

The “Cultural Deprivation” of Milwaukee’s Youth:
An Analysis of the Black History Protests in Milwaukee's Public Schools
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Abstract: Throughout the 1960s, African American high school students across the United States were demanding the inclusion of “black history” in their schools. This was no less true in Milwaukee, as the city experienced a wave of direct-action protests led by African American students between 1967 and 1968 demanding the inclusion of African American history in standard U.S. history courses, as well as the development of new classes which would teach African history, culture, and languages. Although Milwaukee saw little in the way of such curricular reform prior to the student protests for black history, school officials had in fact been genuinely interested in enacting positive change within the curriculum for a number of years prior to the students themselves forcing a reform in response to their militant demonstrations. Several Milwaukee Public Schools' (MPS) officials had been active in a national coalition of urban educators known as the Great Cities Council, which was dedicated to improving the conditions in the nation's urban public schools. Although these school officials were genuinely concerned with the betterment of the schools under their direction, many of these same people were simultaneously influenced by an emerging concept of a “culturally deprived” urban student. My paper identifies the Great Cities Council as being the conduit through which ideologies espousing “cultural deprivation” found their way into official MPS policy, while juxtaposing the perspectives of MPS administrators with those of Milwaukee's African American youth in regard to whether or not these students were in fact “culturally deprived.” I additionally argue that the black history protests should be characterized as neither civil rights nor Black Power activism, but instead as one moment among many in which this activism became intertwined.

Throughout the 1960s African American students of all ages increasingly began to demand that African and African American history and culture be taught in the public schools and universities across the nation. This struggle for "black history" had been an ongoing concern for many African Americans that had begun to unfold decades earlier with the establishment of Negro History Week in 1926 by Carter G. Woodson, and the 1935 publication of W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America*. It was not until the mid-1960s, however, that curricular reforms actually began to take hold in America's educational institutions through the establishment of Black Studies programs in universities and the introduction of multiculturalism in the nation's public schools. Although debates surrounding multicultural curricula exist to this day, prior to the reforms that began in the 1960s, United States history was presented as a "whitewashed" version of events that virtually excluded all contributions made to the development of the nation by people of color. The first such curricular reforms came in direct response to the persistent demands made by African American students across the nation. Subsequent groups of underrepresented students quickly became inspired by the gains made by African American students, and they, too, soon demanded similar recognition in the curricula. However, the significance of the black history protests is deeper than its effect on educational policy during this period and the subsequent curricular changes that occurred in the wake of these demonstrations. When interpreted as a separate campaign for equality in its own right, rather than a footnote in the larger history of African American school reform, the black history protests highlight the ways in which the categorical bifurcation of "civil rights" and "Black Power" activism are obscured at the local level.¹

Shortly preceding these student-led efforts for curricular reform was the establishment and growth of the Ford Foundation's national coalition of educational policymakers and urban school officials known as the Research Council of the Great Cities Program for School Improvement (hereafter referred to as the "Great Cities Council").² In addition to the demands for change placed upon them from the escalating Civil Rights

¹ Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

² "Report 65: The Great Cities Program for School Improvement," Folder 2, Box 4, Elisabeth Holmes Papers, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee Libraries

Movement, the Great Cities Council was simultaneously influenced by a growing body of scholarly educational policy literature arguing that a significant, and increasing, number of the nation's urban students were "culturally deprived." The "compensatory education" programs that were created by numerous urban school districts across the country in conjunction with the Great Cities Council that sought to remedy the perceived cultural deprivation of these students often resulted in the reinforcement of white middle-class values in the curriculum—indeed, such reinforcement was the explicitly-stated intention of many of these programs. However, it was the utter dominance of white middle-class culture in the curriculum that African American students were rebelling against in the first place. Ironically, at the same historical moment that the Great Cities Council was producing the nation's first multicultural primary school readers and working with the textbook publishing companies to create books that were more relevant to urban youth,³ they were simultaneously working to enact compensatory education programs which the majority of those same students increasingly viewed to be irrelevant due to the inherent, and frequently intentional, white middle-class bias of its content. The Great Cities Council should consequently be recognized as being not only a conduit through which educational policies espousing problematic notions of "cultural deprivation" emerged in America's largest urban public school systems, but also as an organization that ultimately aided in reforming the nation's public school curricula in response to the pressing demands of African Americans across the country.

The “Cultural Deprivation” Discourse and the Great Cities Council

In her 1969 essay, Yetta Trachtman Goodman argues that the term “cultural deprivation” was “first popularized by two widely quoted books”: *The Culturally Deprived Child* and *Compensatory Education for Cultural Deprivation*.⁴ A central aim in Frank Riessman's 1962 book, *The Culturally Deprived Child*, was to “develop new approaches to underprivileged individuals by emphasizing positive aspects of their cultures which,

³ Detroit Public Schools, Great Cities School Improvement Program, Writer's Committee. *Play with Jimmy*. Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1962; Joint Conference of the Great Cities Research Council and the American Textbook Publishers Institute, “New Directions for the Learner, the Teacher, and the Instructional Materials,” *Proceedings*, Los Angeles, 1965.

⁴ Yetta Trachtman Goodman, “The Culturally Deprived Child: A Study in Stereotyping,” *Equity and Excellence in Education* 7, no. 4 (1969): 59.

hitherto, have been largely ignored.”⁵ Almost immediately, however, Riessman takes the time to qualify his own use of the term “culturally deprived” in his book while defining it as a strictly class-based label:

A word is necessary about the term ‘culturally deprived.’ While lower socio-economic groups lack many of the advantages (and disadvantages) of middle-class culture, we do not think it is appropriate to describe them as ‘culturally deprived.’ As we shall see, they possess a culture of their own, with many positive characteristics that have developed out of coping with a different environment. The term ‘culturally deprived’ refers to those aspects of middle-class culture—such as education, books, formal language—from which these groups have not benefitted. However, because it is the term in current usage, we will use ‘culturally deprived’ interchangeably with ‘educationally deprived’ to refer to the members of lower socio-economic groups who have had limited access to education.⁶

This is a curious statement from an author who titled the book in which these lines appear *The Culturally Deprived Child*. As Goodman points out, “[f]or some reason Riessman negates his own term, indicates that it is inappropriate, but goes on to capitalize on the ‘common sense’ use of the term....In essence, Riessman is saying ‘the term is inappropriate, perhaps even misleading, but we’ll use it anyway!’”⁷

When *Compensatory Education for Cultural Deprivation* was published three years later, the phrase appears to have become accepted as a standard term, and no similar qualifying statements accompanied its usage.⁸ Instead, the editors wished to emphasize at the outset that “[c]ultural deprivation should not be equated with race.”⁹ Goodman took issue with this statement as well, noting that “[a]lthough the authors say ‘cultural deprivation should not be equated with race,’ there are complete separate sections devoted to the problems of Negroes without careful examination of Negro groups which are not ‘culturally deprived’ leading the reader to conclude that ‘Negro’ and ‘culturally deprived’

⁵ Frank Riessman, *The Culturally Deprived Child* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), xiii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷ Goodman, “The Culturally Deprived Child: A Study in Stereotyping,” *Equity and Excellence in Education* 7, no. 4 (1969): 60.

⁸ Sylvia L. M. Martinez and John L. Rury, “From ‘Culturally Deprived’ to ‘At Risk’: The Politics of Popular Expression and Educational Inequality in the United States, 1960-1985,” *Teachers College Record* 114 (June 2012).

⁹ Benjamin S. Bloom, Allison Davis, and Robert Hess, eds., *Compensatory Education for Cultural Deprivation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1965), 5.

are synonymous terms.”¹⁰ Goodman's conclusions correspond with the recent arguments made by Sylvia L. M. Martinez and John L. Rury tracing the evolution of the term "cultural deprivation." Martinez and Rury argue that the phrase increasingly came to be more associated with race than class during the 1960s, and they demonstrate that there was a rise in the popular use of the term "cultural deprivation" during this same period.¹¹ Although books such as *The Culturally Deprived Child* helped popularize notions of "cultural deprivation," it was the Great Cities Council that was largely responsible for transmitting this ideology into the official policies of the nation's public school districts.

The Great Cities Council was created in 1956 “for the purpose of studying educational problems which were of special concern and interest to large cities.”¹² Milwaukee was a prominent member of the Great Cities Council during the mid-1960s, and several MPS officials served in leadership positions for the organization. MPS Superintendent Harold S. Vincent served as a member of the Council’s Executive Committee, MPS Assistant Superintendent Dwight Teel was integral in developing the Council’s “School-University Teacher Education Project,” and MPS school board member Elisabeth Holmes sat on the Council’s Board of Directors.¹³ Holmes was a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, and she had been involved in several school reform efforts and projects for MPS students. On February 13, 1964, in an article titled “Culturally Deprived Students Given Educational Opportunity,” the *UWM Post* reported that Holmes had been named as the director of a special project designed to increase educational opportunities for “[h]igh school students who are both culturally and financially lacking.”¹⁴ Both Riessman and the editors of *Compensatory Education for the Culturally Deprived* attempted to emphasize in their books that the label “culturally

¹⁰ Goodman, “The Culturally Deprived Child: A Study in Stereotyping,” *Equity and Excellence in Education* 7, no. 4 (1969): 61.

¹¹ Martinez and Rury, “From 'Culturally Deprived' to 'At Risk': The Politics of Popular Expression and Educational Equality in the United States, 1950-1985,” *Teachers College Record* 114 (June 2012): 1-31.

¹² “Report 65: The Great Cities Program for School Improvement,” Folder 2, Box 4, Elisabeth Holmes Papers, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

¹³ “The Research Council of the Great Cities Program for School Improvement, Officers, Staff, Executive Committee, and Board of Directors,” Folder 2, Box 4, Elisabeth Holmes Papers, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department; “News Notes,” dated November 6, 1964, Folder 2, Box 4, Elisabeth Holmes Papers, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

¹⁴ “Culturally Deprived Students Given Educational Opportunity,” *UWM Post*, February 13, 1964.

deprived” was a fundamentally class-based designation, and they argued that it should be employed to describe lower-income students who experienced less educational preparation outside of the school gates than their middle-class counterparts. However, the *UWM Post* article references students who are *both* “culturally and financially lacking,” reflecting a contradiction in how the term “culturally deprived” was being commonly employed at the time.

One year after her special project was announced in the *UWM Post*, Holmes attended the annual meeting of the Great Cities Council in New York City. In addition to receiving several handouts, reports, schedules, and newsletters, conference attendees were presented with a booklet titled “The Culturally Deprived: Educating the Disadvantaged,” which begins by relating a story about a teacher who visits the home of one of her “culturally deprived” students.¹⁵ At one point in the narrative, the author of the booklet invokes value-laden prose to juxtapose the patience of the teacher, “who is very honest,” with the irresponsibility of “a lazy mother who gives her children a piece of candy for breakfast.”¹⁶ In addition to the critiques previously noted, Goodman argues in her aforementioned essay that “cultural deprivation” is “a meaningless term which does not permit coordinated scientific study.”¹⁷ She adds that variations of “cultural deprivation,” such as “culturally disadvantaged” or “socially deprived,” were frequently used interchangeably with the original phrase, despite the fact that these “terms are not precisely defined” and “their use promotes dangerous value judgments.”¹⁸ As the *UWM Post* article on Holmes and the booklet received by her at the annual convention of the Great Cities Council illustrate, such criticism on the part of Goodman does not appear to be unfounded. Moreover, Holmes’ project targeted three schools in particular: North Division High School, West Division High School, and Lincoln Junior-Senior High School. All three schools had significant African American student bodies, further supporting Goodman's

¹⁵ “The Culturally Deprived: Educating the Disadvantaged,” Folder 2, Box 4, Elisabeth Holmes Papers, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Goodman, “The Culturally Deprived Child: A Study in Stereotyping,” *Equity and Excellence in Education* 7, no. 4 (1969): 58.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

critiques.¹⁹ However, despite the white, middle-class bias evident in some of the Great Cities' publications, the organization was in many ways very progressive, and Holmes, herself a white, middle-class woman, appears to have been a genuine advocate of reform on behalf of Milwaukee's students.

On April 8, 1964—three years prior to the city's first organized black history protest—a special meeting of the Milwaukee Board of School Directors' Committee on Appointment and Instruction was held in order to hear the recommendations of the Textbook Subject Committee regarding the adoption of textbooks for the following school year. During the 1964 meeting, Cornelius L. Golightly, the board's first African American member and a philosophy professor at the University of Wisconsin, asked the committee if they had evaluated the textbooks' portrayals of race and class.²⁰ U.S. history teacher Arthur Rumpf responded that, "the teachers involved here did consider this as a factor in all of the books that were recommended to the teachers for consideration and considered as satisfactory any submitted in this recommendation."²¹ However, when MPS Superintendent Harold Vincent asked Holmes to comment on the subject since she was currently serving on a national textbook committee for the Great Cities Council, Holmes replied, "If we are perfectly frank...there isn't any satisfactory one on the market...I do think there are signs of hope...but it is going to take five years."²² Holmes also added that seven textbook companies had agreed to begin printing textbooks that showed pictures of black children in them within the next year, although these would not be offered in nine of the former Confederate states.²³ At the 1967 meeting of the Committee on Appointment and Instruction, Holmes again voiced her concern over the treatment of African Americans in the proposed textbooks. With a greater sense of urgency than she had expressed three years earlier, Holmes stated, "I think that all of these are thoroughly unsatisfactory from the point of view of Negro history. And we know that books are coming out before too long

¹⁹ Ibid. According to estimates made by MUSIC for the 1963-1964 school year, North Division had a 90-100% black student body, Lincoln had a 67-90% black student body, and West Division had a 10-33% black student body. See "% of Black Enrollment," Folder 30, Box 81, Barbee Papers, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

²⁰ Milwaukee Board of School Directors, Minutes from the Committee on Appointment and Instruction, April 8, 1964, 15.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

that are the kind giving it honor. I hate to see us tied down another six years to the kind of text that the whole country is protesting against."²⁴ Holmes' concern about being tied down to an unsatisfactory textbook referred to a state law that required a five-year obligation to a textbook after its adoption.²⁵ Because of Wisconsin's five-year rule governing textbook adoptions, the committee voted unanimously to "hold it over for one year, inasmuch as there seems to be the possibility in a year's time there will be better texts on the market."²⁶ Three weeks later, Milwaukee's National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Council organized the city's first black history protests.²⁷

The Black History Protests and the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council

On April 30, 1967, the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council hosted a "Freedom Rally" at St. Boniface Church in order to discuss "the need for integrated textbooks in Milwaukee schools," and to decide what "future action" should be taken to ensure their implementation into the curriculum.²⁸ The following day, approximately thirty-five black students at Riverside High School conducted a "textbook turn-in" led by Riverside junior, and NAACP Youth Council officer, Vada Harris. Just before school let out for the day, Harris dropped one of her textbooks onto the floor signaling that it was time to begin the protest, and all of the black students in her class rose from their seats and followed her into the hall. As Harris led her classmates down the hall, black students from other classes joined them and the group marched directly to Principal Emil Rucktenwald's office. Students piled their history textbooks onto the principal's counter, and Harris read a prepared statement demanding that the school provide its students with textbooks that more accurately reflected the history of the United States:

We are sick and tired of receiving an inferior education, a biased one, and one that deprives a large group of our citizens of their rightful recognition as people

²⁴ Milwaukee Board of School Directors, Minutes from the Committee on Appointment and Instruction, April 5, 1967, 3.

²⁵ "The Question of a Multi-Ethnic Approach to American History in the Milwaukee Public Schools," Folder 14, Box 106, Lloyd Barbee Papers, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department, 9.

²⁶ Milwaukee Board of School Directors, Minutes from the Committee on Appointment and Instruction, April 5, 1967, 5.

²⁷ "Where It's At!," *Milwaukee Star*, Page 16, April 29, 1967; "Read, White, and Biased Books Out Say NAACP Youth," *Milwaukee Star*, Page 3, May 6, 1967.

²⁸ Ibid.

who have contributed to the development of our democracy....We want books that picture the true history of America so that we have a better chance to become real Americans, and not just second-class citizens of a country which tries to ignore our presence.²⁹

With similar protests reportedly occurring that day at Rufus King, Lincoln, and North Division High Schools, Milwaukee students joined with countless others across the nation in the struggle to integrate black history into America's public school curriculum.³⁰

The following semester, a second, and significantly larger, wave of black history protests swept through the city. In September 1967, black student leaders at Rufus King High School began circulating a series of statements and petitions to their classmates, one of which read:

We, the Black students of Rufus King feel we are entitled to certain teachings about our culture: Black languages and certainly Black history. Too long we have been deprived of our cultural merits. As you may well know, white languages, white culture, white history, has been impressed upon Black Students for centuries and we at Rufus King are sick and tired of this white "brainwash." We demand to know our heritage without hesitation.³¹

This petition and the earlier statement made by Harris during the protest at Riverside both employ language that is strikingly similar to that invoked by the policymakers who embraced notions of "cultural deprivation." While Harris stated that African Americans had been "deprived" of their "rightful recognition" as Americans, the students at Rufus King asserted that they had long been "deprived" of their "cultural merits." The students who placed these demands upon school administrators had indeed been deprived of the knowledge of their collective history and cultures, as well as an official acknowledgement of this information by school authorities.

An article appearing in one of Milwaukee's underground student newspapers in 1968 illustrated the very real need for school officials to legitimize African American history through its official incorporation into the standard United States history curriculum. *The Open Door* was published by high school students from Pius XI, Riverside,

²⁹ Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 120-121.

³⁰ "Read, White, and Biased Books Out Say NAACP Youth," *Milwaukee Star*, Page 3, May 6, 1967.

³¹ "Rufus King Students Petition for Black History in Textbooks," *Milwaukee Courier*, September 30, 1967.

Washington, Shorewood, Hamilton, Marshall and South Division High Schools—all were schools with predominantly white student populations.³² Many of the articles were written from the perspective of white students commenting on the racism existing in their schools, and they provide valuable insight into the racial climate permeating Milwaukee's schools during the late 1960s. One article authored by an unnamed Nicolet High School student in 1968 described the attitudes that some of her white classmates held towards black history and African Americans in general:

When in my World History class we got to discussing civil rights, I was appalled to hear someone start talking about how all blacks (he called them "those colored people") are inherently lazy, no good, and generally less intelligent than whites. When a friend and I started trying to tell him about the basically racist atmosphere that blacks in this country are confronted with from birth, he was joined by three or four others who started yelling about white superiority and how no black has ever done anything worthwhile. They said all this with such great conviction it was frightening.³³

In an oral history interview conducted decades later, Milwaukee Youth Council member Shirley Butler-Derge recounted several similar incidents that occurred while she was a student in Milwaukee schools. As a grade school student at St. Boniface, for example, Butler-Derge distinctly remembered that only one page of her U.S. history textbook contained a picture of an African American, and it was an image of a woman picking cotton "with an old raggedy dress on, a head wrap that was old and all torn, and a little baby next to her with hardly any clothes on." Her class was learning about Christopher Columbus and Juan Ponce de León when she raised her hand to ask the question, "Sister Frances Rose, why aren't there any black people in our history book?" The nun replied that there were black people in the textbook, and she proceeded to direct Butler-Derge to the photograph of the woman picking cotton. Although she knew more than she let on, Butler-Derge asked, "Is this all we did?" Sister Frances Rose replied, "Well, you were slaves. And you were happy, and you picked cotton." Butler-Derge responded by throwing her textbook out the window and walking home. After telling her mother what had happened, she and her

³² Milwaukee United School Integration Committee, "Percent of Black Enrollments," Box 81, Folder 30, Barbee Papers, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

³³ "A Case of the Student as Nigger and Racist," *The Open Door*, Volume 1, Number 3, Marquette University Libraries.

mother went back to school so that her mother could speak with the teacher. Butler-Derge had returned to her class and was seated at her desk, but she could hear the conversation between her teacher and her mother in the hallway. When the nun apologized for not knowing anything about black history, Butler-Derge's mother responded, "Well there's some things *I* know, and if you're not teaching them in school I'll make sure that they're learning it at the house. But you don't tell Shirley and any of those kids that black people did not do things, because we did."³⁴ Such incidents not only depict the educational environments existing within Milwaukee schools during this period, they also demonstrate the very real need for teaching the type of curriculum that the students advocated.

Like many of the young activists of her day, Butler-Derge had been exposed to militant activism at an early age. Her mother had been highly active in the city's earlier school desegregation efforts as a member of the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC), and Butler-Derge attended the Freedom Schools that were sponsored by MUSIC during a series of public school boycotts that occurred in the city between 1964-1965 protesting the de facto segregation of MPS. Butler-Derge continued this activism as a member of Milwaukee's NAACP Youth Council, which, most notably, led a prolonged struggle to enact fair housing laws in the city beginning in the summer of 1967.³⁵ Enduring over 200 consecutive nights of violent white backlash on Milwaukee's south side, and achieving national recognition in the process, the open housing marches ultimately resulted in the passage of a local fair housing ordinance and aiding in the passage of the national Fair Housing Act of 1968.³⁶

Many of the young protestors from the Youth Council went to school during the day and marched for fair housing in the evenings. Shortly after the Youth Council began their open housing marches, students at Rufus King High school circulated petitions demanding that "Black History, Languages and Culture be taught in the schools for the benefit of all."³⁷ The following month, a spontaneous demonstration of approximately 700 students erupted

³⁴ Dr. Shirley Butler-Derge interview with author, August 4, 2011.

³⁵ Ibid.; Frank A. Aukofer, *City with a Chance: A Case History of Civil Rights Revolution* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press), 151.

³⁶ Patrick Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 199-200, 207-208.

³⁷ "King Students Stage Walk Out; Demand Negro History," *Milwaukee Courier*, February 3, 1968.

in the cafeteria in what Rufus King Principal John A. Powers described as “a general melee.”³⁸ At a special assembly held the next day, students cited the lack of black history in the school’s curriculum as one of the causes for the disturbance.³⁹ In response, Principal Powers directed his teachers to make immediate changes to the history curriculum, and he notified MPS school administrators that he “expected them to develop a meaningful program” for their students.⁴⁰ By the end of January, the Youth Council had been marching in support of fair housing on a daily basis for five months straight. Despite this incredible level of activism—or perhaps as a consequence of it—on January 29, 1968, over 100 students at Rufus King were again compelled to walk out of their classes, and ten student representatives met with Principal Powers to find out why black history had still not been incorporated into their regular history classes.⁴¹

According to the *Milwaukee Courier*, “students had expected new texts and other material with the start of the new semester” as an outcome of the student demonstrations that occurred during the previous semester.⁴² In response to the January 29 demonstration, the new MPS Superintendent, Richard Gousha, invited student representatives from Rufus King and Lincoln High Schools to meet with him to discuss the problem. During the meeting, students told the superintendent that the supplementary material on black history was not being utilized in their regular history classes. When the superintendent told the students that books on black history had been placed in the libraries of all inner city high schools, one student responded, “They put 60 or 70 books in the library for 2000 kids. And now they want to give us different books with our regular history books. And only us. We want the white kids who don’t go to school in the [inner-city] to know about Black history too.”⁴³ The student’s comment regarding “different books” was in reference to a pilot program that had been agreed to at the meeting in which the textbook *The American Negro* was agreed to be used as a “companion textbook” in Rufus King’s eleventh grade American history class. If this integrated history course turned

³⁸ “Students Condemn Disturbance at King,” *Milwaukee Journal*, October 11, 1967.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ “King Students Stage Walk Out; Demand Negro History,” *Milwaukee Courier*, February 3, 1968.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

out to be successful after an assessment by students, parents, teachers, and school officials, the administration had planned on implementing Rufus King's pilot program on a citywide basis. Most students were in opposition to the use of supplementary texts, and instead preferred the use of a single integrated textbook.⁴⁴ Despite this, another massive wave of black history protests swept through the city as word spread of Rufus King's new integrated history course, and "[w]ithin one week, virtually all central city schools experienced demonstrations which demanded that they, too, receive a similar pilot program."⁴⁵

The first, and most violent, black history demonstration following the implementation of Rufus King's pilot course occurred at North Division High School. On February 5, 1968, approximately 800 students walked out of school while a smaller group of students was meeting with Principal Andre Ptak in his office to discuss the lack of black history being taught at North Division. The *Milwaukee Courier* reported that "[i]mpatience and lack of hope was cited by students, who took part in the walkout, as the reason they did not wait for results of the meeting before beginning their demonstrations."⁴⁶ When a group of about forty North Division students went to the MPS central administration building later that day and demanded to speak with Superintendent Gousha about the lack of black history taught at their school, they were told that the superintendent was too busy to meet with them. The next morning, Principal Ptak called a school assembly to update the students on what had occurred the previous day, but halfway through the assembly roughly 1000 students walked out of the meeting and convened a rally for black history in Franklin Square Playground.⁴⁷

During the two-block march from North Division to Franklin Square, students were escorted by police officers, teachers, and a small group of NAACP Youth Council Commandos. That afternoon, the group of forty students was granted a meeting with Superintendent Gousha. However, there was a miscommunication during this meeting after

⁴⁴ "The Question of a Multi-Ethnic Approach to American History in the Milwaukee Public Schools," Folder 14, Box 106, Lloyd Barbee Papers, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee Libraries, 8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁶ "Truce Called at North in Black History Conflict," *Milwaukee Courier*, February 10, 1968.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*; "Melee Over; Pupils Go Back to School," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 7, 1968.

the superintendent informed the students that he would have to find money in the budget to pay for the same books that Rufus King students were about to receive. In response, the majority of the students walked out of the meeting and headed back to school where they announced to their waiting classmates, "They're not going to do it!"⁴⁸ Outraged students responded by tearing bulletin boards from the walls, smashing a glass serving table in the cafeteria, knocking filing cabinets over in offices, hurling bricks through school windows, and setting fires in the bathrooms. When police showed up in riot gear, one officer suffered a concussion after being struck in the head by a rock thrown by one of the students. Unbeknownst to the rebelling students, Superintendent Gousha had informed the few students who had remained with him at the meeting that funding would be provided for *The American Negro* after all, and North Division would indeed get the same pilot program as Rufus King. About an hour after the disturbance began, Vice Principal Victor Anderson informed the students that their demands had been met and that classes would be called off for the rest of the day.⁴⁹ A group of parents who supported the protests showed up at the school the next day to meet with administrators, but left shortly after Vice Principal Anderson threatened to call the police and have them thrown off school grounds. Expressing her solidarity with the students, one mother remarked, "They can think the kids are just unruly if they want to. They'll learn soon enough that they are just seeing mama through junior."⁵⁰

One week later, Vada Harris—then in her senior year—helped lead a second black history demonstration at Riverside High School. However, the first textbook turn-in that she had led in 1967 paled in comparison to the second protest that occurred the following year on February 13, when approximately 250 students walked out of their homeroom classes and began demonstrating in the hallways. Harris' younger sister, Karen McDowell, was a freshman at Riverside in 1968 and she later recalled, "We sung 'We Shall Overcome,' and we walked down the halls encouraging others to come out."⁵¹ Singing protest songs and chanting "We want black history," the young activists filed into the streets where two

⁴⁸ "Melee Over; Pupils Go Back to School," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 7, 1968.

⁴⁹ Ibid.; "Truce Called at North in Black History Conflict," *Milwaukee Courier*, February 10, 1968; "Pupils at North Set Fires, Hurl Bricks," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 6, 1968.

⁵⁰ "Truce Called at North in Black History Conflict," *Milwaukee Courier*, February 10, 1968.

⁵¹ Karen R. McDowell, interview with author, September 9, 2011.

students were arrested for disorderly conduct. In response to the incident, during which witnesses stated that police brandished guns and clubs while arresting the two young protestors, several hundred of their classmates amassed in the school's auditorium to demand that Principal Rucktenwald negotiate the students' immediate release from police custody. The *Milwaukee Courier* reported that "black and white students sitting in the auditorium sang 'We Shall Overcome' and chanted 'Sock it to me, black power.' They applauded students speaking about the importance of black history and jeered Rucktenwald every time he attempted to speak."⁵² Unlike the incident at North Division where no disciplinary actions had been taken against the rebelling students, at Riverside 210 students were suspended for their refusal to leave the auditorium and return to their classes. Principal Rucktenwald refused to reinstate any of the students until their parents came to the school for a meeting.⁵³ The following day, conferences were held with parents and *The American Negro* was distributed to students. Several parents were irritated with school officials for having taken disciplinary actions against the students, and it appears that the majority of the students' families tended to support the demonstrations. McDowell recalled that, "My grandmother was proud that we did this until we got a suspension. Then she was kind of upset because she had to take off work and go down to the school to reinstate us."⁵⁴ One black father at the conference remarked that he wanted to see the system-wide implementation of an integrated history textbook "so that the whites on the south side learn about us."⁵⁵

On February 27, 1968, the MPS Board's Committee on Appointment and Instruction met following the height of the black history protests. Unsurprisingly, the topic of black history in the schools was the subject of a heated debate. Representatives from the Citizens Association of Wisconsin and the Juvenile Protection Committee of the Parent Teacher Association called for the placement of uniformed guards "with police arrest authority" into the schools, in addition to "the immediate prohibition to principals and teachers with regard to the holding of any meetings or discussions in the schools with members of an

⁵² "Black History Conflict Spreads to Riverside, Parents Join Protest," *Milwaukee Courier*, February 17, 1968.

⁵³ "Riverside Reinstates 210," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 15, 1968.

⁵⁴ Karen R. McDowell, interview with author, September 9, 2011.

⁵⁵ "Riverside Reinstates 210," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 15, 1968.

extremist group known as the [Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council] Commandos.”⁵⁶ Phyllis Kirk, one of the several people speaking in opposition to these groups, retorted that black parents “have children in these schools [too]. They are concerned; very much concerned.”⁵⁷ However, Kirk added:

I feel that this was 1940 Germany: hot line from the police force, uniformed guards in the school, protecting the principal. What is this? We are supposed to educate our children in the schools....black history, this is what they are asking for. This is what they are entitled to. We have history. We want to hear about it....These [students] are trying to negotiate with the School Board because they want a decent education. That’s what they are asking for: a decent education...because they feel maybe, in some way, shape or form, they might get an education that is worthwhile, so they can become productive in the community, their country. You, a lot of people, forget that the black people, this is their country. This United States is their country.⁵⁸

By demanding the rightful place of African Americans in the standard U.S. history curriculum, these students in Milwaukee, with the support of their families, were asserting their right to equal treatment as residents of the city and citizens of the United States. Although some white Milwaukeeans were not prepared to accept the legitimacy of this line of thinking, it appears that those who spoke for MPS were not among them.

Following the February 1968 wave of protests, the MPS Division of Curriculum of Instruction issued a report outlining the background and evolution of the black history protests, as well as documenting their response to the crisis. After explaining that pilot programs utilizing *The American Negro* had been introduced at Lincoln, North Division, Riverside, and West Division High Schools, the report stated that, “Although there is a continued desire for an ‘integrated’ text, pupils seem to have accepted the ‘companion volume’ as an interim measure. The superintendent and his staff have assured pupils and parents that every effort will be made to find a suitable text.”⁵⁹ This last statement does not

⁵⁶ Milwaukee Board of School Directors, Minutes from the Committee on Appointment and Instruction, February 27, 1968, 4-5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁵⁹ “The Question of a Multi-Ethnic Approach to American History in the Milwaukee Public Schools,” Folder 14, Box 106, Lloyd Barbee Papers, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department, 10.

appear to have been empty rhetoric. The MPS administration had, in fact, taken immediate action in response to the student's demands.

On February 19, the MPS Coordinator of Secondary Social Studies, Arthur Rumpf, sent an urgent letter to the American Book Company stating that “there is a growing interest in materials which adequately portray the contribution of the Negro and other minority groups to the development of the American culture. This problem in Milwaukee has reached such proportion that it demands immediate attention.” Rumpf then requested “a copy of any United States history textbook which you have developed which uses an effective multi-ethnic approach to our history,” in addition to a “statement which you think will clarify the intent of your organization with respect to this national problem.”⁶⁰ One week later, a similar letter was sent to the Executive Director of the American Textbook Publishers’ Institute, which had been working with the Great Cities Council since at least 1965 to develop more meaningful textbooks for students attending urban public schools.⁶¹ Rumpf additionally mailed letters to twenty of the largest school systems in the country requesting information about how those cities were handling the issue of black history in their curricula.⁶² MPS officials speculated about the many possible causes for the inadequate treatment of African Americans in the history texts, but they ultimately concluded in a 1968 report issued in the wake of the February demonstrations that, “Whether omission in some cases is due to a planned design to distort history or in other cases to ignorance, the results are all too clear—texts which do not adequately portray the history of all Americans....Let us hope that [we can] move forward and work together to reach the goal we all seek—the fullest education possible for each of our children.”⁶³ This acknowledgement by MPS officials suggests that these administrators had begun to view the “cultural deprivation” of their students in a similar light, and with a corresponding sense of urgency, as the students themselves.

⁶⁰ Ibid., Attachment 3.

⁶¹ Ibid., Attachment 5. Joint Conference of the Great Cities Research Council and the American Textbook Publishers Institute, “New Directions for the Learner, the Teacher, and the Instructional Materials,” *Proceedings*, Los Angeles, 1965.

⁶² “The Question of a Multi-Ethnic Approach to American History in the Milwaukee Public Schools,” Folder 14, Box 106, Lloyd Barbee Papers, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department, 11, Attachment 4.

⁶³ Ibid., 1, 14.

Historiography of Civil Rights and Black Power Activism in Milwaukee and the "Long Movement" Debate

The black history protests in Milwaukee occurred during a historical moment that is not easily defined by historians. Indeed, the temporal and geographic confines of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements are currently being contested and debated among scholars of the long struggle for African American equality. The black history protests themselves defy any simple categorization. Whether they represent civil rights activism in the North, were expressions of Black Power, or should be understood simply as another aspect of African American educational reform in the city remains open to interpretation. Many of the young students who were leaders during this campaign for curricular reform also participated in concurrent struggles for fair housing in the city; many had also previously been involved in the city's earlier school desegregation efforts and attended Freedom Schools during the city's public school boycotts. Though such struggles could be characterized by scholars as examples of civil rights activism in the North, the young people involved in these efforts often explicitly embraced an ideology of Black Power, as has been recently noted by historians such as Jack Dougherty and Patrick D. Jones.⁶⁴ Yet despite their relevance to the contemporary debates among scholars attempting to interpret civil rights and Black Power activism, the black history protests in Milwaukee have for the most part been presented as a minor aspect of the larger efforts of African Americans in Milwaukee for educational reform. However, these demonstrations are significant in their own right. The black history protests in Milwaukee constituted an organized and sustained campaign on the part of young black activists, and exemplified the ways in which civil rights and Black Power activism often became intertwined.

Although historians of these movements have increasingly begun to turn their attention towards examining the interwoven nature of civil rights and Black Power activism during the 1960s and 1970s, precious little has been published about the interaction between these forces in Milwaukee. The bulk of the historical writing on the

⁶⁴ See for example, Jack Dougherty, *More than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Patrick Jones, "'Not a Color, but an Attitude': Father James Groppi and Black Power Politics in Milwaukee," in *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, eds. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

Civil Rights Movement has tended to restrict itself within the geographic confines of the South and temporal periodizations that typically begin with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling and conclude with the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Similarly, conventional narratives of the Black Power Movement have typically portrayed it as a violent end to the morally superior goals and tactics associated with this "heroic period" of the Civil Rights Movement.⁶⁵ In recent years, however, a number of historians have made calls to reinterpret the prevailing narratives of these struggles for African American equality. In 2003, coeditors Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard published *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, a collection of essays that sought to illustrate "the distinctive forms of U.S. racism, the variety of tactics that community members used to attack these inequalities, and the prevalence of reformist and nationalist thinking in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s," that occurred outside of the South.⁶⁶ Two years later, Jacqueline Dowd Hall called for the writing of a "truer story" of the Civil Rights Movement—a story of "a long civil rights movement that took root in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s," stretching "far beyond the South," and lasting well into the 1970s.⁶⁷ Most recently, Peniel E. Joseph has noted that the placement of "Black Power activism within the same contested political climate as civil rights struggles alters our standard conception of postwar African American history," and he argues that "[a]lthough civil rights and Black Power activists occupied distinct branches, they nevertheless remain part of the same historical family tree."⁶⁸ Despite the persuasiveness of their arguments, such calls by scholars for an expanded interpretation of the modern Black Freedom Movement have not come without dissent.

In a direct response to Hall's article, that also addresses arguments made by Joseph, Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang challenged "the theoretical propositions and historical interpretations of the Long Movement thesis," and argue that Hall's premise was

⁶⁵ Peniel E. Joseph, *Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama* (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2010), 12-13.

⁶⁶ Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 8.

⁶⁷ Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1235.

⁶⁸ Peniel Joseph, *Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama*, 15.

fundamentally ahistorical.⁶⁹ Likening the “Long Movement” to an undead vampire, Cha-Jua and Lang explain:

We question the adequacy of the Long Movement thesis because it collapses periodization schemas, erases conceptual differences between waves of the BLM [Black Liberation Movement], and blurs regional distinctions in the African American experience. Indeed, we view the characteristics of the Long Movement thesis as analogous to those of the mythical vampire....[T]he vampire’s...distinctive trait is its *undead* status; that is, it exists outside of time and history, beyond the processes of life and death, and change and development. The vampire is thoroughly rootless and without place—it makes its home everywhere and nowhere.⁷⁰

Similarly, although he embraces a “long movement” interpretive framework in his book *More than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee*, Jack Dougherty cautions that “future historians would be wise to reflect on...whether the ‘long movement’ model illuminates more about the past than it obscures.”⁷¹ Indeed, as coeditors Margo Anderson and Victor Greene note in *Perspectives on Milwaukee’s Past*, in their efforts to provide posterity with a “usable past,” historians often “do not pause to consider other perspectives regarding the same time periods and events. That is, once the historian settles on an object of study, other viewpoints, narratives, and projects disappear from view.”⁷² The historiography of African American activism in Milwaukee has suffered from such, perhaps inevitable, interpretive tendencies, as the existing literature on this era of black activism in Milwaukee has, at times, overlooked significant congruities that existed between struggles for equality in the city.

The majority of the scholarly literature on civil rights and Black Power activism in Milwaukee focuses on the efforts of African Americans to enact school reform in the city over the course of several decades. Most prominent among these is Dougherty’s, *More than One Struggle*, which seeks to illustrate Milwaukee “activists’ multiple perspectives within

⁶⁹ Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Yang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Struggles,” *The Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 265.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Jack Dougherty, *More than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Jack Dougherty, “African Americans, Rights, and Race-Making,” in *Perspectives on Milwaukee’s Past*, ed. Margo Anderson and Victor Greene (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 150.

⁷² Margo Anderson and Victor Greene, eds., *Perspectives on Milwaukee’s Past* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 2.

black-led reform organizations” while “exploring the degree of interaction between local and national history.”⁷³ Similarly, Bill Dahlk’s recent publication, *Against the Wind: African Americans & the Schools in Milwaukee, 1963-2002*, provides a more detailed, though less analytically interpretive, history of school reform efforts in the city over the course of multiple decades.⁷⁴ Although both books provide a wealth of knowledge documenting the prolonged efforts by African Americans to enact school reform in the city from the perspective of a “long movement,” their broad temporal scope results in some significant historical oversights. Dougherty and Dahlk both discuss the black history protests in their books. However, the significance of the campaign is not fully explored and neither author effectively links the black history protests to the city’s concurrent open housing campaign. Both struggles, however, appear to have been initiated and led by the young men and women of Milwaukee’s NAACP Youth Council.

The prolonged struggle to gain fair housing legislation in the city is best recounted in Patrick Jones’s *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee*, second only to *Milwaukee Journal* reporter Frank A. Aukofer’s first-hand account of the activities of the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council during the mid-to-late 1960s in his book, *City with a Chance: A Case History of Civil Rights Revolution*.⁷⁵ Jones provides the most comprehensive history of civil rights and Black Power activism in Milwaukee to date, while also effectively challenging the prevailing understanding of the meanings and uses of Black Power. Several reviewers have acknowledged the enormous contribution that his book has made to the slim historiography of African American activism in the city. According to Cha-Jua, “Jones has written an important history about one of the most tumultuous and potent civil rights struggles in our history.”⁷⁶ Robert S. Smith similarly asserts that “the text is, without

⁷³ Jack Dougherty, *More than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 4.

⁷⁴ Bill Dahlk, *Against the Wind: African Americans & the Schools in Milwaukee, 1963-2002* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010).

⁷⁵ Jack Dougherty, *More than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Bill Dahlk, *Against the Wind: African Americans & the Schools in Milwaukee, 1963-2002* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010).

⁷⁶ Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, review of *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee*, by Patrick D. Jones, *Journal of American History* 96, no. 4 (March 2010): 1260.

question, solid civil rights history....this book is an important and powerful work."⁷⁷ However, Smith also notes that Jones "slips into aggrandizing Father Groppi...[and] the efforts of leading African Americans such as alderwoman and judge Vel Phillips, legislator Lloyd Barbee, and the labor radical Calvin Sherard...pale in comparison to the detail given to Groppi."⁷⁸ Likewise, although reviewer Darryl Mace feels that the white priest's efforts were indeed an important aspect of the struggle in Milwaukee, he offers a similar view writing that "Jones's focus on Father Groppi...serves as the source of this book's major shortcomings." Mace adds that, "dedicating almost three-quarters of the book to the priest overshadows the fruitful and energetic efforts of others within and outside of the [Youth Council] and Commandos."⁷⁹ The story of the black history protests illustrates that although charismatic leaders were as prominent in Milwaukee as they were on the national stage, it was the energy of countless other activists—black youth in particular—that propelled the struggle for African American equality during the modern Black Freedom Movement.

Such histories focusing on the activities of prominent leaders all too often overlook the contributions of the "ordinary" activists that formed the backbone of the movements on whose shoulders these charismatic leaders stood. The stories of these activists and their struggles must be told as well, for any narrative that neglects the contributions of such individuals is woefully incomplete. The strongest connection that Jones makes in *Selma of the North* acknowledging of the role played by the Youth Council in the black history protests states that, "[i]n February and March [1968], the Commandos supported a series of protests at inner core schools over the absence of black history textbooks and the lack of 'soul food' in cafeterias."⁸⁰ Jones cites this information to support his argument that by the spring of 1968, "the open housing campaign began to wane."⁸¹ The implication is that the Youth Council first turned their attention to black history in February and March 1968 after

⁷⁷ Robert S. Smith, review of review of *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee*, by Patrick D. Jones, *American Historical Review* 115, no. 4 (October 2010): 1189.

⁷⁸ Ibid..

⁷⁹ Darryl Mace, review of *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee*, by Patrick D. Jones, *Journal of African American History* 96, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 275.

⁸⁰ Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 206.

⁸¹ Ibid.

the open housing marches began to die down. However, the Youth Council had initiated the city's first textbook turn-in prior to the first march for open housing, and the campaign for black history was waged alongside the struggle for fair housing legislation. In the few instances that the national black history protests have been treated as a campaign in their own right, they have typically been subjected to familiar binary constraints attempting to characterize these protests as expressions of either the integrationist ideals of the Civil Rights Movement or the separatism associated with Black Power activism. Jonathan Zimmerman, for example, has argued that by the late 1960s demands for black history were characterized by a shifting ideology on the part of black student activists. According to Zimmerman, "black students increasingly insisted that *any* national narrative would neglect or erase their distinctive experience," and they subsequently abandoned "the longtime quest for 'inclusion' in the 'regular' curriculum, [and instead] demanded a curriculum of their own."⁸² Additionally, Zimmerman maintains that, "Many of the protests [for black history] occurred in cities that had already adopted integrated history textbooks, [suggesting that] students wanted 'their own history' rather than a 'revised edition of American history.'"⁸³ However, much like other aspects of the civil rights movement in Milwaukee, such as the struggles for school desegregation and the passage of a fair housing ordinance, the student protests for black history in the late 1960s do not fit as neatly into a national narrative as Zimmerman suggests. Zimmerman ultimately argues that a growing sense of black nationalism among students during the late 1960s led them to reject an integrationist approach to the history curriculum. However, in Milwaukee the opposite was largely true. By the late 1960s, the majority of Milwaukee students appear to have embraced the idea of an integrated history presented in a single textbook, and they increasingly came to reject the use of supplementary materials or separate courses in black history alone. The central grievance of the students in Milwaukee was that black history was *not* included in their regular American history courses, and they only grudgingly accepted the introduction of supplementary texts on black history as a temporary measure until an adequate integrated textbook appeared on the market. While Zimmerman's

⁸² Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America?: Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 109.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 120.

arguments may very well hold true in other cities, the events in Milwaukee show that the national struggle for black history is much more complex than he initially concludes.

Many of the Milwaukee Youth Council members who had marched for fair housing and participated in school desegregation demonstrations had come to embrace an ideology of black power *within* the context of an integrated movement prior to the first demonstrations for black history in the city.⁸⁴ Dougherty, for example, maintains that Vada Harris had "internalized a positive black identity that bolstered her political commitment to integration rather than conflicted with it."⁸⁵ However, the student leaders of these movements came from a variety of ideological backgrounds. Wells Street Junior High school student Marcia Waiss, for example, led a walkout at her school to protest the lack of adequate black history texts available to the students. However, Waiss was not a member of the NAACP Youth Council and she was not an integrationist. The Waiss family were relative newcomers to the city and they were heavily involved in the Panther's Den, an organization that, Dahlk maintains, "provided a strong nationalistic focus" to the family.⁸⁶ Despite this, Waiss appeared in a press conference on Friday, February 23, 1968, to announce a boycott of all Milwaukee public schools that was scheduled to occur the following Monday if the school district did not comply with the students' demands for the teaching of black history. During the press conference Waiss was surrounded by several Youth Council Commandos, and it appears that these students were working in concert towards a common goal despite any ideological differences they may have held regarding integration.⁸⁷ Jones similarly argues in *Selma of the North* that "[t]he story of Milwaukee's open housing campaign does not fit with the popular narrative of the modern civil rights era," and that the Youth Council's "ability to reconcile race pride and community empowerment with integrationist goals...indicated a much more fluid connection between

⁸⁴ Patrick Jones, "'Not a Color, but an Attitude': Father James Groppi and Black Power Politics in Milwaukee," in *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, eds. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

⁸⁵ Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); 120.

⁸⁶ Bill Dahlk, *Against the Wind: African Americans & the Schools in Milwaukee, 1963-2002* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010), 191.

⁸⁷ WTMJ-TV, Canister 1968.44, Segment 3, February 25, 1968, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.

concepts like 'integration' and 'Black Power.'"⁸⁸ The cooperation between nationalistic students, such as Waiss, with the more integrationist Youth Council, suggests a similar relationship. Theoharis has argued that placing such activism in the framework of "the black freedom struggle" is a more effective approach for historians to employ, as it allows them to move "beyond a dichotomy between civil rights and Black Power both ideologically and chronologically."⁸⁹ It may seem that such an approach would be useful in the study of the black history protests. However, in their critique of such propositions to re-envision the way African American activism is currently understood, Lang and Cha-Jua argue that what Theoharis

considers a false dichotomy has erroneously led some scholars to view certain tactics and themes such as self-defense, internationalism, teaching Black History, and combating police brutality as only Black Power concerns, and to treat desegregation, civil disobedience, and electoral politics as civil rights issues. As many African American historians have demonstrated, these issues have persisted across time. However, their existence during the 1930s, 1960s, or 1980s, or that both Civil Rights and Black Power activists challenged these forms of racial oppression, or utilized similar tactics in doing so, does not demonstrate that "Civil Rights" and "Black Power" were the same.⁹⁰

This statement by Lang and Cha-Jua is accurate. So how then should the campaign for black history be understood? As Lang and Cha-Jua note, the teaching of black history has, when mentioned at all, tended to be presented as a mere tactic of Black Power activism rather than being a campaign for equality in its own right.

Conclusion

Following the argument of Hall that the Civil Rights Movement finds its origins in the 1930s, one could perhaps trace the black history protests to the publication of Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-education of the Negro*. Explaining the fundamental importance of teaching black history in the public schools, Woodson wrote:

⁸⁸ Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 4, 234.

⁸⁹ Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Yang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Struggles," *The Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 274.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

The thought of the inferiority of the Negro is drilled into him in almost every class he enters and in almost every book he studies....[T]o handicap a student by teaching him that his black face is a curse and that his struggle to change his condition is hopeless is the worst sort of lynching. It kills one's aspirations and dooms him to a life of vagabondage and crime. It is strange, then, that the friends of truth and the promoters of freedom have not risen up against the present propaganda in the schools and crushed it. This crusade is much more important than the anti-lynching movement, because there would be no lynching if it did not start in the classroom.⁹¹

This powerful statement rang as true in the 1960s as it had in 1933 when Woodson first penned it, and the date of its publication seems to support Hall's proposition that "a long civil rights movement...took root in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s."⁹²

However, because student-led demonstrations for black history in the public schools did not emerge for another three decades, it would appear that the application of a "long movement" framework to these demonstrations may not be particularly insightful.

The first student-led demonstrations demanding the inclusion of black history in the public schools appears to have occurred in 1966 in Bridgeport, Connecticut. On the morning of May 24, Bridgeport NAACP Youth Council members organized a textbook turn-in strikingly similar to the demonstration that would occur one year later in Milwaukee. On the day of the first textbook turn-in in Bridgeport, the national NAACP Youth and College Division Director, Mark Rosenman, sent a memorandum to NAACP Executive Director, Roy Wilkins, informing him of the demonstration. "I planned to work with the Bridgeport Youth Council on this protest activity and to involve the press media," Rosenman wrote. "As you are aware, this is a new type of demonstration and should receive much attention in the public news media."⁹³ The association of the NAACP Youth Councils with the black history protests, and the close involvement of the organization's national leaders during the first demonstration, suggest that the black history protests may have represented civil rights activism. Indeed, if civil rights activism is defined as the provision of equal access to, and representation in, the nation's existing institutions, then the black history protests surely fall under this definition. However, the emergence of this activism in 1966, and its

⁹¹ Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1977), 3-4.

⁹² Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1235.

⁹³ Mark Rosenman to Roy Wilkins, May 20, 1966, Papers of the NAACP, Special Subject Files, 1966-1970, Part 28, Series B, Reel 11, Frame 00116.

continuation throughout the latter half of the decade, place it outside of the classic periodization for the Civil Rights Movement.

The significance of the black history protests goes far beyond its implications for educational policy during this period and the subsequent curricular changes that occurred in the wake of these demonstrations. When viewed as a separate campaign for equality in its own right rather than a side note in the larger history of African American school reform, the black history protests begin to further complicate the dichotomies between civil rights and Black Power activism. As a result, they serve as an example of the ways in which the corresponding use of binary periodization schemas are insufficient measures when local activism, especially in the North, is taken into consideration alongside what has typically been characterized as an essentially Southern struggle for equality. Consequently, the black history protests validate the calls by scholars such as Theoharis, Woodard, Hall, and Joseph for reinterpretations of how we frame and understand the black freedom movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. While the recent scholarly debates about civil rights and Black Power activism demonstrate that these struggles were often, in the words of Joseph, "distinct branches...of the same historical family tree," perhaps the city's black history protests may best represent one of the frequent moments when those branches became entangled in the winds of change.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Peniel E. Joseph, *Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama*, (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2010), 15.

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