; build public housing for Blacks; desegregate the public schools and hospitals in the county; implement a federally funded jobs program; have a member of CNAC on the Human Relations Commission board, and form a biracial committee to deal with other racial issues not addressed by the treaty. They also were able to secure the freedom of the two teenage demonstrators, Dinez White and Dwight Cromwell, who had served nearly three months in juvenile prison.⁷⁸ After nearly forty days of shootings, burnings, and beatings, CNAC had reached an agreement with city officials.

Despite her apprehensions about the treaty, Richardson signed the agreement. Scholar Annette Brock has argued that Richardson “wanted to prove that the moral suasion of the federal government would not make local leaders keep the promises they

⁷⁶ “Warns of Civil War.”

⁷⁷ “Warns of Civil War”; “Maryland Tension Eases; 6,000 Rally in New York,” *The Hartford Courant* (1923-1991); *Hartford, Conn.*, July 22, 1963; Bernard Gavzer, “Deepening Crisis: Is US Race Bomb Ticking?,” *The Austin Statesman* (1921-1973); *Austin, Tex.*, July 22, 1963.

⁷⁸ “Treaty of Cambridge,” July 22, 1963.

made, as Washington [D.C.] thought.”⁷⁹ If Brock’s assessment holds weight, as I believe it does, then Richardson’s decision to sign the treaty was an intentional means of highlighting the futility of moral suasion, an often unsuccessful and overused tactic within the Civil Rights movement. Moreover, Richardson may have also signed the treaty to prove to other civil rights leaders that the government (both local and federal) were incapable of real reform, and therefore more radical change was needed.

The treaty was short-lived and faltered almost immediately. One aspect of the agreement—the public accommodations ordinance—was scheduled to go into effect in August. The ordinance would have made discrimination on the basis of race illegal in restaurants, hotels, and motels in the city. But pursuant to the law, the ordinance was subject to a referendum. This became a point of contention after the all-white Dorchester Business and Citizens Association filed a referendum petition to overturn the ordinance.⁸⁰ The referendum vote was set for October 2, 1963. Richardson took a controversial stance when she announced that CNAC would not take part in voting on the referendum that fall. In a 1964 article, “Focus on Cambridge,” published in *Freedomways*, Richardson argued it was a matter of principle. She insisted, “the referendum was unconstitutional, illegal and immoral. We called for Negroes to boycott the polls...”⁸¹

This position distinguished Richardson from her Civil Rights contemporaries.⁸² “At that time[,]” Richardson stated “I was generally credited with irresponsible

⁷⁹ Brock, “Gloria Richardson and the Cambridge Movement,” 136.

⁸⁰ Murray Kempton, “State of Maryland,” *New Republic* 150 (May 23, 1964): 6–8.

⁸¹ Gloria Richardson, “Focus on Cambridge,” *Freedomways* 1st Quarter (1964), <http://www.crmvet.org/info/cambridg.htm>.

⁸² “Negro Leader Quits in Cambridge, Md.,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1963.

leadership...⁸³ Indeed, she fielded criticism from both Martin Luther King, Jr. and the local NAACP. On one occasion, she recalled being invited to Carnegie Hall “because Martin was supposed to convince me on the, uh, referendum initiative to vote.”⁸⁴ She ended up leaving the concert because she could not be pressured into supporting the vote. King criticized her for opposing the referendum at a time when others in the South were fighting for the right to vote.

The local NAACP cut all ties with CNAC and criticized her for “sending the wrong message to moderates who had stuck their necks out for blacks.” The Clergymen “conducted a strenuous campaign to get out the vote.”⁸⁵ Phillip Savage, the area secretary for the NAACP ran off over 5000 flyers for the ministers, the leaflet pleaded with voters, “your vote is your blow for freedom now!”⁸⁶ The NAACP partnered with all five clergymen of the city to get out the vote. CNAC and Richardson ran an equally vigorous campaign to get voters to stay at home on October 2. They argued that Black people’s rights were already guaranteed by the constitution. Theoretically, the NAACP agreed with Richardson’s position that rights should not be voted on, but they took a mediated approach when it came to the referendum. The objectives of the movement for Cambridge’s clergymen and local NAACP was to secure civil rights for Blacks and eliminate discrimination in public spaces. They considered the referendum a final hurdle in reaching these goals—and a win for the movement.

⁸³ Richardson, “Focus on Cambridge”; Richardson.

⁸⁴ Gloria Hayes Richardson oral history interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier.

⁸⁵ George Collins, “Voting Over New Crisis; Cambridge,” *Afro-American Baltimore*, October 12, 1963.

⁸⁶ “Phillip H. Savage, Field Secretary Files, 1963,” January 1, 1963, Group III, Series C, Branch Department Files, General Department File, Papers of the NAACP, Part 25: Branch Department Files, Series D: Branch Department General Department Files, 1956-1965.

The measure was defeated by a 274-vote margin. The final numbers were 1994 to 1720. “Had Second Ward voters [with a 1535 voter registration] heeded the pleas of the NAACP and ministers to turn out at the polls, the amendment would have passed with room to spare. A 60 percent vote would have turned the tide,” reported the *Afro-American*.⁸⁷ The results of the vote reveal the power of CNAC and the prowess of Richardson’s leadership, as less than half of the registered voters cast a ballot that fall.

Richardson clearly had different ideas about the objective of the movement. Therefore, it is necessary to consider her conception of freedom. In reflection she wrote, “what is the meaning of the Negro revolt for American democracy?” She disagreed with the legions of leaders that told her to make a deal despite the inalienable rights of Black citizens provided by the Constitution, and thought about the referendum not in terms of her own locale but of what it would mean for the overall movement. Noting that those same leaders who advised her to ‘go along’ with the measure would not “assume responsibility for the thousands of black people across the south who, once we submitted, would be subject to the same tactic although they would not even have the advantage of a swing-vote. They would be forced, in the name of democracy, to submit to the biased whims of a majority, and in the name of the democratic process be bound by it.”⁸⁸ She was concerned about the precedent the passage of the referendum would set, that people would be at “the whims of dishonest, big business politicians who would piously use ‘the referendum’ as a tool to shove down the throats of an unsuspecting and unwary racial or economic minority any type of racially punitive or economically punitive legislation, on a

⁸⁷ Collins, “Voting Over New Crisis; Cambridge.”

⁸⁸ Richardson, “Focus on Cambridge.”

local, state or federal level.”⁸⁹ These reflections further illuminate Richardson’s leadership style. For her the referendum was about power—the misuse of power by the majority and the misuse of democracy to restrict civil rights efforts. Her foresight in this regard was outstanding.

Richardson also found the emphasis on equal accommodations a distraction from the more pressing “problems facing Cambridge Negroes.” She explained, “here Negroes are faced with chronic and widespread unemployment and underemployment, inadequate and substandard housing and living conditions, discrimination in every area of endeavor.”⁹⁰ Therefore for her the Cambridge movement was about these “bread and butter” issues. But as she noted, the power structure lacked any real plans to fundamentally reform the system in the foreseeable future. Her assessments reflect her understanding of movement goals, and the need to overhaul the entire system. She referred to the struggle as a “Revolution.” By definition a revolution is a forcible overthrow of a government or social order in favor of a new system. Audaciously, Richardson predicted the Black revolt was headed in a new direction—“the attack now has to be directed toward the economic and political structure of a community” she wrote, and advised against any token progress.⁹¹

Black people’s views towards violence were changing. Referencing their willingness to engage in self-defense when attacked, Richardson observed, “they are not concerned with the philosophy of Gandhi.” She reasoned,

this can be directly traced to the fact that the federal government has failed to act with vigor to stop police brutality; to see and demand that Negroes be allowed to

⁸⁹ Richardson.

⁹⁰ Richardson.

⁹¹ Richardson.

register and not be arrested for the attempt; that the FBI, that great ‘fact-finding unit’ can somehow never find enough evidence of brutality if a Negro is the victim; that the Justice Department only enters with vigor when a white man is hurt.⁹²

Richardson’s castigation of the Justice Department, particularly their willingness to intercede when whites were victims, was a common critique volleyed in the movement. In this 1964 article, she was far more explicit in calling out judicial malefactions, state violence against civil rights workers, and police brutality than she had been in her 1963 telegram to Robert Kennedy. This bold stance reflected her growing militancy and radicalization.

A Radical in Cambridge

Just a month after the failed referendum Richardson traveled to Detroit, Michigan to attend the Northern Negro Grassroots Leadership Conference hosted by the Group for Advance Leadership (GOAL). Founded in 1961 by Reverend Albert Cleage, Jr. and the Henry brothers, Milton and Richard, GOAL was an all-Black organization that offered Detroit residents an alternative to the NAACP. Like Richardson, members of GOAL were known for calling out Uncle Toms.

GOAL’s formation and the organizing of the Northern Negro Grassroots Leadership Conference offer a significant history of the shifting objectives of the Civil Rights Movement that is worth explicating. GOAL’s origins can be traced to the liberal Detroit Council of Human Rights (DCHR). In 1963, the DCHR organized the Northern Christian Leadership Conference as an affiliation with Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Reverends Albert Cleage and C.L. Franklin

⁹² Richardson.

were members of the DCHR but had divergent opinions about the proposed guest list for the conference. Cleage wanted to invite activists who were associated with radical groups, including the Socialist Workers' Party, the Nation of Islam, and UHURU, a student-led Black nationalist group in Detroit. Because the issue could not be resolved, Cleage left the DCHR and organized a rival meeting. This new Northern Negro Grassroots Leadership Conference distinguished itself from the civil rights establishment by welcoming a wide range of Black radicals. The conference was held on November 10, 1963, at King Solomon Baptist Church, and was especially important to the intellectual development of the Black Power Movement. The keynote speaker for the conference was Malcolm X, spokesman for the Nation of Islam.

It was at this speaking engagement that he gave one of his most famous speeches, "Message to the Grassroots," in which he articulated the difference between liberal and nationalist goals of the Black Freedom struggle, encouraged Black radicals to think in revolutionary terms, and challenged the dominant ideology of nonviolence in the movement. Drawing a distinction between a "Black revolution" and a "Negro revolution," he advised Black people to understand the full implications of the word "revolution," and warned them not to use it loosely. Using several historical examples, he argued that revolutions in America, France, Russia, and China all concerned land and involved bloodshed. But in the U.S. Blacks believed they could have a nonviolent revolution. He begged to differ, arguing: "You don't have a peaceful revolution. You don't have a turn-the-other-cheek revolution. There's no such thing as a nonviolent revolution. The only kind of revolution that's nonviolent is the Negro revolution. The

only revolution based on loving your enemy is the Negro revolution.”⁹³ Revolutions, Malcolm reasoned, were bloody, hostile, and offered no compromise. It was at this conference that Richardson met Malcolm and they developed a friendship based on their mutual ideas about the goals and objectives of the Black Freedom struggle.

Richardson’s alignment with Malcolm X further situated her as an outlier amongst the civil rights mainstream. After the Detroit conference, she and Malcolm met a handful of times to discuss how to support one another’s efforts and about the direction of the movement.⁹⁴ While both leaders believed in the philosophy of armed resistance, Malcolm’s notoriety far exceeded Richardson’s fame. Shortly after their first meeting in Detroit, Malcolm was suspended from the Nation of Islam and eventually left the organization. As an independent political leader, he established two separate organizations, the Muslim Mosque Inc. and the Organization for Afro-American Unity. Richardson invited Malcolm to Cambridge several times, but he never made it to the city. Malcolm also invited Richardson to attend his meetings held at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, which she did. According to Richardson, she and Malcolm agreed on several issues regarding the movement including the use of armed self-defense, and that the direction and objectives of the movement should move beyond accommodations. In a recent interview, she noted her alignment with Malcolm’s thinking as articulated in his speech, the “Ballot or the Bullet.” Malcolm claimed 1964 as the year of the ballot or the bullet. In this speech he said, “it’s the ballot or the bullet. It’s liberty or it’s death. It’s

⁹³ Malcolm X and George Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (Grove Press, 1965).

⁹⁴ Her friendship with Malcolm also had consequences. In her interview with Szabo she recounted how the money dried up after “I endorsed Malcolm X, [prior] we had a little money that came in from a couple of the unions [the Meat Packers and the International Ladies Garment Workers]” She recalled. She stated funders “withdrew [their money] because they didn’t like my position on that and since I wouldn’t go back on it. Szabo, “An Interview with Gloria Richardson Dandridge.”

freedom for everybody or freedom for nobody. America today finds herself in a unique situation. Historically, revolutions are bloody...you don't have a revolution in which you are begging the system of exploitation to integrate you into it." He argued, "Revolutions overturn systems. Revolutions destroy systems."⁹⁵

1964 was the year that Barry Goldwater, U.S. Senator from Arizona, ran for the Republican Party's nominee for President of the United States. Richardson told Malcolm that she "thought that before the election he should make it clear, if [Barry] Goldwater was running, that it should not be ballots, and he agreed."⁹⁶

Arch-segregationist George Wallace ran for the Democratic Party's nomination that year. As Governor of Alabama, Wallace gained national notoriety when he stood in front of the entrance of the University of Alabama in an attempt to prohibit the enrollment of Black students. He was a Dixiecrat known for his pro-Jim Crow stance, evident in the 1963 Inaugural Address in which he declared "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!" In November 1963, Wallace announced his intention to run for President, on a platform that was anti-integration and tough on crime. As he campaigned for the Democratic nomination against incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson, Wallace gained support across the country and particularly in Maryland. In April 1964 Gloria Richardson reached out to fellow activists for assistance: Governor Wallace was coming to town after receiving an invitation from the Dorchester County Business and Citizens Association.

Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and Cleveland Sellers were among those activists that arrived at the Eastern Shore city to support the local movement. Carmichael

⁹⁵ Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*.

⁹⁶ Gloria Hayes Richardson oral history interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier.

and Sellers were Howard student members of the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG), a SNCC affiliate on Howard's campus. Sellers recalled, "I knew when I decided to go that I was about to get involved in a struggle far more dangerous than anything I had previously experienced."⁹⁷ Sellers was a fairly seasoned activist, having worked in Mississippi but found the movement in Cambridge unique. He wrote in his memoir that this moment in Cambridge was bigger than just a visit from a pro-segregationist, it represented the changing wind throughout the Civil Rights movement:

Local Blacks [in Cambridge] were convinced that the town's whites were intent on destroying them...Black demands to improve [economic] conditions had precipitated white violence. A number of people had been brutally beaten and snipers frequently fired into black homes. By the time we got to town, Cambridge's blacks had stopped extolling the virtues of passive resistance. Guns were carried as a matter of course and it was understood that they would be used in case of attack. After only three days, we had completely adjusted to the local movement. If attacked, we intended to defend ourselves—"by any means necessary!"⁹⁸

Sellers was willing to accept a gun, and he regarded it "as necessary to the work we were doing as stirring speeches, picket signs and marches against blatantly racist presidential candidates."⁹⁹ As a member of a nonviolent student-led group his position on armed resistance foretold the shifts SNCC would undergo in the coming months.

The rally was set for May 11, 1964, to be held in a public skating rink with an expected all-white crowd. Over 2,000 people gathered to hear Wallace attack the Civil Rights Bill and express his support for segregation in the town. In response, Richardson led 500 Black and white protesters in a march through the Second Ward towards the rally. The Maryland National Guard, armed with rifles with bayonets as well as military

⁹⁷ Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 68.

⁹⁸ Sellers and Terrell, 68–69.

⁹⁹ Sellers and Terrell, 69.

tanks, attempted to prevent the march from crossing Race Street (the dividing line between the Black and white communities). Normally, General Gelston was the commanding officer of the Guard. Gelston was a respected official who maintained a good rapport with Richardson, CNAC and the Black community. But on May 11, Colonel Tawes, the nephew of the Maryland governor, was in charge. Although the marchers were peaceful, he ordered them to disperse, citing martial law. Richardson refused, reasoning that if whites could hold a pro-segregation rally, Blacks must have the right to protest as well. When Tawes arrested her the marchers sat down on the pavement and sang freedom songs in response.¹⁰⁰ The National Guard then fired CN₂, a military gas that had never before been used on civilians, into the crowd of mostly Black American civilians.¹⁰¹ The gas was so strong, Richardson recalled, that it made “people ten blocks away from the demonstration [sick].” The gas was also toxic, it killed an elderly man and infant in nearby homes exposed to the fumes.¹⁰² This was just another example of state violence used to quell civilian protest during the Civil Rights Movement.

Conclusion

The protests that took place between 1962-64 had a lasting impact on the Civil Rights Movement and foretold a shifting paradigm, as historian Sharon Harley has argued.¹⁰³ Gloria Richardson’s vision for the movement in Cambridge contrasted from that of Diane Nash’s “beloved community,” and was probably more akin to Mable Williams’. For Richardson, the movement was about self-determination, economic justice, jobs, and

¹⁰⁰ Gloria Hayes Richardson oral history interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier.

¹⁰¹ “Wallace Sparks Cambridge Protests,” *The Student Voice*, May 19, 1964, Vol. 5 No. II edition.

¹⁰² Dandridge Richardson, “The Energy of the People Passing through Me,” 287.

¹⁰³ Harley, “‘Chronicle of a Death Foretold’: Gloria Richardson, the Cambridge Movement, and the Radical Black Activists Tradition.”

improved housing—she did not seek to change the hearts and minds of segregationists. In fact, she was regarded by some in the movement to be anti-white. ““I have never known anyone so antagonistic toward the white man,”” an informant told Robert Liston, reporter for the *Saturday Evening Post*. “She is the only person I have ever known who never seems to have anything good to say about any white man.””¹⁰⁴ These reflections suggest that Richardson was more concerned with getting things done for her community than she was concerned with loving her enemy. This view of movement goals shaped her position on armed resistance.

In this chapter I use the political activism of Gloria Richardson to further demonstrate the dissertation’s overarching argument that women grew increasingly more inclined over time to participate in armed activity while pursuing Black freedom. Examining Richardson’s story reveals how her understanding of the goals and objectives of the Civil Rights Movement informed her acceptance of armed resistance. She did not have a philosophical commitment to nonviolence. Rather she approached anti-Black violence from a situational perspective, accepting and encouraging self-protection in situations where it was needed. Cambridge activists were embroiled in armed confrontations with white civilians, police and National Guardsmen in 1962 and 1963. Despite mounting state repression, Richardson called for an all-out revolution. The changes she wanted to see enacted in Cambridge and the response from the government ultimately shaped her eventual embrace of a revolutionary position.

As the Civil Rights Movement struggle wore on, the philosophy and tactic of nonviolence continued to lose favor in the face of blatant and unrelenting government

¹⁰⁴ Liston, “Who Can We Surrender To?”

misconduct and state violence. In late 1963 SNCC and CORE decided to recruit several hundred northern college students, mostly white, to work in Mississippi during the summer. The next chapter examines the Freedom Summer, the multi-group effort to integrate Mississippi's segregated political system. Civil Rights workers helped Black residents register to vote; established a new political party; and formed Freedom Schools to help residents learn about history and politics. These actions provoked extraordinary terror by whites, including murders, bombings, kidnappings, and torture. For the first time, the country's attention was focused on civil rights issues because national television covered the events occurring in Mississippi. Scholar Akinyele Umoja has successfully argued that events in Mississippi in 1964 shifted the views of CORE and SNCC in terms of their ideological position on nonviolence.¹⁰⁵ He concluded that this shift signaled the beginning of the end of nonviolence as the Southern freedom movement's philosophy and method. The next chapter illuminates how Black women's armed activity helped to bring about this shift.

¹⁰⁵ Akinyele K. Umoja, "1964: The Beginning of the End of Nonviolence in the Mississippi Freedom Movement," *Radical History Review* 85, no. 1 (2003): 201–26.

Chapter 4

Civil Rights and the Politics of Armed Self-Defense (1964-1966)

In 1964 SNCC embarked on statewide grassroots voter registration drives in Mississippi and Alabama. To institute over forty different projects that ranged in size and scope all across Mississippi, SNCC worked with three civil rights organizations: the NAACP, CORE, and SCLC. Together these organizations made up the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). That summer, COFO embarked on a major project, Freedom Summer, to dramatically increase voter registration in Mississippi. The organizers of Freedom Summer selected Mississippi because of its severe voter discrimination: though Blacks made up nearly half of the state's population, less than 5% were registered to vote in 1964. SNCC also set up projects in Alabama, which was not far behind in its dismal voting rights record for Blacks.

Prior to the summer of 1964, Blacks who attempted to register to vote faced unyielding opposition from the white power structure. Tactics to prohibit the Black vote ranged from literacy tests to intimidation, arrests at the courthouse to economic retaliation, home evictions to foreclosures and credit denials, and most feared of all, Klan violence. In response to this widespread voter suppression, SNCC initiated grassroots voter registration drives that involved both volunteers and local residents. The Committee recruited nearly a thousand new volunteers to help. This influx of white and Black workers, many from out-of-state, enraged white segregationists in the Magnolia and Cotton states who viewed them as Northern invaders and troublemakers.

Volunteers and locals faced constant abuse and harassment from the state apparatuses: the government, military, police, judiciary and administrative bureaucracy.

Meanwhile the Ku Klux Klan devised and carried out a systematic series of violent attacks, including arson, beatings, false arrest, and murder. After three activists went missing for nearly a month at the start of the summer, local residents and freedom fighters came to understand the brutal consequences of their work.¹ Although activists repeatedly requested intervention, the federal government was reluctant to interfere in Southern states' affairs.

Scholar Akinyele Umoja has referred to 1964 as “the beginning of the end of nonviolence” in the Southern freedom movement. CORE and SNCC’s ideological shift away from nonviolence, Umoja argued, occurred primarily because of the impact of events in Mississippi in 1964.² Similarly, Simon Wendt, Lance Hill, and Chris Strain contend that 1964 was a turning point in the movement. But there is little consensus about how armed self-defense changed. For Wendt and Hill the emergence of the Deacons for Defense in Louisiana reflected a major shift in self-defense and overall movement tactics.³ Umoja noted that after 1964, “armed resistance would take on a more institutionalize[d] and paramilitary character.” Hill, on the other hand, contended that “armed self-defense had no political significance until it became collective and public

¹ On June 21, 1964, three civil rights workers, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman went missing near Philadelphia, in Nashoba County, Mississippi. The disappearance of the three young men led to a massive FBI investigation. Their bodies were discovered over a month later on August 4.

² Akinyele K. Umoja, “1964: The Beginning of the End of Nonviolence in the Mississippi Freedom Movement,” *Radical History Review* 85, no. 1 (2003): 201–26.

³ Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Simon Wendt, “‘Urge People Not to Carry Guns’: Armed Self-Defense in the Louisiana Civil Rights Movement and the Radicalization of Congress of Racial Equality,” *Louisiana History* 45, no. 3 (July 2004): 261–86; Simon Wendt, “‘They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men’: Violence, Non-Violence and Black Manhood in the Civil Rights Era,” *Gender & History* 19, no. 3 (November 2007): 543–64; Christopher B. Strain, “‘We Walked like Men’: The Deacons for Defense and Justice,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 38, no. 1 (January 1, 1997): 43–62.

and openly challenged authority and white terror.” Despite these differences, none of these scholars accounted for the role women played in the shifting ideology of organizations like SNCC and CORE, despite the fact that women were four times more likely to participate in the movement than men.⁴

Black women’s armed resistance presented a challenge for civil rights organizations that were premised on the philosophy of nonviolence. When civil rights volunteers arrived in Southern communities they encountered indigenous women, for example, who did not believe in nonviolence and practiced armed resistance.⁵ Women alongside men played a critical role in ensuring the safety of volunteer participants. Many civil rights workers stayed with and benefited from the wisdom and protection of indigenous leaders.⁶ One volunteer, Peggy Ewan, stayed with the Caulfield family and was taught to use a shotgun when she arrived.⁷ Local women’s practices helped to shape Civil Rights’ workers ideas about nonviolence and armed resistance. For example, Steve Miller was protected by Jackie and Bob Hicks in Bogalusa, Louisiana from the Klan. Miller admitted that after his time there he no longer held a commitment to nonviolence.⁸

⁴Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (University of California Press, 2007), 266.

⁵ The term “indigenous” is used in Civil Rights scholarship and means native to the land.

⁶ To be clear, this was not at all a new dilemma. It was an issue Martin Luther King Jr. faced in Montgomery when he had armed guards stationed outside of his house, and CORE also encountered a similar dilemma. Armed self-defense triggered many vigorous philosophical discussions among the Louisiana task force, but most CORE field workers came to accept black protection as a simple necessity. In a letter to the regional CORE office, Mike Lesser discussed his work in West Feliciana Parish: “Incidentally, so you don’t get the wrong idea, we are preaching non-violence, but [we] can only preach non-violence. We cannot tell someone not to defend his property and the lives of his family, and let me tell you, these 15- 20 shotguns guarding our meetings are very reassuring.” Wendt, “URGE PEOPLE NOT TO CARRY GUNS,” 74.

⁷ Jim Peck, ed., “Louisiana---Summer 1964: The Students Report to Their Home Towns,” 1964, 14.

⁸ Conversation with Steve Miller, Telephone, April 14, 2017.

This chapter explicates how Black women, helped to usher in the ideological shift on the question of nonviolence. I argue that this significant turning point in the history of the movement cannot be understood without looking at female participants, both locals and volunteers. The first section evaluates one indigenous leader's practice of armed resistance. The following sections examine three new volunteers: Gwendolyn Robinson, Fay Bellamy, and Gloria Larry, who were less committed to the principles of nonviolence relative to their predecessors. There was something profoundly different about Robinson, Bellamy, and Larry. These Black women "joined SNCC in 1964 and 1965 firmly believing that a woman could do anything a man could do."⁹ This ethos of equality between the sexes informed how these women understood their own role in the movement. They believed themselves to be as committed and capable of bringing about a drastic change in the United States as their male counterparts. Therefore, they did not subscribe to traditional gender roles, and would not have seen armed resistance as a 'man's job.'

To further situate women's embrace of armed resistance I use Scholar Karen Kampwirth's analysis of women and armed struggle. Kampwirth identifies two factors that help explain women's participation in armed struggle. She writes, "the experience of organizing in an unarmed capacity both pushed and pulled women [into armed struggle]; they were pushed by the government's escalated violence, and they were pulled by their own growing political skills and consciousness."¹⁰ The chapter surveys the activism and

⁹ Sara Margaret Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*, vol. 228 (Vintage, 1979), 84.

¹⁰ This analysis is drawn from my readings on women in revolutionary struggles in Central and South America. See Karen Kampwirth, *Women and Guerrilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba* (Penn State University Press, 2002), 8, 51–52; T. David Mason, "Women's Participation in Central

political development of Robinson, Bellamy, and Larry to examine the pull and push factors leading them to practice and advocate armed resistance. A major pull factor in women's growing political consciousness was Black Nationalism. Another was a growing disdain for capitalism and imperialism. These three ideological positions ultimately informed the intellectual character of many Black Power activists by 1966.

To fully understand "the end of nonviolence," we must examine how women were pulled into armed resistance by escalating state violence. For our purposes state violence refers to deliberate attacks on civilians committed by representatives of the government (i.e. law enforcement and military personnel) for the purpose of maintaining the political status quo. State violence took many forms, from police brutality and repression, to government inaction and failure to protect civilians. Black women's frequent experiences of state violence between 1964 and 1966 further shifted their views on the utility of armed resistance.

These incidents have a lot to tell us about overall shifts in the movement. Women's experiences of police brutality while they were organizing in an unarmed capacity pushed them into armed struggle. State violence affected men and women in similar ways and both were pushed to embrace armed struggle. Scholars however have constructed a narrative frame that excludes women, because women did not adopt armed resistance to restore their sense of manhood. This chapter offers a new theory that is gender inclusive, which can be used to explain both men and women's actions.

American Revolutions: A Theoretical Perspective," *Comparative Political Studies* 25, no. 1 (April 1, 1992): 66, 79.

According to scholar Joy James, armed resistance is advanced by people who “fear state violence against them,” and do not trust the state to protect them.¹¹

Equally important was that by 1964 women took on greater leadership roles. According to scholar Belinda Robnett, a “sharp increase in demands upon leadership resources placed” Robinson, Bellamy, and Larry “in new positions of responsibility and power.”¹² These women took on leadership roles, and their experiences and knowledge informed the direction of SNCC. They participated in setting the agenda of the movement, making proposals, writing position papers, and guiding discussions. Ultimately, because they held positions of power, their experiences and knowledge informed the direction of SNCC.

Indigenous leadership, armed resistance, and the Mississippi Freedom Summer

Black women made the movement possible. Their multifaceted leadership, organizational skills, and strong support helped to make the Civil Rights Movement a success.¹³ Similarly, Black women’s armed activity was useful and necessary for the

¹¹ Joy James, *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture* (U of Minnesota Press, 1996), 19 Emphasis added.

¹² Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 108.

¹³ For the last two decades scholarship on Black women in the movement has blossomed. The following is not an exhaustive list of these ground-breaking studies which range from anthologies to biographies. Bettye Collier-Thomas and Vincent P. Franklin, *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (NYU Press, 2001); Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (Indiana University Press, 1990); Charles Payne, “Men Led, but Women Organized: Movement Participation of Women in the Mississippi Delta,” *Women and Social Protest*, 1990, 156–165; Bernice McNair Barnett, “Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: The Triple Constraints of Gender, Race, and Class,” *Gender & Society* 7, no. 2 (June 1, 1993): 162–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124393007002002>; Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*; Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance : A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (Random House Digital, Inc., 2010); Emilye Crosby, “‘The Lady Folk Is a Doer’ Women and the Civil Rights Movement in Claiborne County, Mississippi,” in *Mississippi Women: Their Histories, Their Lives*, ed. Martha H. Swain, Elizabeth Anne Payne, and Marjorie Julian Spruill (University of Georgia

success of the movement. However, scholars have yet to fully appreciate this aspect of women's contributions to the movement.¹⁴ Alongside Black men, Black women protected movement workers, including their own children. Their efforts helped to minimize movement casualties and curbed future attacks. In areas where the Ku Klux Klan had a stronghold, where those in the movement ran the risk of being kidnapped, raped, beaten or murdered, local women placed their faith not in the law but in their pistols, shotguns, and other implements of protection and defense.

When SNCC first arrived in Greenwood, Mississippi in the summer of 1962 to start a voter registration project, Mrs. Laura McGhee, a widow who owned a small farm, was among the first to respond favorably to SNCC's request for help. Mrs. McGhee's local leadership was invaluable to the Greenwood movement and its participants. She made her first attempt at registering to vote that summer and encouraged her friends and neighbors to do the same. Her home was used for meetings, her land was used for rallies, and she taught citizenship classes.¹⁵ Mrs. McGhee's deep involvement in the movement was accentuated by her willingness to use armed resistance when necessary.

While others rested, Mrs. McGhee would sit up at night and watch over her home. She sat on her porch with her Winchester rifle to ensure the safety of her property and family. Scholars such as Akinyele Umoja have duly noted women's involvement "in

Press, 2010); Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014); Charles M. Payne, "'Sexism Is a Helluva Thing' Rethinking Our Questions and Assumptions," in *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, A National Movement*, ed. Emilye Crosby, n.d.

¹⁴ For example, women and armed resistance was not featured in a single article comprised of *Want to Start a Revolution* despite the clear connection between revolution and armed resistance. Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard, *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (NYU Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 208–9; Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement*, 2013, 71–72.

armed resistance, particularly in defending their homes and families.”¹⁶ However, greater attention to women’s armed activity reveals these actions were not limited to the private sphere of the home, and that protection of their families also meant protection of valuable participants of the movement.

Even without her rifle, McGhee practiced armed self-defense. On April 3, 1964, she was one of forty demonstrators marching despite an injunction against demonstrations issued by local officials. As police officers arrested nineteen protestors, one shoved Mrs. McGhee. She ended up in a full-on fist fight with the policeman after he attempted to hit her with his nightstick. The brawl only ended once activist-entertainer Dick Gregory restrained her. Public moments such as these have sometimes escaped the analytical purview of scholars because women’s armed activity did not always include armaments. The value in an expansive definition of *armed resistance*, which includes fist fighting, allows us to examine these public moments of defiance as significant endorsement of armed resistance. As a pillar of the movement in Greenwood, Mrs. McGhee’s actions certainly influenced how other demonstrators viewed armed resistance in situations where police violated their rights.

Mrs. McGhee was what scholar Belinda Robnett calls an “indigenous bridge leader.” These women floated between civil rights groups without a formal position within a local organization. They were active, trusted, and dependable women in the community. Robnett noted that bridge leaders tended “to advocate more radical or nontraditional tactics and strategies because, unlike formal leaders, they [did] not need

¹⁶ Umoja, “1964,” 222.

the legitimacy with the state.”¹⁷ Robnett does not discuss armed resistance as a tactic used by bridge leaders, yet the example of Mrs. McGhee suggests this tactic was among many adopted by informal leaders of the movement. Moreover, bridge leaders helped to relay movement goals, values, and beliefs to potential constituents.¹⁸ Women like Mrs. McGhee certainly conveyed that the movement’s goals were not incompatible with the practice of armed self-defense, through their actions if not their words.

Mrs. McGhee’s children were also involved in the movement. During the summer of 1964, Silas McGhee, a high school senior, joined the movement after the passage of the Civil Rights Act in July. After the bill was enacted, Silas attempted to test the new legislation by integrating one of the whites-only movie theaters.¹⁹ According to an incidents report, after leaving the FBI office on July 16 “Silas McGhee...[was]...picked up by three whites, forced to enter [the] cab-of their pickup truck at gunpoint, then beaten with [a] pipe and plank.”²⁰ This was just one of many attacks McGhee’s sons endured. Despite the attacks, Silas and his brother, Jack, made several attempts to integrate public facilities thereafter. By August, Silas and Jack had caused quite a stir with these activities, having been arrested half a dozen times between them.²¹ On August 15, Silas was shot by a white man in the head with a .38 bullet, which broke his jaw and went

¹⁷ Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 20.

¹⁸ Robnett, 13.

¹⁹ The report also noted Silas McGhee was the young man whose beating in local movie theater prompted first arrests under the 1964 Civil Rights Act. “Running Summary of Incidents, Mississippi Summer Project,” n.d.

²⁰ “Running Summary of Incidents, Mississippi Summer Project.”

²¹ Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 213.

down his throat, according to a COFO incidents report.²² Bob Zellner, a SNCC worker, rushed him to the hospital. Luckily Silas survived the terrorist attack.²³

Three days after Silas' shooting, Jake was arrested. Deeply concerned for her son's safety while in police custody, Mrs. McGhee went to the jail to check on Jake, taking Zellner and an attorney with her. Upon arriving at the station, the chief of police asked to speak with the lawyer in a side room guarded by an officer. When Mrs. McGhee attempted to enter the room, the officer refused to allow her to enter. He then hit her in the chest.²⁴ Zellner recounted the confrontation in the SNCC staff report, stating McGhee "hit him right in the eye, right in the eye as hard as I've ever seen anybody hit in my life...I remember his eye swelling up...and [him] losing consciousness, sliding down the door. Meanwhile, Mrs. McGhee is following him on the way down. She's not missing a lick—boom, boom, boom! —and every time she hits him, his head hits the door."²⁵ What can we make of Mrs. McGhee's willingness to defend herself when attacked by police? Certainly, the core principals of nonviolence would disavow such behavior. Mrs. McGhee's actions were more aligned with the philosophy of armed resistance, which privileged Black people's right to bodily integrity and humanity.²⁶ Her willingness to

²² He was rushed to University Hospital in Jackson in critical condition. Silas McGhee was initially brought to Leflore Hospital but staff reportedly were unable to remove the bullet. But according to Zellner, the hospital staff refused to treat him. Zeller was restricted from entering the hospital because he was not wearing a shirt. He had taken the shirt off to help stop McGhee's bleeding. "Running Summary of Incidents, Mississippi Summer Project"; "Mississippi Harassment," *The Student Voice*, August 19, 1964, sec. Vol. 5 No. 21.

²³ Gwendolyn Hall, Interview with Bob and Dottie Zellner, Audiocassettes, 1977, Box 7 Folder 2, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall Papers, Tulane University Amistad Research.

²⁴ "SAVF-Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) Papers (Social Action Vertical File, circa 1930-2002; Archives Main Stacks, Mss 577, Box 15, Folder 1)," n.d., Archives Main Stacks, Mss 577, Box 15, Folder 1), Freedom Summer Digital Collection, accessed April 13, 2017.

²⁵ "Running Summary of Incidents, Mississippi Summer Project"; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 213–14.

²⁶ A warrant was issued for Mrs. McGhee's arrest for assaulting the officer.

practice armed resistance had profound consequences for her children's participation in the movement.

While scholars have proven both local men and women's armed resistance was essential to the success of the movement, they say very little about the impact of women's involvement.²⁷ One wonders if Silas and Jack would have continued to participate in the movement had it not been for their mother's effective defense. While they were her children, they were also valuable activists in the movement. Silas eventually served on the Executive Committee of SNCC, and Jake became an officer in the NAACP.²⁸ Silas and Jake both attributed their involvement in the movement to their mother.

SNCC's lead organizer in Greenwood, Sam Block effusively stated "Armed blacks had deterred whites intending to do harm to the SNCC office." Block used the example of Laura McGhee, who had prevented attacks on her home by openly carrying arms.²⁹ Mrs. McGhee's armed activity and willingness to defend herself and others was aligned with the southern culture many new volunteers witnessed. But her use of armed resistance unearthed tensions within the student organization around its philosophy of nonviolence and policies on armed self-defense.

²⁷ Umoja argues that without armed resistances primarily organized by local people, the NAACP, CORE and SNCC activists would not have been able to organize in Mississippi. Essentially, armed resistance was critical to the efficacy of the southern freedom struggle and dismantling of segregation and Black disenfranchisement. Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*.

²⁸ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 215–16; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: Sncc and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Harvard University Press, 1981), 151.

²⁹ Quoted in Umoja, "1964," 206.

Internal Debates within SNCC—Self-Defense

Questions arose within the SNCC: when women like Laura McGhee armed themselves, what should be done by trained nonviolent field workers? On June 10, 1964, SNCC national leadership met in Atlanta to discuss Freedom Summer. The question of armed self-defense was brought up, and for the first time, SNCC activists revisited their organizational positions on carrying weapons. Staff working in Greenwood, Mississippi informed their colleagues that they had decided to “protect the people around the office” and prevent “people from breaking in and bombing the office.”³⁰ Since January guns had been kept in the Freedom House because staff members believed their lives were in danger, as word spread about whites increasingly arming themselves in Mississippi.³¹ The Greenwood staff’s confession awakened vigorous debate on the question of armed self-defense versus nonviolence. Should SNCC at large support armed self-defense? Should they carry guns? Should arms be allowed in Freedom Houses for protection? What relationship should SNCC have with local Blacks who practiced armed self-defense? Did SNCC even want local people to defend its organizers with arms?³²

One staff member argued that arming activists would make them more susceptible to violence. Another, Prathia Hall, a theology student and ardent believer in the philosophy of nonviolence, asserted armed self-defense would be suicidal for local Blacks. After much debate, the group finally reached a consensus. A decision was made to keep guns out of the “Freedom House or office in any SNCC project...It was also

³⁰ Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 86; Umoja, “1964.”

³¹ Freedom Houses served as the office for SNCC’s operations. They were also communal living areas for volunteers that were not hosted by local families.

³² Charles E. Cobb Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* (Basic Books, 2014), 178.

resolved that SNCC as an organization would not take any public position on armed self-defense.”³³ The decision was only a temporary resolution for a much broader unfolding phenomenon. As SNCC continued to organize in the rural south, student activists witnessed the enduring practice of armed resistance. By permitting some form of armed self-defense, SNCC was moving away from its principles of non-violence. This enabled women to continue to fight against oppression in ways that made sense to them.

Little was resolved at the meeting in Atlanta. Instead, it reflected the tensions between nonviolence and armed resistance in the wake of four long years of brutal attacks. The choice of tactics was ultimately made by each individual organizer in the field, often at a moment’s notice. The debate, however, reflected growing concerns of both rank-and-file members as well as new recruits in the organization. To fully assess how local women’s armed resistance impacted volunteers, it is necessary to examine armed resistance from the perspective of one of SNCC’s thousands of new recruits.

Gwen Robinson in Laurel, Mississippi

Gwendolyn Robinson was a fresh-faced college student at Spelman College when she joined the Civil Rights Movement. She was raised by a Memphis, Tennessee family who were well aware of the brutal realities of southern racism and discouraged her from joining the movement. They were not alone in that sentiment. According to Robinson, “the Spelman administration warned us Spelman women to stay clear of any involvement with the Movement.”³⁴ Nonetheless Robinson participated in the efforts to integrate the

³³ Carson, *In Struggle*; Umoja, “1964”; Akinyele O Umoja, “The Ballot and the Bullet: A Comparative Analysis of Armed Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 4 (March 1, 1999): 558, 562, 563.

³⁴ Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, “From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon,” in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*, ed. Faith S. Holsaert, 1st Edition (University of Illinois Press, 2012), 14.

city, she attended SNCC meetings, and she helped to recruit other Spelmanites to the movement.

As a sophomore she was inspired by the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and opted to organize a campaign to integrate the Krystal restaurant chain in downtown Atlanta. She enlisted a few Spelmanites to join her in the effort. On the first day, the co-eds entered the restaurant and asked to be served. Instead of integrating the store the manager closed the restaurant for the day. Feeling successful, the young students proceeded to another Krystal's restaurant with the same plan in mind. Each time the managers would close the store. Robinson and her friends did this for two more days. On the third day, the women entered the store and again the manager put the "Closed" sign on the door, as he had done the last two days. But he also steamed up the windows so that no one could see in or out. Unbeknownst to Robinson, hiding in the back were several white men waiting for the women to arrive. Armed with sticks and clubs, the white men attacked the Spelman students. As Robinson attempted to get away from the male attackers, a waitress struck her, Robinson recalled, "I punched her with all my might and shoved her away from me...My [Spelman] sisters were also attempting to defend themselves."³⁵ What was supposed to be a nonviolent desegregation attempt turned into self-defense very quickly.

Although Robinson was discouraged from participating in the Movement, she seemed to see herself as part of a long line of defiant Black women. She took pride in watching her grandmothers defy authorities in Memphis. In fact, Robinson had watched her grandmother practice self-defense and learned from her example. Robinson

³⁵ Simmons, 20.

remembered one occasion quite vividly when she saw her grandmother “stand up to some white policemen (with a shotgun across her forearm) who were roaming around without authorization in our backyard late one night ‘looking for a suspect.’”³⁶ Formative life moments such as these impressed upon would-be activists that Blacks could and should defend themselves and their families. When Robinson joined the movement in 1962, she brought along these memories of capable Black women practicing armed resistance.

In 1964 when Spelman administrators learned of Robinson’s intention to join Freedom Summer, they immediately called her family, who promptly arrived on campus to intercept her plan. They swiftly brought her back to Memphis, before she could get herself “killed trying to get Negroes to vote.”³⁷ Her grandmother threatened to disown her if she decided to carry out her plans. Still, Robinson was determined to join the thousands of volunteers in Mississippi that summer, despite her family’s objections. Undeterred, she arrived in Oxford, Ohio in June 1964 for orientation.

The orientation was designed to prepare each student volunteer for the tasks they would undertake in the field. They were informed of the risk involved in their work, and provided with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to survive their summer in Mississippi. Students were trained in nonviolent techniques which typically involved role-playing and included workshops on how to protect themselves and others when attacked. When physically attacked, volunteers were instructed to drop to the ground and protect themselves in a “non-violent position” using a curb or wall to shield their backs. When a fellow student was attacked, they could intervene by using their body to absorb

³⁶ Simmons, 19.

³⁷ Simmons, 24.

the blows thereby protecting another volunteer. Under no circumstances were students to retaliate against physical or verbal assaults. On the third day of the second orientation, Robinson and several hundred volunteers had to contend with the news of three missing activists. Robinson remembered being told, "If they were missing, we were told, they were most likely dead!"³⁸ Although she was given the option to go home, and despite her fear of "being caught by some rednecks, raped and tortured before being shot," she stayed the course.³⁹

In July, Robinson arrived at her first assignment, Laurel, Mississippi. She was joined by Jimmy Garret, a college student from Los Angeles, and, Lester McKinney, the project director and a seasoned SNCC field secretary from Washington D.C. To Robinson's surprise, no white volunteers were assigned to Laurel. She recalled "I couldn't believe that I was one of the three people going to work in an all-black project because it was too dangerous for white volunteers! The whole idea, I thought, was to bring in white students so as to open up the state and in some sense let them act like shields against the violence. I was none too happy at the prospects for the three of us."⁴⁰

³⁸ In response to the murders Cynthia Washington, a former SNCC field secretary said: "I never was a true believer in nonviolence, but was willing to go along [with it] for the sake of the strategy and goals. [However] we heard that James Chaney had been beaten to death before they shot him. The thought of being beat up, jailed, even being shot, was one kinda thing. The thought of being beaten to death without being able to fight back put the fear of God in me. Also, I was my mother's only child with some responsibility to go home in relatively one piece and I decided that it would be an unforgivable sin to willingly let someone kill my mother's only child without a fight. [So] I acquired an automatic handgun to sit in the top of that outstanding black patent and tan leather handbag that I carried. I don't think that I ever had to fire it; I never shot anyone, but the potential was there." Washington served as project director in Bolivar County, Mississippi one of the few women to hold this type of leadership position. Washington's response was common. Cobb Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*; Simmons, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," 26.

³⁹ Simmons, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," 23.

⁴⁰ Simmons, 26.

Robinson arrived on Mrs. Elberta Spinks' front porch that summer scouting for places to stay and assistance to build the infrastructure needed to get the project off the ground, she was welcomed in and offered a summer home.⁴¹ Mrs. Spinks hosted Robinson and recruited her neighbor, Mrs. Carrie Clayton into the efforts.⁴² Mrs. Clayton housed Garret and McKinney and allowed the workers to set up their office in her house, using the back porch for more than half the summer.

When white and Black volunteers arrived in cities across the state of Mississippi they encountered women like Mrs. Spinks, who knew her shotgun would provide the protection the local police refused to give. Mrs. Spinks was a resident of Laurel, Mississippi and provided room and board for SNCC workers to conduct their Freedom Summer project. Since Laurel was a stronghold for the Ku Klux Klan, civil rights workers operated under the constant threat of violence. Mrs. Spinks, however, met the unrelenting danger with an unfettered determination to fight back.

As the civil rights workers labored to build a movement in Laurel, the Klan organized a counterattack: hosting demonstrations, harassing and beating freedom fighters, burning crosses, buildings, and businesses, and terrorizing Black citizens. On July 21, dynamite was thrown into the SNCC office. This was the first of several attacks on the SNCC office.⁴³ Another fire was set after the culprits smashed all the equipment and destroyed all the material in the office and burned down the library.⁴⁴ City and

⁴¹ Gwendolyn Robinson married Michael Simmons, a member of SNCC, thereafter her married name was Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons.

⁴² Oral history with Eberta Spinks; 1995, interview by Kim Adams, Audio, 1995, Mississippi Oral History Program of the University of Southern Mississippi, <http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/coh/id/16674>.

⁴⁴ "Mississippi Harassment."

county officials did little to curb these attacks, and FBI agents stood idly by as workers were abused and violated.

Mrs. Spinks' use of arms influenced Robinson to embrace the tactic. As the threat of violence became more intense, Mrs. Spinks sat up nights with her shotgun ready, and told her guests to sleep tight, "They might get me, but I'm going to get one or two of them first."⁴⁵ Mrs. Spinks' position echoed the sentiments of women before her. Ida B. Wells, for example wrote at the turn of the century, "I had determined to sell my life as dearly as possible if attacked. I felt if I could take one lyncher with me, this would even up the score a little."⁴⁶ Spinks' spirit of resistance is an important dimension of the philosophy of armed resistance as the assertion of one's humanity and one's self. Mrs. Spinks' willingness to fight to the death for Black freedom informed the way Robinson understood the utility of armed resistance in the movement and further pushed her to question its objectives and tactics.

There is no evidence to suggest that Robinson attempted to persuade Mrs. Spinks to adopt the philosophy of nonviolence or to rid the matriarch of her shotgun. Robinson's approach contrasted with that of other civil rights workers. Scholar Simon Wendt has revealed that during the summer of 1964, CORE staff in Louisiana were told to "urge [local] people not to carry guns."⁴⁷ Mrs. Spinks demonstrated for civil rights workers like Robinson the utility and necessity for armed self-defense. Robinson argued that the work

⁴⁵ Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons oral history interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier in Gainesville, Florida, 2011-09-14., interview by Joseph Mosnier, Transcript, 2011; Simmons, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," 30.

⁴⁶ Ida B. Wells, "The Lynchers Wince," *New York Age*, September 19, 1891, <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/ead/pdf/ibwells-0008-008-03.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Wendt, "URGE PEOPLE NOT TO CARRY GUNS," 278.

of SNCC was made possible by “Laurel’s strong indigenous leadership.”⁴⁸ Mrs. Spinks, like Mrs. Ghee discussed prior, fit the bill of an “indigenous bridge leader,” armed and protecting movement participants.

Shortly after arriving in Laurel, Robinson became project director when Lester McKinney left Mississippi. According to Robnett, Robinson was one of seven female project directors of the twenty-nine in Mississippi, southwest Georgia, and Alabama.⁴⁹ Under Robinson’s leadership, they acquired over twenty more volunteers, set up a Freedom School, a daycare center, a fifteen hundred volume library, and held successful mock voter registration campaigns and elections to get local people involved in the political process.⁵⁰

According to Robinson, she adopted a “feminist style” of leadership as the project director in Laurel. She noted she was extremely democratic while some of her male counterparts were known for an authoritarian leadership style. Women in power meant that armed resistance was inclusive and not exclusionary. Her feminist style of leadership reflected Robinson’s keenness to address sexism in the movement. “I was particularly sensitive to sexual harassment,” Robinson noted. She sought to protect underage local girls, the majority of whom were Black, from older civil rights workers declaring them “off-limits to project males.” This policy addressed both gender dynamics and power

⁴⁸ Simmons, “From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon,” 30.

⁴⁹ Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 110.

⁵⁰ These latter efforts were part of the newly formed Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), which Robinson helped form with other local activists to combat white supremacy in Mississippi’s political arena. In the summer of 1964 several elected MFDP representatives traveled from Mississippi to Atlantic City to attend and participate in the National Democratic Convention. The DNC failed to seat the democratically elected representatives of the MFDP. This miscarriage of justice contributed to SNCC’s transformation from an integrationist organization towards a Black Nationalist orientation that embraced Black Power, Black internationalism, and self-defense.

relations of movement participants and the local community. She also had to contend with sexism from her male counterparts, “especially the white volunteers, who could not believe that a black girl younger than they were was the project director.”⁵¹ Robinson merged civil rights objectives with women’s issues; for her they were one in the same.

Years later Robinson reflected on her time as a SNCC activist, writing, “I rejected the notion of ‘redemptive suffering’ and the duty of blacks to save the soul of white America.”⁵² Whereas Martin Luther King, Jr. and Diane Nash, followed in the Christian belief that human suffering can educate, transform, and reconcile the races, Robinson was moving in a new direction. Her rejection of redemptive suffering was also a rejection of nonviolence. She wrote, “I was moving toward the idea that power concedes nothing without a struggle and possibly that this struggle could only be successful if it met force with force-no more turn the other cheek.”⁵³

Other issues certainly influenced Robinson’s politicalization as well. After a stint in a Jackson, Mississippi jail, Robinson was reassigned to SNCC’s New York office.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Simmons, “From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon.”

⁵² Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, “Martin Luther King Jr. Revisited: A Black Power Feminist Pays Homage to the King,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 2 (2008): 191.

⁵³ Simmons, 191.

⁵⁴ In her accounts of the movement, Robinson only briefly mentions the brutality she personally experienced. For instance, she recalled a large demonstration held in Jackson, Mississippi in which she along with nearly a thousand protesters were arrested. The state capital’s jail was ill-equipped to house that many people, so the police took them to “the fairgrounds, and, uh, we were put in houses that had, they normally use for livestock. And I spent fifteen days there, and it was, uh – we were brutalized very badly, uh, lots of beatings, and, um, all kinds of terrorizing.” Her account is otherwise conspicuously silent on the abuse she and others endured by the authorities. The *Voice*, however printed statements and excerpts of letters written by volunteers who participated in the protest. One woman, Mrs. Annie Mae King, of Sunflower County, Mississippi described the brutality one Black woman suffered as “she lied on the floor two cops taken [sic] her feet, and they drug her about 25 feet across the hall, and they kicked her all in her privates and beat her terrible...And it was two young ladies there pregnant, and they beat one of them so she had a miscarriage.” These are only a few examples of the sexual and gendered abuse women in the movement experienced at the hands of law enforcement; these terrorizing moments had a lasting impact on the women and the movement. “Notes From Mississippi,” *Student Voice, Inc.*, July 5, 1965, sec. Vol. 6 No. 4.

Jim Forman, SNCC's Executive Secretary, determined Robinson was experiencing post-traumatic stress and thought the time away would be beneficial. While living in New York for three months Robinson's political consciousness grew as she was introduced to Black Nationalism through the efforts of the Nation of Islam (NOI), one of the most enduring Black organizations of the twentieth century. The religious political organization grew to prominence in the 1950s, challenging long held notions of Black inferiority and promoting Black self-determination, Black love and unity, economic independence, and personal development. The Black Muslims were widely known for denouncing Christian American values that undergirded white supremacy in the United States. When Malcolm X was its spokesman, he questioned and rejected nonviolence as a philosophy and organizing strategy for Black liberation. He spoke out against imperialism, neo-colonialism, and capitalism.⁵⁵ Robinson may have been introduced to the NOI after Malcolm was expelled in 1964 and assassinated in 1965, but his ideas were widespread throughout the organization and particularly in Mosque No. 7 located in Harlem. Malcolm's argument that "blacks needed their own land in this country" resonated with Robinson.⁵⁶

She also became acquainted with the budding Black Arts Movement through the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and LeRoi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka) in 1965. She recalled, "those three months...had a profound impact on me, in terms of, 'Hey, there's a whole 'nother thought process about what black folks need to do that's *not* about integration,' which I didn't know anything about..."⁵⁷ By 1966 Robinson held no philosophical

⁵⁵ For more on Malcolm X see Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, Reprint edition (Penguin Books, 2011).

⁵⁶ Simmons, Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons oral history interview.

⁵⁷ Simmons, 27.

commitment to nonviolence, and this move was representative of the changing organizational structure of SNCC.

Sometime in late 1965 Robinson moved to Atlanta and worked out of SNCC headquarters. She, along with Bill Ware, Stokely Carmichael, Michael Simmons, Gwen Patton, and Mendy Samstein worked on the Atlanta Project in Vine City. The Atlanta Project emerged from SNCC's organizing work after SNCC activist Julian Bond was barred from taking his seat in the Georgia State Legislature in January 1966.⁵⁸ Although Bond was duly elected as representative for Atlanta's 136th Legislative District, the Legislature voted to bar him after he supported SNCC's anti-Vietnam War position.

The Atlanta Project addressed urban issues in the city, including poor housing, wages, and major economic disparities. They set up their office in Vine City, a poor and working-class neighborhood in Atlanta with Bill Ware as its director. According to its participants, the Atlanta Project was SNCC's first opportunity in the South "to shift the movement's focus away from the federal government as [a] major agent of change."⁵⁹ This idea was an equally important shift in focus for civil rights workers, who had spent years lobbying the federal government to enact change. While diligently working to combat poor housing conditions, the collective also helped to initiate a shift in the organization's philosophy and organizing strategy. Members of the Atlanta Project,

⁵⁸ On the Prospectus for the Atlanta Project see Mendy Samstein, "Prospectus for an Atlanta Project," n.d., Mendy Samstein papers, 1963-1966 (Archives Main Stacks, SC3093; WIHVS260-A), Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵⁹ Samstein, 2.

including Robinson embraced Black self-determination and an all-Black organizing philosophy. Robinson helped to craft SNCC's position on Black Power.⁶⁰

While the statement on Black Power said nothing about armed self-defense or violence, in general, it marks the intellectual contribution of Robinson and her comrades on the changing direction of the Black Freedom movement. Members of the Atlanta Project were deeply concerned with the direction of the organization and questioned, "Where do we go from here as a Movement and as a people?"⁶¹ Black activist women posed this question as a specific group with unique needs, specifically about their role in the future of the movement, and how to address male chauvinism. While the subsequent chapter details this development, it is significant to understand that both the movement at large, and Black women within it, were considering new directions.

In the early movement, the language of the "beloved community" was central. But the events of 1964—the influx of hundreds of white volunteers, the brutal murders of activists, the rapes, the beatings, the shootings, the failure of the Democratic Party to seat the delegates of the MFDP in Atlantic City—all had a mounting impact on how SNCC activists understood the goals of the movement. According to Robinson, "it was an evolution." She noted that "a delegation of SNCC people went to Africa after the

⁶⁰ Black self-determination was always a core part of the fabric of SNCC. Biographer Barbara Ransby argues, self-determination was one of the critical organizing principles that Ella Baker taught, and SNCC absorbed. She writes, "For Baker, this principle was not an exclusively racial proposition, as it was often deployed, but simply the democratic idea that an oppressed group, class, or community had the right to determine the nature of the fight to end its oppression. Such self-control of the movement's leadership by those it purported to represent was essential in Baker's view." See Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*, New edition (The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 300; "Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Position Paper: The Basis of Black Power," n.d.; Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons oral history interview.

⁶¹ Martin Luther King Jr, Coretta Scott King, and Vincent Harding, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Beacon Press, 2010).

Mississippi Summer Project ... they visit Guinea, they visit Ghana. And more and more, the understanding became that this is more than a moral issue. This is more than getting white Americans to love us. This is about us sharing power.”⁶²

The position paper on Black Power that Robinson co-drafted presented three major ideas. These early Black Power theorists first rebuked the notion that integration was progress and argued that integration perpetuated the myth of white supremacy. Given the origins of the organization, this was a drastic change. For years civil rights organizers had focused on integration. Second, the paper presented the notion of Blacks in America as a colonized people, and therefore victims of a domestic colonialism. This was not a new concept - segments of Black Nationalist movements had long argued that Black people in the US constituted a nation within a nation. The framework of colonization was useful for envisioning Black people’s relation to the state as a structure of domination. This shift also was a clear indication of SNCC members’ growing identity as Black Nationalists. Finally, the paper argued that Blacks needed to cut themselves off from whites to build their own institutions, co-ops, credit unions, political parties, and “write our own histories.”⁶³

The writers knew this final point would be the most provocative. They rebuffed notions that they were anti-white or racist. Rather they proposed that “white people who desire change in this country should go where that problem (of racism) is most manifest. That problem is not in the Black community. The white people should go into white

⁶² “Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons and Lucas Johnson — The Movement, Remembered Forward -,” *On Being with Krista Tippett*, T12:00:00+00:00, <https://onbeing.org/programs/gwendolyn-zoharah-simmons-and-lucas-johnson-the-movement-remembered-forward/>.

⁶³ “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Position Paper: The Basis of Black Power.”

communities where the whites have created power for the express-purpose of denying Blacks human dignity and self-determination.”⁶⁴ Logically, Black Power activists believed white activists needed to work in white communities to address racism at its source. Some members of their group believed whites should not be in SNCC at all. Excerpts of this statement were run in *The New York Times* on August 4, 1966, and erroneously attributed to Stokely Carmichael.⁶⁵

Robinson was a part of the changing tide in SNCC. This change involved several new ideological currents that pulled her toward armed resistance. While Black women were taking on greater leadership roles and articulating Black feminist concepts, they were also helping to articulate new goals and tactics for the organization. Members of SNCC and activists at large began to see armed self-defense as a necessary option for Black freedom. Robinson’s encounters with local women like Mrs. Spinks, and her grandmother’s stance against the authorities each demonstrated for her a defiant Black womanhood worth emulating. Robinson’s own confrontations with the state shaped her ideas on armed resistance. She came to believe “power concedes nothing without a struggle” and realized this struggle could only succeed if it met “force with force.”⁶⁶ Robinson helped to usher SNCC into its Black Power phase in 1966 as one of the authors of the “Black Power” position paper. But to fully appreciate how SNCC emerged as one

⁶⁴ “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Position Paper: The Basis of Black Power.”

⁶⁵ Gene Roberts, “Black Power Idea Long in Planning: S.N.C.C. Dissidents Wrote Document Last Winter,” *New York Times*, 1966.

⁶⁶ Robinson, however, did not maintain a lifelong commitment to the ideas of armed resistance. Her story reveals the fluidity of the philosophies of nonviolence and armed resistance I described in the Dissertation’s Introduction. Years after the movement, Robinson became a student of Sufism. She admitted that after King was assassinated she reverted back to a belief in nonviolence confessing, she “re-embrace[d] nonviolence as the only way to bring about deep social change that will last.” Simmons, Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons oral history interview; Simmons, “Martin Luther King Jr. Revisited,” 191.

of the most preeminent Black Power organizations it is worth examining voter registration efforts in Alabama.

State Violence in Alabama

While a growing Black consciousness *pulled* some women into embracing armed resistance, the government's response to unarmed activists *pushed* other women into armed struggle. The government's reaction to SNCC's voter registration efforts in Alabama offers an example of how women were ideologically pushed away from nonviolence and into the philosophy of armed resistance. The government responded to Civil Rights activity in at least two ways during the Movement. The first can be framed as 'inaction,' refusing to take any real action to protect freedom fighters from anti-Black violence. The government failed to enforce legal statutes designed to ensure the constitutional rights of citizens, and when perpetrators of anti-Black violence were brought before a judge, judicial malfeasance often resulted in an acquittal. Similarly, the government avoided responsibility for the actions of its representatives (i.e. officers of the law) who deliberately attacked civilians. The second response by the government was state-sanctioned and organized repression against activists, volunteers, and organizers which prevented their ability to fully participate in the democratic process. Politically repressive acts included but were not limited to violent attacks by the police, harassment, intimidation, human rights violations, unlawful surveillance, unlawful arrest and detention, and trumped-up charges. Most often these acts were carried out by local and state police. At other times, political repression was carried out by the federal

government, through the National Guard or the FBI's infamous Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) operation.⁶⁷

State-sponsored violence in Alabama in 1965 and 1966 was particularly gruesome.⁶⁸ The steady rise in the number of Blacks attempting to register to vote sparked indignation within the hearts of whites who violently terrorized Black communities and the organizers who helped them. The state and federal government did little to address the concerns of Black citizens, which was damaging to the morale of the movement but activists continued to press on towards their goals. Government inaction and repression were key elements in the changing tide within the movement. In their accounts of the movement, Black women point to their experiences of state violence as a catalyst for their radicalization and embrace of armed resistance. The following section surveys two women's accounts of organizing in Alabama in an unarmed capacity, and charts how they concluded armed resistance was necessary to the Black Freedom movement.

Fay Bellamy in Selma Alabama

Selma was one of the most repressive places in the Alabama Black Belt and the site of anti-Black violence. SNCC's campaign in Selma began in early 1963 when field secretaries Colia Liddell and her husband Bernard Lafayette embarked on a massive voter registration program. According to a November 1963 field report, Blacks accounted for over fifty percent of Selma's 28,600 population but had little economic or political

⁶⁷ James contends that state violence and coercion remain invisible to most Americans. James, *Resisting State Violence*, 5.

⁶⁸ "Deaths Mount in Alabama Campaign," *Student Voice, Inc*, March 26, 1965, Vol. 6 No. 1 edition.

power. The report revealed, “approximately .9% of eligible Negroes were registered prior to SNCC’s voter registration project in Dallas County.”⁶⁹ In addition to challenging substantial voter registration fraud, the civil rights activists had to contend with Sheriff Jim Clark who deputized hundreds of white men to harass, intimidate, arrest and brutalize freedom fighters.⁷⁰ In 1963 Clark’s posse developed a reputation for beating activists that extended well into 1965 when SNCC worker Fay Bellamy (Powell) arrived in the city.

Fay Bellamy (Powell) was compelled to join the Civil Rights Movement at the end of 1964 after a series of racially motivated killings. The murder of Emmett Till had a lasting impression on her, “Till might have been the brother of any one of us,” she wrote.⁷¹ Bellamy was a part of that generation of future SNCC workers who saw the images of Till’s body in *Jet Magazine* and hoped to one day avenge his murder. Fellow SNCC member Joyce Ladner referred to herself and activists like Bellamy as the “Till generation.” Eight years later, four little girls died in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 after a white supremacist placed a bomb in a church. Bellamy marks these egregious acts of brutality as her motivation for joining the Civil Rights Movement in late 1964.

Originally from Clairton, Pennsylvania, Bellamy was older than many of SNCC’s new volunteers. Born on May 1, 1938, Bellamy was also unusual in that she was not a college student turned activist. After attending one year of business school, Bellamy enlisted in the United States Air Force. Scholars have drawn a connection between military veterans and armed resistance in the Civil Rights Movement. In his work on the

⁶⁹ Bruce Gordon, “Field Report from Bruce Gordon on Selma, November 9, 1963,” November 9, 1963, 1.

⁷⁰ Gordon, “Field Report from Bruce Gordon on Selma, November 9, 1963.”

⁷¹ Fay Bellamy Powell, “Playtime Is Over,” in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*, ed. Faith S. Holsaert et al., 1st Edition (University of Illinois Press, 2012).

Deacons for Defense, Chris Strain noted the Black men that formed the Deacons in Jonesboro, Louisiana were “all

United States Army veterans, [who] decided that if the white power structure would condone and abet [Klan] activity, they must do something to help themselves.” According to Strain these men used the skills and discipline they acquired in the military to protect their community. They organized themselves like a military cadre equipped with “citizens band radios and ammunition and established nocturnal patrols of the black community.”⁷² Similarly, in Monroe, NC the rifle club was comprised mostly of returned veterans “who were very militant and who didn't scare easy.”⁷³ The strong presence of veterans in self-defense groups have led some scholars to speculate about the nature of armed resistance in the movement. An overemphasis on masculinity and manhood in the scholarship has produced a limited understanding of female veterans in the movement.

Perhaps because of her military background, or the nature of being raised by “strong women,” Bellamy joined SNCC believing women were equally as capable as men of fighting for Black people’s freedom.⁷⁴ She joined with the belief that she was a freedom fighter willing to die if necessary for the movement. She did not have a commitment to nonviolence like some of SNCC’s veterans but she did see the value in participating. Her friend and comrade Gwen Patton remembered Bellamy as “always [pointing] out the importance of the Black woman’s view, based upon our socialized experiences and circumstances in a racist society” at SNCC meetings. This reflection

⁷² Strain, “We Walked like Men,” 44.

⁷³ Robert F. Williams, *Negroes with Guns* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2013), 14.

⁷⁴ Powell, “Playtime Is Over.”

reveals the important intellectual work Bellamy did within SNCC and successive groups, like the Black Women's Liberation Committee.

When Bellamy arrived in Selma on New Year's Eve 1964, she "immediately became the entire office staff: the manager, the secretary, receptionist[,] and typists, as well as the media specialist," she recalled years later.⁷⁵ The efforts in the Selma office were geared towards voter registration and SNCC coordinated activities with SCLC staff. The activists met weekdays at 7:00 am to plan.⁷⁶ Between January and February 1965, SNCC and the SCLC led a series of marches including one on the night of February 18.⁷⁷ During the demonstration, an Alabama state trooper shot and killed Jimmy Lee Jackson as he attempted to help his mother who had just been clubbed by the trooper.⁷⁸ In response to this brutal killing, another march was scheduled for March 7. The demonstrators were to begin a fifty-four-mile march from Selma to Montgomery, the state capital.

Bellamy did not participate in the march because she "fear[ed] that there would be a knockdown, drag out assault by the police forces on defenseless people."⁷⁹ Other workers shared her concern, including Stokely Carmichael, the state director for Alabama, and SNCC's Executive Secretary James Forman. Instead of attending the Selma to Montgomery march they decided to head to Atlanta. On Sunday, March 7, nearly two-thousand protesters started their trek across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on their

⁷⁵ Powell, 476.

⁷⁶ Powell, 477; Carson, *In Struggle*, 157–62.

⁷⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. announced a major voting rights campaign in Selma in early 1965. Carson, *In Struggle*, 157.

⁷⁸ "Deaths Mount in Alabama Campaign."

⁷⁹ SNCC's Selma staff did not support the March from the onset, and SNCC remain officially uncommitted to the march. Carson, *In Struggle*, 158.

way to Montgomery. The marchers were met by Alabama State troopers and Sheriff Jim Clark's deputized posse who ordered the marchers to disperse within two minutes. When the protesters refused, the officers shot tear gas into the crowd and rushed to beat the nonviolent protesters with billy clubs. Deputized men on horseback rode over and through the crowd, attacking demonstrators. So many people were injured during the march it was dubbed "Bloody Sunday," and televised around the world.⁸⁰

Upon hearing the news, Bellamy, Carmichael, and Forman drove from Atlanta to Selma. Bellamy was enraged by the realities of Bloody Sunday. The government's role in beating unarmed civilians forced many activists to consider what role the government should actually take in the Civil Rights struggle. In the early years of the movement, activists had called on the government to be active agents in the fight for full freedom, requesting legislative action to address segregation and racial issues. After Bloody Sunday, activists like Bellamy were less keen on government involvement.

Martin Luther King Jr. called for civil rights supporters to come to Selma for another march. A meeting was convened that night at 3:00 a.m. According to Bellamy, SNCC leaders learned there would be no second march because SCLC would be served with a federal injunction. Representatives of SNCC however, felt the injunction had to be broken for the morale of the movement. After much debate, another march was held two days later on March 9. Again, the troopers and deputized men met protesters at the

⁸⁰ "FBI Agent Defends Use of Tear Gas: Dept. of Justice Legal Staff Surprised," *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current File)*; *Chicago, Ill.*, March 13, 1965, sec. S; "Shame on Alabama," *Los Angeles Sentinel (1934-2005)*; *Los Angeles, Calif.*, March 11, 1965; "FBI Agent Backs Use Of Tear Gas in Selma," *The Hartford Courant (1923-1991)*; *Hartford, Conn.*, March 13, 1965; "Use of Tear Gas Justified at Selma, FBI Man Testifies," *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*; *Atlanta, Ga.*, March 13, 1965; "Thousands Across U.S. Join in Selma Protests: Civil Rights Demonstrations Mourn Reeb, Demand Federal Intervention in Alabama," *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*; *Los Angeles, Calif.*, March 15, 1965, sec. PART ONE.

bridge. This time, Bellamy was at the front ready to confront the police.⁸¹ Perhaps because of her military training she was not afraid to encounter the state police and deputized posse. Regardless of the fact that King led the marchers in prayer at the end of the bridge and then instructed the demonstrators to turn around, Bellamy's place on the frontlines is significant.

After the march, Bellamy asked to be relocated, wanting more field experience, to fully understand what it meant to be a field worker, especially because she had asked others to do the job. Although she acknowledged the assignment was potentially more dangerous, she accepted the risk. At the end of the year, she worked for a short stint in Greene County, Alabama and then left the state and relocated to Atlanta, Georgia. In contrast to her office work in Selma, her experiences in Atlanta as a field secretary exposed her to mounting government reprisal. She participated in local protests and discovered she was not inclined to be nonviolent in response to state violence. She admitted, "at my first Atlanta demonstration on the steps of the State capital, a state trooper attempted to hit me with his stick and knock me down the stairs. Although this was a nonviolent demonstration, I immediately found myself locked in mortal combat fighting the trooper."⁸² Bellamy's reaction illuminates the changing tides within the student group by 1965. In the early days of SNCC, students encountered a similar level of danger, but their commitment to nonviolence was stronger. Indeed, prior to student workers going out into the field, they were trained on how to use nonviolent techniques in dangerous situations. Field workers attended workshops on how to protect themselves

⁸¹ Powell, "Playtime Is Over," 478; Carson, *In Struggle*, 158–59.

⁸² Powell, "Playtime Is Over," 479.

nonviolently against clubs, tear gas, and water hoses.⁸³ Bellamy, was, therefore, trained when she was on the steps of the state building, but that meant little when the state trooper hit her.

Activists like Bellamy were targets for government-sanctioned violence, which is how she found herself in the “street fighting hand to stick with a policeman in the Deep South.”⁸⁴ Demonstrations for civil rights came to be treated by local and state police as insurrections against the government, and the violence carried out by police was permitted.

Other volatile encounters with the police radicalized Bellamy. For instance, while protesting in the neighborhood of Summerhill she was arrested after she stopped a police officer from pulling his firearm on a young protester. The following day, as she awaited arraignment, again she found herself in combat with law enforcement, this time with a 350 pound “giant of a man.” Bellamy described the incident as the jailer manhandled her, “I reached back with my other arm and hit him with all the power I could muster and with such force that he turned my arm loose and fell backwards.” Bellamy eventually concluded, “from these experiences I finally learned that being nonviolent [was] not one of my strengths.”⁸⁵ The gumption she demonstrated at the jailhouse was emblematic of several Black women in the movement who were willing to take on “giants.”

These encounters with the state coupled with a growing Black Nationalist consciousness radicalized Bellamy. In 1968 Bellamy helped to create a sub-committee within SNCC, the Black Women’s Liberation Committee (BWLC), at this point she

⁸³ Peter Cummings, “Training for Freedom,” *The Harvard Crimson*, May 7, 1964, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1964/5/7/training-for-freedom-precruting-selecting-and/>.

⁸⁴ Powell, “Playtime Is Over,” 480.

⁸⁵ Powell, 481.

understood that state violence was a necessary component to maintain racism, capitalism, and sexism in America. These ideas were articulated in the literature of BWLC which is discussed more fully in the subsequent chapter. The members of the BWLC were committed activists, many of whom had witnessed and experienced police violence; their negative and sometimes fatal confrontations with the state fashioned their perspectives on armed resistance.

When considering pull factors, Bellamy's story also reveals one additional point. Although she determined she could not practice nonviolence, Bellamy still participated and found a role to play in the movement, noting "there are still things one can do in a nonviolent struggle."⁸⁶ Bellamy's assertion reveals a schism in Civil Rights historiography. Several researchers have noted women participated in the Civil Rights Movement in greater numbers than men. To explain this phenomenon scholars Lance Hill and Simon Wendt have relied on prescribed gender roles that suggest men had an aversion to nonviolence while women were naturally nonviolent and passive. Therefore, according to this logic, women were more aligned with the strategies of nonviolence. Lance Hill argued that the tactic and philosophy of "nonviolence discouraged black men from participating in civil rights protest in the South and turned the movement into a campaign of women and children." The inference is that women and children were not discouraged by nonviolence. According to Hill, Black men boycotted the civil rights movement, because they could not endure passive resistance. Simon Wendt similarly stated, "A closer look at civil rights organising in the Deep South reveals that the nonviolent strategy's connotations of effeminate submissiveness seriously hampered the

⁸⁶ Powell, 481.

efforts of civil rights activists to win over male African Americans to the movement's cause." Men, Wendt wrote, "refused to participate because of their opposition to nonviolence." Wendt's infers women did not refuse to participate, because they had not opposition to nonviolence. Wendt and Hall's evidence is drawn from the predominately all-male group, the Deacons for Defense and Justice.⁸⁷ Bellamy's story indicates women may not have been aligned with the philosophy of nonviolence or even been able to fully practice nonviolence, though they still chose to participate. Proudly, Bellamy contended "if it had not been for women and young people there would have been no movement."⁸⁸ The significant number of female participants, however, cannot be explained by their adherence to the philosophy or practice of nonviolence alone.

Gloria Larry in Lowndes County

Bellamy's experiences were not rare nor was she the only woman to determine that self-defense was necessary against state violence. SNCC worker Gloria Larry came to the same conclusion after she witnessed Tom Coleman, the Hayneville deputy sheriff, gun down Jonathan Daniels, a white civil rights worker and Episcopal seminarian.⁸⁹ Coleman fired at the protesters just after the sheriff released Larry, Daniels, and approximately thirty other demonstrators, instantly killing twenty-seven-year-old Daniels and severely wounding the Catholic priest, Father Richard Morrisroe.⁹⁰ The unprovoked

⁸⁷ Powell, 481; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 2, 8, 28, 44, 107, 236–37, 260–61, 268; Wendt, "They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men"; Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (University Press of Florida, 2010).

⁸⁸ Powell, "Playtime Is Over," 482.

⁸⁹ "Reports on Shooting of Jonathan Daniels, August 20-21, 1965," n.d., "Gloria House" SNCC Digital Gateway, SNCC Legacy Project and Duke University.

⁹⁰ White volunteers in the movement were targets of white supremacy as well. Their murders brought national and sometimes international attention to Civil Rights efforts and white terrorist tactics that helped to defend a southern way of life. Unfortunately, the violence against white civil rights workers often and frequently garnered more media attention than that of Black workers.

murder happened on August 20, 1965, in broad daylight and about 500 yards from the county jail.

Perhaps to the surprise of some civil rights workers, Coleman was tried in a court in Hayneville. One might surmise that his case went to trial because his victims were white. From the very beginning *Newsday* remarked on the potential miscarriage of justice evident in the trial. The newspaper noted the jury was composed of “twelve white men chosen from a county that is 80 percent Negro.” The daily newspaper highlighted the fact that Coleman’s friends, many of whom had rank and status in the community, were on the jury and his Defense attorney, Joe Phelps, gave a brief lecture on the meaning of friendship in his final summary.⁹¹ While Coleman claimed he gunned down the clergymen in self-defense, asserting that the men were armed with a switchblade and a pistol, Black civil rights workers testified that the men were unarmed.⁹² The courtroom was filled with Coleman’s friends, including “Robert Shelton, Imperial Wizard of the United Klans [who] led a large contingent of visiting Klansmen...” According to Jack Nelson of the *Washington Post* the audience also included known murders: “Collie Leroy Wilkins, Eugene Thomas and William Orville Eaton, three Klansmen accused of murder in the March 25 slaying of Viola Liuzzo of Detroit.”⁹³ The judicial discrepancies in Coleman’s case were more common than rare. When it came to the courts, civil rights workers did not expect justice would be served.

Indeed, Larry’s experience in the courtroom was a firsthand account of how the judicial system worked to protect Coleman, the perpetrator, and not Daniels or Morrisroe,

⁹¹ “Mike McGrady,” *Newsday*, September 30, 1965.

⁹² Jack Nelson, “Rights Workers Unarmed When Shot, 4 Negroes Testify in Alabama Trial,” *The Washington Post*, September 30, 1965.

⁹³ Nelson.

the victims. “The man who killed Jonathan,” Larry recalled “was a marksman who had been deputized for the occasion of our release from jail and that his assignment had been to kill Jonathan and Father Morrisroe.”⁹⁴ Coleman was acquitted by the all-white jury of his friends on September 30, 1965.⁹⁵ Consequently, Larry saw the government’s role in the movement as adversarial. This view undergirded her acceptance of armed resistance as a tool to achieve Black freedom.

The incidents leading up to and after Daniels’ murder exemplify how escalating government violence pushed Larry to reject the philosophy of nonviolence. “After Jonathan’s murder,” Larry recalled, “and the brutality of my short jail experience I could not see how nonviolence would be effective in the African American struggle for liberation.”⁹⁶ For women like Larry, practicing nonviolence proved a challenge when they were continually provoked, harassed, threatened and abused, particularly by officers of the law whose job it was to protect them.

After Daniel’s murder, Larry continued to work in Lowndes County with the Alabama Project. Lowndes County was one of the poorest counties in the state and known for its violence toward Black men and women. As a field secretary, Larry worked with Stokely Carmichael, Courtland Cox, and Janet Jemmott to get local residents registered to vote.⁹⁷ Staff meeting notes from 1965 revealed that only 2,000 Blacks were registered to vote out of a possible 5,000.⁹⁸ The voter registration efforts in Alabama

⁹⁴ Gloria House, “We’ll Never Turn Back,” in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*, ed. Faith S. Holsaert, 1st Edition (University of Illinois Press, 2012), 508.

⁹⁵ “All Alabama Knew He’d Be Cleared,” *Boston Globe*, October 1, 1965.

⁹⁶ House, “We’ll Never Turn Back,” 508.

⁹⁷ Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes* (NYU Press, 2009), 180.

⁹⁸ “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Staff Meeting Minutes,” November 1965.

were compounded by SNCC's previous attempts to increase Black political participation in the South.

In the summer of 1964, SNCC helped to form the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to combat white supremacy in Mississippi's political arena. In August, the elected MFDP representatives traveled by bus from Mississippi to Atlantic City to attend and participate in the National Democratic Convention (DNC). The DNC refused to seat all delegates, despite the fact that they were democratically elected representatives of the state. The fallout of this moment had a lasting impact on SNCC and its most valued members. The decision of the DNC demonstrated to SNCC the ways in which white supremacy was ingrained within the political system. In reality, the Democratic Party had labored to keep Blacks away from the polls, using legal voter suppression tactics for generations. These scare tactics maintained the status quo in the South. Nonetheless, SNCC still believed the vote could be a powerful tool for Black freedom—but in 1965 they approached this belief in new and innovative ways.

SNCC moved away from attempts to integrate the all-white Democratic Party by forming an all-Black political party. SNCC's Researcher Department investigated the validity and legality of forming independent political parties. They discovered an old Reconstruction era law that allowed citizens to form political parties at the county level.⁹⁹ Thus, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), an independent Black political party was formed. Local people chose the Black panther as LCFO's logo.¹⁰⁰ The panther was a vicious animal, which only fought when attacked, and would not back

⁹⁹ Carson, *In Struggle*, 165; House, "We'll Never Turn Back," 509; Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*.

¹⁰⁰ "LCFO Political Education Primer for Sheriff, [1968]," n.d., "Gloria House" SNCC Digital Gateway, SNCC Legacy Project and Duke University, crmvet.org.

down. LCFO's logo conveyed the position of the people: that they would fight back if necessary. The formation of the LCFO represented a transformation within SNCC from a Civil Rights organization to a Black Power organization. This change began with the Mississippi Freedom Summer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) in 1964, but fully matured in 1965 with the LCFO. The following year several Black panther parties would emerge across the country.¹⁰¹

On May 22, 1966, *The New York Times* announced, "a major shift in [SNCC's] civil rights philosophy has taken place." At a staff retreat in Kingston Springs, Tennessee, over a hundred staffers convened to discuss SNCC's organizing program. The committee made two major leadership changes, voting out chairman John Lewis, "who believed in nonviolence as both a 'way of life' and as a way of forcing concessions from the 'white power structure' in the South,"¹⁰² and voting in the new chairman, Stokely Carmichael. The paper reported that Carmichael was "disillusioned with using nonviolent protest to force integration from reluctant white communities. Mr. Carmichael does not advocate violence, but neither does he believe in turning the other cheek." The paper's ideas about frustrated youth would inform the early Civil Rights and Black Power literature for nearly three decades. Unfortunately, scholars latched on to a "declension narrative" that blamed "Black Power" for the decline of the Civil Rights Movement but failed to examine the ramifications of state violence.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Among them was, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense out of Oakland, CA led by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. There was also the Black Panther Party of Northern California (BPPNC) which was initiated in the Bay Area by the Revolutionary Action Movement in August 1966; in Los Angeles, the Black Panther Party.

¹⁰² Gene Roberts, "New Leaders and New Course for 'Snick,'" *New York Times*, 1966, sec. Help Wanted.

¹⁰³ Emilye Crosby et al., "Rethinking and Un-Teaching Entrenched Movement Narratives: A Virtual Roundtable," *Fire!!!* 2, no. 2 (2013): 78–108, <https://doi.org/10.5323/fire.2.2.0078>; Peniel E. Joseph, ed.,

The staffers also came to three major policy decisions. First, they proposed to make the development of independent third parties that could seize political power, the focus of SNCC fieldwork.¹⁰⁴ Second, they opted to promote the ideology of self-determination, and felt they should focus on developing Black consciousness to dispel the myth of white supremacy.¹⁰⁵ Third, they agreed to limit organizing in black communities to Black workers. *The Times* reported, “The student committee will abandon its long-time policy of using integrated civil rights teams. ‘We will not fire any of our white organizers,’ Mr. Carmichael says, ‘but if they want to organize, they can organize white people. Negroes will organize the Negroes.’”¹⁰⁶ Gloria Larry clarified the new policy, “it seemed to us a major contradiction to ask white secretaries to go among black sharecroppers and convince them of their power to be self determining and independent.”¹⁰⁷ Scholars generally only evaluated male leaders to explain these changes in the organization.

As Larry described it, she along with several other SNCC staff “called for a stronger international orientation and self-determination for oppressed nations around the world, including our own nation of thirty million black people in the United States.” This notion that Black people in the United States constituted a “nation within a nation” was

The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era (CRC Press, 2006); Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (Macmillan, 2007); Peniel E. Joseph, “The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field,” *The Journal of American History* 96, no. 3 (2009): 751–776; Peniel E. Joseph, “Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights -- Black Power Movement,” *Journal of American History* 92, no. 1 (June 2005): 304–5.

¹⁰⁴ Roberts, “New Leaders and New Course for ‘Snick.’”

¹⁰⁵ “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Central Committee Memoranda and Meeting Minutes,” January 1, 1965, Subgroup A. Atlanta Office, Series II. Executive and Central Committees, 1961-1967, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, Copyright: Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., Atlanta, Georgia.

¹⁰⁶ Roberts, “New Leaders and New Course for ‘Snick.’”

¹⁰⁷ Cheryl Greenberg, *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (Rutgers University Press, 1998), 161.

not new, but the idea was gaining credence as Black Nationalism captured the Black American spirit in the late 1960s.¹⁰⁸ Larry continued, “This new direction grew out of our deepening knowledge of our history...as well as our identification with liberation movements of the period in Asia, South America, and Africa.”¹⁰⁹ Larry applied these new beliefs to the provocative SNCC position paper on the Vietnam War.¹¹⁰ In the position paper, Larry tied the struggles for freedom and self-determination in the American South to the struggles of the people in Vietnam. She linked the repression SNCC experienced to the violence the US government was imposing on the Vietnamese. She wrote: “We ourselves have often been victims of violence and confinement executed by United States governmental officials. We recall the numerous persons who have been murdered in the South because of their efforts to secure their civil and human rights, and whose murderers have been allowed to escape penalty for their crimes.”¹¹¹ She noted that the murders of people like Sammy Young in Tuskegee were no different than the murder of peasants in Vietnam. Drawing further the connection, she questioned the ability and desire of the US government to guarantee free elections abroad, and castigated the US for its hypocrisy. The statement was damaging for SNCC’s future, as the organization lost financial support from many of its white liberal supporters and set it on an oppositional course with the U.S. government.

SNCC’s public opposition to the Vietnam War and its call for Black Power altered the organization forever. Financial support for its projects dried up, which made it

¹⁰⁸ For a spirited discussion of this see Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2005).

¹⁰⁹ House, “We’ll Never Turn Back,” 510–11.

¹¹⁰ Daniel Little, *Gloria House Segment 6*, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qoZnrj8fuj0&t=8s>; House, “We’ll Never Turn Back,” 510–12.

¹¹¹ “SNCC Position Paper: Vietnam,” n.d.

nearly impossible to cover its operating expenses. The committee came under fire from both the federal and state governments. The FBI's counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO), government agencies and local police sought to destroy the organization. The increased government repression was a direct result of the committee's changing objectives and philosophy.

Like many of her fellow activists, Gloria Larry began to reconsider the freedom struggle all together, and what freedom really meant for Black people living in the United States. She rejected the notions of freedom that celebrated integration and adopted notions of freedom concerned with liberation. Government violence catalyzed activists into advancing a revolutionary agenda. The two were connected for Larry. To her, Coleman's role as deputy and the murderer of Jonathan Daniels were not unrelated, and informed her conclusion that "nonviolence would [not] be effective in the African American struggle for liberation." Ultimately, Larry argued that revolutionary action was the only real option for Black people and all other oppressed people around the world.¹¹² Her position was not unlike many young budding Black revolutionaries, male and female.

Conclusion

1964 was a turning point in the Civil Rights movement. Scholar Akinyele Umoja has called it "the beginning of the end of nonviolence" and indeed it would seem so. This chapter has revealed how Black women, both local indigenous leaders and activists, helped to usher in the ideological shift on the question of nonviolence. Particularly crucial to understanding the end of nonviolence for Black women are the pull and push factors which led to their embrace of armed resistance. Women's developing political

¹¹² House, "We'll Never Turn Back," 505-8.

consciousness around ideas of Black nationalism, anti-capitalism, and anti-imperialism shaped how they understood the range of tactics and pulled them into armed resistance.

Equally important to pull factors are the push factors. The role the state played in acts of brutality was a strong push toward women's embrace of armed struggle. The governments' responses to civilians protesting, demonstrating, and organizing in accordance with their constitutional rights and in a nonviolent manner had a devastating effect on the movement. The response can be summed up by "inaction" and repression, and both responses shaped the movement after 1964.

The federal government's response to the political crisis of the Civil Rights Movement was wholly inept. For instance, when the FBI opened a field office in Jackson, Mississippi J. Edgar Hoover declared "we most certainly do not and will not give protection to civil rights workers...protection is in the hands of local authorities."¹¹³ The office was opened only after mounting criticism was hurled at the government for their failure to protect civil rights workers. President Lyndon B. Johnson requested 50-100 agents be sent to Mississippi, 1/10 of what concerned citizens had demanded after three civil rights workers disappeared in June 1964. The FBI initiated a massive investigation after the disappearance of the civil rights workers. The investigation resulted in the arrest of 18 men, the majority of whom were law men, businessmen, and/or high-ranking officials of white supremacy organizations. Among the arrested was the Neshoba County Sheriff Lawrence A. Rainey; KKK Imperial Wizard Samuel Holloway Bowers; Philadelphia Police Officer Other "Otha" Burkens; Baptist preacher Edgar Ray Killen;

¹¹³ Jerry DeLaughter, "FBI Director Tells Plans for Our State: No Protection Planned for Civil Rights Workers Here," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 11, 1964, Vol. CXXV No. 141 edition.

White Knights Imperial Wizard Samuel Bower; Exalted Grand Cyclops of the Meridian White Knights Frank Herndon; members of the white knights Bernard Akin, Oliver Warner and James Harris. None of those arrested were convicted in 1964. Mississippi state official refused to prosecute the murders. While the federal government was uncharacteristically involved in the case the “inaction” of the state of Mississippi was standard during the Civil Rights Movement.

From the perspective of student demonstrators, the federal government acted predictably uninterested in justice and democracy. Just months after the miscarriage of justice in Mississippi, the political wing of the national Democratic Party proved to civil rights workers just how serious they were about upholding white supremacy. At the National Democratic Convention in 1964, the DNC refused to seat the democratically elected Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) fearing to upset the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party that rejected Black participation in Mississippi. Incidents like these were evidence that the government was unwilling to implement justice and reluctant to protect citizens’ civil rights.

In 1966 SNCC’s central committee reflected on their experiences in the movement and admitted in the beginning they had assumed the “country [was] really a democracy, which just [wasn’t] working.” But they realized through projects in Mississippi and Alabama that they “had no concept of how brutal it could be if we started messing it up.”¹¹⁴ SNCC felt the brutal realities of “messing” with the status quo. The government responded with severe repression in response to very moderate oppositional activities, such as picketing, demonstrating and registering citizens to vote. As students at

¹¹⁴ “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Central Committee Memoranda and Meeting Minutes.”

some of America's finest colleges, these visionaries believed they could change the system. They could not have possibly fathomed the levels of vicious brutality undergirding the very system they sought to change. This caused many women to support armed resistance as a means of self-defense.

The committee also had made other fatal assumptions. They admitted, "we assumed after 1964 that there would be a force left in Mississippi to hold together all those concepts [of indigenous leadership, the power of voting and organizing] that we had developed there. We know [sic] see how far the government is willing to go to perpetuate white supremacy and the idea that Negroes are inferior."¹¹⁵ Indeed, the organization witnessed firsthand government officials beat citizens—"Bloody Sunday" was one example of thousands. These types of experiences led Gloria Larry to conclude in the statement on Vietnam that "our work, particularly in the South, has taught us that the United States government has never guaranteed the freedom of oppressed citizens, and is not yet truly determined to end the rule of terror and oppression within its own borders."¹¹⁶ Larry's sentiment illuminates how activists were seeing their encounters with the police within a larger paradigm.

The horrors of mounting state repression were a catalyst that led some women to take steps toward revolutionary activism. These women realized that the government was not willing to defend justice, fairness, or democracy. They concluded the U.S. needed to be radically changed and not reformed. The following chapter examines these women

¹¹⁵ "Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Central Committee Memoranda and Meeting Minutes."

¹¹⁶ "SNCC Position Paper: Vietnam."

and what they hoped to accomplish by overturning the existing power structure and establishing a people's government in the United States.

Chapter 5

Revolutionary Black Women (1968-1979)

On June 5, 1966, James Meredith staged a one-man “March Against Fear” in Memphis, Tennessee with the intention of walking to Mississippi’s state capital in Jackson. His objective was to show prospective Black voters that it was safe to register to vote.¹ The first day of Meredith’s march was fairly uneventful. But on the second day, a white man from Memphis fired a 16-gauge shotgun at the lone marcher’s back, the buckshot hitting Meredith in the head, neck, and body. He did not die, but he was wounded. While in the hospital, he told *The New York Times* that “he would never walk through Mississippi unarmed” again and regretted not having “something to take care of” the man who had shot him, presumably referring to a weapon of his own. As a result of the cowardly attack on Meredith, prominent activists from SCLC, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Abernathy, CORE Chairman Floyd McKissick, and newly elected Chairman of SNCC Stokely Carmichael vowed to continue Meredith’s March Against Fear. The ensuing demonstrations, which spanned from June 6-19, 1966, were well attended by local Blacks and members of CORE, SNCC, and SCLC. Accompanying them was the Deacons for Defense and Justice, an armed defense group charged with protecting marchers against any would-be violence perpetrated by vigilantes or police officers. Formed in 1964 in Jonesboro, Louisiana, the Deacons for Defense were known for their armed protection of activists in the Mississippi Delta. Their

¹ William Moore made a similar attempt to march to the state capitol in 1963.

involvement in the March Against Fear exemplified the changing movement for Black Freedom.²

The marchers' evolving chants also signified a change. In the early years of the movement, a typical call and response at a demonstration included someone beginning the chant with, "What do we want?" and the crowd responding, "Freedom!" But in 1966 in Greenwood, Mississippi, the call and responses were much different. On June 16, Carmichael stood in front of the audience and after his address chanted the common refrain, "What do we want?" But instead of yelling back, "Freedom," Willie Ricks, a SNCC field secretary responded with, "Black Power!" Soon the demonstrators joined in, so that when Carmichael summoned the crowd with "What do we want?" he was met with a chorus of, "Black Power!" from the hundreds gathered.³

While the slogan may have meant different things to different people, it indicated a new direction for SNCC and participants in the movement more broadly. Scholars Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang clarified the new orientation of the Black Freedom Movement with the rise of the Black Power Movement, explaining, "the meaning of freedom and its articulation reflected the specifics of particular historical moments...just as 'Negro' gave way to 'black,' 'freedom' gave way to 'liberation' in the era's lexicon."⁴ Indeed, as the previous chapter demonstrated, SNCC had moved away from emphasizing integration,

² Gene Roberts, "Rights March Disunity: Campaign in Mississippi Emphasized A New 'Black Consciousness' Force," *New York Times*, 1966; Gene Roberts, "Mississippi March Gains Momentum: 208 Take Part in Protest Begun by Meredith Civil Rights March Presses Deeper Into Mississippi on Meredith's Route," *New York Times*, 1966; "Mississippi Marchers Meet Many Obstacles," *Call and Post (1962-1982), City Edition; Cleveland, Oh.*, June 18, 1966.

³ Roberts, "Rights March Disunity."

⁴ Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *The Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (April 1, 2007): 278.

interracialism, and non-violence, turning instead toward independent Black politics, Black self-determination, and armed resistance. The slogan “Black Power” encapsulated this shift.

However, Black Power rhetoric implicitly centralized men and masculinity, leaving Black women activists to find their own way. In 1968 several members of SNCC formed the Black Women’s Liberation Committee (BWLC), in part to address this very issue. The BWLC was concerned with addressing male chauvinism within the organization and the movement in general. These women were also troubled by the impact of capitalism and racism on the Black community. Kimberly Springer noted that they “brought [the] difference of culture, race, and ethnicity into the fight against capitalistic exploitation in communities of color...”⁵ Consequently, the BWLC understood Black women’s struggles with sexism, racism, and capitalism from an interlocking perspective, these systems of oppression impacting the lives of Black women in unique ways, separate from Black men who experienced economic exploitation and racism, and white women who rallied against sexism. Within two years the BWLC evolved into the Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA) and had chapters across the country.

TWWA adopted a revolutionary nationalist ideology.⁶ One of the leading tenets of the Black Power Movement, this ideology contended that the goal of the Black Power Movement should be to seize state power from the white capitalist ruling class.⁷ The TWWA

⁵ Kimberly Springer, “The Interstitial Politics of Black Feminist Organizations,” *Meridians* 1, no. 2 (2001): 166.

⁶ Early architects of this philosophy included Mabel Williams and her husband, Robert. Other organizations also used revolutionary nationalism as an organizing philosophy, including the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and the more popular Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.

⁷ Several ideological expressions emerged from Black Power. Revolutionary nationalism was one of many. There was also cultural nationalism, territorial separatism, Black capitalism, political pluralism, Black feminisms, and Pan-Africanism. The following texts cover these ideological expressions, but this is by no means an exhaustive list. Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (Macmillan, 2007); Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (CRC Press, 2006); Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)*

sought to achieve this goal through armed struggle and Black women's armed engagement. They believed that Black people united with other oppressed people could wage a revolution against America. However, I argue as a feminist organization, their emphasis on Black women was uniquely different from other Black Revolutionary nationalist groups like the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM).

This chapter explores how the TWWA formed and their vision for a revolution in the United States which included the cultivation of Revolutionary Black women. The first section of the chapter examines the ideological landscape in which the BWLC and TWWA emerged, situating the organizations within the broader context of Black Nationalism, Black feminism, and revolutionary violence. I then turn to the BWLC in the second section, detailing how they developed a Black woman-centered revolutionary ideology that purported Black armed womanhood. This intellectual grounding informed how the TWWA came to celebrate and cultivate Black women as revolutionary agents, as discussed in the final section of the chapter.

The Ideological Landscape

This section provides a scaffold for understanding the emergence of the Revolutionary Black woman. The lexicon of the Black Power movement shaped gender dynamics within organizations and among activists. Alongside the language of revolution (i.e. armed struggle, guerrilla politics) came an overt masculinist political rhetoric, emphasizing manliness and men's autonomy, vigor, and independence. Both men and

and Black Power Politics (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2005); Kimberly Springer, *Living For The Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Duke University Press, 2005); Scot Brown, *Fighting for Us* (NYU Press, 2005); Rhonda Y. Williams, "Black Women and Black Power," *Oah Magazine of History* 22, no. 3 (2008): 22–26.

women spoke of a pending revolution, a people's revolution, and armed struggle. With such an explicit focus on men and masculinity, many wondered how the revolution would change gender relations, especially women. One of the most pressing questions permeating the Black Power movement was: "What is the role of Black women in the Black liberation struggle?"⁸ The answer for some segments of the movement was easy. Black women should be subordinate and support their men.

Despite this opinion, Black feminism and Black Power were not ideologically incompatible.⁹ Stephen Ward contends that "TWWA's feminism was not simply a critique of Black Power politics but, rather, a form of it."¹⁰ In the late 1960s, some Black women began to identify as "Revolutionary Black Women," women who exhibited what scholars Helen Neville and Jennifer Hamer later termed "Revolutionary Black feminism." Neville and Hamer classified Revolutionary Black feminism by four core elements, the first being the

⁸ Several activists and scholars tackled this question in Black Power texts, such as the *Black Scholar*, *Freedomways*, and *Liberator*. Feminist texts addressed this issue, as well. Mary Ann Weathers, "An Argument For Black Women's Liberation As a Revolutionary Force," *No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation* 1, no. 2 (February 1969), <http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/wlm/fun-games2/argument.html>; Kathleen Cleaver, Interview with Kathleen Cleaver, interview by Joseph Mosnier, Transcript, September 16, 2011, Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture. Kathleen Cleaver, a member of SNCC who then served as the first woman of leadership in the BPP, rejected the question and retorted: "No one ever asks what a man's place in the Revolution is." Philip Sheldon Foner, *Black Panthers Speak*, 2013, 145; Cleaver, Kathleen Neal, "Women, Power, and Revolution," 1998, <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/cleaverwomenpowerrev.html>; Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas, *Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Black Panthers and Their Legacy* (Routledge, 2014); Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Reprint edition (New York: Washington Square Press, 2005); Matthew borrows Cleaver's statement for the title of her well-cited essay. Tracye Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution Is': Gender and the Politics of the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971," in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E Jones, 1998, 267–304.

⁹ Stephen Ward argues that radical Black feminism was among the intellectual and political currents of the Black Power Movement. Stephen Ward, "The Third World Women's Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics," in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (CRC Press, 2006), 140; Also see Tracye Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution Is': Gender and the Politics of the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971," in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E Jones, 1998, 267–304.

¹⁰ Ward, "The Third World Women's Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics," 120, and 143.

articulation of a dynamic revolutionary vision. Revolutionary Black women assessed their specific historical moment and crafted a radical vision that almost always included the freedom of all people. Their revolutionary dreams involved the transformation of society from capitalism to socialism and the eradication of all forms of oppression.¹¹ Scholar Joy James similarly contends, “the ‘radicalism’ of feminism recognizes racism, sexism, homophobia, and patriarchy but refuses to make ‘men’ or ‘whites’ or ‘heterosexuals’ the problem in lieu of confronting corporate power, state authority, and policing.”¹² Proponents of this form of feminism have continuously argued for an intersectional approach to revolution. Therefore, as James explained, “Black feminist liberation ideology challenges state power by addressing class exploitation, racism, nationalism, and sexual violence with critiques of and activists’ confrontations with corporate-state policies.”¹³ Together James, Neville, and Hamer’s understandings of Revolutionary Black feminism describe the women in this chapter.

Revolutionary Black Women challenged ideas and behaviors that perpetuated a Black

¹¹ The other core values, Neville and Hamer outline are as followed: 2. The notion that Revolutionary Black feminism is rooted in an understanding that racial, gender, and sexual oppression change as the political economy changes. 3. Black women’s experiences of oppression consisted of both structural and ideological components. Structural components refer to the organization of society which perpetuate and maintain political and economic domination of men (primarily white men) over women (mostly Black women and women of color). Whereas structural oppression refers to the material systems comprising society, ideology refers to the system of representation (images, myths, ideas, or concepts) that serve to protect the status quo. For instances, false notions of women as inferior (emotionally, intellectually, and physically) and simultaneously represent men as capable, conceptually thinking, and strong beings are examples of gender ideologies that are perpetuated throughout society. 4. The idea that there is a dialectical link between theory and practice—praxis, is essential component of Revolutionary Black feminism. Helen A. Neville and Jennifer Hamer, “‘We Make Freedom’: An Exploration of Revolutionary Black Feminism,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 2001, 437–461 Also see; Helen A. Neville and Jennifer F. Hamer, “Revolutionary Black Women’s Activism: Experience and Transformation,” *The Black Scholar* 36, no. 1 (2006): 2–11.

¹² Joy James offers an excellent discussion of Black feminisms, drawing clear ideological distinctions within Black feminism including Black radical feminism and Black revolutionary feminism. Joy James, *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

¹³ James.

machismo and the belief that all political and revolutionary power resided within manhood.¹⁴

They fought against reactionary gender politics within Black Power organizations.¹⁵

Revolutionary Black feminists believed that Black males had a duty to challenge sexism and that women should be seen as their equals, as discussed below.

These women crafted a revolutionary Black feminism within a militant national liberation movement and, as Anne McClintock describes, their singular contribution was an “insistence on relating the feminist struggle to [the] liberation movements.”¹⁶ Nationalisms, McClintock maintains, have historically been unenthusiastic about addressing gender concerns or seeing gender conflicts as a fundamental issue in society.¹⁷ Instead, feminism has either been looked down upon or unjustly silenced within Nationalist movements. Moreover,

¹⁴ For a discussion of Black women and Black power see Kimberly Springer, *Living For The Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Duke University Press, 2005); Stephen Ward, “The Third World Women’s Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics,” in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (CRC Press, 2006); Robyn C. Spencer, “Engendering the Black Freedom Struggle: Revolutionary Black Womanhood and the Black Panther Party in the Bay Area, California,” *Journal of Women’s History* 20, no. 1 (2008): 90–113; Kristin Anderson-Bricker, “Triple Jeopardy’: Black Women and the Growth of Feminist Consciousness in SNCC, 1964-1975,” in *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: Contemporary African American Women’s Activism*, ed. Kimberly Springer (NYU Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Springer, *Living For The Revolution*; Springer, “The Interstitial Politics of Black Feminist Organizations”; Kristin Anderson-Bricker, “‘Triple Jeopardy’ Black Women and the Growth of Feminist Consciousness in SNCC, 1964-1975,” in *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: Contemporary African American Women’s Activism*, ed. Kimberly Springer (NYU Press, 1999); Ward, “The Third World Women’s Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics”; Williams, “Black Women and Black Power”; Rhonda Y. Williams, “Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power,” in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (CRC Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Anne McClintock, “No Longer in a Future Heaven: Women and Nationalism in South Africa,” *Transition*, 1991, 121.

¹⁷ For more on Nationalism and feminism see Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, updated edition (University of California Press, 2000); Likewise, Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis argue that racism cannot be understood without considering the interconnections with ethnicity, nationalism, class, gender and the state. They interrogate literature on Nationalism that consistently fails to appreciate or identify women’s roles in Nationalism beyond baby making. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class and the Anti-Racist Struggle*, New Ed edition (London; New York: Routledge, 1993); Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 1 edition (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1997); Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Woman-Nation-State*, 1989 edition (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989); Anne McClintock, “Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family,” *Feminist Review*, 1993, 61–80; Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat, *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (U of Minnesota Press, 1997).

male Nationalists “condemned feminism as divisive, bidding women to hold their tongues until after the revolution.”¹⁸ Revolutionary Black women contended with these accusations within the Black Power Movement but nonetheless argued that gender issues were equally significant to race issues. For them, activists needed to address both race and gender.¹⁹

Some women within the (white) feminist movement viewed Black Revolutionary women as problematic and confused.²⁰ In the 1970s and 1980s scholars concluded that the threat of “Second-Wave feminism” was equally, if not more, dangerous as the threat of revolutionary violence and that women’s participation in revolutionary violence was the result of feminism going awry.²¹ Feminism, however, was loosely defined by proponents of this position.²² Perhaps as a result of this position, some white feminist groups, according to Becky Thompson, attempted to project women as naturally “more nonviolent, less

¹⁸ McClintock, “No Longer in a Future Heaven,” 121.

¹⁹ I would like to make a distinction here between Revolutionary Black Women and armed Black women. In this chapter, I use the terms interchangeably because it makes sense within the historical context of Black Power, but throughout history, armed Black women were not always Revolutionary Black women.

²⁰ See Robin Morgan, who was involved in revolutionary actions in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s she published *The Demon Lover* and argued these women were really token revolutionaries. She writes, “The ‘revolutionary’ woman has bought into the male ‘radical’ line...She has learned that in order to be a real revolutionary, she must disassociate herself from her womanhood, her aspirations, her reality--and most of all, from other women. She must integrate into herself the alarm and disgust with which such men regard ‘women’s issues.’” Robin Morgan, *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism*, 1st ed (New York, N.Y.: Norton, 1989), 196.

²¹ Zwerman notes that the threat of second-wave feminism began to be discursively cross wired with the threat of “home-grown terrorism.” Gilda Zwerman, “Conservative and Feminist Images of Women Associated with Armed, Clandestine Organizations in the United States,” *International Social Movement Research* 4, no. 151 (1992): 140; Likewise, Amanda Third describes the ways that proponents of terrorism studies repeatedly drew attention to the coincidence of the rise of second-wave feminism and a seemingly dramatic increase in numbers of women participating in “terrorism.” In so doing they establish an explicit connection between the rise of feminist politics and the occurrence of terrorism in the US. Scholars construct a “commitment to feminism, however loosely defined, as a necessary precondition for women’s participation in revolutionary terrorism.” Amanda Third, “Mediating the Female Terrorist: Patricia Hearst and the Containment of the Feminist Terrorist Threat in the United States in the 1970s,” *Historical Social Research* 39, no. 3 (2014): 169.

²² Amanda Third notes the rise of “terrorism,” and the study of ‘terrorism’ occurred at the same time as the women’s lib movement. Third’s article centers on the “female terrorist.” Unfortunately, Third conflates revolutionary women with female terrorists, not because she doesn’t see and value the difference but because the media and law enforcement tended to see them as one in the same. Her article analyzes the ways that mainstream media coverage operated to contain both the threat of female terrorists, and the threat of second-wave feminism more broadly. Third, “Mediating the Female Terrorist,” 168–69.

aggressive, and more peace-loving than men.”²³ Thompson also notes that the white feminist movement ideologically saw “the Black Power Movement as a male invention.” To that end, militant women, both black and white, were considered “brainwashed into accepting male models of confrontation.”²⁴ Black Revolutionary women, however, did not see their feminist politics, revolutionary politics, or advocacy of armed struggle as conflicting ideological positions. In their writings, poetry, speeches, and artwork, they prioritized gender as an important factor in the struggle for Black liberation and called for women’s full participation in the Black freedom struggle. This included armed protection of the community, weapons training, and performing the duties of a guerrilla soldier.²⁵

For Black revolutionary women, pairing men with violence and women with nonviolence seemed nonsensical. Revolutionary Black women within the Black Power Movement “reframed mainstream debates about what constituted violence in order to account for the power of a white supremacist state.”²⁶ These women offered a nuanced analysis of state violence, militarization, police brutality, and poverty—all of which affected Black women, men, and children. Similarly, they understood that both white men and white women were culpable and complacent in the violence done to communities of color. During the Black Power movement, Black women searched for examples of militant women to emulate, looking to the past and outside of the United States for worthy models.

²³ Becky Thompson, *Promise And A Way Of Life: White Antiracist Activism*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2001), 42.

²⁴ Thompson, 130.

²⁵ For examples see this interview with Panther women “Black Panther Sisters Talk about Women’s Liberation,” *The Movement*, September 1969, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/red-papers-3/doc8.htm>; “SNNC TWWA” (Newsletter, n.d.), 001 SG1 S24, Records of the National Council of Negro Women, Series 24--Frances Beal Series in National Archive for Black Women’s History in Washington D.C.; women against prison, “Free Assata Shakur,” *Off Our Backs* 5, no. 9 (November 1, 1975): 6; Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Zed Books, 1987).

²⁶ Thompson, *Promise And A Way Of Life*, 131.

Forming the Black Women's Liberation Committee

In late December 1968, SNCC activists who recognized that the movement had yet to address the specific needs of Black women formed the Black Women's Liberation Committee (BWLC).²⁷ These women believed that the group was necessary to “talk about those unique problems” impacting Black women. They also wanted “to talk about how they relate to their black men, to talk about how we relate to our children and our community, and to talk about how we ultimately relate to the revolution.”²⁸ Comprised of “the most active women who have been involved in the movement,” the BWLC included Tuskegee activist Gwendolyn Patton serving as chairman, Mae Jackson, a native of New Orleans, Louisiana as secretary, and longtime SNCC member Eleanor Holmes Norton as legal adviser. Among other founding members were political theoretician and writer Frances Beal and Selma activist Fay Bellamy.²⁹ The group charged itself with the task of addressing concerns that were ignored in the larger organization and formulating a specific woman-focused, intersectional analysis of the problems impacting women and girls in the United States.

On January 6, 1969, Gwendolyn Patton sent a letter to her “sisters” inviting them to “sit down to seek answers to some of our major problems.” According to Patton, the movement was at “rock bottom,” a term she borrowed from James Forman, a former

²⁷ “SNNC TWWA”; Interview with Frances Beal, interview by Loretta J. Ross, March 18, 2005, 37, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

²⁸ “Transcript” April 17, 1969, 001 SG1 S24 B03 F104, Records of the National Council of Negro Women, Series 24--Frances Beal Series in National Archive for Black Women's History in Washington D.C.

²⁹ “General Resolution of Unincorporated Association, First National City Bank, New York” February 21, 1969, 001 SG1 S24 B03 F104, Records of the National Council of Negro Women, Series 24--Frances Beal Series in National Archive for Black Women's History in Washington D.C.; “Transcript” (Notes on the Black Women's Liberation Committee, April 17, 1969), 001 SG1 S24 B03 F104, Records of the National Council of Negro Women, Series 24--Frances Beal Series in National Archive for Black Women's History in Washington D.C.

Executive Secretary of SNCC, in a 1967 internal document contending that the movement was at its lowest point, with “nowhere to go but up or under.”³⁰

Attached to her invitation was a list of nearly one hundred thought-provoking questions that she felt the group needed to answer, a format borrowed from prior SNCC communications. The subjects covered various political, theoretical, and ideological topics. She grouped them under seven main headings: Female, Male-Female, Black-White, Family, Philosophy, and Revolution. Under the final title, “Revolution,” Patton started with basic questions like: “What is the Revolution?” and “What do we mean by Revolutionary?” The questions progressively intensified in their complexity and specificity. She asked her readers to consider what the revolution would offer women as a group and what part Black women would play in the armed struggle. Leaving nothing to be assumed, she asked if Black women felt they could “fight, kill and die” for the revolution and if they would “take up a gun.” Patton’s questions also asked readers to consider the meaning of womanhood within a revolutionary context. She asked, “Can there be a revolutionary woman? If so, ... Should she be confined to [sic] deal with children, cultural programs and typing revolutionary speeches? ...how does this differ from the roles ascribed to her by the American system?”³¹ These questions were at the heart of Patton’s purpose for the gathering. With self-reflection she

³⁰ For six years SNCC waged an attack on public accommodations and voter registration, and he deemed these efforts a success despite their obstacles. With the passage of the 1965 Civil Rights Bill, Forman argued the framework in which the organization had previously worked was no longer valid, he claimed they needed to “revamp” their programs and set out a definitive new direction. “The question is no longer the right to vote, but the nature of the politics in which we should engage,” Forman wrote. His letter laid out a compelling case for internal political education to address the ‘rock bottom’ issues within society. His missive was over twenty pages and the majority of the document consisted of questions which the readers were instructed to carefully consider. Patton also adopted Forman style in her letter to her “sisters.” James Forman, “Rock Bottom,” 1967.

³¹ The questions fell under seven headings: Female, Male-Female, Black-White, Family, Philosophy, and Revolution. "Transcript," 21.

wrote that the objective of the meeting was to evaluate Black women's participation in the Movement for the last eight years.

The activist met in New York City in April 1969. A transcript of the committee's meeting reveals that the women attempted to address many of Patton's questions. Patton began by talking about the unique space Black women in America held, a space which made the formation of the Black Women's Liberation Committee a necessity. She argued that SNCC's women's group was different from other Black women's organizations because they were committed to developing a "historical analysis of other women who have actually fought in liberation struggles." The objective, she said, was to "find out what their roles in that struggle was" during armed resistance and after that in the revolutionary period.

They turned their efforts toward analyzing "people's revolutions," throughout the world. By definition, a people's revolution was carried out by the masses instead of a select group of elite peoples. Therefore, the political and economic demands of "the people" would set the tone for the revolution. Both men and women called for a "people's revolution," but the BWLC understood that even seemingly gender-neutral terms like "people" could and often did exclude women from the decision-making realms. As a result, the BWLC found it imperative to define for themselves what they meant by the term and to envision how they would participate in the revolution. What they found from their research of global revolutions was a testament to the importance of women's inclusion in every phase of the revolution. They wrote, "where women did not ... have the right to...partake...[in] all phases of the armed struggle then the struggle was... not quite a people's struggle and in many instances[,]

those struggles have reverted to some form of capitalism or into some stage of new colonialism”³²

This was one of many conclusions the women came to that day. Another was a vision of themselves as nation-builders. As scholar Cynthia Enloe contended, women are not considered nation-builders, instead “nationalist movements have rarely taken women’s experience as the starting point for an understanding ... [of how to] throw off the shackles of that material and psychological domination. Rather, nationalism typically has sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope. Anger at being ‘emasculated’ ... has been presumed to be the natural fuel for igniting a nationalist movement.”³³ Indeed, Black Power rhetoric explicitly tasked men as nation builders and women as followers.

BWLC pushed against this concept by envisioning and articulating the nation they hoped to create. The idea grew in clarity as the group continued to organize, strategize, and discuss its ideology, ultimately arriving at four fundamental principles. First, the purpose of the nation would be to utilize the collective resources of all people for the benefit of all people. Second, they sought to build a nation of “whole human beings” whose talents were considered the most important resources of the nation, where no individual would benefit from the resources at the expense of another. This view reflected their Black feminist vision as they counted all people as equals and acknowledged that women had talents and contributions to make beyond the domestic and supportive role. Their emphasis on the “whole human being” then, was about emancipating all people. Third, BWLC sought to build

³² “Transcript,” 1.

³³ Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*; Also see McClintock, “No Longer in a Future Heaven”; Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, *Woman-Nation-State*.

a nation where the physical resources and means of production were owned collectively and used to benefit all. Finally, they understood they had a distinct role as Black women to ensure the movement stayed on task. They wrote, “an important part of our role as black women in this nation-building, is to see to it that the ultimate goals are never blurred or forgotten in the violent and necessary struggle for liberation.”³⁴ This final principle spoke to the popularity of calls for revolution, and activists that glorified armed struggle over and above total liberation. They understood violence was necessary for freedom but counseled activists against overly romanticizing armed conflict.

In this regard, the BWLC’s ideas followed a tradition of Black women activists including nineteenth-century club women such as Anna Julia Cooper who emphatically declared, only the Black women could say “when and where I enter” the entire race enters with me.³⁵ Like Black Nationalist women before them, the BWLC understood that nations were built through armed resistance, as they noted, it was a “necessary struggle for liberation.” While Black Nationalist women in the 1940s often articulated their political ideas “within the constraints of a male-dominated newspaper” and therefore “could not directly challenge masculinist discourses in print,” the BWLC had no such constraints.³⁶ A male-dominated space did not control their political ideas. In fact, the creation of the BWLC was a political move that countered any silencing or usurping of their feminist views. The formation of the BWLC as a sub-group affirmed their need for an all-Black women’s space.

³⁴ “Black Women Everywhere: It’s Our Time” n.d., 001 SG1 S24 B03 F104, Records of the National Council of Negro Women, Series 24--Frances Beal Series in National Archive for Black Women’s History in Washington D.C.

³⁵ For more on nineteenth-century Black women’s vision of freedom see Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999); P. Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (William Morrow Paperbacks, 1996).

³⁶ Keisha N. Blain, “‘We Want to Set the World on Fire’: Black Nationalist Women and Diasporic Politics in the New Negro World, 1940–1944,” *Journal of Social History* 49, no. 1 (September 1, 2015): 199.

At first amongst themselves, and later in their public writing, these women directly challenged the discourse of masculinity permeating much of the Black Power movement. While segments of the movement promoted the idea of only men being warriors for the revolution and began to form all-male cadres, members of the BWLC believed that women had a significant role to play in the armed struggle to build a strong nation. For a nation to be powerful, they reasoned, "strong men, strong women and strong children" were necessary. "We need our whole army out there...and not half of an army."³⁷ This perspective illustrates the early promotion of women as armed agents that undergirded the TWWA promotion of Revolutionary Black women in later years. The BWLC believed that how the struggle was waged from the beginning often dictated and reflected how the nation would operate after the people were in power. They reasoned, that if women's roles were gendered in the beginning and confined to child bearers, caregivers, homemaker, and "supporter"—than they would have the same duties once the revolution came. "If we look closely at other revolutionary struggles, France, Albania, Cuba, Vietnam, you will find that the more intense the struggle, the more liberated the women are, and the more victorious they become...and that's what we're talking about in SNCC's Black Women's Liberation Committee."³⁸ These points expose Revolutionary Black Women's vision of freedom and revolution.

The BWLC took the position that sexism was reactionary and counterrevolutionary. This perspective illustrates E. Frances White assessment that, Black Nationalism "can be radical and progressive in relation to white racism and conservative and repressive in relation to the internal organization of the black community."³⁹The position was informed

³⁷ "Transcript," 3.

³⁸ "Transcript."

³⁹ E. Frances White, "Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse and African-American Nationalism," *Journal of Women's History* 2, no. 1 (1990): 77.

by the Moynihan Report and its effects informed the BWLC's position. In 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan published a report on the Black family, in which he argued that Black women were to blame for the pathological breakdown of Black families because they were domineering matriarchs. Moynihan's report influenced numerous Black male thinkers and activists who believed racism had emasculated them and that Black women had helped white men 'castrated' Black men.⁴⁰ In this climate, some Nationalists, both male and female, were openly hostile to any feminist agenda.⁴¹ The BWLC rejected the ideas put forth in the report. They also rebuffed the notion that Black women had to step out of positions of power and leadership so that Black men could step forward as leaders of the nation.

As Black feminist revolutionaries, they understood their responsibility was to articulate a radically different vision and not merely to reject the status quo. Fran Beal weighed in on this point. Challenging men to embrace true revolutionary ideology in the most intimate spaces of their lives, she argued, "I think that brothers have got to understand that a revolution entails not only the willingness to go out there and lay your life on the line and get killed. To me that's almost an easy kind of commitment to make. The difficult commitment is the changes that you make in your day to day life. Your routine life, the way that you deal with each other. How you deal with your wife, your girlfriend, your family, your children."⁴² She challenged her male counterparts to be revolutionaries in all aspects of

⁴⁰ For instances, Robert Staple responded to Michelle Wallace's Black Macho piece arguing that Wallace was influenced by white media. Robert Staples, "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists," *The Black Scholar* 10, no. 6-7 (1979): 24-33.

⁴¹ For instance, during Eldridge Cleaver's 1968 presidential campaign, he promoted the idea of "pussy power," women's ability to withhold sex in order to compel men to political activism. He told women, 'Until he [sic] ready to pick up a gun and be a man, don't give him no sugar. Politics comes from the lips of a pussy. I don't know how you can stand to have them faggots layin' and sucking' on you. You can always have a real man.' And in his book, *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver describes how he raped white women to indirectly attack white men. Cleaver 'practiced' raping Black women before crossing the colorline. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (Delta, 1999); Also see White, "Africa on My Mind."

⁴² "Transcript," 6-7.

their life by advocating an interpersonal revolutionary mode. In many respects, she may have also been pushing back against the idea that upholds only men as martyrs.

The formation of SNCC's Black Women's Liberation Committee caused controversy within the group. The women encountered accusations that they were being "divisive" and overly influenced by white women. In reality, the BWLC was not divisive but inclusive. Unlike some white feminist groups that were separatist, these Black feminists wanted a radically different future than what Black nationalist men were working towards and the status quo. Black women did not, however, want to leave Black men behind. Instead, their vision of revolution was inclusive of all Black people.

They argued that their formation was the natural outgrowth of where the movement was and where it could go in the future. If the revolution was pending, the BWLC believe it was their job to create a revolution that was inclusive and intersectional. They did not trust movement men to do this work for them. The BWLC understood men wanted to put women's issues on the back burner; but they argued the Black nation was no longer in future heaven, to borrow Franz Fanon's phrase. Black women's concerns would be a central part of building a new nation, and not after. They claimed, "we can't wait to start working on those problems until that great day in the future when the revolution comes. We have to start working on that now."⁴³ Their position highlights Joan Sharp's contention that "the postponement of a consideration of gender issues in the name of the construction of the nation-state will irrevocably alter the direction the emerging nation-state will take. The very nature of [the

⁴³ "Transcript," 15.

nation-state] will be different depending upon whether or not it deals with gender issues at the outset.”⁴⁴

The BWLC believed that revolutionary men needed to see revolutionary women as their equals. They asserted they earned their revolutionary status on the battlefields, as SNCC activists, against “the man,” a shorthand reference for white power and police:

In SNCC, when sisters and brothers were out there together getting their heads beat, the man didn’t hit on the sister any lighter because she was a woman, not one bit, they hit on her just as hard because she was black. And this is one reaason [sic] we have less of a problem in SNCC perhaps than in some of the other organizations because the repression of both brothers and sisters by the man kind of equalized things. You cannot go back to the old ways after that happened.⁴⁵

The political repression Black women experienced shifted gender dynamics within SNCC; a point scholars have often missed.⁴⁶ Although scholar Jane Jaquette has argued “the act of taking up a gun ... *implies* a new relationship of equality with men,”⁴⁷ examining Black women in the U.S. reveals a different story. Taking up the gun did not necessarily or automatically create the conditions for a new egalitarian relationship. For example, Mabel Williams picked up a gun and even protected her husband at times, yet the evidence suggests that their relationship was not equal.⁴⁸ State repression during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements altered gender relations in significant ways.⁴⁹ The women of the BWLC

⁴⁴ Joanne R. Sharp and Gendering Nationhood, “A Feminist Engagement with National Identity,” *Bodyspace: Destabilising Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, 1996, 97.

⁴⁵ “Transcript,” 14.

⁴⁶ For instance, Robnett says very little about the role repression played in the shifting gender dynamics within the Civil Rights Movement Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴⁷ Emphasis added Jane S. Jaquette, “Women in Revolutionary Movements in Latin America,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 35, no. 2 (1973): 344.

⁴⁸ Jasmin Young, Conversation with Gwendolyn Hall, July 12, 2013.

⁴⁹ AngelaLeBlanc-Ernest marks 1969 as “a watershed period for the participation of women,” in the Black Panther Party specifically due to increased political repression.” Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, “The Most

saw these experiences as a great equalizer, and some of their male counterparts likely agreed.⁵⁰ But outside of a select few comrades, most Black men still believed a woman's proper place was subservient to a man's.

The Black Women's Liberation Committee put forth a radical vision of revolution that employed Revolutionary Black feminism. From the very beginning of their formation, the BWLC saw themselves as nation-builders to the chagrin of other Black nationalists that sought to redeem Black manhood. When they argued that a mighty nation needed, "strong men, strong women and strong children" they spoke against an all too familiar belief that Black liberation efforts revolved around developing strong Black men. The BWLC reasoned, to create a strong Black nation, "we need our whole army out there...and not half of an army."⁵¹ The BWLC tasked themselves with the responsibility of creating a nation for all men, women, and children and strongly advocated for women's involvement in armed struggle as a way to achieve full liberation.

The Emergence of the Third World Women's Alliance

The BWLC decided to expand the scope and membership of the organization and move beyond SNCC. The group went through several name changes. By 1970 they opted to form an autonomous organization, the Black Women's Alliance (BWA); and later that year the Black Women's Alliance became the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA).

According to Frances Beal, this change was the result of two Puerto Rican independence

Qualified Person to Handle the Job": Black Panther Party Women, 1966–1982," in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E Jones, 1998, 309.

⁵⁰ The question of women being equal to men during and after armed struggle is taken up in several studies. Turshen writes, Some women were bitter: Mme Houria Imache Rami, a mujahida, told me, "[in the maquis] we were all equal in the war - it was afterward that our citizenship was taken away from us." Meredith Turshen, "Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle and the Civil War: From Active Participants to Passive Victims?," *Social Research*, 2002, 893.

⁵¹ "Transcript," 3.

movement activists asking to join the organization.⁵² After robust debates about their call for solidarity with the Third World, the BWA fully embraced their ideological position on international solidarity, but continued to maintain a focus on Black women and envisioned themselves within the Black liberation struggle.

Many of the ideas the BWLC discussed at their meetings appeared in Fran Beal's famous "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." The position paper was written in 1969 and published in two anthologies, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman* anthology and Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful*.⁵³ According to Beal, the paper reflected the ideas of the group, but Beal was the principal writer and thus credited with the piece. In "Double Jeopardy," Beal rejected feminisms that posits sexism as the primary source of women's subordination, and Black Nationalism that theorizes racism is the only source of Black people's subordination. Together with the other members of the collective, she developed an analysis centered on Black women, coining the term "double jeopardy" to describe how the interaction of race and sex oppression produced a unique form of discrimination.

Beal wrote, "As blacks, they suffer all the burdens of prejudice and mistreatment that fall on anyone with darkskin. As women they bear the additional burden of having to cope with white and black men."⁵⁴ Beal also noted that Black women experienced "super-exploitation" as Black people and women, she argued that a "liberation of these two groups is a stepping stone to the liberation of all oppressed people in this country and around the

⁵² Interview with Frances Beal, 39.

⁵³ Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Reprint edition (New York: Washington Square Press, 2005); Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

⁵⁴ Frances M. Beal, "Black Women's Manifesto: Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" (Third World Women's Alliance, 1969), <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/196.html>.

world.”⁵⁵ As Erik McDuffie contended, Beal’s analysis harkened back to the Black Left feminists of the mid-twentieth century, among them Claudia Jones, whose seminal piece, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” published in 1949 offered a similar conclusion.⁵⁶ The text provided a revolutionary vision of a “new world” free of all oppression including capitalism. She wrote, “Black women must take an active part in bringing about the kind of world where our children, our loved ones, and each citizen can grow up and live as decent human beings, free from the pressures of racism and capitalist exploitation.”⁵⁷

In a booklet produced by TWWA, the members boldly articulated what the BWLC had only contemplated and mused upon in meetings. In 1969 the BWLC posed questions amongst themselves about the role of women in the revolution, by the summer of 1970 TWWA felt confident enough to express the organization's relationship to the struggle and Black Power more broadly. The TWWA was adamant about their revolutionary potential, identifying themselves as “one of the most revolutionary forces confronting the U.S. ruling class.”⁵⁸ Members argued that they were uniquely positioned to struggle against racism,

⁵⁵ Beal.

⁵⁶ McDuffie argues that Black Left feminism provides a theoretical and empirical template radical black feminists politics during the early and mid-twentieth-century that laid the groundwork for the black feminism of the 1970s. Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Duke University Press, 2011); Claudia Jones, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!,” *Revista Estudos Feministas* 25, no. 3 (2017): 1001–1016; On the political life of Claudia Jones see Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁵⁷ Beal, “Black Women’s Manifesto: Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female.”

⁵⁸ “SNCC TWWA” n.d., 001 SG1 S24 BOS TWWA, Records of the National Council of Negro Women, Series 24--Frances Beal Series in National Archive for Black Women’s History in Washington D.C.

sexism and economic exploitation. By organizing Third World women to fight capitalism, their efforts “enhanced” the national liberation struggle of Black people by attracting “women who might not ordinarily be reach[ed] by male-female organizations.”⁵⁹ The TWWA would have interested women who were turned off by the machismo of groups like the Black Panther Party.⁶⁰ The TWWA saw themselves as the “vanguard” and argued they would “never be free until all oppressed people are

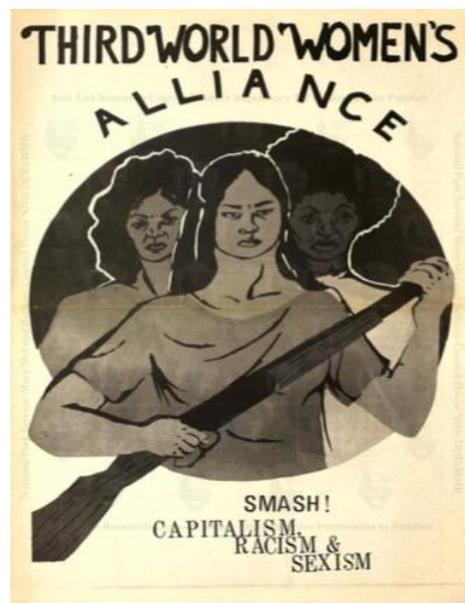


Image 1: TWWA Booklet, n.d.

free.”⁶¹ Although other Revolutionary Nationalist organizations existed, the TWWA was unique in its assertion that Black women constituted the vanguard. From a Marxist perspective, the vanguard represented the most class-conscious and politically advanced group of working-class people, well positioned to draw the masses of working-class people to revolutionary politics. Revolutionary Black Nationalist, however, altered this contention by arguing the Black proletariat was the vanguard, their argument took into account Black people’s particular standpoint as both Blacks and workers and how racism helped to uphold and perpetuate capitalism. The TWWA’s contention that Black and third world women constituted the vanguard marked a significant shift in the theory by making an intersectional

⁵⁹ “Third World Women’s Alliance: Our History, Our Ideology, Our Goals” August 1970, 001 SG1 S24 B04 F143, Records of the National Council of Negro Women, Series 24--Frances Beal Series in National Archive for Black Women’s History in Washington D.C.; “SNCC TWWA.”

⁶⁰ For instance Tamu McFalls did not join the Panthers because she did not like the masculinist rhetoric, image, and energy were privileged. Valerie Mitchell aka Tamu McFalls, December 11, 2016.

⁶¹ “SNCC TWWA.”

argument about racism, classism, and sexism. Black women as the vanguard were uniquely positioned to draw the masses of people to revolutionary politics.

One of the first images circulated by TWWA featured three stern-faced women of different hues brandishing a rifle with the caption "Smash! Capitalism, Racism, and Sexism." (Image 1) If the cover of the booklet did not convey their position on women and armed resistance their pamphlet candidly stated their opinion:

Self-Defense:

WHEREAS the struggle for liberation must be borne equally by all members of an oppressed people, we declare that third world women have the right and responsibility to bear arms.

Women should be fully trained and educated in the martial arts as well as in the political arena. Furthermore, we recognize that it is our duty to defend all oppressed peoples.⁶²

The TWWA declared it was their responsibility to bear arms and defend oppressed people. By claiming their duty to provide armed defense, they challenged gendered expectations, and rhetoric in the movement (i.e. having babies for the revolution) and traditional gender roles more broadly. They rejected traditional gender norms of supporter, mother, and vixen. They wrote, "we opposed these concepts[,] stating that a true revolutionary movement must enhance the status of women."⁶³

The TWWA turned Black Nationalist language on its head by insisting that Black militant men were being "white" and middle class when they enforced middle-class gender roles and expected Black women to have babies for the revolution. Within the controversial debate on birth control raging within the Black community, the TWWA argued women

⁶² "SNCC TWWA."

⁶³ "SNCC TWWA."

should have the right to decide if and when they want to have children, a stance many Black feminists' groups took.⁶⁴ Their perspective, however, was distinct because they connected a Black woman's access to birth control to their revolutionary agenda and suggested that birth control gave women the option to actively not have children to participate more fully in the revolution. They reasoned, "birth control will free the black woman to participate in the revolution."⁶⁵ Not only were these Black revolutionary women thinking about women and armed resistance differently than men, but they also analyzed women's issues from an entirely different novel perspective.



Image 2: TWWA Black Power Fist, 1971

During the fall of 1971, the TWWA launched the central organ of the organization, *Triple Jeopardy*. The paper was a significant Black Power text. Published monthly between the fall of 1971 to the summer of 1975, *Triple Jeopardy* worked to cultivate and celebrate Revolutionary (Black) women. The

paper featured a radical logo that announced to their readers that Black and Third World women were the vanguards of the revolution. Using the universal character for the woman, merged with the Black power fist, which was the feminist symbol for "woman power" during the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, this symbol was adopted by the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) in 1973, an organization that tackled similar topics to the TWWA such

⁶⁴ See for instance Toni Cade Bambara's essay, "The Pill." Bambara, *The Black Woman*.

⁶⁵ "Transcript"; Fran Beal mentions the importance of birth control in her manifesto but in her version, she does not tie birth control to revolution like the BWLC does in their initial meeting. Beal, "Black Women's Manifesto: Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female."

as welfare rights and reform, reproductive freedom, and the rights of domestic workers.⁶⁶

Perhaps most evident of the distinction was the way that TWWA fundamentally altered the image of woman's power by placing a rifle in the Black power fist, a clear indication that they would usher in the revolution by actively participating in armed struggle (Image 2).

Triple Jeopardy captured TWWA's emphasis on the exploitation and oppression that women of color suffer as women, as workers, and as members of oppressed racial/national ethnicities. The paper included articles on capitalism, editorials on women's health, and essays on the working conditions of women of color in the United States.

Triple Jeopardy was essential to the TWWA's efforts to cultivate revolutionary women by studying revolutionary struggles outside the United States. The paper featured editorials on anti-imperialist conflicts around the globe and paid particular attention to the experiences of the women in those countries, both as women and as liberation fighters. In an interview, Beal recalled, "our own international work had to deal with solidarity with the Vietnamese women, and as it pertained to Africa, it also was solidarity with the women in FRELIMO (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique), the women in South Africa, and we were very much influenced by Amilcar Cabral [of Guinea Bissau], in terms of some of his writings."⁶⁷ Like many Revolutionary Nationalist groups, the TWWA was influenced by the success of the Cuban Revolution, as well. She stated, Cuba "played an important role, in terms of our...evolving consciousness around both some race and class issues...I think that

⁶⁶ The Combahee River Collective evolved from the NBFO in 1974 once they realized their vision for social change was even more radical than the NBFO. Like the TWWA, the Collective acknowledge the simultaneous systems of oppression impacting the lives of Black women. See their statement. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," *This Bridge Called*, 1982; Duchess Harris, "'All of Who I Am in the Same Place': The Combahee River Collective," *The Womanist* 2, no. 1 (September 1999): 9–21.

⁶⁷ Interview with Frances Beal, interview by Loretta J. Ross, March 18, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

many of us have, you know, witnessed in Cuba the possibility of a society in the future that was free of racism and the possibility of a society in the future in which women played an active and equal role in society.”⁶⁸ The TWWA continued to study women in revolutionary struggles across the world as they had done in their early days as the Black Women’s Liberation Committee. The newspaper provided a space for the organization to promote Revolutionary women to a broader audience.

The TWWA also used *Triple Jeopardy* to cultivate Revolutionary women by teaching them to perform basic tasks around the home to help women emerge as autonomous beings. These lessons appeared under “The skills” section of the paper. Tasks such as fixing a faucet, changing a flat tire, and building a toolkit were typically accompanied diagrams and detailed instructions. In the domestic sphere, (the general domain of women) these tasks were relegated to men. The TWWA regarded learning such skills as a matter of women’s rights and responsibilities as revolutionaries: “In order to participate in the struggle for liberation,” they insisted, “we must develop all possible skills.”⁶⁹ They regarded the home, then as a site to breed revolutionaries, as oppose to an oppressive space constraining women’s activism. The home has served as a significant site for Black women’s armed activity as South African scholar Shireen Hassim argued, “It is precisely because the home has not been a safe refuge for... blacks that it has been historically possible to organize women around its defence.”⁷⁰ The TWWA assessment may have also sprung from their experiences as SNCC activists

⁶⁸ Interview with Frances Beal.

⁶⁹ “Triple Jeopardy, Vol. 1 No. 1” (Newsletter, November 1971), 001 SG1 S24 BOS TJv1n2, Records of the National Council of Negro Women, Series 24--Frances Beal Series in National Archive for Black Women’s History in Washington D.C.

⁷⁰ Shireen Hassim, “Family, Motherhood and Zulu Nationalism: The Politics of the Inkatha Women’s Brigade,” *Feminist Review*, no. 43 (1993): 14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395066>.

protected by indigenous female leaders in Mississippi and Alabama as described in Chapter 4.

The TWWA mission was “to train, develop, and organize Third World women to actively participate in the liberation struggles of our people.” Their approach was uniquely different from other Revolutionary Nationalist organizations and Black feminist formations. For instance, the Black Panther Party trained women in self-defense, karate, and armament, but the group did not focus on women exclusively. And perhaps the most salient difference between the two organizations in this regard was the impetus for cultivating women as revolutionaries. As historian Robyn Spencer noted, initially the Panthers “uncritically embraced the gendered assumptions of masculinist self-defense rhetoric, and their initial members were men. Despite the fact that women too were supporters and practitioners of armed self-defense, the general dialogue [of the panther] had at its core the assumption that men would be on the front lines of white violence serving as protectors of the black community.”⁷¹ Panther women had to struggle with Black men to be considered revolutionaries and warriors.⁷² Tracye Matthews argued women “expected to be treated as equals, as revolutionary comrades, by their male counterparts”⁷³ In the TWWA there was no such issue, women were assumed to be competent from the outset. Because they declared

⁷¹ Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*, Reprint edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016), 37.

⁷² For more on Panthers approach to women and armed resistance see Spencer, especially Chapter 2. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*; Courtright however focuses very little on women in the party. John A. Courtright, “Rhetoric of the Gun: An Analysis of the Rhetorical Modifications of the Black Panther Party,” *Journal of Black Studies* 4, no. 3 (1974): 249–267; Lumsden rightly argues the Panther paper created some of the most salient images of Black women with guns. Linda Lumsden, “Good Mothers with Guns: Framing Black Womanhood in the Black Panther, 1968-1980,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 900–922.

⁷³ Matthews, “‘No One Ever Asks, What a Man’s Place in the Revolution Is?’” 275.

Black and Third World women as the vanguards of the revolution, the TWWA understood that these women would need cultivation.

Another aspect of developing women into revolutionaries was the celebration of Revolutionary (Black) Women. The pages of *Triple Jeopardy* were used to spread the TWWA's revolutionary ideology and for "propaganda purposes."⁷⁴ To build political consciousness and education, the TWWA encouraged their readers to support women not just in liberation struggles in the Third World but also in the United States. These women included Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Lolita Lebrón, as "shining examples" of the capabilities of women. To fully understand how the TWWA envisioned Black women participating in the liberation struggle as armed revolutionaries, it is necessary to explore the political experiences of Davis, Shakur, and Lebrón. Each of these revolutionary women lived out the theoretical conception articulated by the Black Women's Liberation Committee and the Third World Women's Alliance. They fully participated in the armed struggle in various ways—they held leadership positions in revolutionary units, supplied weapons, and articulated the need for armed struggle to the masses of people.

One of Davis' roles in the revolutionary organization, the Che-Lumumba Club, was purchasing weapons for herself and others.⁷⁵ Part of the organizing and activist work the club did, centered on prison inmate reform.⁷⁶ The Club supported the legal battle to free the

⁷⁴ Frances M. Beal, "Dear Sister," April 30, 1970, Series 24 Box 4 Folder 135, Records of the National Council of Negro Women, Series 24--Frances Beal Series in National Archive for Black Women's History in Washington D.C.

⁷⁵ According to Tamu McFall, club members were all familiar with guns and often trained at Centinela park's pistol range. Valerie Mitchell aka Tamu McFalls, December 11, 2016.

⁷⁶ McFall had a long history of advocacy work on behalf of prisoners in California. Serving as the chairman of the Club, McFall was an instrumental member of the collective. A major part of McFalls work centered on prison advocacy (writing letters, arranging family visits, conducting legal research for prisoners' cases and working to restore rights of individuals; many of the prisoners she encountered had served time in the California Youth Authority. Consequently, she and Davis, attended a community meeting for three After that meeting Mc

“Soledad Brothers,” inmates in California’s Soledad Prison--George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo and John Clutchette. The men were accused of murdering John Mills, a prison guard, on January 16, 1970. George Jackson’s younger brother, Jonathan, worked with Angela Davis, the Che Lumumba Club, and the Soledad Defense Committee. Jonathan’s close relationship with the Club granted him access to the artillery Davis purchased.⁷⁷ On August 7, 1970, in a botched attempt to publicize dehumanizing prison conditions, Jonathan Jackson entered a courtroom in Marin County, California and used weapons purchased by Davis to secure the freedom of three inmates.⁷⁸ The state of California attempted to use Davis’ critical role as a weapons procurer to implicate her in Jackson's plan. They charged her with conspiracy to commit murder and kidnapping.⁷⁹ Davis immediately went underground, when she learned about the arrest warrant issued for her but was captured by the FBI in October 1970.

That same year, Davis published a statement, “I am a Revolutionary Black Woman,” in *Muhammad Speaks*, the newspaper founded by Malcolm X. The conclusions Davis drew

Falls and Davis became deeply involved and invested in the efforts to free the “Soledad Brothers,” as the three inmates had become known. The two organizers shared an apartment that became central headquarters for the Che-Lumumba Club and the Soledad Defense Committee. Valerie Mitchell aka Tamu McFalls, April 1, 2017; Valerie Mitchell aka Tamu McFalls, December 11, 2016; Angela Yvonne Davis, *Angela Davis-An Autobiography* [Random House, 1974], 246; Also see Murch for a discussion on the Black Power Movement and California Youth Authority. Donna Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* [UNC Press Books, 2010].

⁷⁷ Also see Angela Yvonne Davis, *Angela Davis-An Autobiography* (Random House, 1974).

⁷⁸ Jonathan Jackson was one of Angela Davis’ bodyguards because she was receiving daily death threats. A result of coming under fire from then Governor Ronnie Reagan for being a Communist in 1969. Friends and co-activists provided security often with guns that Davis purchased and kept in her apartment. Davis, *Angela Davis-An Autobiography*; Anspacher, “Witnesses Give Angela Key Alibi.”

⁷⁹ The night before the incident, Jonathan Jackson took weapons from the gun rack from the Los Angeles apartment shared by McFall and Davis. Along with three prisoners, James McClain, William Christmas, and Ruchell Magee, Jackson took as hostages the judge, district attorney, and several members of the jury. The seventeen-year old and the inmates brought the hostages to a yellow van in the parking lot. San Quentin prison guards fired on the parked vehicle, killing Judge Haley, Jonathan Jackson, McClain and Christmas. The District Attorney, several jurors, and Ruchell McGee were seriously wounded but survived the cascade of bullets from the prison guards. At the time of the hostage take over, Davis was not in Northern California. Still, because the guns were registered in her name Davis was designated by police as an accomplice and charged with murder and kidnapping. Sol Stern, “The Campaign to Free Angela Davis and Ruchell Magee,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1971, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/08/home/davis-campaign.html/>.

in her piece echoed many of the points the TWWA made in their writings. She was the living embodiment of what they articulated as a Revolutionary Black woman. Her piece, in which she explained her dedication “to the struggle for [the] liberation of black people” and asserted her innocence, is worth exploring in some detail.

Perhaps she imagined her audience to be primarily Black men when she wrote that the outcome of a revolution would reflect the way people waged struggle from the outset. Davis argued, “The battle for women’s liberation is especially critical with respect to the effort to build an effective black liberation movement. For there is no question about the fact that as a group, black women constitute the most oppressed sector of society.”⁸⁰ For those men interested in forging a revolution she remarked, “...no revolutionary should fail to understand the underlying significance of the dictum that the success or failure of a revolution can almost always be gauged by the degree to which the status of women is altered in a radical, progressive direction.”⁸¹ Like the TWWA, Davis urged her readers to challenge “anachronistic bourgeois family structures” and the oppressive character of women’s role in the struggle.” Calling for a progressive Black masculinity, she declared, “the fight for the liberation of women must be embraced by men as well.” This perspective illuminated the position the TWWA took on Black men, which was one that embraced their male counterparts as opposed to some white separatist feminist organizations that found little use for men. They welcome Black men to imagine with them a new world order, a revolution in which all people could be free.

⁸⁰ Marable and Mullings, *Let Nobody Turn Us Around*, 461.

⁸¹ Angela Davis “I am a Revolutionary Black Woman,” 1970 in *ibid.*

Davis' case garnered massive support in the United States and around the world, in part because Black women organized in her defense, including members of the TWWA.⁸² The Third World Women's Alliance collaborated with the New York Committee to Free Angela Davis. The January 1972 issue of *Triple Jeopardy* carried a letter from Angela Davis written from Marin County Jail while she prepared for trial. The letter urged TWWA readers to write correspondences in support of her efforts and send financial contributions for her defense. On the West Coast, Linda Burnham, a member of the TWWA worked with the Angela Davis Defense Committee to help secure Davis' freedom.⁸³ Six months after the TWWA ran her letter, the courts acquitted Davis of all charges in June 1972.⁸⁴ By the time Davis declared herself a Revolutionary Black woman, she was in good company with other Black women, particularly with members of the TWWA, who were equally committed to the political identity and ideological underpinning of Revolutionary Black feminism.

The January-February 1974 issue of *Triple Jeopardy* kept readers abreast of the trials of Assata Shakur and Lolita Lebrón.⁸⁵ Assata Shakur was perhaps the most well-known and

⁸² For a firsthand account of these organizing efforts see Linda Burnham, Linda Burnham, interview by Ross, Loretta J., Transcript, March 18, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College; Also see Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Duke University Press, 2011).

⁸³ Burnham had a close relationship with Davis and her family. She recalled, "I was very active around Angela Davis's case, partly because the Davis family are old family friends from way back in the Birmingham days, so my parents had become close to her parents in the '40s when they lived in Birmingham. And then Angela and her sister Fania were living out here in California, and my sister, who was an attorney — very young attorney, practically just out of law school at the time — became one of Angela's attorneys and moved out here to play that role, as her attorney. So naturally, pretty much, I was very active in the Free Angela, Angela Davis Defense Committee that was located here." Burnham, Linda Burnham, 27; Also see McDuffie on the significance of these interpersonal relationships to the development of Black Left feminism. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*.

⁸⁴ Earl Caldwell, "Angela Davis Acquitted on All Charges," *New York Times*, June 5, 1972, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/08/home/davis-acquit.html>.

⁸⁵ "Triple Jeopardy, Vol. 3 No. 3" (Newsletter, February 1974), 001 SG1 S24 BOS TJv3n3, Records of the National Council of Negro Women, Series 24--Frances Beal Series in National Archive for Black Women's History in Washington D.C.

internationally recognized member of the Black Liberation Army (BLA).⁸⁶ On May 2, 1973, Assata Shakur and two comrades, Zayd Malik Shakur⁸⁷ and Sundiata Acoli,⁸⁸ traveled southbound on the New Jersey State Turnpike. James M. Harper, a New Jersey State Trooper, stopped the white 1965 Pontiac sedan carrying the three activists. None of them could have predicted that their lives would change forever that night. The details of the events that took place on the turnpike are unclear, but reports and first-hand accounts document the aftermath. Zayd Malik Shakur and NJ State Trooper Werner Foerster lay dead. Assata Shakur suffered critical gunshot wounds, but she and Sundiata Acoli survived. By the time Shakur found herself lying in a pool of blood on the New Jersey Turnpike, she had been in the underground organization for at least two years as a member of the BLA.

Authorities charged Shakur with murdering the state trooper as well as her comrade Zayd.⁸⁹ Upon arrest, New York and New Jersey charged her with several other offenses including bank robbery.⁹⁰ Shakur's revolutionary activity and fight for her freedom surely held valuable political education for the TWWA. Because of their revolutionary praxis, the TWWA never stopped studying radical women, their focus on Assata Shakur was a celebration of her efforts to achieve Black liberation. She was particularly crucial for understanding Black women's roles in 'underground' or secret organizations.

⁸⁶ See for example Assata Shakur, "To My People," *The Black Scholar* 5, no. 2 (1973): 16–18.

⁸⁷ Given name James F. Coston, Jr. at the time age 32

⁸⁸ Given name Clark Edward Squire at the time age 36

⁸⁹ Her defense team called on expert witnesses that testified medical evidence showed Shakur, unequivocally could not have shot the trooper. Due to her critical wounds, the witnesses testified, she was physically incapable of shooting the trooper because the police had shot her. Despite this evidence, an all-white jury, which included five members who had personal ties to state troopers, declared her guilty in 1979. Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Zed Books, 1987).

⁹⁰ See William's account of Shakur's many trials. Shakur was also represented by Flo Kennedy, one of the founders of the National Black Feminist Organization. Evelyn Williams, *Inadmissible Evidence: The Story of the African-American Trial Lawyer Who Defended the Black Liberation Army* (Lincoln, NE: IUniverse.com, 2000); Women Against Prison, "Assata Shakur: Another Victory," *Off Our Backs* 5, no. 11 (January 1, 1976): 4.

As a leading member of the BLA, Assata Shakur argued that armed struggle was not merely about picking up the gun, it also involved conveying to Black communities the importance of militant action to gain the support of the masses. The primary task of the underground should be organizing and building, Shakur contended. But she did not rule out armed acts of resistance: "As long as they didn't impede our long-range plans, guerrilla units should be able to carry out a few well-planned, well-timed armed actions that were well coordinated with above ground political objectives."⁹¹ Shakur's experience in the BLA led her to conclude the underground was rife with politically inexperienced inept men and women, who were armed but ill-prepared for the battle. Her point undergirded the TWWA's mission to construct a revolution from an interpersonal perspective. For both Shakur and the TWWA, the most relevant factor in the armed struggle was the people. The TWWA's support of Shakur was both an effort to celebrate her activism and to study her revolutionary position in society.

Likewise, the TWWA praised women such as Lolita Lebrón, a revolutionary Puerto Rican nationalist. On March 1, 1954, Lebrón led a group of nationalists in an attack on the House of Representatives in Washington D.C. and demanded freedom for Puerto Rico. After waving a Puerto Rican flag and shouting "Every Nation has a right to its independence," they all began to fire, wounding five congressmen.⁹² Lebrón was imprisoned for nearly two decades when the TWWA announced "Comité Lolita Lebrón Creado (Lolita Lebrón Committee Forms.)" They noted the committee shared Lebrón's desire for the liberation of

⁹¹ Shakur, *Assata*, 243.

⁹² "Triple Jeopardy, Vol. 2 No. 3" (Newsletter, March-April), 7, 001 SG1 S24 BOS TJv2n3, Records of the National Council of Negro Women, Series 24--Frances Beal Series in National Archive for Black Women's History in Washington D.C.

Puerto Rico and committed themselves to work for her freedom. They noted they had “learned a lot from Lolita” and regarded her as “a living example of a revolutionary Puerto Rican woman.”⁹³ The TWWA’s support of Revolutionary women was not limited to the pages of *Triple Jeopardy* but also manifested in their activism. TWWA extended their work into the political prisoners’ movement helping to publicize the cases of Lebrón, Shakur, and Davis.

Conclusion

The idea of revolution—that is a radical change in the way a nation is governed, coupled with an enduring faith in the power of the oppressed to change the United States—moved the women of SNCC to form the Black Women’s Liberation Committee and eventually to adopt the title of Revolutionary Black women. While some people in the Black Power Movement believed women should play a supportive role in the armed struggle toward seizing power, Black Revolutionary women had other ideas. They created organizations to foster their revolutionary ideology, studied women’s armed activity in other parts of the world and in the U.S., to construct a model for armed struggle in America, and they supported one another when the United States government attempted to imprison them for their political activities.

Seeking explicitly to nurture and promote Black women’s militancy in the late 1960s and 1970s, the TWWA’s specific organizational position on Black women’s armed resistance far surpassed that of other Revolutionary Nationalist and feminist groups. Their explicit articulation of Black and third world women as the vanguard illuminates how the philosophy

⁹³ “Triple Jeopardy, Vol. 3 No. 3” February 1974, 001 SG1 S24 BOS TJv3n3, Records of the National Council of Negro Women, Series 24--Frances Beal Series in National Archive for Black Women’s History in Washington D.C.

of armed resistance took full form within a feminist organization. The TWWA's vision for a future included freedom for all people; they reasoned that Black women's freedom from oppression would necessitate the liberation of everyone. Armed resistance was a key component to their revolutionary aspirations.

Conclusion

As the Black Freedom Movement's goals and objectives changed from integration and interracialism to self-determination and community control, Black women increasingly embraced the tactic of armed resistance as a tool to achieve full freedom from the Civil Rights to the Black Power Era. One of the dissertation's contributions to the field is its assertion that armed resistance was not simply a tactic, it was a philosophy. I frame this in the same ways that scholars, activists, and supporters have theorized about nonviolence. Examining armed resistance from the perspective of Black women allows us to use a new theoretical approach to freedom, violence, activism, and the Black Liberation Movement.

Thinking of armed resistance, as a philosophy, allows us to examine both women (and men) who *believed* in Black people's right to safety and investigate those that *practiced* armed resistance for protection. The belief and practice is considered in this work by suggesting that there was a continuum of thought and action.¹ First and foremost, the philosophy of armed resistance is an acknowledgement and affirmation of Black humanity. A second basic principle of the philosophy is that armed resistance holds its own emancipatory value, despite real concerns about white rage and aggression. Another basic aspect of the philosophy is the desire for self-determination. Lastly, armed resistance targeted institutional anti-Black violence. It was a symbolic and literal challenge to the pseudo-democratic government, which failed to incorporate Black people as full citizens with rights and privileges. Armed Resistance, then, seeks to achieve full freedom and the ability to exercise

¹ Crosby, "It Wasn't the Wild West' Keeping Local Studies in Self-Defense Historiography," I've made every attempt to move away from the violence versus nonviolence dichotomy. The dissertation seeks to investigate women's beliefs, actions, and ideas outside of this dichotomy because it is limiting and incorrect. I have also made every attempt to discuss armed resistance without assigning a negative quality to the philosophy and tactic.

all rights and privileges of first class citizenship. Thinking about armed resistance as a philosophy allows us to examine both men and women who supported and purported this ideological position. For far too long women have been left out of the scholarly conversation about armed resistance.²

Theorizing about armed resistance has additional benefits. Emilye Crosby first noted in 2002 that scholars such as Lance Hill, Tim Tyson, and Simon Wendt had divergent definitions of armed resistance. In her article, “It wasn’t the Wild West” Keeping Local Studies in Self-Defense Historiography” Crosby wrote, “we need more precision around the definition of ‘armed resistance’ and more clarity about the role of violence (broadly defined) within the movement, including those aspects that are not so easily categorized as self-defense.”³ Taking his cue from Crosby, Akinyele Umoja began the task of categorizing physical moments of resistance. He noted there was the umbrella term—“armed resistance” and then several positions that fell under that umbrella—“armed self-defense,” “retaliatory violence,” “rebellions,” and “uprisings,” and “revolutionary violence.”⁴ In this dissertation, I incorporate his categories into my analysis. Like Umoja, I conceive of armed resistance broadly to include any instrument or weapon that could be used to defend, protect, or protest, such as a knife, molotov cocktail, missile, fists or foot. This decision was based on the evidence of women using these objects. If I had limited my analysis to women who only used firearms such as a pistol or a rifle, this project would have looked very different. A narrow

² To be more exact, Black women are excluded from the conversations period, scholarly or otherwise. A contemporary example is the retelling of the Southampton Rebellions in the film, “Birth of a Nation.” In the film, women are present as motivating forces in the uprising but were as visible in the uprising itself.

³ Crosby, “‘It Wasn’t the Wild West’ Keeping Local Studies in Self-Defense Historiography,” 201.

⁴ Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*.

definition of armed resistance might be one explanation for why women have been largely excluded from research on armed resistance.

One of the major interventions of this work has been its focus on women in narratives of armed resistance. “Strapped” departs from previous scholars who have overwhelmingly assumed that armed resistance was the purview of Black men during the Black Freedom Movement. The coupling of manhood/masculinity with armed resistance is pervasive in the work of Lance Hill and Simon Wendt. However, their assessment was not entirely incorrect. Many Black men did see armed resistance as a show of manhood, and believed it was their job to protect *their women and children*. The brilliance of Farah Jasmine Griffin’s notion of the “promise of protection” lies in its acknowledgement of two core facts: first, the commitment Black Nationalist men had to protect Black women, as a way of restoring their sense of masculinity; second the recognition that Black men’s desires to protect Black women emerged out of a sincere concern for their emotional, psychic, and physical safety.⁵ Therefore, when Lance Hill wrote that “freedom for black men depended on manhood, and manhood meant the willingness to use force to defend one’s family and community,” he was not wrong.⁶ For Black men, rights without manhood status may have been meaningless, but this assessment tells us very little about what rights and freedom meant for Black women.

Historian Joan Scott taught us the importance of gender as a category of analysis when she reflected on the problems of doing this type of history. She concluded: “I do not think that we should quit the archives or abandon the study of the past, but we do have to change some of the ways we’ve gone about working, some of the questions we have asked.

⁵ Griffin, “Black Feminists and Du Bois,” 35.

⁶ Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 261–62.

We need to scrutinize our methods of analysis, clarify our operative assumptions, and explain how we think change occurs.”⁷ Scott reminds us that the ways of looking at the past can drastically transform the way we do history and the questions we ask. The questions this dissertation address center on Black women: What were Black women ideas about armed resistance? And why did some women adopt the practice? In answering these questions, the dissertation offered a new interpretation of the Black freedom movement and women contributions to it.

As the first chapter indicates, Black people’s orientation towards armed resistance in the 1960s and 1970s was not new. In fact, the idea grew in prominence among the general Black population, and women in particular. To explain this development, I first assess the philosophies of armed resistance and nonviolence in the late 1950s. Using the writing and activism of Diane Nash and Mabel Williams, we gain an understanding of both philosophies as they played out for women in the movement. Nash’s perspective is situated within the context of the development of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a student group that embodied the changing tide of the Black freedom movement throughout the 1960s. From the view of Nash we gain an understanding of the philosophy of nonviolence and the magnitude of its influence over the movement.

Activists that adhered to nonviolence fell into at least two categories: philosophical nonviolence and tactical nonviolence. Those that adhered to philosophical nonviolence, who like Nash believed in the “beloved community” tried to love their enemies and to win over their heart with justice, love and redemptive suffering. They took action that opposed

⁷ Scott, “Gender,” 1066–67.

injustice and inequality and were pacifists.⁸ Philosophical nonviolence was a way of life more than just a political instrument. Tactical nonviolence, on the other hand, was a tool used to achieve political goals. As an organizing method, tactical nonviolence was an effective means of protest. Proponents of tactical nonviolence understood it to be an approach and not a philosophy, in other situations activists may have employed a different technique.⁹ This final point helps us to understand how activists, like Mabel Williams, used nonviolent tactics in some situations and armed resistance in others.

Mabel's critiqued the philosophy of nonviolence. She was not alone in outlining the limitations of the philosophy. Her husband, Robert, was perhaps the most notable critic of the philosophy, after Malcolm X. Both Robert's and Malcolm's criticism was based on the assertion that the method of nonviolence was effeminate. They believed it was a man's job to protect a woman. The fact that armed resistance during the Civil Rights era was foreclosed to women does not negate their desire to participate in these organized and formal efforts. Rather it evinces women's rejection of nonviolent philosophy and the patriarchal structures that limited their ability to tap into a repertoire of collective and individual actions. Furthermore, it demonstrates how Black women's tradition of armed resistance changed over time. By the Black Power era, an armed woman did not raise as many questions as she had during Mabel's day.

To counter notions of armed resistance as a man's job, Mabel illuminated Black women in Africa who participated in armed resistance struggles. By highlighting Black women involved in armed battles, Mabel disrupted the male-centered thinking of men like

⁸ According to Julian Bond and Bruce Hartford this group represented a very small minority of activists in the movement. See Bond, "Nonviolence: An Interpretation" And also <http://www.crmvet.org/info/nv2.htm>.

⁹ The majority of activists in the Civil Rights Movement were at least tactically nonviolent.

her husband. She demonstrated the importance of women's participation in armed resistance. Moreover, she practiced armed self-defense. The significant of Mabel's story lies in her challenge to misconceptions about gender, armed resistance, and nonviolence. She however, lived in the shadow of her husband who led the Monroe movement.

Gloria Richardson's influence by contrast, allows us to see the importance of women in leadership. It calls into question theories about women's propensity for nonviolence. The Cambridge Movement orchestrated a concerted armed defense against anti-Black violence under her guidance. Richardson understood that there were two types of nonviolence—tactical and philosophical, and as she said in 1994, "I saw it as a tactic." For Richardson there was no question, if attacked, "you had the right to defend yourself."¹⁰ The movement she led reflected this ethos. In contrast to the Monroe rifle club under the direction of Robert Williams, which excluded women, the defense unit under Richardson's guidance was inclusive rather than exclusive. The Cambridge movement may be the only example of a civil rights campaign led by a woman with an armed self-defense unit.

As a grassroots leader, Richardson took her direction from the people most affected by discrimination and not from the mainstream movement. Her position on grassroots activism and support of armed resistance set her apart from and at odds with other frontrunners of the era. Examining Richardson's leadership and contribution to armed resistance during the early 1960s also reveals the importance of considering movement goals as they relate to movement tactics. Lastly, Richardson's move towards radical change foretold the growing sentiment within Black America for a revolution.¹¹ By 1964 activists

¹⁰ Szabo, "An Interview with Gloria Richardson Dandridge."

¹¹ Some scholars like Harley have pointed to the use of armed resistance as a key indication of the death of the civil rights movement. Harley describes this as a 'Death Foretold,' however the use of armed resistance during

involved in the Civil Rights Movement, specifically SNCC volunteers, began to reevaluate the federal government's role as an agent of change.

A shift occurred in major civil rights organizations including CORE and SNCC. Dr. Akinyele Umoja has argued that 1964 was the beginning of the end of nonviolence, his work focuses on the Freedom Summer in Mississippi. I argue that this change cannot be understood without accounting for the role Black women played in the movement. Looking at local Black women-- who were not necessarily committed to nonviolence and who practiced armed resistance, illuminates the important role they played in protecting movement participants. These Black women also helped to shift the views of some volunteers on armed self-defense as a tactic. Umoja's claim is also revealing when placed alongside Belinda Robnett's assertion that Black women's influence and power rose in SNCC in 1964. These two facts come together in this dissertation to analyze how Black women increasingly embraced armed resistance and how that impacted the changing philosophy of SNCC. The direction SNCC went after 1964 helped to spark the Black Power Movement.

Women's involvement in the Black Power Movement, as Revolutionary Black women concludes the dissertation. But in many ways their vision of a new world, a new nation, and a new Black woman was a beginning. Revolutionary Black women, specifically those in SNCC's Black Women's Liberation Committee (BWLC), envisioned a revolution in the United States that freed all oppressed people. They believed women were capable of bringing about a change in the world. The group affirmed their humanity, they affirmed their

the Civil Rights Movement was not new nor unique. I point to Richardson's interactions with the government as an indicator of a shifting tide in the movement. My thinking on this is influenced by Cha-Jua and Lang's analysis in Cha-Jua and Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire" Also see; Harley, "'Chronicle of a Death Foretold': Gloria Richardson, the Cambridge Movement, and the Radical Black Activists Tradition."

desire for self-determination, and their dutiful role as liberators. Revolutionary Black Women conceptualized oppression as interlocking—that is, they saw systems of oppression (racism, sexism, classism) working in concert rather than separately. Their perspective foreshadowed what Kimberle Crenshaw described as the necessity for intersectionality.¹² The Black Women’s Liberation Committee grew into the Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA), and as a revolutionary nationalist feminist organization, the TWWA cultivated and nurtured Revolutionary Black Women through their activism and in their publication, *Triple Jeopardy*. As a Black Power organization, the TWWA made a valuable contribution to Black feminism, Black Power, and Revolutionary Nationalism.

By examining the reasons why Black women increasingly embraced the tactic of armed resistance as a tool to achieve full freedom in post-World War II America, this work puts forth a new theory on armed resistance that moves away from overly simplistic concepts of it as a tactic or a natural reaction of frustrated Black Americans. This approach to armed resistance allows women to come into full view, to account for their particular and unique experiences engaging in, and contributions to the philosophy of armed resistance. Prior to this dissertation, Black women had barely been an honorable mention in most manuscripts. I argued that the exclusion of Black women’s participation in armed efforts was a conceptual issue of many historians and social scientists. A new theoretical approach was necessary to account for how and why armed resistance was a critical aspect of the Black freedom movement from 1950s to the 1970s.

Epilogue

¹² Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.”

I would like to use this concluding space to discuss the implications of this study for our contemporary moment. I have limited my discussion to two concerns. First, Black women's experiences of state violence and second, the import of this work for the future of Black Power studies. "Strapped" described Black women's responses to gender and racial violence. I have opted to examine their promotion and adoption of armed resistance in reaction to vigilante violence and police brutality. Certainly, other approaches existed, however, this work illuminates armed resistance as a tactic and philosophy employed to achieve liberation. Black women were primarily concerned about Black women's rights, and specifically their bodily integrity.¹³ I also examine women who hoped to orchestrate a revolution in the United States. This dissertation does not, however, offer analysis of the level of repression Black Revolutionary women experienced in the late 1970s or the ways in which that repression was explicitly gendered. Our current moment suggests that concerns over police brutality and repression are just as pressing today as they were in the mid-twentieth-century.

Implications of the Study: Black women and Police Brutality

There is little doubt that Black women's experiences of police brutality uncovered in this dissertation indicate a long history of police surveillance and misconduct that has contemporary implications. Because of the work of Black activists, it is becoming increasingly harder to ignore the violence (racial and gender) that Black women experience.¹⁴ Historically, the experiences of Black men have stood in for all Black people, but the reality is that women have their own encounters with the police and the state that warrant individual

¹³ Butler, *Freedoms given, Freedoms Won Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition, São Paulo and Salvador*.

¹⁴ This work is taken up mostly by women of color and Black women. See the work of "Incite-National.Org"; "African American Policy Forum"; "Black Women's Blueprint, Inc."

attention. Scholars, such as Tera Hunter, Deborah Gray White, and Danielle McGuire have documented the violence Black women experienced in the nineteenth and twentieth century.¹⁵ These historians write against a body of literature that argue Black women had more leeway to say and do what they pleased in white spaces and to white people.

Sociologist John Dollard's *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* reflects this concept. Dollard argued, "black women could be somewhat more expressive of their resentment than the Negro men," he wrote, "much more antagonisms [are] tolerated from the women; they can do and say things which would bring a severe penalty had they been men."¹⁶ In many ways, Dollard's assessment is more representative than singular and has significant implications for scholarship, policies, and subsequent Black liberation movement agendas.¹⁷

Currently, public discourse on racial violence still centers on Black men even though Black women also experience racial violence at the hands of white civilians and law enforcement officers. The murder of Black women does not elicit the same public outcry, condemnation, and mobilization nationally as the murders of Black men. The names and stories of Tanesha Anderson, Marlene Pinnock, and Rekia Boyd are less known to the general public than the cause célèbre of Michael Brown, Eric Gardner, and Trayvon Martin. 37-year-old Tanesha Anderson died after Cleveland Police used a 'take down' move by

¹⁵ What follows is not nearly an exhaustive list. See Hall, "The Mind That Burns in Each Body"; Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West"; Hunter, "Domination and Resistance"; Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*; Feimster, *Southern Horrors*; McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*.

¹⁶ Dollard, *Caste, and Class in a Southern Town*, 289–90.

¹⁷ Take for example the current efforts to address school-to-prison pipeline, Black girls, and young women are frequently excluded from these national conversations. The African American Policy Forum and Columbia Law School's Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies issued a report, *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected* which reviews the realities of girls of color in schools. They found Black girls face much harsher school discipline than their white peers. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, "As public concern mounts for the needs of men and boys of color through initiatives like the White House's My Brother's Keeper, we must challenge the assumption that the lives of girls and women—who are often left out of the national conversation—are not also at risk." The report can be accessed through the AAFP's website at <http://www.aapf.org/publications/>

slamming her to the pavement. Marlene Pinnock's encounter with a California Highway Patrol officer was caught on tape as he sat on top of her and viciously beat her, repeatedly punching her in the face and head. Rekia Boyd was shot in the head when a Chicago police officer, fired his weapon over his shoulder into a group of people standing in the park.

Sadly, the stories of Black women who have been killed by police and experienced gender-specific police violence do not illicit policy reform to address police brutality nor are they the typical cases used to demand greater accountability. Black women are rarely, if ever, positioned in the media as the representation of victims or survivors of police brutality. To bring greater visibility to the experiences of Black women, the African American Policy Forum issued a report, "*Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women.*" The report argued,

The resurgent racial justice movement in the United States has developed a clear frame to understand the police killings of Black men and boys, theorizing the ways in which they are systematically criminalized and feared across disparate class backgrounds and irrespective of circumstance. Yet Black women who are profiled, beaten, sexually assaulted, and killed by law enforcement officials are conspicuously absent from this frame even when their experiences are identical. When their experiences with police violence are distinct—uniquely informed by race, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation—Black women remain invisible.

The report indicates that the existing frameworks on racial profiling and excessive force can be useful for understanding the murder and abuse of Black women. Additionally, the report makes visible the unique forms of police brutality that the existing framework obscures through an overemphasis on killings and excessive force. The second most reported complaints after excessive force are police officer's sexual misconduct against Black women and women of color. Perhaps the most egregious example of police sexual misconduct, of late, is the story of Oklahoma police officer, Daniel Holtzclaw. The officer racially profiled Black women and forced them to perform sexual acts. A police investigation uncovered at

least thirteen victims, all who had a criminal record, which means Holtzclaw understood the bias of justice system against poor and vulnerable Black women. In 2015 Holtzclaw was tried and convicted by an all-white jury on 18 of 36 charges and sentenced to 263 years in prison. Holtzclaw's actions represent the potential and real dangers Black women face when encountering the authorities. Certainly, some Black women are at higher risk than others—poor women, criminalized women, sex workers, transwomen, and gender non-conforming women.

My dissertation, like the cases of police brutality aforementioned, spotlights the particularly unique space Black women in America hold. At the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality—Black women's specific and unique experiences of sexual abuse and racial violence need more visibility. This dissertation has served to uncover some accounts of violence and the responses Black women employed to counter police misconduct.

Implications of the Study: Black Power Studies

I see this dissertation as a contribution to Black Power Studies.¹⁸ As I wrote this work, I mulled over a critical question for Black Power Studies: How do we tell the story of a defeated and unfinished revolution? The Black Revolutionary women surveyed in this study unequivocally believed the revolution was coming. This belief informed their actions, commitment, sacrifices, and faith. I have attempted to make sense of their political lives and document the U.S. Government's brutal counterattack against the Black freedom movement, but left wholly unrecorded is the long-term effects the movement had on their personhood, families, and futures. Far too many Black Power activists are still under government

¹⁸ Joseph coined the term "Black Power Studies" see Joseph, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*.

surveillance and attack: the harassment, rearrests and arraignment of the San Francisco 8, on trumped up charges with no new evidence thirty years later is only one example.¹⁹ The two-million-dollar bounty for Assata Shakur is another (as of May 2013 she was added to the FBI Most Wanted Terrorist List). Shakur is not the only activist living in exile. Several other activists are living outside of the United States under constant harassment and threat of persecution.

There is also a list of political prisoners both Black men and women, who are currently incarcerated and have been for over four decades, many unjustly imprisoned on fabricated charges that help to fulfill the mission of the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO).²⁰ Akinyele Umoja points out that corrections officers treated political prisoners more inhumanely than other inmates and that they frequently received "maximum sentences, isolation, and sensory deprivation"²¹ According to Umoja "Human rights advocates see the rendering of maximum sentences to political prisoners as a punitive measure to keep insurgent activists out of their communities as long as possible." Black

¹⁹ In 2007 eight former Black Panthers were arrested for allegedly murdering Sgt. John Young in San Francisco in 1971. The "San Francisco 8" case included Herman Bell, Jalil Muntaqim, Richard Brown, Richard O'Neal, Ray Boudreaux, Hank Jones, Francisco Torres and Harold Taylor. The evidence for the case was based on statements made by three of the men after police in New Orleans tortured them for several days employing electric shock, cattle prods, beatings, sensory deprivation, plastic bags and hot, wet blankets for asphyxiation. In 1975 a California judge threw out the case founding the involuntary statements coerced. In 2007 with no new evidence the government attempted again to try the men for the murder. After a long and hard battle, charges were dropped against most of the men. Muntaqim and Bell were already incarcerated at the time of the retrial. Bell plead guilty to voluntary manslaughter in the death of Young. Muntaqim pleaded no contest to conspiracy to commit voluntary manslaughter.

²⁰ For more on Sundiata Acoli visit: <http://www.sundiataacoli.org/>. For more on Jamil Al- Amin visit: <http://www.freemamjamil.org/>. For more on Herman Bell visit: <http://www.freethesf8.org>. For more on Veronza Bowers visit: <http://www.veronza.org/>. For more on Marshall 'Eddie' Conway visit: <http://www.freeeddieconway.org/> For more on Jalil Muntaqim visit: <http://www.freejalil.com/> For more on Sekou Odinga visit: <http://www.thejerichomovement.com>. For more on Mutulu Shakur visit: <http://www.mutulushakur.com>. For more on the Move Nine visit: <http://www.onamove.com/>

²¹ Umoja, "Repression Breeds Resistance," 431.

Revolutionary Women, such as Assata Shakur, Angela Davis, Afeni Shakur, and Safiya Bukhari present many of these issues in their narratives.²² Exiled activists and political prisoners remain part of the unfinished revolution but are also a vital space for historians to shine the light on Black women's (and men's) relationship to the state, incarceration, power, and citizenship. These observations illuminate the contemporary significance of the past. I join other scholars who understand the political stakes of Black radicalism and argue for an expansion of histories focused on political prisoners, and specifically Black women.²³

Comparatively, Civil Rights activists have enjoyed accolades that far exceed that of Black Power activists.²⁴ Politically, the state, as well as right-wing conservatives, have used the Civil Rights Movement to further their agendas, as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has argued.²⁵ The Civil Rights Movement is now caused for national celebration; we see this in the proliferation of museums, exhibits, oral history repositories, public talks, national days of remembrance, and parades afforded to Civil Rights theorists, leaders, and organizations annually. Conversely, the Black Power movement receives significantly less scholarly attention (and political action). In our nation's public memory Black Power activists are still demonized, marginalized, and forgotten. From this perspective, Black Power heroes are nonexistent in the national dialogue.²⁶

²² Davis, *Angela Davis-An Autobiography*; Shakur, *Assata*; Guy, *Afeni Shakur*; Balagoon, *Kuwasi Balagoon*; Brown, *A Taste of Power*; Also see Perkins, *Autobiography As Activism*.

²³ Joy James work is an excellent example. James, *Imprisoned Intellectuals*; James and Buck, "The Effects of Repression on Women in Prison"; Davies also does this in her treatment of Claudia Jones. Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*; As a scholar-activist Umoja has set an example for myself and others in this regard. Umoja, "Repression Breeds Resistance."

²⁴ Fenderson, "Towards the Gentrification of Black Power?"

²⁵ Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past."

²⁶ Their sacrifice(s) for the movement have been nominally remembered mostly due to the efforts of current organizations such as the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement.

By documenting and examining armed resistance and demonstrating how Black women increasingly embraced the tactic from the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Power Movement, “Strapped” make a contribution to the literature by highlighting the strategic vision, goals and objectives, leaders, practices, symbols, and discourses of Black women during the Black Power era.

On the other hand, characterizing the Black Power movement just as a failed revolution is wholly inaccurate. It was a world-defining social movement that experienced both defeats and victories. These triumphs are plentiful and range from the emergence and proliferation of Black Studies programs, departments, and centers on college campus across the country and k-12 classrooms. The creative outgrowth of the movement produced a litany of Independent Black institutions, including Independent Schools and Black professional organizations such as the National Conference of Black Lawyers founded in 1968.²⁷ Black cultural and literary productions also abound in this era, some of which continue to produce scholarly work and invaluable perspectives on the state of Black America.²⁸ The Third World Women’s Alliance and other feminists laid the foundation for Black women’s studies with their publications including *Triple Jeopardy*, and Toni Cade Bambara’s *Black Woman: An Anthology*.²⁹ The holiday Kwanza, first celebrated in 1966, recently held its 50th anniversary in December 2016. Nationally, Black Americans celebrate the Black Power holiday, and the United States Postal Service issued a stamp in honor of the celebration. These are only a few examples of the victories of the era. Because the movement touched every aspect of

²⁷ Rickford, *We Are an African People*; Kendi, *The Black Campus Movement*; Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*; Bradley, *Harlem vs. Columbia University*.

²⁸ For example, *Freedomways*, *Negro Digest/Black World*, and *Liberator*. The Black Scholar founded in the Bay area in 1969 still publishes a journal quarterly.

²⁹ Bambara, *The Black Woman*; Shange, *Nappy Edges*; Beal, “Black Women’s Manifesto: Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female”; Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement.”

American life and culture, the generative experimentalism of its participants deserves considerably more scholarly attention.

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