UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Styles of Struggle:
Community Organizing, Youth Culture, and Radical Politics
in New York City, 1968-1981

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

by

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The Dissertation of Cutler Curtis Edwards is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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University of California, San Diego

2014
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This tour is finally done. Seven years of rehearsals, practices, performances, and now it is time to move on to the next stage. But what a run it’s been. From the backwoods dirt roads of Wakulla County Florida to the Southern California streets of San Diego, the journey has been an amazing one. That the tour is over, the dissertation is complete, is the result of an incredible group of people. Friends and family, colleagues and critics, teachers and talkers, all part of a network of support and encouragement without which I could not have made it.

I arrived in San Diego in 2007, sight unseen. Low humidity and no mosquitos alone would have been enough to lure me to La Jolla. I never visited the campus or even the city before applying to UC San Diego, or after being accepted—I simply put my things in a moving truck and headed west. But while deciding on a program, the conversations I had with Luis Alvarez made all the difference. His openness, candor, support, and encouragement let me know that whatever else happened, I would find both the challenges and possibilities that I sought in a graduate program at UCSD. Since arriving on campus, he has proven my decision correct a hundred times. The collaborative relationships and environment that he and Daniel Widener foster among those with whom they work has been instrumental to my success, and a wonderful model for my own professional practices. As mentors, as teachers, and as people, they provided distinct but equally valuable examples. Nayan Shah asked to think differently, and was always happy to push me out of my comfort zone and then help
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As with any graduate program, colleagues are a critical component of the process. I was welcomed to UCSD by a group of folks who became friends as well as colleagues. Liz Mikos, Gloria Kim, Alicia Ratterree, and Andy Rice shared office spaces, secrets to success, and tips on escaping the environs of the History department periodically. I shared an advisor with Jimmy Patiño and Anita Casavantes Bradford, but their shared political commitments and professional tips were even more important, and shaped my first years at UCSD in ways that mattered long after they
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In the long run, the political positions and the popular culture perspectives shaping this project come from my family. My folks, Don and Suzanne Edwards, taught me that independence and strength are only meaningful in context, and don’t mean much if you don’t use them to help others. They also had me thinking at an early age about music as a site of struggle, and my dad’s righteous anger at inequality and social injustice shaped me in ways that I have realized only as an adult. My brothers West, Lyman, and Brooks have long served as sources of support, whether near or far. They’ve offered critical suggestions and just the right notes of strength more often than they can imagine. This is their project too.

Marilyn Brogan has put up with the most, listened the most, supported the most, and endured the most. When I left for San Diego, she stayed in Tallahassee while I got my bearings in San Diego. It took only a few days to realize I would never
get my bearings if she weren’t with me. She put her Betta fish Vera in a jar, the jar in her cup holder, her plants in the back seat, and drove nonstop from Florida to San Diego. We haven’t looked back since. I am grateful for her courage, confidence, determination, and continued grace under pressure. I am also grateful for her willingness to cede the dinner menu when it became clear that cooking was a vital way for me to unwind from the mental contortions of dissertating. If you’re ever lucky enough to be near a kitchen when she’s working her culinary magic, you’ll realize what a sacrifice it has been for her to let me commandeer the cast iron. Marilyn, thank you for the patience, the support, and the love. It’s wonderful to get to spend my life with someone so distinctive, so creative, and so complementary to my personality. We have all the fun. I can’t wait to see where we have it next.
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Styles of Struggle:
Community Organizing, Youth Culture, and Radical Politics
in New York City, 1968-1981

by

Cutler Curtis Edwards
Doctor of Philosophy in History
University of California, San Diego, 2014
Professor Luis Alvarez, Chair
Professor Daniel Widener, Co-Chair

Styles of Struggle: Community Organizing, Youth Culture, and Radical Politics in New York City, 1968-1981 builds on a recent historiographic trend challenging narratives of the 1970s as a period of conservative retrenchment, and demonstrates that the multiracial, anti-imperialist visions fueling the radical dreams of the 1960s continued to inform local struggle in what me might call the “long 1970s.”
For a theoretical frame looks to emergent youth culture during the same period. The artistic and aesthetic principles shaping hip hop during its early years, based in a commitment to collaborative competition, unexpected reformulations of everyday material, and the elevation of innovation as part of a strategy for survival constituted a “freestyle politics.” Hip hop culture and radical politics of the 1970s more broadly articulated and elaborated a freestyle politics that were multiracial, anti-imperialist, and deeply invested in struggles over race and space.

Local efforts to transform social and spatial relations drew on a longer history of anti-racist and anti-imperialist organizing. By the late 1970s, activists combined the two threads into a powerful critique of the resurgent frontier discourse used to justify neglect or destruction of the city’s minority communities. From the multiracial Black Theatre of Urban Arts Corps to the largely Puerto Rican United Bronx Parents’ fight for community control of education, from the tenuous alliances of Columbia students and Harlem activists to South Bronx youth partnering with avant-garde art gallery Fashion Moda, communities in struggle worked to develop a range of approaches for survival and self-determination. I conclude by analyzing how these practices came together in 1980-81 protests against the anti-Black and anti-Puerto Rican film *Fort Apache: The Bronx*, when hip hop culture was first explicitly deployed as a political organizing tool. Contributing to Civil Rights, popular culture, and social movement historiographies, *Styles of Struggle* locates the historical continuities of the long 1960s against what is often characterized as a point of rupture, interrogates the relationship
between transnational and local politics, and demonstrates how expressive culture shapes and sustains ongoing struggles for social justice into the 21st century.
Introduction

In March 1981, photographer Martha Cooper rushed to a subway platform in New York's underground, alerted to a "riot in progress." There she found a standoff between a group of Black and Puerto Rican youth and officers from the New York Police Department. The kids claimed they were dancing, a new style they called "breaking." The cops, sure it was a gang fight, had stepped in and broken up the party. In this apocryphal tale, the police questioned the kids, the kids demonstrated the dance moves, the officers realized they were wrong, and all was well. Several weeks later, Cooper and writer Sally Banes published "To the Beat Y’all: Breaking is Hard To Do" in _Village Voice_, bringing the nation's attention to the burgeoning New York youth culture called hip hop.¹

As the tale has long been told, the breakers were dancing rather than fighting. Their boisterous style, aggressively athletic moves, and sheer numbers led observers to interpret their dancing as physical conflict. Not to be overlooked is the way that the racialization of Black and Brown youth in New York City at the time would have made passers-by far more likely to conclude that these were troublemakers involved in unlawful activity rather than kids having fun, a conclusion confirmed by the police reaction. Their physical occupation of the public subway platform, repurposed as a recreational space, sent shockwaves of concern through a city that saw youth of color associating in groups as a prelude to a riot or other criminal act. They were seen as

destructive, not creative. The idea that they could be dancing, especially creating a
dance form so innovative that it was not readily legible as play, was far-fetched if not
unthinkable.

I argue that these breakers were doing both, dancing and fighting. After all,
breakers call these kinds of dance contests "battles." They were not physically fighting
with each other, but they were fighting against the attitudes directed towards them as
nonwhite youth. They were fighting against the marginalization and oppression of
their communities, the legacies of racism and imperialism that continued to shape the
lives of New York's multicultural Black and Brown populations. These battles were
struggles for recognition, for pride, for dignity. From poor parts of the city, the
crumbling blocks of the South Bronx, the rough neighborhoods of Harlem, they took
over street corners, subway platforms, and other public spaces. Their dancing
reasserted control over areas that had increasingly been policed as "hostile territory"
throughout the 1970s by New York authorities intent on subduing "unruly savages" to
keep the city safe for civilized society.

Breaking, like the other elements of hip hop culture—DJing, MCing or rapping,
and graffiti art—was a strike back at a society that excluded Black and Brown
communities from meaningful participation. Physically, sonically, verbally, and
visually, hip hop culture critiqued the positions of African-Americans, Afro-
Caribbeans, Latina/os, and other poor and immigrant communities of color.
Considered in context, this youth culture is part of a broader, ongoing fight for justice
among New York's minority populations, one that tied the kids in the breaking circle
to a global anti-racist and anti-imperialist movement. Their bodily actions, and hip hop culture in general, were but one style of struggle in the communities that had spent more than a decade diversifying and developing alternative political strategies in the wake of government clampdowns on radical activities since the end of the 1960s. Across the city, a variety of local organizations and individuals pursued their own goals in ways that referenced and regularly reshaped the local/global, anti-racist/anti-imperialist connections made in the late 1960s. Radical political projects had to be developed and articulated in new ways to carve out spaces of possibility in an increasingly hostile climate and circumvent restrictions meant to curtail them. As hip hop culture developed by freestyling on the streets of the South Bronx, so too did community activists and grassroots organizations develop a freestyle politics to help them navigate the shifting terrain of the 1970s.

This is not a history of hip hop, but it is a hip hop history. My analysis of the events on the ground and the groups discussed in the following chapters is shaped by the politics of the freestyle aesthetic at the heart of hip hop culture. It is the result of several sporadic but energized sessions of what a vinylophile might recognize as digging in the crates. Historians work until they exhaust the sources; DJs work through endless stacks of records as well. I went to the archives with a general rhythm for this project in mind—the radical politics on the ground during hip hop’s formative years in the early 1970s—but did not limit myself to a specific genre or style. At Columbia University, I read the University Protest and Activism Collection with a
particular ear for non-student voices, hoping to locate the student strike of ’68 in the broader politics of the city. A central issue in the strike was the university’s imperial expansion into Morningside Heights, generating a multiracial opposition that stretched far beyond the school’s student body.

Thinking about the connections between race, imperialism, and urban space in the long 1970s sent me chasing down samples farther uptown, where the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture houses the extensive Christiane C. Collins Collection documenting 40 years of organizing in the greater Harlem community. Looking for notes to complement that narrative, I found, among others, the records of Urban Arts Corps, a multiracial Black Arts group with distinct political perspectives on the issues of race, space, and colonialism that also fueled the Columbia unrest. UAC operated between Harlem and midtown Manhattan theatre spaces from 1968 through the late 1970s, and performed in housing projects, parks, and playgrounds around the city and state. Urban Arts Corp’s appearances in the Bronx in particular, alongside hip hop DJs developing their craft and gaining fame for their performances in the same kinds of spaces in the early 1970s, mark two distinct but overlapping efforts to reclaim territory in the South Bronx from the forces of neglect and racial hostility.

At the Schomburg I also sampled some work on the Black Panthers and a few things by the Young Lords, several of whom were Columbia students before the strike led them down a different political track. Following the Young Lords as a bridge of Columbia-Harlem relations sent me deeper into the stacks of Puerto Rican activism in
East Harlem at Hunter College’s Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños. There, archivist Pedro Juan Hernandez and his crew tuned me into the community organization United Bronx Parents, their dynamic, commanding frontwoman, Evelina Antonetty, and a host of activists and organizations that were a part of their circle in the long 1970s. After pursuing UBP and their allies and opponents through records of the Board of Education, it was back to Centro for a second take on Puerto Rican politics during this period. I realized that in addition to their education projects, United Bronx Parents, Richie Perez, and Diana Caballero, as well as others tied to the struggles at Columbia University in 1968, were instrumental players in a group called Committee Against Fort Apache. CAFA was a multiracial collective that practiced a freestyle politics, employing a range of tactics to battle against Time-Life Inc. and the 1981 film *Fort Apache: The Bronx* over its racist and imperialist representations of South Bronx residents.

There, in the Centro archives, flipping through files on the last day of my research trip, I came across a torn-out page of *Latin NY* magazine. Across the top it said “Fort Apache Bop: sung to the music of the Suger Hill (sic) Gang”; below, the full lyrics to a protest rap against *Fort Apache*. Suddenly, the crate digging paid off and the freestyle came full circle. I originally had been driven to this project by an effort to read a critique of the frontier myth in the 1981 song “Apache,” by the Sugarhill Gang. When I first learned about the Committee Against Fort Apache, I started planning how I could remix CAFA with the Sugarhill Gang song, to argue that community protests and popular culture were related at some level. Instead, I found
direct evidence that the two were directly and intentionally linked as part of a broader strategy for pursuing social justice in the early 1980s.

Forays at the Fales Library at NYU uncovered the genre-challenging work of concept/gallery Fashion Moda, the brainchild of Austrian immigrant and artist Stefan Eins and several others who fled the downtown avant-garde art scene for the pulsing streets of the South Bronx in 1977. Not the kind of place one might imagine would have introduced graffiti to the mainstream art world as aesthetically and politically important cultural production, but an important counterpoint to other efforts underway in the area. Africa Bambaataa was in the Southeast Bronx discovering the experimental electronic noise-rock of German band Kraftwerk, eventually manipulating their sounds into his legendary hip hop hit “Planet Rock”; just across the Bronx River, an Austrian immigrant and his multiracial crew of collaborators were working with South Bronx youth who created their own works of art by remixing aerosol paint into full-color murals. The South Bronx meets central Europe, circa 1980, and the world has never been the same.

With confirmation that the ferment in the South Bronx in the late 1970s and early 1980s was consciously connected to the emergence of hip hop culture, I returned to a variety of archives to resituate my sources in the broader theoretical and physical geographies of the city. Across the archipelago of archives in the city I traveled, searching among the stacks for the syncopations and submerged rhythms of struggle linking what had, during previous visits, seemed to be distinct political and cultural formations. During this remix phase, attention to forgotten notes and fragmentary files
proved to be as important as the documentation of mobilizations and organizations fully documented and preserved. The latter provided the narrative focus, the verses of the story that unfolds in this project. The former provided the backbeat, the transitions, the punctuated hits that place the verses in the context of the time.

    Sometimes, deep into the best freestyle sessions, as a dancer, DJ, or rapper, what comes out is no longer totally voluntary. At some level, with enough immersion, it is almost as though the subconscious takes over. Your feet, hands, or mouth begin to move more quickly than the brain can instruct them. In these sublime moments, even aware that they are happening, one is aware also that they are ephemeral. The “Fort Apache Bop” was a discovery like that, where the archival find I had dreamed of turned out to actually exist, and the outline of this project fell right into place. Far-ranging reading of an intentionally wide selection of archival sources had helped me build a framework within which to consider the enduring radical politics on the ground in the 1970s. Deep digging into a distinct but complementary collection of individual organizational records provided the details that would allow me to tell a larger story through an analysis of particular examples.

    Together, mixed and arranged, my research tells the story of a rich, complex, polyphonic period of political ferment through the specific tracks of five carefully chosen styles of struggle. I have worked here to spin a freestyle tale of culture, politics, and demands for social justice in the long 1970s. Of course, a freestyle is only a start. At some point the MC puts pen to paper, the DJ moves from impromptu scratch session to orchestrated set. During my research, I pulled out some esoteric
records and discovered some overlooked gems. But these raw elements still need production work to be a finished piece. Unlike a studio recording, the mixtape is a space that affords experiment, trial, forays into the unfamiliar, and delivers them to the listener through a kind of collaborative relationship that reveals the working process of the producer and lyricist. What follows, then, is a mixtape in the contemporary sense. It has some extended verses and sustained narratives, sprinkled with riffs, samples, and snippets that resonate around a central theme: multiracial struggles to decolonize New York City.

**Styles of Struggle**

This project tracks the similarities and divergences between forms of community organizing and local politics in New York City from 1968 through the early 1980s. In popular memory and understanding of the 1970s, the decade marked the decline and demise of radical, Left, and even progressive political movements in the United States. From radical groups like the Black Panther Party to the Republican presidential lineage from 1968-1992, broken only by Jimmy Carter's single term in the late 1970s, the "conservative backlash" seems to be the best explanation for the course of US politics and society in the late 20th century. Between 1968 and 1972, law enforcement, prosecutors, and a range of extra-legal forces waged war against visible groups like the Panthers, the US organization, the Chicano movement, Puerto Rican independence activists, various groups involved in anti-war activities, and other organizations that presented challenges to the status quo in the United States. For
many of these groups, the connections between their own particular domestic projects, and the ongoing global decolonization movements of the 1950s and 1960s manifest most strongly during the contemporary moment in the opposition to the war in Vietnam, coalesced around a cluster of efforts directed against racism, imperialism, and capitalism that have been characterized as a US Third World Left.  

But the crackdown on leftist organizations and the national turn away from liberal policies did not mark the demise of those fighting for change in the United States. Dan Berger suggests that rather than focusing on conservative power and regarding this period as a "time of limits," we should instead look to this decade as the "ultimate exploder of limits" as activists developed strategies to continue pursuing their objectives. Throughout the 1970s, a variety of community groups, youth cultural practices, and arts organizations developed their own particular style of struggle in the fight for justice. They generated a host of programs and approaches, opposed enduring racism, and challenged both the local and global dimensions of US imperialism.

Looking at any of these groups individually, as a single project, would offer insight into a slice of the political struggles waged by the city's Black and Brown populations during the long 1970s. However, the larger context of the moment, and the far-reaching connections made by their individual, local efforts would be obscured by this tight focus. By considering the overlapping and contemporaneous struggles of a variety of groups operating in Harlem and the Bronx between the social upheaval of

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1968 and the tightening conservative grasp over US society marked by Ronald Reagan's second inauguration, we can begin to understand the ways in which radical and progressive groups survived and even thrived throughout this difficult period. Whether working through the system by tapping the dwindling liberal government and philanthropic program funds, as did groups like Urban Arts Corps and United Bronx Parents, or, like the youth who were a part of the burgeoning new hip hop culture, striking out on their own to make dramatic sonic and spatial statements against racial inequality and oppression in their neighborhoods, these actors developed a range of innovative and flexible strategies to maintain their struggles within the shifting and increasingly hostile political landscape.

Activism, efforts for social change, and radical or even revolutionary transformations take time and long-term investments. They happen over uneven and ever-changing terrain, and the human labor, the efforts of individual people, is likewise uneven. In the contemporary world, few have the time, resources (and to be honest, dedication) necessary to live every moment of their lives in the kinds of engaged, active, overtly "political" practices that are readily legible as "revolutionary struggle." More often, people are mobilized in fits and starts, their political projects and passions balanced by the quotidian necessities of survival. Street corner conversations, parties with family, friends, and neighbors, artistic activity in formal or informal spaces, and living—really living in, experiencing, sharing, and being part of a community—these are critical elements of long-term political mobilization. Even when not on the march or going door-to-door there are numerous vital ways of
sustaining movements. A life lived successfully, with love and passion, in a system meant to silence, marginalize, or eliminate you, is a radical act.

At the heart of this project then is a concern with political mobilization, efforts for social change, and the role of popular culture and performance in functioning as vehicles or conduits for those changes. In the late twentieth century, changing political and economic relations helped cripple the power of traditional forms of organizing. Outsourcing, flexible production, and the fluidity of capital has divorced the worker from what had long served as the source of labor's power—sole provision of the energy to drive capital's engines. Similarly, an ongoing and ever-developing sophistication around issues of language, discourse, and control of media spin by conservative and reactionary forces has pre-empted the traditional strategies of marginalized populations. With legislation meant to “guarantee” minority equality, protest marches are spun as complaints rather than morally righteous appeals to society and it becomes difficult to secure those rights already nominally granted. Since Richard Nixon's appeal to "law and order" in the South, the Republican Party and their allies on the political right have solidified control of the terms of political debate, marshaling large numbers of white voters behind a wall of fear that might best be characterized as white privilege in crisis.

Clearly, whiteness as a political structure is not actually under any severe threat in the United States, either in the 1970s nor today. However, the sheer visibility of minority populations is sufficient to cause panic among those invested in the
privileges of whiteness. That is to say, "liberty and justice for all" is at odds with political whiteness.

For these reasons, among others, many are looking elsewhere than electoral politics and traditional organizing to bring about meaningful transformations in their communities and in their own lives. During the 1960s, these efforts were visible in many communities, as a range of revolutionary nationalists, cultural nationalists, hippies, bohemians, anarcho-pacifists and others variously dropped out, went underground, or made efforts to exist "within, but without, White America." Some were influenced by the strategies and tactics of anticolonial struggles around the world, and formed what Cynthia Young has called a “US Third World Left” that worked to “craft an anti-imperialist, anti-racist grassroots cultural politics.” The connections that local activists made between race and colonialism, institutional power in the city and imperialism more broadly, sustained and were elaborated by a variety of groups throughout the 1970s.

As the avenues for more formal and organized radical activity were threatened by the political economy of 1970s New York, minority activists developed a variety of different political strategies to pursue justice. Groups that learned to navigate the treacherous political terrain of the time in part by reformulating the descriptions of their political projects based on the audiences being addressed. They exploited

4. A great quote from the film "The Mack," when Roger Moseley's character is leading a Black Nationalist meeting to talk about establishing community control and local self-determination. Part of the funding for these kinds of organizations, as with UAC and UBP, came from Federal poverty programs. The Mack, directed by Michael Campus, Cinerama Releasing Corporation, 1973.

dominant understandings of ideas about gender, race, and desires for citizenship to pry open space for themselves. Nominally, groups like Urban Arts Corps and United Bronx Parents were part of a system meant to offer just enough to marginalized communities to keep them from becoming further aggrieved. They used the meager resources they were received from federal and philanthropic sources, however, to pursue political projects beyond the bounds of what was intended.

Understanding these links is an important part of examining how the mobilization of 1968 had lasting impact on the politics of protest in Harlem and the Bronx in subsequent years. Doing so allows us to reconsider the intersections between a variety of political projects and strategies in 1970s New York, from the reform efforts of the United Bronx Parents to control local education, to the radical cultural politics of youth culture and the rise of hip-hop. Inchoate, the politics of early hip-hop culture during the 1970s have garnered little attention and when they have, they generally are represented as primarily a struggle for survival and joy in the face of nearly overwhelming economic and social oppression. However, by tracing the circuitous paths of struggle in 1970s New York, I also make an argument about the broader politics of hip hop culture, and its ongoing relevance in the current political moment. Once we understand that hip hop culture emerged from a complex, contested, fraught political moment, intimately connected to everyday communities struggles against racism, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalist oppression, we have a way to rethink the reasons that hip hop continues to hold such cultural sway in times and places far from its origins. The globalization of hip hop as a popular cultural product is
the result of consumer practices. But its adoption by and adaptation to the specific needs of communities in struggle around the world is directly tied to the history of hip hop as a contextually specific, political youth culture since its emergence from the streets of the 1970s South Bronx.

**Freestyle Politics**

Looking to the practices and aesthetics of hip hop in the context of its creation is where I find the roots of what I call "freestyle politics." This is a mode of political struggle that draws on the raw materials, possibilities, and meanings of the moment, yet assembles, reformulates, and deploys them in new and unexpected ways. When an MC freestyles, he or she works to craft on the fly metaphors and drop unexpected references in novel ways to impress listeners with the creativity and originality of the rhymes. The skilled freestyler turns the battle her direction and keeps the opponent guessing by using their own words against them in ways more creative and energetic than they originally conceived. She is flexible, non-linear, and layers multiple meanings and senses over one another. Her references range from the general, understood by all, to the hyper-specific, taking the measure not only of the opposition but of the audience through their responses. Probing, poking, searching for a sign of weakness, freestyle is about specifically matching the particular opposition to a particular strategy of engagement. All freestyle battles cannot be won using the same techniques. To emerge victorious in a given battle, the freestyler must take the consider the time, place, context, and opponent, crafting an approach that wows
observers who—despite their own personal experience with the kinds of tactics and materials being used—are impressed or caught unaware by the innovation displayed in the performance.

Freestyle politics in the long 1970s was composed from three main flows. First, freestyle politics is a multiracial politics. It followed on the heels of the efforts of various nationalist groups in the 1960s to collaborate with each other in their radical aims, and was reinforced by the rapidly-shifting demographics of New York City in the late 1960s. Large-scale deindustrialization, massive urban renewal projects, and economic woes dislocated and relocated thousands of people, transforming entire areas of the city in a matter of years. Robert Moses’ Cross-Bronx Expressway carved through the middle of the Bronx in the 1950s, the horrors of its construction running off the sturdy working-class Jewish families and others who had long lived there. Into their places by the mid-1960s moved even poorer folks displaced from elsewhere in the city, “welfare tenants and the poorest of the working poor,” into dilapidated buildings that were “homes as the cave of the savage was a home.”6

Puerto Ricans driven from East Harlem by institutional expansion and economic pressures also headed across the Bronx River. They were joined by newly-arrived immigrants from the Caribbean, particularly Jamaica, in the wake of the Hart-Cellar Act, which in 1965 effectively uncapped migration from the Western hemisphere. New York City—the Bronx and Harlem in particular—was “a site of significant cultural and political contacts in which there occur[ed] a coalescence, structural reformation, and fusion: of

Caribbean peoples, Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and other groups that were “apart, antagonistic, and even ignorant of each other” previously.\(^7\) As folks figured out new ways of relating, interacting, and struggling together in a New York City where social and spatial relations were being dramatically reshaped, they also developed expansive ideas about racial and ethnic identity and affiliation.

Freestyle politics is also decolonizing. There is an easy link to be understood here, as African American and Puerto Rican activists continued long-standing efforts for self-determination, independence, and meaningful freedom. The significance of a decolonizing politics in New York’s Black and Brown communities has a resonance beyond this U.S.-bound conception, however, in the context of surging immigration to the city. Many thousands of these new arrivals to the city were from Caribbean nations that had recently won independence. Between 1960 and 1980 nearly half a million documented immigrants came to the US from the Anglophone Caribbean; more than 214,000 of these were from Jamaica, which had won its independence only in 1962. Over half of them settled in New York, along with thousands of others from Trinidad-Tobago (independence 1962), Barbados (1966), Bahamas (1973), and Grenada (1974).\(^8\) Each of these populations had its own particular connections to and understandings of struggles against colonial occupation and imperial power laid over with hierarchies of racial control. As they encountered each other in the context of renewed attacks on the city’s Brown and Black residents, these legacies informed a


shared understanding of refusal. Simply surviving or even thriving in Harlem or the South Bronx was a declaration of self-determination, an individual act of bodily decolonization. When communities refused to submit—to Moses’ steam shovels, to benign neglect, to social injustice—they drew on these longer histories of fighting for freedom.

Third, freestyle politics is about the racialization of space and the spatialization of race. The changing dynamics of race and urban space in the post-war period are highlighted in New York City, coalescing most clearly in the resurgent discourse of the city’s poorer neighborhoods as frontier territory. The communities impacted by that frontier approach challenged its attendant polices and practices as racist and imperialist, and they fought to redefine the spaces they inhabited. George Lipsitz has recently argued that scholars need to pay more attention to how “prevailing cultural norms and assumptions, …the dominant social warrant of the white spatial imaginary,” work to racialize space in ways that are “ideologically legitimate and politically impregnable.”9 But we also need to examine how the Black spatial imaginary “generates new democratic imaginations and inspirations,” how people who do not control physical spaces “construct discursive spaces as sites of agency, affiliation, and imagination.”10 These discursive spaces are centrally concerned with place and power; that is, with self-determination, with decolonization. In Harlem, elite institutions like Columbia University saw Black-occupied land as underutilized and ripe for the taking. In the Bronx, institutional neglect and white hostility constructed

the space as a blighted wasteland inhabited by savages. For Black and Brown communities, refusing these characterizations, they created new and enduring communal spaces both physical and discursive.

The specifics of the 1970s give a certain importance to this formulation of freestyle politics. The shifting geography of the post-1968 era, as Richard Nixon worked to dismantle the War on Poverty by redirecting it to benefit groups that would solidify his power, made the survival of radical political projects ever more perilous. Activists had to scramble to rediscover the funding, space, and time to pursue their objectives, working to find connections and resources in a rapidly changing political climate. Freestyle politics is related in some ways to the improvisational politics that Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz identify as holding real potential for the future of struggles for social justice. “Improvisation,” they write, “teaches people to enact the possibilities they envision. It emerges from communities whose members have been compelled to look beyond surface appearances… Adaptability, improvisation, and invention are the weapons of the weak.”

Freestyle politics seems to go one step farther. It teaches people to recognize the possibilities that others envision, and to use those possibilities to pry open more space, to carve out more territory than others imagined. And if improvisational politics is about collectivity, community, and new forms of collaboration and social relations, freestyle is the next step from there as well. Improvisation creates the connections, the

crew, that generates new performative possibilities. Freestyle politics are what a crew relies on when they go into battle. Whether in a contest against a friendly rival, or against municipal forces working actively to withhold the financial, physical, or psychological resources necessary to power social change, freestyle politics is oriented towards tactics of confrontation. If improvisation is about building and connecting across boundaries, freestyle is about circumventing and subverting those who refuse to join the party.

Freestyle politics springs from the need to stay one step ahead, the imperative to create something fresh and vital from the elements around us that have been overlooked or become ossified in their meaning. Freestyling is about repurposing more than it is about either recycling or creating something entirely new. Rather than follow prescribed or traditional patterns of interaction and resolution, winning freestyle battles means continually bringing something new to the table. Politically freestyling is about delivering or developing a project that other participants, either opposition or allies, may not have anticipated. It means recognizing that others involved will have different understandings of the approaches, messages, and materials incorporated into a particular performance, and that they will respond differently to them.

It also means that those most invested develop patterns of language and understanding that are multilayered and complex if not actually encoded—it’s no coincidence that rappers and breakers compete in circles known as "cyphers." Allies, partners, and others involved in close relationships with each other develop a common
base of referents, and common understanding of the coded meanings of these elements. The opposition, the crew on the other side of the battle, has to work to interpret and decoded these messages. Accordingly, those with experience in the cypher often have wholly different understandings of a freestyle performance than the uninitiated. Rather than recoiling from the unfamiliar or dismissing it as derivative and void of secondary significance, we must work to find the points of contact and connection between our own approaches and understandings, and those of others who are developing their own political performances. Theorizing a freestyle politics helps to explain why oppositional groups generated such different responses to ongoing racism and imperialism in Black and Brown New York. Like the best freestylers, they took conventionally recognized and understood ideas and materials and freaked them, turning them inside out, reformulating and reimagining them, and deployed them in new ways.

In other freestyle confrontations like b-boy battles, these elements are all on the floor, and the dancers respond to each other spontaneously. Sparring, jabbing, reformulating on the fly, the movements and referents become layered and complex. Ridicule and derision are matched by bravado and braggadocio. The declarations of strength and vitality draw attention and support to the dancer. On the other hand, a derisive posture like a thumb-sucking baby or a prancing, effeminate walk is intended to poke fun at the opponents. This is an intentional performance of weakness that serves to highlight the masculine power and confidence of the performer, usually understood by observers as imitative and dismissive of the breakers' counterpart. In
isolation from the context of the circle of dancers, however, it could be misunderstood. Without the dynamics of the give-and-take being established, it can be read as though the breaker himself is weak. That of course would be a mistake of interpretation.

In considering the broader context of freestyle politics, this kind of strategic performance of weakness, of subservience or submission, is important. It can easily lead the opponent to underestimate you. Even more significantly, it can lull the opponent into a false sense of security, the assumption that you will perform your expected social role without challenge. As Tricia Rose has argued about hip hop’s cultural power, “a style that has the reflexivity to create counter dominant narratives against a mobile and shifting enemy” can be an “effective way to fortify community resistance.”¹³ Thus, for example, when a group like United Bronx Parents appeals for funding to help them train their children to become better citizens, their request can easily be understood as a normative performance of liberal motherhood. Funding their project furthers the intent of governmental programs like the War on Poverty meant to recruit and incorporate poor, primarily minority, communities into the US body politic. But when UBP uses these funds in a clear pursuit of self-determination, the success of narrating themselves as "concerned mothers" in a way that they knew would speak to the particular political mentality of grant administrators is a success for freestyle politics.

It is more than coincidence that freestyling was so central to emerging hip hop culture in the 1970s. The changing conditions of the postindustrial city necessitated

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different strategies for survival and thriving. This need extended beyond youth searching for recognition and new sense of identity and the flow, layering, and rupture that characterized their stylistic experimentations.\textsuperscript{14} Community organizations, grassroots activists, and radical dreamers also had to account for a sudden shift in ground tactics in the post-1968 era. This project describes how several of these organizations drew on and reformulated pre-existing ideas to pursue their own political objectives. They freestyle about race, space, the meaning of community, and the frontier myth to continue carving out room for social change in a political climate increasingly hostile to their needs and demands.

\textit{Race, Empire, and the Frontier in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century}

The frontier in this project is not explicitly an analytic, nor a framing for the analysis of the organizations and movements that the chapters discuss. Rather, the frontier is the terrain on which the actors themselves waged their struggles over race, representation, and control in New York City in the 1960s and beyond. Urban authorities and the mainstream constituencies they represented saw the outer boroughs, particularly the South Bronx, as hostile territory in the 1970s. From Columbia officials describing life outside the university's ivy walls in Harlem as "requiring the perpetual \textit{qui vivre} of a paratrooper behind enemy lines" to the 41\textsuperscript{st} Precinct being widely known as "Fort Apache," where a few resolute cops soldiered

\textsuperscript{14} Rose (38-41) identifies flow, layering, and rupture as stylistic continuities linking hip hop to the longer history of Afro-diasporic cultural production. In the rupture, we find the possibility for the emergence of new and unanticipated outcomes.
on against the faceless criminal hordes of the South Bronx, frontier rhetoric haunted
discussions of the city's geographic and social relations.

Of course, it should come as no surprise that the language of the frontier, of
foreignness and invasion, should frame American conceptions of the struggle between
the darkened urban core and the suburban destinations of white flight. For more than a
century, the nonwhite peoples of the world had been paraded in front of the American
public as, at best, the white man's burden, or more frequently as threats to the health
and strength of the United States. From justification for the invasion of Mexico in the
Mexican-American War, to the ongoing campaigns against native peoples throughout
the 19th century, to the Spanish-American War and the ambivalent incorporation of
Puerto Rico and the Philippines under US control, to military interventions in Cuba,
Haiti, and other countries, up to and including US intervention in Africa and the
Middle East in the 1950s and 1960s, the American "duty" to keep the dusky hordes at
bay colored domestic conceptions of the proper status of nonwhite peoples within the
United States.15

In 1965, Charles Abrams, leading urbanist and founder of the New York
Housing Authority, made the connections direct with the publication of The City is the
Frontier.16 For Abrams, the frontier meant the inner city was the place to which the

15. Shelley Streeby, American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular
Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Paul Kramer, The Blood of
Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines (Chapel Hill: University of
North Carolina Press, 2005); Mary A. Renda, Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the
Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,
2001); Melani McAlister, Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle
United States and other countries would need to turn their attentions in order to ensure an orderly, progressive future. Abrams' metaphor was not deeply theoretical, nor did he necessarily locate the threads of his own reflexive terminology in his book. His choice of terms suggests the degree to which the "frontier" had hold over understandings of territory occupied by non-white populations. Calling the city a frontier highlighted that urban spaces had become wild lands full of savages, hostile and dangerous to the future of civilization, the frontier of the urban US was a place that needed to be reconquered more than renewed or revitalized. It should come as no surprise that the people living in these territories would meet with increasingly militarized treatment as the urban crisis deepened.

Even immigration scholars used this language. For the people of the Caribbean, New York City represented “the ultimate urban frontier” in the 1970s. Caribbean immigrants came “from small, powerless, and often poor or less developed emerging nations, caught in the path of lingering racism and ethnocentrism, legacies of colonialism, and the caprices and contradictions of world capitalism.” Once in the United States, they encountered a society that did not recognize them as the kind of people capable of transforming the frontier into civilization. Furthering the frontier comparisons, Panamanian-born Yale sociologist Roy Simón Bryce-Laporte argued that for Caribbean immigrants post-1965 entering New York City “at a point of marked structural and attitudinal adversity,” their experiences were more analogous to

those of “early Chinese and Mexican laborers on the West Coast” than to previous waves of European arrivals in the city.\(^{19}\)

The uses of and struggles over the frontier in post-1968 New York is a place to see the development of freestyle politics in action. Radical activists came to understand that despite the promises of midcentury racial liberalism, full membership in the United States would always be premised on the capacity for verisimilitude of whiteness. Dominant society continued to frame US imperial efforts abroad, urban policies at home, and strident demands for social justice through war metaphors that increasingly tended to frontier discourse. Radicals recognized that marginalized populations, particularly the urban poor, were regarded as dangerous to American civilization, as savages incapable of productively contributing, and as a threatening hordes lurking just behind the barricades.

During the 1970s, a variety of political actors furthered this frontier discourse. Municipal authorities and the mainstream press talked about the threat to the city from the faceless hordes in the outer boroughs. Political scientist Norton Long proposed leaving urban cores rather than renewing them, making the inner city "an Indian reservation for the poor, the deviant, the unwanted, and for those who make a business or career of managing them for the rest of society." Letters to the editors of the *New York Times* complained of "barbarians" keeping the city "in a state of siege."\(^{20}\) New York needed the cavalry to deliver it.

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But in Harlem, the South Bronx, and Brooklyn, people began to think about opposition to the frontier paradigm in different ways. Rather than simply demanding inclusion, crossing the frontier and joining civilization, they rejected the frontier as a viable way of determining who deserved consideration as members of US society. Instead, they began to freestyle on the frontier. They took the power of that concept in the American imagination and turned it against itself. They positioned Native Americans and indigenous populations as the heroes. Cowboys and soldiers and expanding society itself, they attacked as invading forces of oppression. These activists saw their neighborhoods as their rightful homelands, where they should have control and the ability to determine their own futures. The actions of outsiders, well intentioned or not, were acts of colonization that recapitulated Manifest Destiny; urban renewal, police presence, and media (mis)representation were tools used to attack their communities and justify their destruction. These practices are “justified as forms of frontier defense against demonized people of color,” argues George Lipsitz. “Works of popular film and fiction often revolve around phobic representation of Black people unfit for freedom. These cultural commitments have political consequences.”21 The people of the South Bronx recognized this, and resoundingly renounced them. “Indians aren’t savages, and neither are we!” they declared. 22 Contests around race, space, and power would be waged through language of the frontier.

**Interventions**

Post-Civil Rights Era Social Movements:

This project reconsiders the relationship between the visible radical political movements of the 1960s and the ongoing struggles that came after them. It connects a variety of contemporary efforts and uncovers the political impulses that drove them. The explosions of the period left radical efforts in the next decade more difficult to identify, but the dreams of liberation that fueled the era could not be extinguished by violence, imprisonment, or half-hearted palliative policies. Rather than trying to trace individual racial or ethnic mobilizations or a single form of political protest through time, this project looks across the city to reframe the legacy of the global connections made by New York activists at mid-century. Through a wide-angle lens trained on local scenes of struggle in the 1970s, we can see how seemingly disparate groups pursued political projects that were each grounded in a transnational resistance to racism and imperialism. It asks us to think about what is happening at multiple levels as efforts overlap, run across one another, and cross-pollinate in ways that can be fleeting and difficult to identify. But looking at the intents driving these groups, and recognizing the deep and lasting impact of radical anti-racist, decolonizing politics in the communities in which they endured, invites us to consider the grassroots and street-corner survivals of global visions of liberation.

In doing so, Styles of Struggle adds to a growing body of scholarship challenging narratives of the 1970s as a period of conservative retrenchment and instead recovering a range of ongoing efforts to transform US society. The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism, edited by Dan Berger, demonstrates that radical
dreams survived in a hostile climate, and that groups involved in projects as diverse as anti-nuclear activism and ending sexual assault worked tirelessly to gain support for their causes. Other scholars have rethought the temporal framing that centers the 1960s, instead examining the longer histories of Black Power, student activism, and other social movements that mark that decade. Daniel Widener’s *Black Arts West*, for example, looks at the central role of expressive culture in Black struggle in Los Angeles from World War II through the 1990s. With a focus on issues rather than convenient dates, the post-war history of efforts for social change become more an ebb and flow of advances and strategic reworkings than a series of disconnected assaults on the ramparts of injustice.

At the same time, this project’s focus on the continuing resonance of the frontier in the late 20th century makes another contribution. The time between 1968 and 1980 is the time in which the frontier becomes this problematic mythical symbol, and a point around which political mobilizations start to operate. In some ways this trajectory functions as a precursor to the new Western history that emerged in the 1980s as a revision of traditional histories of the "frontier" that saw it as a heroic space of American possibility. In their strident opposition to frontier discourse as an organizing principle for addressing the conditions of US cities in the late 20th century, community activism and grassroots organizers were ahead of the academic curve (during the same period, the experiences of female activists in a variety of organizations were laying the groundwork for the feminist-of-color politics announced
in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*). Patricia Limerick has argued that understanding the West through this new critical lens, in which the frontier was less a place of hope and possibility than one of violence and conquest, will help us understand global history more broadly. In its own small way, this project agrees with that position and seeks to contribute.

This project also reassesses the relationship between youth activism and the efforts of an older generation. In many versions of this history, the elder generation focused on local or national struggles into the early 1960s, when they were displaced by younger radicals with more confrontational tactics and a global perspective. It was, as Sonia Lee writes in her recent relational history of the Black and Puerto Rican civil rights movement in New York City, "the age of global revolutions, when the Cuban Revolution, the U.S. antiwar movement, and liberation movements stretching from Vietnam to Congo led activists across the globe to think of human liberation in cross-racial and transnational ways." Kenneth Fox has argued that the urban riots of the mid-1960s were a political response to the physical disruption of urban renewal. Joe Austin adds that "Brutal and repressive policing practices aimed unevenly at political dissent and minor criminal activity" further contributed to the anger simmering in cities.

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26. Austin, 22.
In an era of decolonizing activity across the globe, and particularly in African and Caribbean nations with ties to the communities in which these riots took place, it is not a stretch to think about the urban unrest at midcentury as resistance to imperialist invasions of communities of color. But almost as soon as these global visions developed, they were crippled or destroyed. Lee argues that movements for community control of schools held real potential, but "external repression" from teachers' unions and other forces, forcing community control leaders to "switch goals or simply pursue their goals on a smaller scale." I concede that they may have pursued smaller-scale projects, but we should not discount the importance of those small acts in nurturing and sustaining the politics that framed those broader, large-scale projects. Revolutionary changes do not happen on an accelerating or even steady timetable. They progress here, stall there, lose ground, and respond when possible. The war of position is not won overnight.

Hip Hop Scholarship:

Considering hip hop more explicitly as a politically-charged culture from its earliest days offers a different perspective on the relationship between youth culture and radical politics in the late 20th century United States. To place hip hop in context requires a reassessment of the on-the-ground politics at play in Harlem, the South Bronx, and the other areas from which hip hop began to emerge in the early 1970s. A crackdown on the revolutionary organizations of the 1960s combined with a new wave

27. Lee, 209.
of immigration after the 1968 enactment of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, particularly from the Caribbean, marked a new era of struggle for radical activists in the city and generated a host of responses. Some were linked most directly to the Black Nationalist ideology of the previous decade, others to the Puerto Rican liberation movement, and still others to contemporary artistic debates around race and representation. All of these, however, were tied to the global movements for decolonization and self-determination that had fueled activism in the US and around the world in the 1960s. *Styles of Struggle* provides a new entry point for thinking about the relationship between the globalization of hip hop as a commercial product, and hip hop’s ongoing importance to the political struggles of marginalized and oppressed communities around the world.

*Styles of Struggle* offers a concerted attempt to situate hip hop culture within the wider political milieu from which it emerged. Previous scholars have addressed aspects of hip hop history, but only in parts. Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* and Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop* are perhaps the best histories of hip hop's early years. Chang's engaging narrative history ranges far and wide but does not directly theorize hip hop as a cultural or political form. Rose focuses on the musical dimensions of hip hop through the early 1990s after a thoughtful critical analysis of the sociohistorical conditions that motivated New York youth to produce this new cultural form.

On the graffiti front, itself an independent subculture despite its close association with hip hop, Joe Austin's *Taking the Train* is among the best scholarly appraisals. There are not yet really any substantial scholarly works on breaking or hip
hop DJs before the mid 1980s. Sociologist and DJ Oliver Wang's forthcoming *Legions of Boom*, on the culture of Filipina/o mobile DJs in the San Francisco Bay area, should take its place among the best examinations of DJ culture, but is based on the scene over the last decade or so. Similarly, Joe Schloss' important work on the politics of b-boy and b-girl culture, particularly *Foundation*, is based on ethnographic research over the last 15 years. There simply are not scholarly studies of early breaking and DJ's, due in part to the slower entrance of those elements of hip hop into the academic world, but also due to the archival difficulties of recovering those two more ephemeral forms.

However, from the snips and clips that survived, we can theorize the role that those two elements, dance and the DJ, played in articulating the larger politics of hip hop culture. We know where, when, and who performed, and the kind of responses they generated, even if we cannot analyze their performances in any real depth. Combined with rap and graffiti writing, though, we can sketch the broader meaning of freestyle politics. Considering more fully the situated politics from which hip hop culture evolved will help with that project. Intriguingly, scholars have, here and there, gestured loosely towards the decolonizing politics that I argue are at the heart of hip hop's early years. Joe Austin frames the graffiti crisis in New York as “New Rome” beset by barbarians from beyond the pale. Tricia Rose hints at a decolonizing politics when she writes that hip hop "appropriates urban space,” "claim[s] territories,” and
“made 'open-air' community centers in neighborhoods where there were none.”28 I elaborate on these subtle suggestions in the story that follows.

South Bronx literature:

In a more specific way, *Styles of Struggle* contributes to literature on New York City and the South Bronx in particular in the post-Civil Rights era. Writing back against ideas of the South Bronx as fundamentally abandoned wastelands, or a place for America to point at as an object lesson about the perils of urban life, it demonstrates that even in the harshest of environments people refuse to submit to oppression. Only a few works cover this history of the South Bronx in the 1970s, notably Jill Jonnes’ *We’re Still Here: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of the South Bronx* and Jim Rooney’s *Organizing the South Bronx*. This project adds to those urban community histories by revealing the links between the local politics and the larger national and transnational movements rarely visible from a ground-level vantage. Recent and emerging work on relational Black/Brown struggles for justice in New York City, like Sonia Lee’s *Building a Latino Civil Rights Movements*, engages similar themes but positions them within a strictly US, Civil Rights format. *Styles of Struggle* helps provide a framework to consider New York struggles specifically, as well as other multiethnic efforts for justice around the US, in a transnational frame that can productively expand our understanding of local, grassroots struggles for social change.

28. Rose, 11, 22.
Chapter Organization

1: Harlem is Viet Nam: Articulating Struggles During the 1968 Columbia Student Strike

The 1968 Columbia University strike, often seen as a high-point of student radicalism, anti-war activity, and efforts to connect struggles for racial justice in the United States to decolonization and independence efforts around the world, opens chapter 1. This chapter introduces the variety of organizations and individuals brought together by an event often characterized as primarily a campus protest, and theorizes the transnational dimensions of local political activity in the late 1960s. The Columbia strikers immediately connected the campus expansion into Morningside Park in largely Black Harlem to Columbia's involvement in the Vietnam War. To many community residents, Harlem was Vietnam, and the racist practices of the University in the surrounding community were a reflection of University complicity in racially-charged imperialist projects abroad.

This is a chapter that brings together the three elements that gave shape to freestyle politics in the late 1960s. The strike helped to connect and crystallize a number of pre-existing struggles for social justice that focused on race, space, and representation in Harlem. The mobilizations on campus and in the community show people working through new multiracial relations. They also demonstrate how various groups began to connect local struggles to the broader politics of anti-imperialist and decolonizing movements. As activists across the spectrum made these connections,
they recognized that the racialization of space and spatialization of race affected strategies and possibilities across all geographies of struggle.

2: Stages of Change: The Multiracial Black Theater of Urban Arts Corps

In chapter 2, Urban Arts Corps, a community theater group established to train Black and Puerto Rican youth in stage production and performance, complicates understandings of the politics of Black Art in the late 1960s and beyond. Significantly, UAC performances also managed to offer penetrating critiques of social and racial injustice in the United States, and provided education, jobs, and entertainment to the city's poor and minority communities. To do so, they developed a set of strategies for securing funding under the auspices of waning racial liberalism, allowing them to survive in an environment where many other cultural organizations foundered.

Established in 1967, Urban Arts Corps' traveling company performed retooled classics and new works in the school playgrounds and parks of Harlem and the Bronx. Recruiting Black, Puerto Rican, and other minority youth to join, the Corps also played to mixed-race downtown audiences as a central component of founder Vignette Carroll’s multiracial politics and vision for Black Theatre. Occupation of university buildings, public institutions, and parks were central to the styles of struggle that drove Columbia/Harlem mobilizations from 1968 into the early 1970s; Urban Arts Corps took over public spaces in housing projects, playgrounds, and other locations across the city where they performed their own version of multiracial organizing, and critiqued racism, colonialism, and the spatialization of race through their plays. In
Manhattan, UAC is worth considering in the context of the actions at Columbia. In the Bronx, UAC should instead be thought of alongside the other young Black and Puerto Rican artists—the hip hop kids—who liberated public space for their own impromptu performances of a multiracial, decolonizing politics.

3: Community Control as Decolonization: United Bronx Parents, Education, and the Fight for Self-Determination

Chapter 3 primarily addressed the decolonizing aspect of freestyle politics. It examines the largely Puerto Rican organization United Bronx Parents, which fought for community control, self-determination, and improving the education and overall lives of nonwhite residents in New York City. Based in the Bronx but active throughout Harlem, into Brooklyn, and eventually across the country, UBP began with a focus on educational reform. During school decentralization in New York City, UBP felt that only local control would deliver an educational system responsive to the needs of Spanish-speaking New York. They offered training courses to teach parents to navigate the school system, advocate for students' rights, and initiate investigations and disciplinary proceedings against teachers and administrators who failed to meet community expectations. Recognizing the links between material and political struggle, UBP won grants that enabled them to start local daycares employing Bronx residents and offer stipends to parents who participated in their training programs and workshops.

United Bronx Parents was an inclusive organization that was made up of “all races and colors,” but the organization itself was driven by an explicit politics of
Puerto Rican liberation, both independence for the island and self-determination for Puerto Rican communities in New York. This anti-imperialist vision was framed around a recognition of the spatialization of race in the South Bronx and its detrimental impacts on residents. UBP responded to this with a freestyle interpretation that racialized space in the South Bronx in a different way. They considered the South Bronx as Puerto Rico in microcosm, and UBP sought to carve out and claim territory there as a meaningful step on the path to Puerto Rican independence.

4: Ghetto/National/International: Fashion Moda Gallery, Youth Culture, and Street Art in the South Bronx

Fashion Moda, the first contemporary art gallery to open in the South Bronx and a venue for aspiring artists starting in 1977, is a point of entry to discussing the politics of youth culture in chapter 4. From its South Bronx base, Fashion Moda staged exhibitions and events that took seriously the graffiti art and music of emerging hip hop culture as challenges to dominant notions of the political purposes of modern art, and characterizations of minority youth cultural practices as destructive and void of meaning. Displaying graffiti as art rather than vandalism, Fashion Moda gave institutional recognition and voice to a rising generation of artists whose vibrant murals adorned city walls. This chapter primarily is about contests over race and space. Cofounders Stefan Eins and Joe Lewis went out of their way to bring white folks to a Black/Brown area, and to challenge ideas about the meaning and value of
things that were produced there as well as notions about the relations between racial and ethnic groups.

The shows that Fashion Moda mounted and sponsored also were about race and space. As the frontier rhetoric began to emerge more explicitly in the late 1970s, activists who had been working on a number of related causes throughout the decade began to locate the ways that that the frontier, the myth on which American history was based, was about the racialization of space. My analysis of Fashion Moda exhibitions asks how the graffiti murals and musical performances positioned youth artistic activity as a decolonizing project, staking claims to Black and Puerto Rican rights to self-representation and community control of artistic meaning. The relationship between Fashion Moda's institutional position, and the quotidian activity of South Bronx youth and other residents who interacted with the gallery, help us understand how the readily-legible battles of groups like the Young Lords and UBP were also fought by artistic organizations that blurred the distinction between traditional politics and cultural practices.

5: The Battle of *Fort Apache: The Bronx*: Frontiers of Struggle in the 1980s

The final chapter brings the radical politics, organizations, community institutions, and youth culture of the previous chapters together in an analysis of protests and mobilizations against the 1981 film *Fort Apache: The Bronx*, the nickname given the neighborhood's 41st Police Precinct. The film's representation of the South Bronx as a savage frontier provided a focal point that yoked together the
multiracial and decolonizing politics and the struggles over race and space that had swirled through the city across the long 1970s. As the Columbia Strike of 1968 served as a nexus for a number of overlapping and intersecting struggles to be articulated, so too did the movement against *Fort Apache* provide points of accessibility and contact between groups with distinct objectives and positions. Centered on the production of, and protests against, the movie, this concluding chapter looks at the relationship between the Committee Against Fort Apache's efforts to stop the film's production, and hip hop cultural production that engaged these debates over race and representation.

While CAFA, composed of more than thirty community organizations, took to the streets and courtrooms to protest, they also turned to culture to build a critique of official discourse depicting the South Bronx as a "Wild West" frontier, and its residents as violent savages in need of civilizing by the "cowboys" of the New York Police Department. The competing representations in official discourse, community organizations, mainstream film, and local youth cultural activity reveal the convergence of traditional and cultural politics in negotiating control over the lives and communities of racialized populations in New York City.

**Interludes**

Between the chapters are interludes covering the elements of hip hop: DJing, Graffiti Art, Breaking, and MCing. These interludes are essentially brief freestyle sessions. They propose ways to think about the evolution of hip hop culture in the
context of the main chapters. Placing the elements of hip hop within and among a number of contemporary political projects in the same spaces and places helps to draw out the multiracial and decolonizing impulses of hip hop during its formative years. They are intended to help both explain freestyle politics and provide a break in the narrative before spinning into the next chapter. As Bambaataa’s Universal Zulu Nation reminds us, the fifth element of hip hop is knowledge, “overstanding.” The interludes suggest a more expansive historical meaning for hip hop culture.

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All of this is to say, the anti-racist and anti-imperialist politics that linked activists and organizations on campus and around the world did not end with the close of the 1960s. Instead, we might productively consider the Columbia student strike of 1968 as a launching pad that reinvigorated and perpetuated a variety of political projects in Harlem and surrounding areas throughout the 1970s and even beyond. A number of students left the university and became involved in political organizing at the community level.

Perhaps the best example is SDS member Juan Gonzalez. As a student at Columbia in 1968, Gonzalez had been one of the three-person Strike Coordinating Committee. As a Puerto Rican, he was in a tenuous position. Most of the politicized Puerto Rican students had joined the Student Afro-American Society, because there were too few Puerto Rican or even Latino students to form their own group before 1968. But Gonzalez found Students for a Democratic Society appealing as well, its clear anti-imperialist stance more in line with his own political position regarding
Puerto Rican independence. He became the third member of the Strike Committee because he was on good terms with both organizations but a member of neither.29 Although a Puerto Rican Student Union would emerge in the years following the 1968 strike Gonzalez did not join, having left the university at the end of the year.

His dedication to radical anti-racist and anti-imperialist politics did not flag, though. Once away from campus, Gonzalez was a founding member in June 1969 of the New York branch of the Young Lords and served as its first Minister of Education.30 He was soon joined by Richie Perez, a Bronx public school teacher and budding political activist. Perez, at 25 one of the oldest members of the Young Lords, found his way to a radical politics of Puerto Rican independence through a slightly different course. As a young teacher at Monroe High School across from the Bronx River Houses, Pérez met Evelina Antonetty in the mid-1960s when she and her daughter were forming United Bronx Parents. From Antonetty, he learned to make a much more critical analysis of the school in which he taught, and the wider systems of power in the city. Pérez credited Antonetty with his politicization and radicalization, and this transformation played an important role in his decision to join the Young Lords in late 1969, during the People's Church occupation.31 He soon was Minister of Information.

29. Juan Gonzalez, videotape interview, tape #163, 164, 24 May 2005; Oral History Collection, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora; Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños Archives; Hunter College, CUNY.
30. Richie Perez, “Brief History of the Young Lords,” n.d., Richie Perez Papers; Box 24 Folder 3, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños Archives; Hunter College, CUNY (Perez Papers).
Although they would pursue distinct paths throughout the 1970s, the two men had their politics irrevocably shaped by the struggles of the late 1960s. Gonzalez would become a leading journalist concerned especially with Latina/o issues. Pérez would spend the 1970s pursuing various kinds of Puerto Rican independence efforts as the Young Lords disintegrated and evolved into the Revolutionary Workers Party. He taught Puerto Rican Studies at Brooklyn College, and helped establish the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights. Forced out of Brooklyn College by right-wing power brokers, he returned to the Bronx and started organizing at the community level again during hip hop's infancy. Pérez then emerged as one of the leaders of the Committee Against Fort Apache in 1980, his long-term organizing experience and contacts across the city instrumental to CAFA's success in the movement opposing racist representations of Blacks and Puerto Ricans in the Paul Newman vehicle *Fort Apache: The Bronx*. By this time Gonzalez was a full-time reporter for the *Philadelphia Daily News* and CAFA regularly relied on his publishing platform and journalist credentials to spread their message and gain access to media events. The continuing importance of the anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggles of the 1960s to activist efforts in the decades that followed are directly visible through these examples. They are but two of the many whose radical politics bridged the period between the heady hopes of 1968 and Reagan's consolidation of conservative power in the early 1980s.

There is a direct line of activism traceable from the Columbia strike to the South Bronx's mobilization against *Fort Apache* over a decade later. However, as the
constellation of struggle that developed during the Columbia actions suggests, the issues the strike raised readily spilled across campus borders. A host of actors reconceptualized the relationship between race, empire, and self-determination in the late 1960s, and these ideas continued to shape the ways that community activists and grassroots organizations fought for social change in the shifting political climate of the 1970s. Whether they had been directly part of the strike or not, they continued to interrogate the connections between the particular causes they pursued and the broader politics that were also at the heart of the unrest at Columbia and other radical mobilizations in the late 1960s. The fight against racism, imperialism, and exploitation raged on into the late 20th century. Activists refused to acquiesce, and instead continued to experiment with strategies and develop tactics that suited the circumstances. What follows is an examination of how different groups from Harlem and the Bronx—frontier outposts of New York City proper—performed their own styles of struggle.
In April 1968, Columbia University was brought to a halt by a powerful, multiracial student mobilization. Driven to action by what they considered the school's callous insensitivity to its school's place in the surrounding Harlem community and sparked by the beginning of construction on a private university gymnasium on land in public Morningside Park, thousands of students struck back against the administration of President Grayson Kirk. At the heart of the students’ challenge was a complex cluster of actions and involvements on the part of the university, from campus expansion into nearby Morningside Heights to university ties to the Vietnam War and the military-industrial complex through ROTC and Institute for Defense Analysis connections. However, rather than view the mobilization happening on campus as a point of origin, as the initial emergence of political activity in late-60s upper Manhattan, the strike is better placed within a longer historical trajectory of struggle in Harlem and surrounding areas. The actions at Columbia, although student-led, brought together the campus and the community, student protesters and community activists, in a multi-racial, intergenerational movement. Briefly focused on events and circumstances related to the University itself—campus expansion, military involvement, an unsupportive environment for students of color—the connections
made during the campus occupation reinvigorated and reshaped political activity in Harlem, and reached into the Bronx and lower Manhattan in the following years.

The Columbia University strike is centered in this chapter as a point of contact that linked together a number of already-existing efforts for change in the greater Harlem community. Juan Gonzalez, a journalist and activist who was a member of the 3-person Strike Coordinating Committee, described the strike as “a merger of… three movements: the Black students who were fighting the racism on campus, it was the Students for a Democratic Society who were fighting the Viet Nam war, and it was the community organizations and those students like myself… who were connected to those groups.”1 To avoid again lionizing white college students as the heroes of '60s radicalism, it is important to point out that "Gym Crow" was a critical site for the development of coalitions, groups, relationships, strategies, philosophies, and for a transformation of the approach that struggle would take in New York. A wide variety of groups had been working to address racist police practices, unfair housing policies, school systems that did not adequately consider local needs, and other issues long before a group of Columbia college students occupied administrative buildings in the spring of '68.

However, the events on campus did play an important role in bringing these disparate efforts together in new ways. Students opposed to Columbia's involvement in the war found partners in local Harlem residents opposed to the university's racist policies towards them. African students at Columbia threw their support behind

1. Juan Gonzalez, videotape interview, tape #163-164, 24 May 2005, Oral History Collection, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños Archives, Hunter College, CUNY.
African-American student efforts, articulating a diasporic consciousness rooted in the revolutionary freedom struggles of African nations. Asian-American, Puerto Rican, and white activists, from Columbia and from the community, developed their own understandings of how issues raised by the strike related to them. The Columbia strike of 1968 helped suture political connections that resonated far beyond the walls of the buildings that students occupied.

**Columbia 1968 in Context**

Anti-racist and anti-imperialist currents had flowed through Harlem streets throughout the twentieth century, in and out of the various meeting-houses, churches, fraternal organizations, and nightspots where Harlemites met and discussed both local and global politics. The ongoing transition of the neighborhood's demography was a central concern, as was the continued and even renewed racism faced by Black New Yorkers at mid-century, as the United States lurched towards meaningful civil rights for African Americans. Meanwhile, independence movements and decolonization efforts in Africa and elsewhere erupted in the post-WWII years, with an intense period of activity in the late 1950s and into the 1960s. Places like Ghana became important beacons not only for other African peoples fighting for liberation, but for Black radicals in the US who cast their nets wide in the search for ways to improve their condition. And with Harlem a "capital of the black world" since the 1920s, there were
enduring and continually renewed relationships between local and international activists.²

Central to the activity in greater Harlem were the connections made between race and space. For the Black population, the treatment meted out by Columbia and other local institutions continued the long historical experience of inequity and white control over racialized spaces in the United States, as well as the ongoing legacy of US entanglements abroad, particularly in the Caribbean and Africa. Former colonies of European powers were shaking off the shackles of imperialism, as nations like Jamaica, Kenya, Ghana, and the Republic of Congo moved to independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Their actions captured the imagination of much of Black America, and resonated particularly strongly in Harlem, where visits from dignitaries like Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first prime minister and a leading anticolonial Pan-Africanist, helped nurture the connections between the struggles in Africa and in African America. As other scholars have shown, these factors have long shaped the history of Harlem politics.³

Gerald Horne's Mau Mau in Harlem is one example of recent works that consider the transnational dimensions of struggles for justice in mid-20th century

Harlem. Examining the impact of Kenyan independence efforts on African American civil rights efforts in the US, Horne makes clear the strong and enduring connections between Black radicals in the mid-20th century, with US activists considering a turn from the nonviolent militancy of the Civil Rights Era to a more aggressive approach. But the issues crystallized in the student strike—University acquisition of property, the removal of minority populations, and the struggle for control of the community—emerged earlier in the century, and came to a head during the 1960s. With a growing housing crisis in the city in general, continued University expansion and territorial conquest, and declining economic possibilities due to deindustrialization, a number of groups emerged to fight for local control of local space.

The student strike itself has been well documented. Many of these accounts have focused on student radicals themselves, particularly Students for a Democratic Society, to frame Columbia's strike within the larger student movement happening around the United States in the late 1960s. Perhaps the best known is the role of Columbia's student leaders and strikers, especially Students for a Democratic Society, in developing a full-blown anti-war effort demanding an end to US military action in Vietnam. The Columbia strike—the largest campus action in the United States—translated student concerns over both the moral legitimacy of the war and the more immediate danger to young people from rapidly-rising draft numbers into an issue

intelligible to the wider US population. Although SDS leaders on campus recognized and actively worked to address the links between anti-racist efforts in the Harlem community and anti-imperialist efforts challenging US foreign policy, as the Columbia strike faded their focus came to rest on anti-war efforts. The spectacular disintegration of SDS and subsequent emergence of the Weathermen as a violent, radical force makes for a compelling narrative, but forgets the centrality of locally specific anti-racist activity in developing their analysis of Columbia's shortcomings.

More recently, the strike has been considered for its role in the Black student movement for Black Studies programs, and for its relationship to broader Black Power movements. Matching SDS as an organizational and ideological force at Columbia was the Student Afro-American Society (SAS), co-leaders of the on-campus activity. But a focus on the connection between the campus protests and anti-racist efforts among Harlem's Black population runs the risk of likewise missing the complex relations between issues of racism and imperialism. Stefan Bradley's *Harlem Versus Columbia* pays additional attention to the context of Columbia within the Harlem community. Bradley frames the Columbia strike as part of a larger Harlem movement for Black equality and justice. Importantly, he also recognizes the connections between fights for African decolonization and Harlem activists' own framing of Columbia's place in the community as an imperial presence. Despite the two-way exchange of action and ideas between SAS and the Harlem community, Bradley's focus on the on-campus trajectory of Black student struggle does not pursue the ways

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6. These connections are pursued in a different direction by Gerald Horne's *Mau Mau in Harlem*, which addresses the impact of African decolonization on African American political thought in New York City in the mid-20th century.
that 1968 continued to resonate off-campus, through Harlem and across the city. As
the following chapters will argue, the Columbia strike is an important part of a
political trajectory that cannot be reconstructed by pursuing only the student radical or
Black Power lineage on their own.

Racism and Imperialism on the Columbia Frontier

Demographic changes in Morningside Heights help to explain that kinds of
thinking that shaped resistance to Columbia's expansion into Harlem in the late 1960s.
These changes also framed the University's growing use of rationales informed by US
expansionism, colonialism, and ongoing imperialist and militarist adventures in
Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Morningside Heights had historically been a largely
white, middle-class enclave. Migration and economic pressures post-1950, however,
led to small but substantial changes by the end of that decade, trends that accelerated
after 1960. In 1950, the area was 91% white, but by 1960 that percentage dropped to
79. The Black population of Morningside Heights swelled from 470 to 3,133, and
increase of nearly 700%. The Puerto Rican population doubled, from 1,650 to 3,014.  

The Columbia administration began growing increasingly concerned about the swelling numbers of "undesirables" in their vicinity.\(^8\)

The rationales driving Columbia's expansion were not intentionally racist, nor a conscious application of time-tested practices of invasion, colonization, and imperial control. That argument is far too mechanical and pits the Morningside Heights rebels against the calculating armies of Columbia. The reality was much more subtle, even considering the prevalence of language that drew on US frontier mythology or Western adventurers encountering "primitive" peoples in African or South American jungles. Surviving in Morningside Heights required, said Provost Jacques Barzun in a statement on the Morningside General Neighborhood Renewal Plan in 1965, "the perpetual qui vive of a paratrooper in enemy country." Harlem was "uninviting, abnormal, sinister, and dangerous."\(^9\) University officials understood expansion as good, white people as far more likely to make good use of land, and minority populations incapable of truly knowing what was best for them and needing to be told by those in power. As the Columbia-Barnard Citizenship Council student organization criticized, the University was operating through a model of "cultured racism" that was not based in explicit articulations. "We are not talking about vulgar redneck hatred for 'niggers' and 'spics'; what is involved is a 'distaste' felt by men in positions of power


\(^9\) "Columbia and the Community: Past Policy and New Directions," October 1968; Collins Collection, Box 6 Folder 4, p. 70.
who consider themselves to be a cultural elite."\textsuperscript{10} Columbia administrators, their allies, and the city authorities with whom they collaborated were imbricated within a US culture that was, and still is, shaped by self-justifying exceptionalist ideas about expansion and white supremacy.

The residents of Morningside Heights also shaped the way that Columbia students thought about the relationship between their university and the neighborhood. In late 1966, Columbia received a Ford Foundation grant in the amount of $10 million intended "for the support of new efforts in the field of urban and minority affairs." The Columbia University Student Council sought community input on the disposition of those funds, certain they would disagree with the plans being made by University administrators. Community groups pointed out that the University's relations with "the minority residents on Morningside Heights" had "almost exclusively consisted of Columbia's systematic removal of Negroes and Puerto Ricans." The grassroots tenants organization Morningside Renewal Council submitted a broad set of suggestions focused around ways that Columbia should use the grant to support programs that fostered independence and self-determination among the residents, "essentially for the purpose of helping the minority residents to help themselves."\textsuperscript{11} This meant improving social conditions, medical facilities, and educational and recreational opportunities on the Heights.

\textsuperscript{10} Columbia College Citizenship Council Committee for Research, "Columbia and the Community: Past Policy and New Directions," October 1968; Collins Collection, Box 6 Folder 4, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{11} George Weiser, Morningside Renewal Council, to David Langsam, President, Columbia University Student Council, 30 January 1967; Collins Collection, Box 1 Folder 13.
Most importantly, though, the MRC demanded that Columbia stop treating the area as a colonial territory to be administered at the University's whim. "There must be," MRC wrote, "a change of heart on the part of ... Columbia. Their negative attitude of complete rejection of the minorities must be changed to one of recognition of the common humanity that the ... residents share with the most highly educated Columbia persons, across the barriers of color, social and economic status, educational accomplishment and social mores." There needed to be a "wholehearted willingness to practice democracy by reaching out the hand of brotherhood to these disinherited and rejected fellow residents."¹² Columbia had to stop thinking of itself as an outpost of civilization among the savages.

Harlem activists had long known this. From the mid-1960s, groups like the Morningside Tenants' Committee, in addition to Harlem CORE and other long-standing Black activist organizations, had been slowly building connections with pockets of student activists at the university. On Columbia's campus, guest speakers began to explicitly connect the situation in Harlem to broader US imperialism, attempting to rally student radicals vehemently opposed to the Vietnam War to their cause. Bill Epton, chair of the Harlem Progressive Labor Party (PLP), spoke on February 27th and delivered a particularly clearly-articulated argument. Out on bail after being arrested for "criminal anarchy" earlier that month, Epton had been working to organize "Black people against the oppressive and super-exploitative conditions" in Harlem for years, and came to authorities' attention particularly for his efforts during

¹² George Weiser, Morningside Renewal Council, to David Langsam, President, Columbia University Student Council, 30 January 1967; Collins Collection, Box 1 Folder 13.
the "police terror" of the summer of 1964 that led to the "Harlem Rebellion."

Organizing Black Harlem, Epton came to Columbia to discuss the situation in his community. Resisting the University's expansion into Harlem, he told his audience, was a critical part of "fighting the same class enemy" that student radicals were challenging in their anti-war demonstrations on campus: "U.S. imperialism, led by the U.S. ruling class."¹³

The battle for Columbia that would shake out over the next several years brought the broader ideological struggles between US and its adversaries home to Harlem. SDS would soon realize that US racism, militarism, and imperialism, the group's main targets, were being replicated in the neighborhoods around them every day, that Columbia was “a microcosm of the imperialist, racist, and war-mongering American government.”¹⁴ Media began to pick up on the dynamics at work in Harlem as well. As one reporter put it, "The school sits on a bluff which looks down on Harlem, and the people who administrate the school do just that."¹⁵ The citizens of Harlem had reached this conclusion long before Columbia's student radicals, and once the students were able to recognize their shared interests, it transformed the movement on campus by linking it to the community.

**The Student Strike of 1968**

¹³. Friends of Progressive Labor, Columbia University, "Hear Bill Epton, Harlem PLP" flyer, February 1968 (n.d.); Collins Collection, Box 1 Folder 3.
The strike itself began on April 23, 1968, in the aftermath of Martin Luther King's assassination on April 4th. Although the student strike at Columbia University seemed to begin with a protest against the construction of the gym in Morningside Park on April 20th, the actions in the Park that day were rather the moment that longer, ongoing campaigns on campus and in the community came together. The students on campus had begun working to organize for tenants’ rights in Harlem, against Columbia's expansion into and growing stranglehold over the surrounding neighborhood. Student organizers also rallied against the Vietnam War, and worked to end military recruiting and research on Columbia's campus. By mid-March of 1968, a planned one-day strike brought all these concerns together. The strike announcement's 6-point platform connected these concerns:

1. End, abolish, kick-out NROTC!
2. No War Research!
3. No Military Recruiting!
4. Open the 197 Apartments!
5. Stop the Evictions at 255 W. 108th Street!
6. Stop the Early Acquisitions Package; Build Low-Rent Housing on Douglass Circle South!

The organizers summed their up with the sidebar-slogan, "Smash the Military, Stop Urban Removal!"16

As early as late February, however, students from Columbia were already joining community members in actions intended to prevent construction work at the gymnasium site, which had been given final approval on October 25, 1967, with construction planned to start February 20th. Columbia Office of Public Information

16. “One Day Strike!” n.d. (March 1968); UPAC, Box 12 Folder 2.
Director John Hastings released a statement intended to marginalize the students as radicals working against the interests of both the University and the Harlem community, noting with "regrets" that a "small group of students had tried to interfere." They were outliers, he claimed, as "the great majority of Columbia students and large numbers of neighborhood youngsters look[ed] forward with pleasure" to the gym's completion. Hastings reiterated the University's promise that those youth would have use of the gym and the swimming pool "year round, free of charge," and that Columbia would supply the required equipment and supervision for 4,000 "youngsters from the Harlem and Morningside Heights areas" to participate in outdoor recreation programs. He optimistically concluded that once the construction was complete, "all students and neighborhood groups will see the great value of these facilities to the community, the University, and the City of New York." The student radicals demonstrating at the gym site were not only misguided but were working against the good of the very community they claimed to be defending, according to the Office of Public Information.17

Of course, it was Hastings' job to try to make the gymnasium project palatable. The University had already spent substantial sums, and the $1.5 million-plus project was a crucial part of Columbia's master plan. Once construction started in early March, the OPI released a longer document, providing Columbia's version of the history between the University and "community gymnasiums." This time, Hastings wrote that the buildings would cost more than $3 million alone, and that the total cost

of the construction would be $11.6 million—figures intended to quantify how
magnanimous the University's actions were. And he reiterated that local youths would
have "free of charge, the exclusive, full-time use of these facilities"—at least in the
"community portion of the building."¹⁸ That was a serious sticking point for
opponents, who saw it as "one [door] on the Columbia side [for] the nice students, the
other on the Harlem side for the 'community.' The idea has not gone well with some
Harlem people. And the gymnasium doesn't sit well with the Columbia students,
either."¹⁹ More than a decade after Brown v Board, and on public land, Columbia
planned to build what seemed an awful lot like a segregated facility. Topography of
the Park site notwithstanding, a four-story gym with a top-floor, street-level, front
entrance for the mostly-white Columbia student body, and a first-floor, backdoor
entrance from the Park for the area's majority-minority residents would be well
received by very few people critical of the dynamics of race, class, and power in
greater Harlem.

Thus it should have come as no surprise that when community activists began
making plans to shut down the construction equipment working on the proposed
gymnasium site in Morningside Park in April 1968, the broader context of racism,
colonialism and US imperialism abroad rippled through their rallies. On Saturday,
April 20th, after an anti-Columbia gathering at 125th St and Seventh Avenue that

Gymnasiums: A Background,” March 1968; UPAC, Box 2 Folder 6: 2-3. By later in the
month, this $11.6 million estimate had increased to more than $13 million.
¹⁹. Jimmy Breslin, “A Day at Columbia,” New York Post, 26 April 1968; Collins Collection,
Box 10 Folder 9.
attracted a crowd of 400, a variety of speakers raised the specter of violent resistance if the University continued with its plans. Only a few blocks from Morningside Park, the rally at this crossroads of Harlem drew activists and community leaders from a range of political persuasions. Victor Solomon, assistant director of Harlem CORE, told the crowd that a "massive direct confrontation" with the University would begin no later than the following weekend, and that it was "very possible for the violence to move to Columbia." Unwilling to limit themselves to battling for control of the space in the neighborhood, anti-gym activists planned to strike back at the heart of the imperial power dominating Morningside Heights. As he spoke, CORE workers circulated through the crowd, distributing information about the list of predations perpetrated by Columbia: "schemes" to purchase property in Harlem and clear out residents in favor of Columbia-affiliated tenants, the University's "take-over" of Harlem Hospital as a training ground for Columbia medical students, and the $10 million grant from the Ford Foundation for a Program in Urban and Minority Affairs based in Harlem, meant to study the twin problems of crime and poverty, that the University was administering without community input.20

The CORE workers also collected signatures on petitions about these issues to build a base of support and present their case to authorities, but others were less convinced of the possibility of bringing about change with this traditional strategy. From the West Harlem Community Organization, speaker Robert McKay proclaimed, "Columbia has pushed the community residents up against the wall." And State

Senator Basil Patterson agreed that regular political channels for change would be ineffective due to the heavy overlap between Columbia trustees and New York politicians: "When Columbia University deals with New York State and New York City, it deals with itself." A different strategy than signatures, petitions, and protests would be needed, and there were those prepared to offer options.

Three days later the frustrations of West Harlem came to a head. Columbia SDS and SAS students planned a protest against the University's involvement actions in Harlem and its involvement in the Viet Nam war effort. Intent on occupying the campus' Low Library administrative building, they arrived only to find administrators prepared for their arrival and the building closed. The conservative group Students for a Free Campus provided a second line of defense, surrounding Low Library and barring forced access. After a brief discussion, the student protesters decided to move their action to the most visible symbol of the Columbia policies against which they were protesting, the Morningside Park gymnasium site itself. Arriving shortly after noon, the students attacked the 12-foot fence surrounding the construction site, gaining access to the space just ahead of the police sent to stop them. A scuffle ensued, with student Fred Wilson arrested for felonious assault, criminal mischief, and resisting arrest. Mark Rudd, chairman of SDS, from atop a pile of construction dirt demanded that the now 30+ officers release Wilson and drop the charges; Sgt. Edward Sullivan responded "Get your people out of the park, and we'll talk." The struggle was already about the occupation of space, and Rudd took this opportunity to reiterate that

21. Haskel, “Violence Predicted Against CU.”
Columbia was actively discriminating against the residents of Morningside Heights, trampling their rights by refusing the community full access to a gymnasium built on public land. The students then discussed their next move.\textsuperscript{22}

Foiled by the police force, they left the park site, but not to negotiate. They went back to campus, where a crowd of fellow protesters met them at the Sundial, central gathering point for many Columbia events. Discussion ensued, and with Low barricaded they turned their attention to Hamilton Hall, the main classroom building for Columbia College. Led by SAS and SDS, students stormed the building, occupied the lobby, and prevented Dean Coleman from leaving his office.

From the beginning of the strike, students were explicit that their actions on campus were the result of a broad range of connected Columbia policies. The Student Strike Committee stated flatly, "the battle which the students are fighting now at Columbia is a battle against policies which oppress the community." This was an important connection, as on-campus activism of the previous year had largely focused on resistance to Columbia's formal involvement with the US war effort in Vietnam, exemplified through student opposition to CIA recruiting, ROTC programs, and the University's contracts with the Institute for Defense Analysis. The University's research for IDA was paralleled by research into "counter-insurgency in the ghetto." "It is clear," the Strike Committee announced, "that University violence against students and faculty is an extension of its violence against black people in Columbia-owned buildings, against the community in seizure of public park land, against third

world struggles in IDA weapon systems, against employees in denial of unions and decent wages."^23 The Morningside Heights construction helped students recognize these local manifestations of Columbia's practices, especially after opposition to the construction resulted in the beating and detention of students and faculty.

As striking students recognized these links, they looked to the community for support. Strike steering committee member Juan Gonzalez recalled, "I worked for years with poor black and Puerto Rican groups outside the university. It took me a long time to make the connection between their fight and ours. But it is essentially the same struggle."^24 The students invited radical Black activists from the community to join them in the occupied buildings, including Charles 37X Kenyatta and the Harlem Mau Maus, and representatives of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Harlem CORE. Authorities, however, cast this show of unity from the community as an example of "outside agitators." Reports claimed that the demonstration, originally a student protest, had "apparently come under the control of black, very militant community leaders."^25 The administration and the mainstream press reporting on the events failed to recognize the degree to which the protest had originated in the community.

That campus officials feared "outside agitators" from the community makes sense given the context of the period. Many Harlem activists drew direct connections

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between anti-colonial struggles in Africa and their own ongoing fights against US racism at home. The Morningside Park project was just the most recent and obvious example, and served to show Columbia student radicals how their long-standing opposition to US imperialism in Southeast Asia had a corollary they could battle in their own backyard. A wide variety of organizations pursuing Black self-determination in the 1960s already approached Black self-determination as an anti-imperialist project, not least of which were Kenyatta and the comrades with him on campus.

Linking African freedom struggles to radical efforts for social justice in the United States, they drew their name and political inspiration from the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya 1952-1960, which laid the groundwork for Kenyan independence. The Mau Mau drew the attention of other radicals across the African diaspora, and the Harlem group adopted the name because they too saw their struggles in New York City as a local phase of a global struggle for Third World liberation. To leaders of a lily-white institution like Columbia, with its own institute specializing in the study of international affairs, the violent specter of successful African rebellion moving into Morningside must have been haunting. In the tense spring days following Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, as Charles Kenyatta stood in front of a crowd protesting the Morningside Park construction, brandishing a machete while telling his audience, police, and the press that violence was a distinct possibility, it conjured a whole range of imagined possibilities for those who heard him.

26. An anti-colonial army fighting to throw off British rule by any means necessary, the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA) were referred to as "Mau Mau" by the British, and eventually reappropriated the term as part of their mission to decolonize Kenyan land and thought. See Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
At the very least, the Mau Mau made dealing with less threatening groups seem quite preferable indeed for administrators more accustomed to the politics of the boardroom. The mainstream press cooperated with administrators by dismissing community members as interlopers and focused on the visible, largely-white SDS as the brain trust behind the strike, with objectives that were understandable and manageable. Black protesters, from the Students' Afro-American Society or from the community, were seen as opportunists or outside agitators. H. Rap Brown responded to this misinformation campaign by accusing the press of attempting to "black out the role of the black people." As Spectator writer Michael Stern wrote, 450 students took over Hamilton Hall on Tuesday, but by Wednesday afternoon, "members of Columbia SAS and various community organizations asked them to go Wednesday morning, leaving only black faces—many of them unfamiliar—peering over the barricades."

However, Stern's account suggests that these unfamiliar faces were partially responsible for a rapidly-changing and strengthening political movement on campus, "a new politics, relatively well-organized and professional compared to" SDS. More than half of the seventy Black activists occupying Hamilton Hall were not students, but Harlemites who had come to campus where they joined SAS in forming the first campus-community coalition. Once formed, this coalition quickly had taken control of the Columbia occupation and asked SDS to leave Hamilton Hall to the Black community. For their part, SDS was willing if initially disappointed about being asked

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to leave. Soon, the rhetoric of solidarity displaced the disappointment, as SDS explained their move as an attempt to open a "second front" in the fight. However, "fear—of violence, of guns—and inexperience and naiveté in the face of superior organization and tactics was principally responsible" for SDS' departure from Hamilton.²⁹ Harlem activists, militant and well-organized, had arrived to Mau Mau the Columbia flak-catchers.

**White Resistance at Columbia**

These attempts to alter Columbia's practices and the broader experiences of Harlem residents did not go unchallenged. The response from conservatives on campus and off, beyond university administrators and officials, demonstrates the strength of social inertia against which student and community activists struggled. The hostility they faced also hints at the resistance that efforts for social change would face in the following years. The South Bronx would see similar problems in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as even well-intentioned white liberals failed to understand demands for justice from community organizations.

One of the earliest and most forceful rejections of student activism around Vietnam, Columbia's expansion, and the generally oppressive nature of the university came from the Committee For the Defense of Property Rights. In an open letter to President Kirk in February 1967, a year before the Morningside Park site brought the

situation to a head, the Committee condemned the "anti-intellectual gangs" of SDS "hoodlums" that had recently become active on Columbia's campus.\(^{30}\)

On February 8\(^{th}\), SDS members had interrupted CIA recruiting on campus and blocked access to the Employment Office. The Committee complained that SDS presented no "rational" evidence or explanation for their action, "believing apparently that the validity of their case could be established by... screaming like savages or spoiled children." SDS also committed increasingly aggressive "acts of coercion... including the recent occupation of a room in which a class was being held." Their tactics, the Committee concluded, were "naked intimidation," an "atrocity" that the administration encouraged them to repeat with "every acquiescence, every appeasement." This language, rejecting appeasement for a more forceful confrontation with the enemy, echoed the policies driving US involvement in Vietnam, itself ironically enough one of SDS's main targets. The Committee feared that if Kirk were lenient and issued only "token sentences" to the sixteen students who occupied Dodge Hall, the dominos would begin to fall. Like a US loss in Vietnam, failure to eradicate SDS at Columbia would lead to the inexorable spread of "coercive violence" and spell the "grinding, terrorized" end of the University.\(^{31}\)

Hyperbole notwithstanding, the open letter is instructive for the ways it reveals the investment of large portions of the Columbia faculty and administration in the ideologies against which SDS was fighting. As is often the case with reactionary

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groups, the prescriptions the Committee offered for dealing with SDS replicated the tactics they accused SDS of seeking to employ. Railing against SDS' use of coercive violence—a term the Committee applied to such standard protest tactics as holding sit-ins in administrative buildings, blocking official ceremonies with human barricades, or "disruption of classes through noise"—the Committee recommended draconian procedures for eliminating dissent "without hesitation and by whatever means are necessary." For the sixteen students of Dodge Hall, a minimum of a yearlong suspension from Columbia. Any who were not "first offenders" were to be unconditionally and permanently expelled. The Committee also demanded that all University recognition of and support for SDS as a student organization be immediately withdrawn, and that "any other group which espouses and employs physical force to achieve its goals" be dealt with likewise.32

In registering their displeasure with President Kirk, the members of the Committee drew heavily on the discourses of the Cold War and rationales for the US war in Vietnam—a hostile opponent opposed to American democracy and capitalism sought to destroy the relations of power and authority that the Committee regarded as natural and right. Cautioning Kirk against lax punishments paralleled the critique of appeasement that fueled US foreign policy's shift move towards containment of Communism during the Cold War. As Lyndon Johnson explained US activity in Vietnam as containment policy, so too was the Committee for the Defense of Property

Rights arguing for the harsh punishment of the Dodge Hall 16 as a deterrent to future subversive activities on Columbia's campus.

Other groups employed similar strategies for rejecting radical efforts to change Columbia policies. Where the Committee for the Defense of Property Rights used the specter of Communist expropriation to condemn SDS tactics, the Committee for the Sane Use of Language demanded that SDS cease its critical analysis of Capitalism and Columbia practices. Jerry Wegman, a class of 1970 law student and Chairman of the Committee headquartered at 504 W 110th Street, condemned SDS organizing tactics as "extremists' childish exclamations," declaring one leaflet a "paragon of propaganda."

Entitled *Capitalism in Decay*, it pointed out the growing gap between personal income tax and corporate income tax rates since 1966. Wegman defended the corporations, and called the SDS' effort a "masterpiece of deceit" [sic] that "could only have been written by someone on loan from Orwell's Ministry of Truth." Obviously failing to grasp the irony of his own overstated response, the Chairman of the Committee for the Sane Use of Language concluded "I salute S.D.S.' new Goebbels. He could make the Gestapo look like a group of social workers." 33

**Conservative Satire: Sowing Confusion on Campus and in the Community**

Satire also figured prominently in the conservative offensive against student radicals. Given the attention that SDS and other student groups were receiving, conservative students found themselves frustrated that they were not getting the same

33. Jerry Wegman, “Paragon of Propaganda,” letter to the editor, 5 March 1969 (clipping); Collins Collections, Box 1 Folder 4.
audience. The Majority Coalition, made up jocks and other opponents of the strikers, surrounded the occupied buildings and tried to confront their radical counterparts physically.34 Others, perhaps afraid of physical confrontation, created make-believe activist groups and lobbed counter-demands around campus. These groups, ridiculous in their aims and claims, help reveal the degree to which the average student at Columbia failed to grasp the importance of the struggles being waged on campus and in the community.

In the context of the Columbia strike and Harlem opposition to university tactics, these groups also provide clear examples of the ways that predominantly white groups understood the contours of the struggles at hand but failed to grasp the particulars. A kind of colorblindness, the inability to understand the racial dynamics of even the parodic struggles they imagined existing as ethnic white resistance, allowed them to continue justifying Columbia's practices as not only acceptable, but as acceptable and even morally correct. Conservative students' perspective on university expansion in late 1960s Harlem is not dissimilar to white attitudes towards communities of color both there and in the Bronx throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. By the 1980s, even well-known white liberals like Paul Newman would be accused of racism for failing to take seriously Black and Brown perspectives on how their own lives were impacted by dominant society's decisions.

34. For a paean to Columbia's counter-revolutionaries, see "Seduced and Abandoned at Columbia," The Alternative, November 1970, pp.16-17, including letters to the editor from R.L. Crossland, "Playing It Straight at Columbia U.," and David Carpenter, "A Letter to the Grateful Administration at Columbia University from one of their Counter-revolutionaries."
Some of these conservative groups played off of a tactic used by the Strike Coordinating Committee, printing and distributing newsletters and leaflets that summarized recent events. For the satire groups, this was an opportunity to lampoon the earnest efforts of student radicals, particularly the sectarian debates that at times paralyzed those fighting for change. They also represented Columbia as a campus completely taken over by an anti-American Communist cabal. An October 16, 1968 release, for example, told readers the following events, among others, had occurred on the previous day:

- Mark Rudd, SDS leader, had been "taken hostage by a Maoist group" and was being held in Hamilton Hall
- The Columbia campus radio station, "WQ Che R" (WKCR) was "being jammed at the source by some unidentified dissident faction"
- All university functions were suspended for a debate "between the Democratic Centralists and the Participational Democrats. Topic: 'The Restoration of Stricter Revolutionary Discipline in Classes and Meetings under Leaders appointed by the Central Committee.'" (The meeting was called off, readers learned, "when the speakers for the Participational Democrats unaccountably failed to appear.")
- Students of Professor Morganbesser who were attacked by an invading group from the Trotskyite center were able to repel the invaders and continue the class.
- A student in the musical analysis class who complained about the volume of the revolutionary committee loudspeakers in Dodge Hall was summarily expelled.
- Ex-Professor Gilbert Highet, being considered for reinstatement by the Deliberalization Faculty Clearance Committee, lectured on 'The Oedipus Legend in the Light of the 'Up Against the Wall' Slogan' to a large audience of enthusiastic students.
- "The computers have now been programmed for the giving of political-compensatory grades, and the operation is proceeding smoothly."

35. Unknown, untitled flier, 16 October 1968; UPAC, Box 11 Folder 1. An admittedly inspired Oedipus joke here, omitting the final word of the "Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker!" slogan for comedic effect.
Readers were "invited to continue these items ad lib.,” indicating that the writers of the document imagined complaints without end from other students on campus. This kind of misinformation, while humorous, also presented the student activists as disorganized, internally fractured, and obsessed with dogmatic minutiae rather than collectively focused on the radical projects at hand.

Conservative students who strongly disagreed with the goals of the Strike Coordinating Committee and others out to change Columbia's policies and practices continued to make their own demands, ridiculous and over-reaching, to diminish the validity of the student radicals' efforts. Most of these were groups of white students who built their opposition on claims to particular ethnic ancestry, which they then used to demand the same kind of special treatment that they thought Black students were demanding. With names like the I.R.I.S.H. Federation (Irish students Repelled by Irresponsible Surrender to Harassment), the Sons Of Gael, the Columbia Italian Association (C.I.A.), they printed newsletter after leaflet after pamphlet modeled after SDS and SAS flyers, flooding the campus with misinformation, confusing terms, and faux demands that at best might have been mistaken for serious and at worst seemed so utterly ridiculous as to put off potential supporters of the actual student strikers' goals.

Amplifying this possibility was the reality that many of the conservative Columbia students knew the history of British imperialism and the oppression of Scots and Irish, the difficulties of earlier Irish and Italian immigrants to New York City, and the current rumblings of independence movements around the world. The grievances
they recounted were real, but comparing them to the current situation of Columbia in Harlem, and the racism experienced by communities of color in New York more broadly, was a false equivalency. It minimized the issues that drove students to strike and their ongoing efforts to substantively change the everyday practices of the university. Not least, the specific claims made by these groups reveal the racist attitudes held by the students who were members and the hostility faced by Black, Brown, and other marginalized communities as they fought for a world in which they could feel they belonged.

One of the earliest lists of satiric demands appeared from the Sham-Rock Association, on behalf of the I.R.I.S.H. Federation. Perhaps the "Sham" in the name was intended as a sly notice that this was not a real activist group. Regardless, they took the demands of the Students Afro-American Society, combined them with other radical demands of the era such as the Black Panther Party's 10-Point Program, and crafted an outlandish list of Irish grievances. Some of the first demands were plausible: Irish music played at assemblies, an Irish cultural society on campus to participate in the St. Patrick's Day Parade, courses in Irish history and literature. The list took a more ridiculous turn after this seemingly innocuous introduction. Sham-Rock insisted "at least one leprechaun" be hired as a guidance counselor, St. Patrick's Day be made a national holiday, and the school colors be changed to green, white, and gold.36

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Beyond these, the list took a more racist turn that hints at the depths of animosity on campus towards Black demands for justice. "English teachers not be permitted to teach Irish students," understandable in the context of English colonialism but irrelevant on Morningside Heights, referenced the growing demands for Black Studies programs at Columbia and other colleges across the country. Significantly, it also lampooned the ongoing struggle in New York communities like Harlem, the South Bronx and most famously Ocean Hill-Brownsville in Brooklyn to have Black and Brown teachers for Black and Brown students, and for bilingual education in Spanish-speaking communities. I.R.I.S.H. Federation insisted on the "appointment of a Dean with natural green hair," the utter impossibility of such a request offering insight into the group's attitude towards finding qualified African American professors and administrators as demanded by the Students Afro-American Society.

Their final demand was perhaps the most obviously hostile to African American efforts to find justice in Harlem. "Reparations to be paid to the Federation," they wrote, "for the work performed on the Union Pacific Railroad by immigrants 100 years ago; said reparations to be not less than the amount of one years Federal budget or 25% of the country's natural resources whichever is highest." That Irish immigrants were hired workers rather than slave labor notwithstanding, this claim clearly demonstrates a lack of understanding of the ongoing legacy of white

supremacy, and a real hostility towards Black efforts to achieve some degree of 
equality in the context of the War on Poverty.

The Sons of Gael (SOG) soon joined the I.R.I.S.H. Federation in ridiculing the 
efforts of the student strikers. In a flyer titled "Minority Students Demand Their 
Rights," SOG called a "Strike for Celtic Freedom." Joined by the Committee for 
Caledonian Correspondence, Friends of the Scottish Nationalist Party, and Britains for 
Peace, they condemned Columbia for its "insidious and expansionist... treatment of 
Scots and students of Scottish descent.... Columbia as an active member of the Saxon 
Anglo-American conspiracy has been instrumental in expansion of British oppressive 
imperialist rule around the world [and] has consistently overlooked the needs of the 
students of Caledonian descent at Columbia." Accordingly, SOG issued its demands: a 
"Caledonian studies program" including "a course in the gentle art of whiskey 
distilling," "rapid construction of housing with sodden roofs to remind us of our 
beloved Highlands" and "scones and oatmeal-bread" in the cafeteria as reflected their 
"belief in total heritage enviornment [sic]." They wanted to graze sheep on Columbia's 
South Field, the "investigation of N.R.O.T.C. impressment practices in Glasgow and 
other Caledonian ports," athletic scholarships for caber tossers, and the "disclosure of 
all secret ties with the Saxon Anglo-American complex and all its vile pawns."39 This 
mix of the harmless—sheep, caber toss—with the more pointed complaints echoing 
SDS demand about N.R.O.T.C. and Columbia's support for imperialism abroad again

39. Committee for Caledonian Correspondence, “Minority Students Demand Their Rights,” 
n.d. (1968); UPAC, Box 11 Folder 1.
suggested that radical students were intellectually disorganized and had muddled priorities.

SOG also called for "admission of a larger percentage of Welsh, Irish Anguillan as well as Scottish students." The Welsh, Irish, and Scottish demands made sense for a group called Sons Of Gael, but the inclusion of Anguilla is interesting for its apparent irregularity. The flyer condemned "Columbia's conspicuous entanglement in such matters as the rape of Anguilla, Scottish nationalism, Welsh separatism and free channel radio stations." Anguilla, a small Caribbean island and British colony, was administered through nearby St. Kitts, itself granted internal autonomy by the British in 1967. That placed Anguilla under the control of St. Kitts, a situation many Anguillans found unsatisfactory. Later that year, the island launched a revolution under the leadership of Ronald Webster. However, rather than seeking independence they fought to be returned to direct colonial control by Britain. The Anguillan revolution, then, sought the opposite of Welsh, Irish, and Scottish independence movements. With Anguilla hot in the world press in 1968, even casual observers might have recognized the dissonance here. Again, the muddled politics of these satiric flyers cast doubt on the organizational and intellectual clarity of Columbia's radical student movement.

SOG and affiliated groups continued to use Anguilla to parody the SDS and SAS arguments about Columbia's racist expansion and contributions to US imperialism in SE Asia. Overblown claims of Columbia-sponsored violence in

40. Committee for Caledonian Correspondence, “Minority Students Demand Their Rights,” n.d. (1968); UPAC, Box 11 Folder 1.
Anguilla also served to make light of the actual suffering being caused by Columbia's actions in Harlem and its involvement in the war. The Columbia Italian-Americans (CIA) was one such "organization," a largely paper-based group spearheaded by conservative libertarian activists Stan Lehr ('71) and Louis Rosetto ('71), who called themselves the "Ministry of Disinformation." Both were members of the Conservative Union and Young Republicans, of which Rosetto was also an officer.\textsuperscript{41} Attempting to carve out their own little preserves of white supremacy in the face of Columbia student activists and Harlem residents struggling for justice, they went to great lengths to craft a narrative that made radical efforts seem like tilting at windmills.

CIA propaganda centered on "Fat Andy" (Andrew Cordier, interim president of Columbia since August 1968) and his fictitious handling of the Anguillan Revolution. The CIA's "Special Committee to Anguilla" learned from a document "captured" from the "Brutish British" that the "expansionist, imperialist oppression practiced by Columbia University knows no bounds." CIA simply transferred the complaints about Columbia in Harlem to Anguilla, effectively writing the communities surrounding the university as "screaming, cursing aborigines" even as CIA claimed to be defending Anguilla from "Columbia's security force (Gestapo)" led by "Adam De Nisco and his men (stormtroopers)."\textsuperscript{42} Quoting fictitious documents they claimed were sent to London by the "commandoes" who invaded the island, CIA wrote that these men should be singled out for praise after they "bravely waded into a

\textsuperscript{41} Juris Kaza, "Factions Proliferate on Campus Right," \textit{Columbia Spectator}, 3 November 1969: 1, 3.

\textsuperscript{42} Columbia Italian Americans, “Andy’s Pigs Rape Anguilla,” n.d. (1968); UPAC, Box 11 Folder 1; De Nisco was Columbia's Chief Security Officer. His handling of unrest on campus was a frequent target of student radical.
'peaceful demonstration' and dispersed the scurvy rabble... recalling the annihilation of the student hordes at the King's Gym last September, and its smashing of the syndicalist, anti-vivisectionist workers in Low Library last February. Not to rest on their laurels, the doughty warriors burned 3 villages, raped 18 women, skewered and barbecued 16 babies and pushed one blind old man down a flight of stairs." By writing a fake description of the battle for Anguilla—well-documented in the press at the time, a small force of British troops landed on the island, were welcomed by residents rather than met with force, and soon returned Anguilla to its desired relationship with Britain—CIA advanced an argument that student radical's claims about the degree and severity of Columbia's racist, imperialist practices were similarly sensationalized.

Having crafted and spread this false Anguillan narrative, CIA/SOG responded with a call for a student/worker/community strike. Their description of the strike's goals was clearly intended to raise alarm about the possible actions of the radical student activists. This strike would "be marked by the killing, maiming, torturing, and/or raping of anyone who attempts to cross our picket-barricades." This placed a renewed focus on the trope of wanton destruction threatening the university. The direct action of SDS and SAS, compounded by the white fear of a Harlem Mau-Mau targeting the university, made the specter of revolutionary violence a perfect way to sow confusion and discredit student activists. Building on fears of student and urban

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43. Columbia Italian Americans, “Andy’s Pigs Rape Anguilla,” n.d. (1968); UPAC, Box 11 Folder 1.
violence inflamed by the actions of the previous year the CIA/SOG press release was confusing and misleading to readers who were not attuned to the real, day-to-day activities on Columbia's campus, students included. It is important, however, to consider how the specifics of this fictitious strike echoed common understandings of the Mau-Mau. A Mau-Mau in Harlem was terrifying, but a white student group making threats rooted in racist ideas about revolutionary struggle was simply a "caustic parody which... amused the university's student body."\(^{45}\) Conservative students, despite their attempts at humor, revealed through their imaginings of alternative strikes the degree to which they were cognizant, and afraid, of the simmering revolutionary potential outside of Columbia's gates.

The Independent Destructionists Association also emerged in solidarity with CIA/SOG. Like the Columbia Italian Americans, their name duplicated the acronym of a central target of radical campus organizing, the Institute for Defense Analysis or IDA. The Destructionists released documents claiming that the time for "carnage and bloodshed" had come to Columbia's "sickeningly tranquil campus.... Get the fuck out there and destroy something!" they urged. Working explicitly to discredit SDS, the Destructionists claimed to have "worked for years to expose the hypocrisy of peace as an intellectual movement."\(^{46}\) Only brutality could solve Columbia's problems.

The real goal of student protest should be "violence, violence, and more violence," IDA insisted. Anyone attempting to "cloud the issue" with misleading claims of "just causes is a muddle-brained revisionist cop." There was no issue save

"the destruction of anyone and anything" standing in the way of their "destructionist path." Representing itself to the community as another radical student group in cahoots with the campus movement, the Destructionists declared that their only goal was obtaining "the complete and absolute freedom to rape, pillage, massacre, burn, loot, mace, smash, or variously destroy anything that we don't like." The Destructionists supported CIA efforts and issued their own anti-peace demands. The School for International Affairs was to be closed because it trained "peace diplomats," a claim that SDS and its actual allies would surely have rejected. Their demand for an end to recruiting "by such peace-fondling groups as the Peace Corps and Vista" mirrored SDS opposition to military and intelligence recruiting on campus. They wanted vacant housing Harlem opened to "all guerrilla and destructionist movements, and their attendant prostitutes and dope addicts," precisely the population that Columbia's expansionist administrators and their racist allies already thought were inhabiting the buildings around the university. The Destructionists also demanded that the city "Free the Nazi 21," and for good measure required the "immediate severing" of Columbia's ties with NASA because of its "stance for the peaceful exploration of outer space." Depicting campus and community protestors as blindly violent, the Destructionists narrative appealed to ongoing white concerns about urban unrest in cities across the nation and in Harlem in particular. The sensational nature of their

47. Independent Destructionists Association, “Time To Destroy,” n.d. (1968); UPAC, Box 11 Folder 1.  
proclamations, like other satirical conservative groups, was an effort to stir renewed opposition from both conscious and casual white supremacists who followed the struggles at Columbia. With the amount of coverage that Columbia garnered in the mainstream New York media, this was a substantial population. Like other conservative groups, what the Destructionists actually worked to destroy was the ability of observers to figure out which side they should be on in the struggle for justice in Harlem.

In the immediate aftermath of the Gym Crow protests and building occupations, this kind of disinformation jeopardized the wide base of support that was critical for the success of the actions on campus. In the long run, these conservative groups help reveal the ongoing difficulties faced by activists for social change in the years that followed the Columbia strike. Throughout the 1970s, community organizations and radical groups working to reshape relations of power in the city would have to deal with ongoing attacks from openly-hostile conservative adversaries. More importantly, they faced opposition from the kinds of people targeted by Columbia conservatives in 1968: those who were politically on the fence, who clung tight to ideas of American democracy and equality but failed to see the stark differences in the lived realities of others, or who were well intentioned but fell for narratives that blamed the oppressed for their own oppression. It was against this future that activists at Columbia and in the community post-1968 were struggling as they worked to build solidarities and alliances that transcended campus boundaries in the years after the strike.
**Demonstration and Diaspora**

Other Columbia students themselves confirmed university fears the kind of transnationally-informed organizing represented by the Harlem Mau Mau was a broader threat in the spring of 1968. For example, The Committee of Columbia University African Students (CCUAS) came to the defense of the Student Afro-American Society and expressed a diasporic consciousness that must have given administrators pause. In an open letter to President Grayson Kirk, CCUAS explained that the efforts for freedom in Africa spurred them to stand with their "fellow black students." SAS was forced to occupy Hamilton as a last resort because the university had refused "to pay the slightest attention to the legitimate demands by the people of the Harlem community" that Columbia stop "snatching from them valuable [public] space." Diplomatically phrasing their rather pointed request, the CCUAS "urge[d] [Kirk] to initiate conversations with the spokesmen of the black students ... by acceding to their demands, which we fully endorse."  

The diasporic anti-imperialism of the Committee of Columbia University African Students came through even more clearly in a second open letter. Addressed to the Student Afro-American Society (SAS), it applauded the SAS for "the seriousness with which you take your position as young black people who must stand up for the dignity and the rights of the black people of Harlem and black people

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everywhere. Immediately, the local positions and uptown protests were connected to broader struggles. Rather than leave it here, the CCUAS went further, expressing the CCUAS-SAS alliance as one facet of a transnational movement challenging white supremacy. This portion bears quoting at length:

One of the increasingly dwindling sources of joy to the American white man is the myth which he has propagated with great effort, that we Afro-Americans and Africans recognise neither a common origin, a confluence of interest, powerful ties of kinship nor an identity of destinies. We take great pleasure and pride to be able at this time to explode this myth by publicly stating that we African students at Columbia University fully and unreservedly approve, endorse and wish to associate ourselves with your protest. We wish to state publicly furthermore that the underlying reasons for our posture is our realization, painfully and tragically belated in some instance, that what hurts the people of Harlem, hurts you and what hurts you hurts us too. We hope for you and ourselves a victorious resolution of this phase of an ongoing struggle and we also hope that a new era of total brotherly cooperation between the two halves of the family has finally dawned upon us and that we here at Columbia will nurture this great solidarity which shall be an example to all black people everywhere.

The CCUAS, then, had constructed, and confirmed to fellow students and administrators, an arc of struggle from the Harlem community, through Hamilton Hall, and out from the Columbia campus to Africa, the Caribbean, and Black communities the world over. Like the Mau Mau Society, although with a different political approach, the African Students were part of a constellation of groups connecting local, grassroots political efforts in New York City to the global flows of struggle that informed their thinking.

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The growing strength of leadership and participation from the greater Black community continued to shape the course of the strike. Thursday night, Charles 37X Kenyatta addressed a rally at the 116th Street entrance to campus. From atop an automobile, Kenyatta spoke to a crowd of 500. "The students are doing what they think is right. They are acting," he told listeners, "for the black community which has no representation and no voice." The next day, April 26th, a battalion of several hundred Black and Latino high school students arrived on campus in support of the striking students.52

These students were backed up by the appearance of H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael. The two militant leaders pushed their way past police and spent half an hour in discussions with the students and community members holed up in Hamilton Hall. When they emerged, Brown announced to a crowd again estimated at 500 people, "We're going to let Columbia know that if they don't deal with the brothers inside, they'll deal with the brothers in the streets." The hundreds of energized Harlem youth who had come to campus were simply the vanguard of a much larger army, should Columbia continue their attempts to colonize Morningside Heights. As Mark Naison, then a student striker and now professor of African-American Studies at Fordham University, recalls, these high school students were instrumental in defending the strikers from assaults by conservative students who came out in force and surrounded the occupied buildings, threatening the striking students within. "It

was the group of 500 high school students from Harlem and the West Side who came up to confront opponents of the strike," Naison writes, "that persuaded the Majority Coalition to end their barricade." Many of them came from the "notoriously tough" Brandeis High in a working-class Puerto Rican neighborhood.53

As they marched onto campus "chanting Black Power slogans," many of the conservative students "began to think twice" about whether they wanted to get into "a race war with neighborhood teenagers." The involvement of youth from the greater Harlem community demonstrated to the Majority Coalition that they had far greater forces to contend with than just the student activists. After that, the demonstrators "no longer had to worry about their fellow students." Naison concludes that it is important to emphasize this incident "because without the passionate support of people in the working class Black and Latino communities adjoining Columbia" the strike might have fizzled before "the major policy change the strike induced," halting the construction of the gym in Morningside Heights.54

**Beyond Campus, Beyond the Strike: Multiracial Organizing on Multiple Fronts**

Stopping the gym construction was a significant achievement. However, the strike also provided an important opportunity for activists of various stripes to rethink the scope of the efforts and their relation to one another. After the emergence of the Morningside Park site as a nexus of campus and community activism, understandings

of the University's moves in the area continued to evolve. The Community Action Committee had warned throughout the mid-'60s that Columbia was harassing minority groups but tended to view this as a kind of abstract situation in which the poor and marginalized did not have their concerns heard. Following the strike, they recognized that "the forces shaping national policies in this country exist in microcosm in every locality." The CAC began to reframe the relationship between Columbia and Harlem as a local instance of the kind of racist and imperialist policies driving US actions around the world, and the fight for housing as resistance to colonizing invaders.

In particular, they saw the University's explanations as a repeat of the Manifest Destiny rationales used to justify the westward march of the frontier. Columbia's claims of "slum clearance" and "urban renewal" were but "brutal euphemisms" that "benefit the institutions but never the community." More than 50% of the over 8,000 residents displaced by Columbia during the 1960s were "Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Orientals...the least sophisticated and weakest group[s]," an "expansion plan...founded upon calculated, deliberate removal of 'undesirable' races." The University avoided claims of its obvious racial discrimination by "characteriz[ing] its victims as socially undesirable as well, lumping all of them with the handful of 'degenerate' SRO tenants" that Columbia was determined to eliminate from its territory. Fighting against these "undemocratic processes... uncontrolled... landlordship, and the continued priority of property rights over human rights," the CAC's rejection of Columbia's narrative of

55. Community Action Committee, “Dear Faculty Members,” 18 October 1968; UPAC, Box 10 Folder 21.
frontier expansion highlights the complex ways that Harlem residents and activists were connecting the histories of communities of color in struggle.\textsuperscript{56}

"Vietnam is HERE!" proclaimed the flyers and posters distributed by the Community Action Committee and the Strike Co-Ordinating Committee in the summer of 1968. Inviting New York City residents to take their own "tour" of Vietnam by visiting Harlem, the groups declared the need to stop "institutional expansion here and in Vietnam." They built their analysis along four main lines of comparison, relating the victims of US policies overseas to those facing similar practices at home. The first point made the case that in both places thousands upon thousands of people were being made into "Refugees! In Vietnam millions have lost their homes. On Morningside Heights 10,000 people have lost their homes [and] 10,000 more are slated to go!"\textsuperscript{57} This was not just slum clearance or urban renewal, but a concerted invasion meant to destroy communities and remove all possibility of resistance. The cold calculation with which large swaths of the Vietnamese countryside were defoliated with Agent Orange or bombed into expanses of churned earth was the same way that the University and its pro-development allies approached the razing of Harlem housing units. Differences in scale perhaps, CAC and SCC argued, but not of kind.

Racism, imperialism, and the violent brutality of militarism were three other parallels that activists drew between the Harlem and Vietnam. In Harlem, tenants were

\textsuperscript{56} Community Action Committee, “Dear Faculty Members,” 18 October 1968; UPAC, Box 10 Folder 21.

\textsuperscript{57} Community Action Committee, “Vietnam is HERE!” flyer, nd (1968); UPAC, Box 10 Folder 21.
harassed, had their water and heat turned off, were locked out of their homes or evicted. When tenants or their allies dared respond, "pure force –Police—is used."

Racism was part of the explanation for why the US was able to attack Vietnam without raising a greater public outcry, activists explained, and was also the reason that Columbia's expansion into Morningside Heights was proceeding largely without question. In both places, "people's lives are disrupted and destroyed simply because they have different skin or language, or are poor and uneducated and have no means to fight back."\(^58\) Seen as savages, undesirables, or sometimes-laboring bodies lacking humanity, "Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Orientals" were detritus to be cleared away in order to advance the projects of US imperialism.\(^59\) Some regarded them as "hungry savages" with "gutter language," whose "jungle manners" forced city employees to neglect their duties and instead become "zoo-keepers" and "garbage collectors."\(^60\) As the CAC and SCC concluded, "In both Vietnam & the Heights, giant corporations grab land and homes, building empires on the suffering of the people."\(^61\) This was not a simple, easy comparison between the two situations, but a concerted community-driven effort to think through the ideological connections linking local events in southwest Harlem to the intense military engagements of the United States in Southeast Asia.

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58. Community Action Committee, “Vietnam is HERE!” flyer, nd (1968); UPAC, Box 10 Folder 21.
59. Community Action Committee, “Dear Faculty Members,” 18 October 1968; UPAC, Box 10 Folder 21.
61. Community Action Committee, “Vietnam is HERE!” flyer, nd (1968); UPAC, Box 10 Folder 21.
In an early strike document, the Columbia and Barnard Citizenship Council worked with Students for a Democratic Society to articulate the relationship of the planned Morningside Park Gym to issues of race, gender, and imperialism. Referring to Gym Crow as "a big steal," they detailed the ongoing battle over control of Morningside Park as an "eight-year-long path," not simply something that emerged overnight--there was a history of struggle in Morningside, a legacy of protest, of the community refusing to submit even in the face of sophisticated and powerful legal maneuvering on the part of Columbia. And if Morningside lost its struggle over the gym site, they warned, a litany of negative outcomes would result. One would be ongoing institutional support for the continued predations of US military forces, as the gym became a training ground for ROTC officers. Another would reinforce the differentially racialized treatment afforded Harlem communities, as those minority residents even permitted to enter the gymnasium—through its back door, no less—would be forced to "cram into a gym which is already obsolescent."62

Dismissing Columbia's response to this criticism, a "Community gym" in the basement of the building as a "sop to public relations," the Citizenship Council refused to be convinced. Instead, they noted, over 80% of the new gymnasium complex built on ostensibly public land would be "completely closed to residents of Harlem and Morningside Heights." Focusing on the relatively narrow section of privileged society that would benefit from the gym's construction, its opponents pointed out that the gym would ultimately only benefit the male, predominately white, of Columbia University.

If anything, the gym's planned patrons were the diametric opposite of the population who would be displaced by its construction. Join us, the Citizenship Council called, and protest the "land grab.... Get Columbia OUT of the park!"

"And get the US out of Vietnam!" others added. Activists continued to hammer the connection between US military aggression and imperialism abroad, and continued strikes on communities of color in the United States. Black and Puerto Rican residents of upper Manhattan were making these connections themselves. They too began to explicitly articulate the fight against Columbia and what it represented as a shared struggle that crossed racial and geographic boundaries. As the students occupied campus buildings, the community continued to mobilize.

On April 27th, four days after the initial takeover of Hamilton Hall, hundreds of people from upper Manhattan chose Columbia as the target of their challenges to US imperialism in connection with a major anti-war rally of 120,000 in Central Park. Marching through Harlem they carried banners opposing the war and urging support for the Black students at Columbia, and called on others to join them. "We've got a battle here in Harlem, not Vietnam," cried one young woman," and those Columbia students are fighting our battle. Let's come on out and support them." This group was joined at 110th Street by a Puerto Rican contingent from East Harlem. The combined group then headed to campus where they staged their own rally before later joining other protesters at Central Park. Marchers also made signs that drove home the interlocking nature of racism and imperialism. "No armed occupation of black

communities," read one. An Asian-American youth, looking to Muhammad Ali for a reference, carried the message, "No black man ever called me chink, support Vietnamese struggle." 64

Those who had proceeded to the Park from Columbia continued to hear speakers deliver messages that reinforced the growing struggle against Columbia. Mayor John Lindsay spoke briefly, and although he had received some credit in student circles for urging police to use restraint against the strikers over the previous several days, he was targeted as part of a broader critique of the dynamics shaping Columbia's expansionist plans in Harlem. Perhaps the most cutting challenge came from Pedro Juan Rua of the Puerto Rican Pro-Independence Movement. "No capitalist politician is exempt from the crimes of imperialism," Rua charged. "Anyone who holds the power to mobilize police and armed forces against blacks and Puerto Ricans is a firm upholder of the imperialist system. No capitalist politician is against the genocide of Vietnamese or any other people; none is against imperialist warfare. What they may fear—and the magnificent Vietnamese and black peoples' struggle has forced some into this position—Is that a particular war may bring about a generalized crisis within the imperialist system itself." 65

While Rua was making these charges, an Anti-Imperialist March of several hundred in Washington Square Park protested the ongoing campaign in Vietnam. Before the march could move more than a few feet, it was savagely attacked by

legions of police who waged a "brutal assault and made over 100 arrests." Marchers complained that they were legally marching on the sidewalk, and noted that the decision to stop the Anti-Imperialist Coalition March must have been made before the 27th. "They might just as well have busted us the night before at out homes," said Walter Teague of the U.S. Committee to Aid the NLF. "It's almost getting to that."66

The Anti-Imperialist Coalition remained undaunted and organized a second march for May 18th. The demands of this second march expanded on and strengthened the links between Vietnam and Harlem. Protesters called for the immediate withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, and followed that with a call for the repeal of Mayor Lindsay's "fascist 'emergency laws,'" allowing police to stop and frisk people with little or no justification, which would "turn New York City into a virtual Saigon under martial law."67 Activists saw this as a thinly-veiled attempt to bring Black and Brown New Yorkers under ever-tighter police control, and sustain a climate of fear among the city's minority populations.

Thus, their third demand was an even clearer rejection of Lindsay's policy: "Get racist police force out of Black and Puerto Rican communities." With a local perspective on troop withdrawal, they called for the dissolution of New York's

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67. Coalition for an Anti-Imperialist March, “We’re Going Back to Washington Square Park,” n.d. (May 1968); UPAC, Box10 Folder 2. To differentiate this group from the Columbia Anti-Imperialist Movement (CAIM), it was called Co-AIM. Co-AIM's member organizations included Youth Against War and Fascism (YAWF), U.S. Committee to Aid the N.L.F., Veterans and Reservists to End the War in Vietnam, Seward Park H.S. Peace and Freedom Coalition, Blacks Against Negative Dying, Movimiento Pro Independencia, Free School SDS, and the City University Anti-Imperialist League. Axel, or Axelrod, was a prominent lifelong Socialist organizer unaffiliated with Columbia University.
Tactical Police Force, and the Bureau of Special Services, the "secret police." Mayor Lindsay, as the highest-ranking public official in the city, bore the brunt of the responsibility in the eyes of organizer Dave Axel, aka Axelrod, and the rest of the Coalition for an Anti-Imperialist March. Although Co-AIM targeted Lindsay while Columbia students were targeting President Grayson Kirk, the connections they made were similar. They derided Lindsay as a banker-politician, intent on smashing the April 27th demonstration because "it attacked the whole imperialist establishment and in particular pointed out his responsibility for police assaults on the Black and Puerto Rican communities and on anti-war demonstrations." Just for good measure, they concluded "Lindsay, Kirk, and [Police Commissioner Howard] Leary MUST GO!" 68

Other off-campus forces quickly joined the struggle. Attention to these extra-University efforts must be considered in an examination of the ways that the efforts on campus developed and elaborated an atmosphere of struggle that encompassed a far greater area than simply the hallowed halls on the Heights. A special issue of the worker clearly laid out a number of ways in which Columbia University was deeply entangled in and profiting from the Vietnam war, and US imperialism more broadly, in a scathing indictment of the relationship between President Grayson Kirk, University trustees such as Institute of Defense Analysis chairman and Wall Street financier William A. Burden and his colleague Frederick Russell Kappel, chairman and CEO of AT&T and director of Met Life, Chase Manhattan, and General Foods, among others. Detailing Kirk's connection to Mobile Oil, for example, the author

68. Coalition for an Anti-Imperialist March, “We’re Going Back to Washington Square Park,” n.d. (May 1968); UPAC, Box10 Folder 2.
pointed out that "as a Mobile Oil director, he is an agent of American imperialism. Dr. Kirk, however, is not neglecting the worker's dollar at home. He is also director of Consolidate Edison of New York ($3 and a half billion) and the Greenwich Savings Bank ($1 billion)." Focusing more closely on the University's involvement in the military-industrial complex, the article noted that several corporations on whose boards Kirk served specialized in the production of weapons used in "killing Vietnamese children... And we ask, how can he deny that he is a Merchant of Death? And how can he double as a war profiteer and a general of learning?" This was a central question, a course of inquiry that tied University actions abroad and in Harlem together, and asked what role the school should play in its community.69

**Re-thinking Student Activism**

As the fall semester got underway, the student movement was entering a new phase. The immediacy of the Gymnasium site had passed, and campus organizers worked to maintain momentum for the movement. In *the columbia OWL*, a November editorial remarked that the row over the gymnasium was as symbolic as it was material, "not only an offensive encroachment into public parkland, but an example of a rapacious expansion policy that matched insensitivity with guile." The university "would not be satisfied until it had... constructed a sort of academic bastion, secure from the black hordes without."70 Disciplinary actions for the students who had participated in the strike were being sorted out, and although 40 of the suspended

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students had been reinstated activists continued to insist on total amnesty for all involved. The focus on student amnesty in the face of university punishment might have become a distraction, but some participants linked the disciplinary proceedings to the issues that had fueled that spring's protests. Cicero Wilson, the president of the Students Afro-American Society, took the University to task and exposed how the administration was using bureaucratic methods to impede resistance to its expansion efforts and to demands for change. Wilson and his organization, like other students who had participated in the strike the previous spring, faced long and drawn-out disciplinary hearings. The time they had to devote to this process was preventing them from pursuing substantive changes to University policy, "especially in the area of black curriculum" and expansion that "infringed upon the rights of '750,000 people in the Harlem community."

SAS recognized that Columbia administrators punishing some students and granting others a reprieve was an attempt to "divide and frustrate the student moment [sic]."

Jomo Raskin, a class of '63 member who had been part of the Fayerweather commune during the strike, agreed in an open letter to student radicals and their allies that the university was returning to the "old imperialist device of divide and conquer."

In reminding his comrades that their amnesty fight was part of the broader set of imperialist practices they had spent the previous months challenging, Raskin's letter confirmed anew that struggles on campus and in the community were shared. An important point in Raskin's analysis of the future of radical struggle for Columbia

students is his location of Columbia as a lynchpin of the larger racist, imperialist society. Students emerged from the summer debating plans of action for the fall. One group wanted to "diversify and expand" their movement, seeking "allies in what they regard as the real world, with workers and the poor." Others wanted to concentrate their efforts on campus, and Raskin agreed this was the "more constructive" option. Not because the university was the most important target, or because the struggles of workers and the poor were less vital, but because the university was not "a closed community" and student working to change the university would be working to change the larger society through their most effective channel of engagement.\footnote{Jomo Raskin, “Dear Brothers and Sisters,” 16 September 1968; UPAC, Box 11 Folder 21.}

This was about thinking through what solidarity and collective struggle meant at Columbia, in the wake of a powerful coalition of community and campus activists earlier in the year. Students leaving Columbia to join the masses in struggle would mean leaving "one of the major racist and imperialist institutions in New York City" unchallenged in its role as one of the leading "factories for the production of imperialist leaders." Fighting Columbia directly was "as direct a confrontation with the power elite as there exists in the United States today," and activists needed not go running to organize the working class when they were already right in the middle of a prime target for young revolutionaries. "The ripples of our struggle at Columbia," Rankin told his colleagues, would connect them to struggles in other places.\footnote{Jomo Raskin, “Dear Brothers and Sisters,” 16 September 1968; UPAC, Box 11 Folder 21.}

Some of these ripples lapped across the boundaries of Columbia's campus. By early 1970, veterans of the spring of 1968 were rethinking the approach that student
radicals should take in order to further the objectives that had originally fueled the strike. One such organization, the Columbia Labor Committee (CLC), asked what constituted "Real Politics" and argued that the Columbia strike was an important model for future radical activity. The strike had connected a variety of social forces from across the city, and demonstrated the potential of expanding student activism beyond campus. At the "high point of radicalism," there was a core of nearly 6000 activists from Columbia, from community organizations, from other radical groups, and even "insurgent groups of high school students." Echoing the observations of many participants during the 1968 actions, it was community involvement that had fueled the student radicals' successes.

The lesson to be taken was that "Real Politics" needed to continue to look outward from campus rather than falling into the internal theoretical debates and power struggles that had reduced the "former heroic strike committee... to a tiny, discredited, Anarchist-ridden relic" that was the current Columbia SDS chapter. For the Columbia Labor Committee the upcoming Transit Strike, intended to preserve the 20¢ subway fare with the ultimate goal of eliminating fees at all, had the potential to inspire another round of multiracial, cross-class, citywide solidarity. Organizing these kinds of "united front community groupings" had a much greater long-term potential to effect change than struggles built around issues primarily of importance to students. This understanding of real politics meant that the "local anarchist muddleheads" running the current iteration of SDS were impotent to lead the next phase of activism.

not because of "any over-radicalness on their part nor their outstripping the 'masses' willingness to act." Placing the root of campus activism in issues of importance to the surrounding community, the CLC concluded that it was because the masses understood "far better than their ultraleft 'leaders' the difficulties" of continuing to fight for meaningful social change in the increasingly hostile, conservative climate of the early 1970s.\footnote{76}{Columbia Labor Committee, “What is Real Politics?,” 18 March 1970; UPAC, Box 10 Folder 12.}

Other groups labored to continue building the network of connections between the local struggles occurring just off campus and the larger issues like war in Southeast Asia that fueled national debate. Although the anti-war movement had "surged fantastically" in the early part of 1970 with "massive demonstrations and a national student strike," the war had not been brought to an end. A broad, multiracial coalition from across New York City held a conference at Columbia on August 15-16, 1970, to plan the fall anti-war offensive.\footnote{77}{"U.S. Out of Asia Now," n.d. (August 1970); UPAC, Box 10 Folder 20.} Using the expanding war in Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand as the fuel to drum up support for the conference, the organizers again hammered home the connections between imperialism in Asia and the conditions in US cities, especially in communities of color.

Conference organizers made these connections through concrete analysis and by describing specific articulations of imperialism abroad to oppression at home. The US "crusade against communism" driving the war in Indochina would, of necessity "create 'involvements'... anywhere else that U.S. corporations have vital interests." Africa, Latin American, the Middle East: all would become targets "because the U.S.
must continue to suppress revolutionary movements of the people" that might threaten capitalism and American corporate power. At home, the war in Vietnam was creating economic upheaval, including unemployment, drastic inflation, housing shortages, and "astronomical medical costs—all of which hurt Black and Latin working people the most." In "ghettoes across the country," from Harlem to Houston, people were fighting back. The antiwar movement needed to understand grassroots resistance against oppression as domestic opposition to American imperialist adventures.

The coalition of groups working together on the conference gives real substance to the claim that the anti-war effort would need to be linked to local resistance to oppression in US communities. Central participants included, among others, the Ethiopian Students Union, Iranian Students Association, Zimbabwe Action Group, and the Columbia University Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, and the Progressive Labor Party. The breadth of this coalition was driven, they noted, by lessons learned during the 1968 student strike: "the anti-war movement, to be successful, must reach out beyond the confines of the campus and build ties to those outside the student community." 79

The Black Panther Party in Harlem was actively working to make these connections stronger as well. While students at Columbia were starting the fall term, and re-energizing the fight on campus, BPP materials making the rounds in Harlem were connecting the experiences of racism in New York City to imperialist practices. Eldridge Cleaver's "Community Imperialism," circulating by early October 1968,

broadcast the need "to free black communities from the imperialist control exercised over them." The struggle in Harlem, long understood as a fight against racism, was a fight "against community imperialism." In language that spoke to residents of Morningside Heights in particular and Harlem more broadly, Cleaver wrote, "The politics in our communities are controlled from outside, the economics of our communities are controlled from outside, and we ourselves are controlled from outside, by racist police who come into our communities and occupy them, patrolling, terrorizing, and brutalizing our people like a foreign army in a conquered land." At the same time, the Panthers were closely involved in actions at NYU and CCNY during 1968 and 1969, where the connections between racism and imperialism also resonated.

Cleaver addressed a rally at NYU on October 11, 1968, so full that a teacher from JHS 271 had to stand in the aisles with the 15 Puerto Rican youngsters he brought with him. As they left at the end of the speech, Cleaver raised a fist and shouted, "Venceremos!" The students turned and shouted back, and soon "the whole hall was on its feet, fists in the air, shouting 'Power to the Puerto Rican People.'" And, as one reporter noted, "everyone's life had changed a little." The role of the Black Panthers and other Black radicals in linking the challenges of racism to imperialism in the New York activist community should not be underestimated.

This kind of renewed vigor the BPP brought in the fall of 1968 may have helped bring about the persecution and prosecution of the Black Panther 21 in 1969.

on charges of attempting to bomb various department stores in the city. As the defense ramped up, groups from around the city rallied behind the Panthers, understanding the shared struggle. The Women's Committee in Defense of the Panthers, Columbia SDS, Young Patriots from Manhattan's East Side, Youth Against War and Fascism, and other more obscure groups like "The Commune" and the "Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers" radical faction of SDS and their guerilla-militant "Karate Division," all rallied to the Panthers.

**Conclusion**

The connections between racism and imperialism, between Harlem and Vietnam, that had driven the strike in 1968 continued to shape organizing in the community for years to come. This is particularly visible around the occupation of an 8-room apartment at 130 Morningside Drive, part of a planned Pharmacy School expansion and the home of Marie Runyon and other long-time members of the tenants struggle on the Heights. Five men, including Jesuit priests Revs. Peter Fordi, Edward McGowan, and Edward Murphy, moved into the vacant apartment on June 25. Four days later, the head of Morningside Heights, Inc., Ronald Golden, tried to set up a meeting with the men, who agreed on the condition that all building tenants could be present. Golden failed to show, sending Columbia P.R. men Nielson and Carlyle who "explained ad nauseum" the University's plan to "help the community," *The
Morningside Sun sarcastically explained, by breaking the apartments into even smaller rooms and raising the per-room rent.\textsuperscript{82}

Like previous events, resistance to the evictions at 130 Morningside Drive brought together a diverse group. The Morningside Tenants Committee was one of the major forces, but the Jesuit priests who occupied the apartment were not part of that group. Flyers distributed by MTC also showed Black and white protesters marching together. Drawings on the flyers depicted a white man carrying protest signs about conditions at Lincoln Hospital, where ongoing labor struggles primarily involved women and workers of color. A Black woman carried a sign alongside him, her "Stop Lousy Renewal Plans!" message making the point that "renewing" Morningside Heights meant more than just building new University buildings.\textsuperscript{83} It meant residents and citizens having meaningful input, at long last, in the community's future, and it meant planning that served their needs.

However, despite Columbia's overtures to community assistance, the reality of the plan was more of the same. The University simply rebranded their efforts to echo a plan originating from another center of power that was having trouble dealing with local resistance. In December of 1969, in response to growing national unrest over the US' continued involvement in Vietnam, the Nixon administration had announced a plan for "Vietnamization." This would turn over control of the war in Vietnam from the US military to the South Vietnamese, in an attempt to make Saigon responsible for

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\textsuperscript{82} "Saga of Six Squatters," \textit{The Morningside Sun}, v2 n2 (12 July 1971): 2, 7; Collins Collection, Box 1 Folder 18.
\textsuperscript{83} Morningside Tenants Committee, “Tenants! Confront Lindsay!,” February 1971; Collins Collection, Box 1 Folder 17.
\end{flushright}
fighting its own battle and get the US out without the administration losing face internationally or domestically. At the meeting with the 130 Morningside tenants, Nielson and Carlyle tried to spin the University's increased assaults on the neighborhood as "Columbiazation," suggesting that the mix of competing ideas about the future of Morningside Heights would be simplified if control were ceded to Columbia. Given the long history of resistance, it is unclear what possible motivation they might have thought residents would have for endorsing this plan save for piggybacking on the appeal of Nixon's neologism. But Morningsiders understood that Columbiazation meant "Help the people, even if you have to drive them out of their homes to do so." Predictably, it did little to sway local sentiment while galvanizing the sense that the battle being fought in Harlem was part of a larger set of struggles against militarism, racism, and imperialism everywhere the US military/academic/industrial complex reached.

Morningside Heights activists, and their allies across Harlem and the rest of the city, articulated this imperial relationship in their own descriptions of themselves. They understood that Columbia was a colonizing force in upper Manhattan, and often referred to their own resistance in matching terms. When President McGill snuck out the back door of his University office as the 130 Morningside squatters approached the building to ask for a meeting the day after their court date, *The Morningside Sun* reported that McGill had left his assistant Mr. Gleason "to cope with the natives." Although the ongoing tenants struggle in Harlem is outside the scope of this chapter,

the ways that this kind of racist and imperialist language continued to frame both official understandings of the need for "control" in New York's Black and Brown communities, and community resistance to that project, is significant. The "natives" of Harlem were soon joined by the "savages" of the South Bronx as targets. Official efforts to rationalize the failures of city policy-makers, politicians, and business leaders to ensure the continued health of New York City required that they blame the communities most negatively impacted by the policies they implemented. But as we will see, numerous responses echoed from Harlem and the Bronx that rejected these characterizations. As they worked to navigate the shifting political terrain of the 1970s, activists would employ a variety of strategies in an attempt to carve out meaningful lives for themselves and create brighter futures for their communities.
Interlude: Sonic Occupation and Spatial Politics

Kool Herc dropped the needle into the groove, right at the beginning of the break that was driving the kids at his little sister’s back-to-school party crazy. As it played, he positioned the needle on his second turntable at the same spot, and when the break ended he switched the mix and dropped the needle on the other record. Doubling the short snippets that the dancers loved, Herc took brief sonic moments and extended them. As he rocked the same breaks over and over, the sounds became his own, reconfigured and shared with an audience that both reveled in and responded to his selections.

In the rec room of 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in 1973, Kool Herc’s set marked the beginning of a transformation in the South Bronx. 1520 Sedgwick, a 102-unit apartment building tucked into the northeast corner of the intersection of the Major Deegan Expressway and the Cross Bronx Expressway, was not the first place that hip hop “happened,” if such a complex and multifaceted youth culture could have a specific point of genesis, despite its current historic designation as “The Birthplace of Hip Hop.” But it was one of the first places hip hop really took over, and became a legendary event because of what followed. Herc’s reputation grew, and those in attendance—including future hip hop luminaries such as rap legends Grandmaster Caz of the Cold Crush Brothers, Busy Bee, and KRS-One, and DJ’s Grandmaster Flash,
Afrika Bambaataa, Mean Gene, and Red Alert—were instrumental in expanding hip hop’s presence across the South Bronx.

During the 1968 Columbia student strike, Harlem CORE sent a sound truck through the streets of Harlem. Loaded with speakers, it blared a call to community members to come join the growing occupation at the university.¹ The use of sound as a recruiting and organizing activity to bring people from the streets to the center of power was not new for the era. But it does remind us that the use of amplified sound was an active part of the politics of protest in New York communities. The concerted use of loudspeakers to rally support for political causes was part of a larger politics of sonic occupation that challenged the racialization of space in the city, and claimed space to imagine new forms of social relations. The ongoing and overlapping anti-racist and anti-imperialist projects in Harlem and the Bronx allow us to reconsider the significance of DJs setting up sound-systems for impromptu parties in public parks, playgrounds, and other places that people congregated. If UAC performances could be heard, along with many others, in the late 1960s, and CORE and other radical groups were utilizing loudspeakers, bullhorns, underground radio, and other forms of sound to communicate and further radical struggles in New York City in the late 1960s and early 1970s, then it is worth thinking about the situated politics of performances like Herc’s.

Wherever they set up their equipment, DJs played an instrumental role in hip hop’s takeover of the South Bronx. In the rec rooms of public housing or community

centers, the DJ’s sound system transformed the environment. They became spaces where young people could mix, mingle, and create the kind of life they enjoyed, if only for a short time. As they developed the sophistication and power of their sound systems, DJ’s could occupy a much larger territory than simply the rooms in which they were playing. Once Kool Herc had finished building his famous system, named “The Herculords,” passing cars on the Cross Bronx Expressway could hear it from his apartment building when he cranked the volume.\(^2\) Motorists must have wondered what the music was. But for Herc and his audience, they were creating, temporarily, the world in which they wanted to live.

Outdoors, the DJ and his sound system also played an important role. Given the impromptu processes by which outside events happened, they had a more directly decolonizing impulse than indoor events that were generally authorized gatherings held in spaces that had to be reserved or rented. When Bambaataa put his speakers in the windows of his Bronx River Houses apartment and filled the Center courtyard with music all day, he could use his home electricity. But in places like St. Mary’s Park between 143\(^{rd}\) and 149\(^{th}\) Avenues or Cedar Park just north of Herc’s building, it was far more likely for the DJ and his crew to set up the system informally. Needing power to run the equipment, hip hop’s founders freestyled on the old tradition of opening fire hydrants to provide aquatic entertainment on hot summer days: they tapped into

\(^2\) Kool Herc, interviewed by Frank Broughton, 30 September 1998, accessed 12 November 2014, http://www.djhistory.com/interviews/kool-herc. The naming of this legendary sound system is a point of some confusion. In this interview with Broughton, Herc appears to set the record straight: “I called my system the Herculords. People thought I was calling my crew the Herculords. The Herculords is not my crew, it’s the name of my sound system.” However, in Can’t Stop Won’t Stop, Jeff Chang quotes Herc as saying the sound system was called “The Herculoids” (81).
lampposts and other street-side electrical junctions, liberating the electricity that would fuel their sonic occupations of public space.

In communities where street takeovers and occupations were a central tactic of political protest throughout the 1970s, the DJ’s setup was an equally important intervention. Expressive culture was part of and parcel with efforts to transform the ways that Black and Brown populations interacted with city authorities and demanded transformation in their communities. DJs and their sound systems demanded that transformation the loudest. As Jeff Chang writes, “the block party—not the political party—was the space of possibility.” The sheer volume of hip hop in the streets is an important aspect of the decolonizing politics of hip hop culture. But simply being loud in public was far from the only connection to be made. Looking briefly to the personal histories of three founding fathers of hip hop culture, it becomes clear that there were direct connections between their DJ practices and the broader freestyle politics of the 1970s.

Herc had the west Bronx. Kool Herc had arrived in the Bronx from Jamaica with his family in 1967 as 13-year-old Clive Campbell. In Jamaica, he had already begun to develop an interest in the almost ubiquitous sound system for which Kingston streets were known. The massive speaker systems were used for parties and dances, blasting out a mix of Jamaican and imported songs as Trenchtown locals danced into the night. The sound systems were also an important part of Jamaican political life. Political scientist Gregory Freeland notes that, “Sound systems, like

those created by Coxsone Dodd and Duke Reid, played the sounds that Jamaicans listened and danced to as they moved toward independence.”

The sound system itself arrived in the Bronx already imbued with a revolutionary, decolonizing politics. Here like thousands of others left a recently-independent nation for a city where Black and Brown communities were waging their own struggles for self-determination. The politics of decolonization swirled through the streets of New York, where African-Americans, Caribbean immigrants, African immigrants, and various others disenchanted with what they saw as the misdirected power of the United States encountered each other in both planned and impromptu settings. Here was there to give them a soundtrack.

Grandmaster Flash had the South Bronx. Born in Bridgetown, Barbados, he had immigrated with his family to New York after independence in 1966. Fascinated by his father’s record collection since a young child, he constantly got in trouble for touching the records. If only his father had known what the future held. His mother wanted him to study electronics, not understanding that in the changing political economy of New York City, jobs in electronics repair would be as rare in the 1970s Bronx as an affordable, well-maintained apartment, even with his training from Samuel Gompers High School. But Flash did have an affinity for it. Rather than a job in some dusty repair shop, the young Flash started studying the equipment of the DJs he admired, Kool Herc among them.

Flash couldn’t afford all the equipment, but he could build parts no one else had. Freestyle electrical engineering, improving on, adding to, and crafting electronics that did what he wanted them to do—and Flash was imagining things others had not. While Herc was known for his monstrous sound system, Grandmaster Flash became known for his technical innovations. He mastered the scratch, rubbing the record back and forth against the needle to produce rhythmic, manipulable sounds unrecognizable from what they sounded like when played as intended. His creation of a mixer allowing him to switch back and forth between two turntables, combined with the scratched back-tracking he developed, took DJing to a new level. A kid slotted into a dead-end vocational track while thinking four beats into the future challenged everyone around him to innovate. Flash’s advances in the art of scratching, transforming a tool meant only to reproduce prerecorded music into an instrument on which to play wholly new compositions, were freestyle politics in action.

Afrika Bambaataa had the South East Bronx. Unlike Herc and Flash, Bambaataa was born in the Bronx, but his family was both Jamaican and Barbadian. His mother had grown up “immersed in international Black cultural and liberation movements,” his uncle a prominent Black nationalist. Bambaataa learned around the dinner table the political currents flowing through the Black community. He was deeply impressed by the 1964 Michael Caine film Zulu, about African resistance to British imperialism. In high school, he won an essay contest for a trip to Africa where

5. Chang, 93.
7. Chang 92-93.
he got see “black people controlling their own destiny” and came back further inspired to learn about African history.\(^8\) He also changed his name to Afrika Bambaataa, honoring Zulu chieftain Bambatha who led an economic rebellion against British taxation in 1906 that sparked a longer anti-colonial struggle in Natal.\(^9\)

These experiences led him away from his path in the early 1970s as a warlord for the Black Spades gang. His gang leadership transitioned fairly directly into the position of community leader, organizing youth to throw jams, speak across histories of violent rivalry, and work to establish a sense of community and unity that allowed hip hop to flourish in the face of institutional hostility. Bambaataa’s efforts to unite youth and harness their energy, first in the Bronx River Organization and since 1977 in the Universal Zulu Nation, was a decolonizing effort that took the anger and aggression fueled by the socioeconomic situation in the South Bronx and worked to create a base from which to respond. He and his SoulSonic Force articulated a vision of global community that went far beyond the South Bronx, even in the early days of hip hop. Songs like “Planet Rock” expressed a politics of multiracial collaboration and cooperation developed and negotiated through expressive culture.

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Stages of Change:

The Multiracial Black Theatre of Urban Arts Corps

The visible, radical activities of groups the Harlem Mau-Mau Society and the December 4th Movement discussed in the previous chapter give insight into the relationship between struggles for justice and performative politics in Harlem and the Bronx during the long 1970s. When the Mau Mau terrified Columbia University administrators with their militant support for Black student activists, or D4M raucously occupied the InterChurch Center in support of the Young Lords’ Harlem offensive, these actions demonstrated larger political connections through public performances. Strategic confrontations staged in public settings, they were set pieces in an ongoing battle over neighborhood control, racial management, representation, and identity.

For another kind of organization, the performances themselves were the battleground. Expressive culture functioned as an important axis of politics that challenged racism and pursued increased self-determination for Black and Brown populations. This chapter focuses on Urban Arts Corps, a theatre group founded by Vinnette Carroll in 1967 to train Black and Puerto Rican youth in stage production and performance. Performing both original plays and updated versions of the dramatic classics, Urban Arts Corps became an important training ground for a generation of actors, singers, dancers, and writers under Carroll's dynamic leadership. The works
UAC presented, whether original or adapted, made explicit critiques of race relations in the United States and economic inequalities throughout the Americas, and often worked to examine the intersections of racial and gender oppression. Indeed, Carroll’s insistence on challenging the status quo and using the theater as a vehicle for Black advancement, her biographer argues, “may be why so little is written” on Urban Arts Corps.¹

With a heavy slate of performances from 1969 through the late 1970s, UAC was a fixture in the New York Black Arts scene. Staging plays at their own theatre first in Manhattan and later in Harlem, they also regularly performed in public spaces throughout the city. School playgrounds, neighborhood parks, churches, and vacant lots in Harlem and the Bronx were as likely to host a UAC performance as were more formal theatre spaces. Usually offering free admission to their events, Urban Arts Corps delivered messages of independence, strength, resilience, and struggle to audiences of all ages. Of course, many of the audience members did not learn of their own self-worth for the first time from listening to the lines delivered by UAC actors. But the impact of a series of successful, polished public performances, staged by an all-minority troupe and delivering wry, incisive blows to the status quo should not be underestimated. For a generation of youth growing up in the 1970s, the regular performances were yet another example of the power of creative expression in working to fashion a better life. A multiracial collective occupying parks, playgrounds, and other public spaces for their performances, Urban Arts Corps gave

visible evidence of ongoing actions to decolonize their communities and reclaim a sense of dignity for local residents.

**Urban Arts Corps, Community Theater, and Public Performance in the early 1970s**

Vinnette Carroll took the helm of Urban Arts Corps at the request of John B. Hightower, executive director of the New York State Council on the Arts. UAC was a pilot program under Governor Rockefeller’s Ghetto Arts Program, which was funded by the Council. Intended to provide training, diversion, and creative outlets for the City's "ghetto youth," Lindsay's program was part of a municipal attempt to open a cultural front in the war on poverty. Hightower went out of his way to lure Carroll, who at the time was directing the Inner City Repertory theatre in Watts during the burgeoning Black Arts movement in Los Angeles, back to New York City to head the program. Carroll was "enthralled" by the potential of a "ghetto arts program" and aimed to make the most of it.

Carroll was born in Harlem to Jamaican parents, but she and her sister moved to Jamaica in early childhood and lived with their grandmother while their father completed dental school. They returned to join their parents in Harlem when Vinnette was 12. In Jamaica, she had fallen in love with theater, art, and music, fed a steady diet of cultural events by their grandmother. But Dr. Carroll, a dignified professional in Harlem during an era in which Black business success was hard earned, persuaded

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3. McClinton, 93.
4. Emory Lewis, "Lindsay Comes to the Aid of Black 'Alice',' The Record (Bergen, NJ), nd (late 1970); UAC, Box 1 Folder 4.
her to abandon those dreams and instead get training for a "respectable" job. She earned a B.A. in Psychology from Long Island State University, an M.A. from NYU, and pursued a doctorate at her father's insistence. After completing PhD coursework at Columbia, Carroll began to concentrate on acting, drama, and theatre. She had been taking acting classes on the side, and although Dr. Carroll was none too happy about the change, her mother supported Vinnette’s desire to pursue her creative passions.5

Once seriously involved in theatre, Carroll progressed rapidly. She caught the attention of Edwin Piscator and earned a scholarship to study theatre at the New School of Social Research. Her classmates included Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier, two of the first African American men to take part in the theatre workshops there, and as the first Black woman to attend the New School, Carroll’s presence was equally ground-breaking. She earned roles in several major productions, including playing the Duchess in *Alice in Wonderland*. This role perhaps planted the seed for the first major production she would stage as director of Urban Arts Corps, an *Alice* remake titled *But Never Jam Today*.

Piscator insisted that students master all aspects of theatrical arts, not just the acting that was Carroll’s focus at the time, and so she trained as a director, writer, and producer as well. After completing her training, she toured a one-woman play from 1952-57, and also joined the faculty at the High School for the Performing Arts in New York City in 1955, where she would teach for a decade. Finding few opportunities for African American actors and directors, she staged her own

5. McClinton, 14-20.
production of *Dark of the Moon* at the Harlem YMCA in 1958. Her directorial debut, it earned Carroll a Ford Foundation grant and featured fledgling actors James Earl Jones, Cicely Tyson, and Rosalind Cash. Carroll was later chosen by Langston Hughes to direct the off-Broadway production of *The Prodigal Son*, an opportunity aided by a friendship developed during Hughes’ frequent visits to the Carroll household during her childhood. These experiences clearly went a long way to solidifying her life-long dedication to pursuing theatrical avenues for Black and Brown youth. Dark of the Moon especially was a turning point in her career, and she began to approach theater as a vehicle for Black advancement, a turn confirmed by the dramatic impact she saw on local youth during her stint at the Inner City Repertory in Watts. Carroll's liberal public insistence that if Black artists trained hard enough and wanted it badly enough they could—and would—eventually be destined for success belied the more radical politics she would bring to Urban Arts Corps practices and performances.

Under Carroll's guidance, the Corps sought both to directly impact the lives of the youth who were training in Urban Arts Corps, and to effect larger transformations in Black and Brown communities across the city. The training, community engagement, and performances would change the relationship of "ghetto area" residents to the arts, how those residents saw themselves, and how they were seen by outsiders. Before launching Urban Arts Corps, Carroll had conducted a study of the Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant communities, and identified critical elements for

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addressing their cultural needs. Her findings shaped the Urban Arts Corps' objectives, which included efforts to "provide youth in ghetto areas with direct collaborative experiences with performing artists who shared their social and/or cultural heritage; aid in the development of work techniques; introduce ghetto youth to materials, organizations, and artists that would enhance and improve their self-image; stimulate and aid in the development of young artists in disadvantaged areas; and stimulate interest in professional and educational opportunities in the arts." To achieve these goals, Carroll focused her efforts on recruiting and training Black and Puerto Rican youth, ranging in age from their mid-teens to early twenties.8

This was a rather straightforward, laudable plan for training Black and Brown youth in a traditional arts form under the eye of recognized professionals. Carroll's background, experience, and ability to move in sophisticated arts and theater circles made Urban Arts Corps an organization that could find ready acceptance from liberal funding sources like Mayor Lindsay's Ghetto Arts Program and the New York State Council on the Arts. Given the racial unrest and Black radical activity of the late 1960s, from riots in Harlem and cities across the country in 1968 to the national attention attracted by the Black Panthers and the alarm they raised in white circles, the Urban Arts Corps tread a fine line. On the one hand, the Corps' municipal funding sources meant that Carroll and her colleagues had to present themselves as part of a project of racial liberalism, assuring authorities that with the proper guidance and training, troubled ghetto youth could grow from problematic to productive, well-

8. “History” background essay, UAC.
adjusted members of society. When her audience was a group like the readers of the *Wall Street Journal*, for example, Carroll would explain that Urban Arts Corps sought to demonstrate that “art is more than a luxury for middle-class whites,” and show that it is possible for “a black or Puerto Rican artists to be part of the American dream.”

On the other, Carroll had a clear and strong belief in the radical potential of Black art for Black people, "accessible art...that demonstrated or gave life to the slogan 'Black is beautiful'," a belief that was only strengthened during her time in Watts. Publicly, she hoped that bringing some entertainment to the people would help keep the ghetto “cooler” in the summers, while privately confiding that she knew the real motivation for Rockefeller’s Ghetto Arts Program was “to keep the darkies happy, and from tearing up the place.” In documents not intended for distribution to funding sources or authorities, Carroll revealed a more radical purpose driving Urban Arts Corps' activities. UAC was a political organization in her eyes, and if artistic activity was not sufficient for a revolutionary transformation of society, it was a necessary component: "It cannot be gainsaid that the fight for meaningful employment, decent housing, and freedom from hunger must preempt the fight for 'Arts' in our list of priorities. It is, however, vitally important to utilize art and the artist as valuable tools in the struggle, as lubricants in communicating the struggle and as forces for creating a more sane, more cultivated, more peaceful life style." In documents not intended for distribution to funding sources or authorities, Carroll revealed a more radical purpose driving Urban Arts Corps' activities. UAC was a political organization in her eyes, and if artistic activity was not sufficient for a revolutionary transformation of society, it was a necessary component: "It cannot be gainsaid that the fight for meaningful employment, decent housing, and freedom from hunger must preempt the fight for 'Arts' in our list of priorities. It is, however, vitally important to utilize art and the artist as valuable tools in the struggle, as lubricants in communicating the struggle and as forces for creating a more sane, more cultivated, more peaceful life style."
But Never Jam Today: *A Black Alice in the Diaspora*

The play that earned Urban Arts Corps its first real, sustained attention was the 1969 production, *But Never Jam Today*.\(^{12}\) It was a reworking of the Lewis Carroll classics *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, although the actual reworking was fairly minimal.\(^{13}\) As Carroll explained it, she wrote *But Never Jam Today* by “rereading” the author's works, and realizing that "the lines of the classic could become relevant to blacks. The lines take on startling new interpretations when read from a Black perspective."\(^{14}\) Once the UAC director realized the power that this work would have when presented by her Corps in a different social context, she quickly began to develop this "Black Alice." Calling Lewis Carroll’s work the "most definitive 'theatre of the absurd' piece" ever written, Vinnette Carroll saw in these tales a perfect opportunity to reframe, interrogate, and play with notions of race, gender, identity, and social hierarchy. Because the Alice tales had "always been told from various Anglo-Saxon points of view," she noted, "this production is designed to focus on the Black point of view."\(^{15}\)

Audiences at preview performances saw the connections too, and Carroll's focus on delivering the play from an African American perspective came through

\(^{12}\) As McClinton points out in his biography of Carroll, by this point, the name had technically been changed to Urban Arts Theatre. However, many continued to refer to it as Urban Arts Corps, including Carroll herself and the organization's documents throughout the 1970s. Despite McClinton’s attentiveness, careful to use the "Theatre" version of the name, I would argue that the continued persistence of the "Corps" helps us to understand where the political thrust of the organization lay: in its status as a group, a collective, and militantly dedicated to training and improving the lives of minority youth.

\(^{13}\) No relation to Vinnette.

\(^{14}\) Emory Lewis, "Lindsay Comes to the Aid of Black 'Alice'," *The Record* (Bergen, NJ), nd (late 1970); UAC, Box 1 Folder 4.

\(^{15}\) "Notes on the Production," nd (c. 1969); UAC, Box 1 Folder 4.
clearly. As one reviewer wrote, "Alice in Wonderland has been annotated and animated, filmed by Jonathan Miller, scrutinized in English and psych courses, but until now, Alice has consistently remained blond, white, and blue. Very Anglo." Highlighting this "Afro Alice" as a theatre "Best Bet" for April 1969 in New York Magazine, the writer offered further explanation of Ms. Carroll's interventions in the upcoming staging as part of Black Expo at City Center, April 22-27, 1969, filtered through his own understanding of radical Black politics. Reminding readers of the line delivered by the "White (honky!) Queen" as she offers Alice a job as her maid—"The rule is jam tomorrow and jam yesterday. But never jam to-day," to which Alice objects, "It must come sometimes to 'jam today'"—New York Magazine's theatre critic concluded that for audiences of But Never Jam Today, the "symbolism of the title is obvious."16

But Never Jam Today was a play with a multilayered and complex message. It critiqued the continued inequality of minority lives in the United States, particularly the Black and Puerto Rican populations most directly served by Carroll's new theatre troupe, but also engaged the broader political currents swirling between New York, the Caribbean, and Africa. Alice's efforts to make a "new way" in Wonderland, despite opposition from the White Queen, reflected Carroll's efforts to change the futures of Corps members' lives, and of Black and Brown communities. The Alice in Never Jam was a "middle-class black girl" in search of her identity, perhaps a cipher for Carroll's own Sugar Hill adolescence. But when the Queen commanded

"Remember who you are!" the enduring power of US racism in the post-Civil Rights era became a central target of Carroll's directorial efforts, framing Alice's emergence within the constraints of contemporary society. Through their performances, Carroll’s cast of fourteen "young actor-singer-dancers" worked to put into practice a different set of social relations.

First produced as part of the 1969 Black Expo slate of plays and performances, But Never Jam Today received critical praise for its April 23 premier at City Center. New York Amsterdam News' Dianne Thompson opined that the play deserved repeat presentations, in part for "highlighting the ability of young blacks to project the depth and beauty of attitudes and dialogs that are unique unto the black community." The "interracially mixed" audience agreed, and the cast "deservedly received standing ovations." Thompson, writing for an African American newspaper, brought to the performance a consciousness of and attentiveness to the malleability and multiple meanings of the scenes and songs in the play. Finding Never Jam an "excellent tasteful, humorous satire on the illogicalness of the logical world," she "pinpointed... the key" of the satire in a musical number performed by Old Father William and his choir. The crux of their performance was that they sang only after White Rabbit deemed Alice's version of the song not authentically black enough, "honest" enough, to satisfy his tastes. While Alice was being told to "remember who you are," Old Father William and crew were performing a comfortingly familiar version of blackness that knew its place, and did not threaten white expectations of black obedience. Old Father Williams' spiritual-style version served to solidify
preexisting notions of the proper performance of blackness, notions questioned by
Alice's defiant efforts to carve out her own identity.\(^{17}\)

The intent of Vinnette Carroll's *But Never Jam Today*, as understood by cast, crew, and by audiences of color, was often missed by white viewers, even those with extensive experience with the stage. White critics like the *New York Times*’ Richard Shepard noted how Black audiences laughed with “wholesome ingenuousness” at the “atrocious puns,” and marveled at their enthusiastic responses even though “they couldn’t have all been relatives.” The play's subtle but pointed jabs at racism, inequality, and injustice, clearly communicated to attentive audiences, were but "happy divagations" devoid of any greater social significance.\(^{18}\) One telling comment, however, that helps to explain the popularity and power of Urban Arts Corps performances on their tours through the city throughout the early 1970s was Shepard's remark that despite the spartan set, "somehow one envisioned a vast tableau, something much to the credit of all concerned."\(^{19}\) Carroll's direction and her cast's efforts were able to convey more than simply the sum of the play's physical and vocal parts. Deceptively powerful, Urban Arts Corps presentations were able to temporarily

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18. Richard F. Shepard, "Stage: Take Lewis Carroll, Add Soul...: 'But Never Jam Today' Follows Recipe," *New York Times*, 24 April 1969: 40. As others have noted, Shepard's racist condescension was common among reviewers of Vinnette Carroll's directorial work from the mid-1960s well into the 1970s. In the entry on Vinnette Carroll in *American Stage Directors of the 20th Century* Fliotsos and Vierow write, "The critics, mainly Caucasian and Jewish men, tried to grapple with an unfamiliar aesthetic, that of African American joyously singing and moving to a type of music that was unexpected on commercial stages."
transport audiences, be they in formal theaters, public parks, or school playgrounds, and create the possibility of something greater.20

**Producing Transformations**

Despite their relative youth and in many cases inexperience, Carroll saw in her charges a group with the potential to radically reshape the position of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other minorities within the world of performing arts, and to challenge dominant ideas about and attitudes toward those populations in general. This kind of transformation was precisely the point behind Urban Arts Corps, taking determined youngsters, introducing them to theater, and teaching them to change themselves and their communities at the same time. UAC would develop the theatrical skills of its members, while enriching the lives of the Black and Brown communities it served. Carroll saw Urban Arts Corps as an opportunity to effect real transformations on youth of color in New York City. The Corps was not a way station or a summer program, not a "dilettante organization." It was a growing "permanent company of young actors," and there was "nothing patronizing about it."21

From her background with Langston Hughes and the actors with whom she worked in New York, to her experience directing at the Inner City Cultural Center in

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20. I am drawing here on Jill Dolan’s theorization of the enduring radical possibility of the theater, which can extend out from formal settings to include more impromptu spaces. Dolan writes of “live performance as a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world,” in *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (University of Michigan Press, 2005): 2.

21. Emory Lewis, "Lindsay Comes to the Aid of Black 'Alice'," *The Record* (Bergen, NJ), nd (late 1970); UAC, Box 1 Folder 4.
Watts in the midst of the Black Arts scene, she recognized that she, her protégés, and Urban Arts Corps itself would have to perform above and beyond the levels of other theater groups to earn the wider attention necessary for their work to have a transformative effect on social and artistic attitudes towards non-white communities. The "galvanic" Carroll was insistent that UAC members could reach this level of skill and dedication. She did not hesitate to replace actors who did not measure up to her standards, but she was also open and clear about her expectations for the members of Urban Arts Corps. They had to "work, work, work... being black isn't enough in terms of being an artist." Carroll taught from personal experience, too. Her father had made sure she knew that theater was a difficult field in which to earn respect. And she was told early that she would have to do far more, with less, than others in order to succeed.

Discussing the attitude she developed early in her career and that shaped her approach to mentoring UAC members, she recalled, "There are so many problems a black artist has to face. Yet you can't let it dominate your work, because it's so immobilizing. When I said I wanted to direct, I was told I'd have to take a third off the show's budget because I'm black, and a third off because I'm a woman. And I said, 'I'm gonna do a helluva lot with that other third'." Carroll pushed and prodded the members of Urban Arts Corps, insisting on total dedication in rehearsal and warning it

22. Emory Lewis, "Lindsay Comes to the Aid of Black 'Alice',' The Record (Bergen, NJ), nd (late 1970); UAC, Box 1 Folder 4.
would be a "living hell." There were no breaks, no smoking, and even no eating allowed during rehearsal. Her stern attitude was tempered by a deep passion for the young member and their collective work. In UAC, Carroll offered the "youngsters a home, and a discipline and love for the theater arts."

Just as Carroll opened up new experiences to the members of the troupe, Urban Arts Corps brought new experiences to Black and Brown audiences throughout the city and around the country. After Never Jam’s triumphant April 1969 premier, Urban Arts Corps continued rehearsing, fulfilling Dianne Thompson's call for "repeats." In June of 1970, Carroll's crew presented Never Jam at the Mt. Morris Amphitheater at 122nd Street and Lennox Avenue in Harlem. The first public performance of the play since Black Expo, it demonstrated how effectively Urban Arts Corps could present its work in outdoor formats. The Mt. Morris performance also revealed Carroll's ability to develop multiple avenues of support. The use of the Amphitheater space was donated by the famed composer Richard Rodgers, of Rodgers and Hammerstein, and $5000 to defray production costs came from his wife. The couple was on hand to celebrate the opening of the play on Friday, June 26th, and no doubt the Rodgers' endorsement was instrumental in gaining financial support for future Urban Arts Corps endeavors.

24. McClinton, 64.
26. Emory Lewis, "Lindsay Comes to the Aid of Black 'Alice'," The Record (Bergen, NJ), nd (late 1970); UAC, Box 1 Folder 4.
27. UAC even offered new perspectives on blackness to audiences across the globe, as the production Your Arm's Too Short to Box With God, commissioned by the Italian government for the 1975 Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, demonstrated.
Funding for the previous spring's production of *Never Jam* came from the state's Arts Council, and Mayor Lindsay and the City delivered some additional money through the summer. But this funding was "only a trickle," and Urban Arts Corps "desperately need[ed] money for a year-round operation, a permanent company with adequate salaries." Carroll estimated that UAC's fall program for 1970 would require at least $210,000, and she was still trying to gather support for a summer tour of *Never Jam* to "the slums and the ghettos, appear[ing] in parks, churches, and schools." The Rodgers grant helped jump-start the Mt. Morris Amphitheater production, and was matched by another $5000 from the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation. The success of Carroll in both attracting outside funding, and directing UAC to a successful performance at the Mr. Morris Amphitheater, helped encourage Mayor Lindsay to find another $25,000 to get the city-wide tour underway.29

That funding came from Lindsay's Urban Action Task Force, and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, part of the recently-formed Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs Administration.30 It also included an infusion from Governor Rockefeller's Ghetto Arts Program, as UAC's summer tour was just the sort of project it was intended to support. In keeping with the mission of the Ghetto Arts Program, the tour performances would be held at non-traditional sites easily accessible to the Black and Brown audiences meant to be served, often open outdoor spaces without capacity limits. That meant Urban Arts Corps performances would reach

29. Emory Lewis, "Lindsay Comes to the Aid of Black 'Alice'," *The Record* (Bergen, NJ), nd (late 1970); UAC, Box 1 Folder 4.
audiences many times the size of more traditional theatre performances. The difficulty of keeping accurate track of admission for these kinds of sites, however, was mitigated by Urban Arts Corps' practice of open admission during the tour. “We do not charge any admission fee... Everybody is always talking about bringing theater to the people. We do it,” Carroll explained.31

The tour started on July 30th, a Thursday, at the Jacob Riis Settlement House location in the Queensbridge Houses. Founded in 1899, the Settlement House had been adding "African American cultural programs" throughout the 1960s in an effort to better meet the needs of the community.32 It was a natural starting point for UAC's tour, a smaller venue to acquaint the company with performing in an alternative space. The location also called attention to the differences between the conditions of public housing projects and the wealthy white neighborhoods of midtown Manhattan just across the East River, reinforcing the Black-oriented social commentary of the play itself. The significance of the Queensbridge Houses as the first performance site should not be overlooked. As the largest public housing project in the United States, the Queensbridge Houses in the 1960s were emblematic of the problems facing Black and Brown communities, and the failures of Civil Rights legislation and War on Poverty actions to bring about transformation and meaningful economic change. Due to changes in the policies of the New York City Housing Authority during the decade,

31. Emory Lewis, "Lindsay Comes to the Aid of Black 'Alice'," The Record (Bergen, NJ), nd (late 1970); UAC, Box 1 Folder 4.
public housing was increasingly home to the very poorest of the poor, even as the booming economy of the United States drew ever more wealth into the city.

*But Never Jam Today* called attention to these inequalities, setting the struggle for Black control in a white world on the slender shoulders of a Black Alice. The tour schedule kept this contrast in focus, the locations continuing to highlight the racial and economic distinctions present in the city. After the July 30th debut at the Riis Settlement House came a July 31st show at Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx, followed by a Saturday, August 1st performance at the Polo Grounds Towers Center, a two-year-old public housing project in upper Harlem. The first two weeks of August were booked full, with presentations of *But Never Jam Today* scheduled for Brooklyn, Coney Island, Crown Heights, Central Harlem, Queens, Rockaway, and the Bronx. More than 5,000 people attended these shows, and plans were underway for "at least another two dozen performances" for the second half of August.33

In addition to the intense slate of *Never Jam* performances throughout the city in August, Urban Arts Corps took the extremely popular play on tour through upstate New York. They played to large crowds in seven cities including Albany, Buffalo, Geneva, Kingston, Newburgh, Rochester, and Syracuse. Performing in front of more than 60,000 people during the tour, the Corps members also gave lectures and demonstrations at public schools. The Corps held open rehearsals so students could see what went into theatrical production, and to make tangible the possibility of pursuing the performing arts. Carroll's charges also invited audience participation in

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the plays as they often did in New York City, bringing spectators into the performance by encouraging them to sing, dance, or clap along with the music. Corps members even lodged with local residents during the tour, building shared experiences and social networks while also stretching Corps funds. The connection between Urban Arts Corps and the communities it served reached beyond the relationship of performer and spectator. Blurring the boundaries of performance between stage, schoolyard, and home, Carroll sought to make Urban Arts Corps an involved, community-oriented organization in every aspect possible.\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{The Politics of Performance in But Never Jam Today}

Locating the performances in these urban spaces did serve the program goals of the Ghetto Arts Program, bringing cultural experiences and arts training to poor Black and Brown communities. But it also brought a different kind of radical political expression to these communities, as Carroll's direction turned classic works like \textit{Alice's Adventures in Wonderland} into parables of Black liberation that placed the younger generation at the forefront of change. Lewis Carroll's original lines could convey the meanings Vinnette Carroll intended her production to have, if the costuming, staging, and acting were done in the right way. As a later critic noted, the play offered "a survival kit" for those "clever enough to understand the lyrics and the

\textsuperscript{34} “History” background essay, UAC.
riddles" that are woven throughout the play, a stream of hidden messages "that speaks directly to Black audiences."³⁵

Carroll's production notes hint at some of the ways that UAC's Never Jam made these points to audiences, without having to make the language of the play plainly revolutionary. To tell the story of Alice from a "Black point of view," Vinnette Carroll was able to start with the obvious racial politics of the struggle for power in Wonderland between the White Queen and the Black Queen. As Thompson had noticed in Black Expo screenings—and Shepard missed—the "soul sister" exchange between middle-class Alice and the lowly "Spades," three "militant, deprived, disadvantaged Americans," revealed an internal Black debate over identity.³⁶ And in a reversal of an old theatrical convention, Carroll dictated that the actors be "all Black. White characters are to be played in stylized white make-up."³⁷

This inversion allowed for white characters to be spoofed, mocked, and understood as pretenders to power within the play. As blackface had historically served as a way to discredit and ridicule African Americans, these whiteface characters helped reveal the flimsy performance of power and illegitimate claims to supremacy of white society. While many audience members may have already understood that white authorities governed without the consent of all of their subjects,

³⁶. "Notes on the Production," nd (c. 1969); UAC, Box 1 Folder 4. Carroll described the Spades as "Americans" in these Production Notes, an interesting choice of words in that it leaves open for interpretation their racial identity. However, she was also careful to list "White" for any non-black characters in the production notes. Perhaps this suggests that Carroll envisioned an alliance of disadvantaged Americans that included whites open to multiracial struggle.
³⁷. "Notes on the Production," nd (c. 1969); UAC, Box 1 Folder 4.
the White Queen's obvious posturing in Urban Arts Corps' production helped make more tangible the possibility of a new course for social and political relations. Beyond the fact that an all-Black-and-Brown cast made a clear statement to UAC's minority audiences about the possibility of Black self-determination, having a Black actor play the White Queen gave the contests that Alice waged with the Queen a different meaning.

Perhaps a white actress would have made the challenges Alice offered as a "middle-class Black girl" seem less believable. The social dynamics of a young Black girl challenging a white authority, even in the context of a play, may have been contained by the realities of racial hierarchy outside the performance space. A whiteface character, however, denaturalized those relationships, providing the opportunity for someone like Alice to believably confront what the audience would have understood as the illegitimacy of power manifest in the White Queen. It also allowed the actress playing the role to capture coded subtleties of white behavior in interracial settings that were commonly understood by non-white cast and audience alike. As published reviews suggest, white critics often missed these subtleties, and the might have escaped just as easily the notice of even the best white actors. That is to say that for Vinnette Carroll's purposes, a Black woman could play the White Queen as a "haughty white woman from the American south" even better than a white woman could.\(^{38}\)

\(^{38}\) "Notes on the Production," nd (c. 1969); UAC, Box 1 Folder 4.
The White Queen, too, was the only white female character cast as a woman. The Queen and King of Hearts were both "to be played by a man. They are white." Although this casting instruction goes unelaborated upon, elsewhere Vinnette Carroll offered some insight into the gender politics at play in But Never Jam Today. Describing the character of the Duchess, Carroll wrote: "Strong matriarchal type, preferably played by a man in order to emphasize the 'male' role so many Black women are compelled to assume." While Carroll and Urban Arts Corps were clearly invested in challenging racial inequality and fighting for Black self-determination, they recognized from the very beginning that there was a gender dynamic that would also have to be addressed. That may have been yet another reason that Ms. Carroll found Lewis Carroll's work an excellent piece to adapt. The protagonist, antagonist, and most of the main characters are women, "a refreshing alternative to the degrading and unsatisfying roles" with which Black performers had been "saturated" historically. The battle for Wonderland is led by women on all sides, and presented a different model of leadership than many of the examples of the 1960s, including the male-dominated Black Panthers and other Black radical groups as well as the general patriarchal nature of US society as a whole.

Costuming was another important component in quietly pulling out the political thrust of the play, making the fight for Black self-determination central without relying on explicitly revolutionary speech. The set was a "raked black and

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39. "Notes on the Production," nd (c. 1969); UAC, Box 1 Folder 4. In the late-'70s revival, Carroll seems to have changed her thinking, casting Black actress Charlene Harris as the Queen of Hearts.
white chessboard," suggesting the shifting terrain of struggle and the racial contests in the contemporary United States while hewing close to Lewis Carroll's original writing. The costumes prescribed in the production notes were probably the most obvious evidence of the radical Black thrust of the Urban Arts Corps' production. The actors' clothing "in the procession and possibly in the final scene should be shades of black, red, and green (colors of the Black Liberation Flag)," Ms. Carroll was sure to clarify. That final scene is Alice's coronation. As she has successfully navigated the whims and dangers of the White Queen, Alice finds herself in line for ascent to Queenhood. Taking the throne, Alice recognizes she is in Africa, and the play closes with the realization of Black power and self-determination.41

Despite the reputation of Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland as children's literature, Vinnette Carroll insisted that the Urban Arts Corps adaptation was anything but simple entertainment for kids. Due to the inequality of Black life that Ms. Carroll's productions were meant to expose, childhood did not mean the same thing for white people as it did for non-whites, particularly in ghettos like those served by Urban Arts Corps. Just as Carroll used the play to comment on the differentially racialized experiences of womanhood, she struck at the impact of racial and economic inequality on Black and Brown children. "This is not a children's play," she insisted. "Black children have to deal with adult realities very early in life," so Alice was written as a "Black girl trying to deal with her identity crisis."42

42. "Notes on the Production," nd (c. 1969); UAC, Box 1 Folder 4.
Throughout *But Never Jam Today*, the audience sees Alice coming into consciousness. At the beginning, she is "not militant, nor is she assimilationist." She is, however, a "very bright" young woman, surrounded by "ambitious and 'aware' relatives." Quick to get hipped to the dynamics of the new world in which she finds herself, Alice is able to read between the lines, navigate the intense political climate, and reach a position of power from which she can influence the lives of the denizens of Wonderland for the better.\(^{43}\) By making Alice, the central character, rather apolitical from the start, Carroll opened up the play to a wider audience, its coded references making it palatable for less radical viewers while nurturing them along to the conclusion of Black self-determination. Audiences were allowed to view these very common and familiar social dynamics, without being assaulted by an explicitly political message. Carroll had faith in the power of the play, and of the performances her actors delivered—viewers did not need to be spoon-fed.

Alice's ascension as Queen of what is ultimately revealed as Africa tied the destiny of African Americans to the fate of Africa, and put *But Never Jam Today* into dialogue with the global decolonization movement. Throughout the play, Alice’s theme helped to sonically suture these relationships. Carroll instructed her composers, Bert Keyes and Bob Larimer, to draw on “Black influences” from across the diaspora. These included “African, Calypso, Rock, Jazz, Gospel, Raggae, and European,” Carroll insisted, recognizing the two-way exchange of empire.\(^{44}\) Of course, Carroll's own Jamaican background, the rising tide of independence in the Caribbean more

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43. "Notes on the Production," nd (c. 1969); UAC, Box 1 Folder 4.
44. "Notes on the Production," nd (c. 1969); UAC, Box 1 Folder 4.
broadly, and the influx of island immigration to New York City added multiple layers to the relationship between UAC performances and both local and Third World struggles for self-determination. Subsequent Urban Arts Corps productions would address these connections even more directly.

**Don’t Bother Me I Can’t Cope: The Evolving Politics of Urban Arts Corps Performances**

If Carroll’s plan with *But Never Jam Today* was to gradually introduce a Black-oriented critique of contemporary race relations and social hierarchy through a familiar, unthreatening text, her next piece for Urban Arts Corps was more direct. It would also be the play that launched UAC to a new level of success, and established a long-term working relationship between Carroll and the multi-talented Micki Grant. Grant was an established actress in her late twenties when she came to Carroll with a collection of original songs loosely organized around the struggles of everyday life in the late 1960s, dealing with themes from gender equality to treating working people with dignity.\(^{45}\) Carroll immediately conceived of a show that would be constructed around Grant’s songs, and a partnership was born.

Grant had previous experience with acting, singing, and performing. She was the first African American woman to become a regular cast member on an American soap opera, *Another World*, in 1968. Grant had been performing since the early 1960s in plays like Jean Genet’s *The Blacks*, with James Earl Jones, Cicely Tyson, and Maya Angelou, among others. The 1961 production is credited with helping spark the boom

\(^{45}\) Robert Ganshaw, Press Release, 28 September 1970; UAC, Box 1 Folder 8.
of off-Broadway Black theatre in the 1960s, and the play’s powerful take on class, race, and colonialism prefigured both Black Theatre’s militant offerings as well as Grant’s own intersectional critique in the plays she helped develop with UAC. Grant’s other performances included a starring role in the 1963 Broadway production of Langston Hughes’ *Tambourines to Glory* alongside Louis Gossett, Clara Ward, and Robert Guillaume. She was critically praised for her singing, as was fellow cast-member Rosetta LeNoire.\(^\text{46}\) This production too would have a broader impact on Black Theatre in the coming years, as LeNoire used her savings to found her own multiracial youth theatre troupe in 1968, AMAS Repertory Theatre based in El Barrio in East Harlem.\(^\text{47}\)

Once Grant teamed up with Carroll, the two women became a powerful duo. After their first Urban Arts Corps collaboration, the fall 1970 touring production of *Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope*, they would work throughout the 1970s as a team. They successfully moved *Don’t Bother Me* to Broadway, and later staged another Broadway production, *Your Arms Too Short to Box with God*, both of which met with critical and popular acclaim. Perhaps most impressive about the first production, *Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope*, was that it premiered within weeks of the Urban Arts Corps’ grueling tour of *But Never Jam Today* across the Black and Brown communities of New York.

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Easing this transition was a new Urban Arts Corps theatre, providing a rehearsal and performance space that did not have to be shared. Located in downtown Manhattan just north of Greenwich Village at 26 West 20th Street, it was an intimate arena, providing a much different experience for performers and audiences alike than the sites UAC often performed in on their city-wide tours. The focus of Carroll’s efforts, however, were still on those tours—the theatre was primarily used in the fall of 1970 to rehearse *Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope*, rather than to present the play in a formal setting. She did offer three preview screenings of the play, to work out the kinks in front of a live audience, inviting the public in for performances on Oct. 5, 6, and 7—free of charge, of course, as their shows usually were.

Another important change for Urban Arts Corps in the brief period between *But Never Jam Today* and *Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope* was that Carroll hired a press agent. Robert Ganshaw became the Director of Community Relations for UAC by September. A publicist who worked with both on- and off-Broadway performance, he had recently finished a stint promoting the Broadway production of *Hair*. He quickly made an impact, as write-ups and smaller blurbs began to appear with greater frequency in the entertainment sections of New York papers, often lifting excerpts directly from Ganshaw’s press releases.

One of his first pieces was a glowing advance review of *Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope*, to which he informed readers that Carroll “asked me to invite you to one of three previews she’ll present in the new, intimate, and unusual theatre at Urban Arts Corps HQ,” the 20th Street location. He was “lucky” to have been permitted to watch,
and confided that is was “unlikely the season will deliver anything that matches in theatrical excitement the powerhouse package she is assembling.” With a humorous “P.S” clearly directed to a Harlem readership, he closed this release with travel instructions, listing the subway lines to take and adding “or maybe you’ll find a cabbie” who goes to Harlem.⁴⁸ This not-so-subtle jab at the ways racism circumscribed Black mobility in New York City contrasted the accessibility of UAC previews with the practicality of getting there.

Written in a confidential tone, Ganshaw’s press releases were meant to deliver information to as wide of a circle as possible, while making it seem as though he were offering privileged information and rare access to his friends. This was not necessarily a novel approach—it was, after all, his job—but the air of intrigue and expectation around the upcoming UAC show was now being spread to mainstream papers with a wider readership than the African American papers that had provided the primary coverage of But Never Jam Today.

Having impressed upon readers that this was a show not to be missed, Ganshaw offered thoughts on the performers. The stellar cast assembled by Vinnette Carroll, a “Pied Piper in attracting wildly talented young people,” included the regular Corps members with less experience but also a range of seasoned stage veterans. Glory Van Scott, with “yards” of credits to her name, had danced for the revered African American choreographers Katherine Dunham and Talley Beatty (who choreographed several shows for Urban Arts Corps), in addition to the American

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Ballet Theatre. Dancer Alan Weeks, a 22-year-old with 16 years of professional performance under his belt, performed in *Funny Girl* while finishing high school in three years and more recently had been a featured dancer in *Hallelujah, Baby*. Providing the music was “one of the most celebrated of gospel groups,” the Bradford Singers led by Professor Alex Bradford. Ganshaw singled them out for their powerful version of “Cain’t No Grave Hold My Body Down.” Established performers anchored this new show.

Clearly, Carroll’s experience and pedigree made it easier for her to bring these kinds of professionals to Urban Arts Corps. But to recruit them, and successfully get them to invest in UAC’s mission “to assemble a company of young top-level black talent and give them an opportunity to try new material,” makes Ganshaw’s description of Carroll as “Miss Pied Piper” particularly fitting. She was skilled at attracting and developing serious talent, but she was also dedicated to putting them on stage with relative novices. This was in part a reflection of her dedication to Urban Arts Corps being a nonhierarchical organization, a place where there were no stars but only colleagues. As she noted, that did not mean that a star could not emerge, but that the Corps was not set up that way.

49. Despite her extensive experience and professional stature, Ganshaw still saw fit to refer to her as a “delectable kitten.” This is not really in keeping with the gender critiques of Carroll’s earlier directorial efforts, or indeed with the thrust of Micki Grant’s songs for *I Can’t Cope*, but perhaps should be understood as part of the process of negotiating the world of theatrical promotion. Ganshaw’s turns of phrase would have been far more at home in the reviews of conservative critics like Richard Shepard than UAC articles in the Black press.
If someone did emerge as a star, it was Micki Grant. The young actress, composer, and singer found a welcoming home in Urban Arts Corps, where she could push and develop her already considerable talents. Vinnette Carroll saw the potential as soon as she walked in. Grant’s songs were both “personal statements” and political critiques. Serious but tinged with wit, her writing had “something to say (usually quite unexpectedly).” For *Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope*, her subjects ranged from women’s liberation, to the Poor People’s movement, to more quotidian subjects like the unpleasantries of inconveniencing cab drivers.\(^5\) They were “full of feeling, now songs about what’s happening today.” Taken together, they amounted to what *Show Business*’ Souzen Deavers found to be a “delightfully funny commentary on the envied virtue of coping.”\(^6\) Deavers did not elaborate on what she meant by coping, nor did she explain who she read as possessing that virtue and who envied it. It does not seem a stretch, however, to think that for Deavers and other white viewers the humor of struggles to cope would have had a different sense than for nonwhites in the audience.

For those doing the coping, a wry humor could be found in shared understandings of the struggle and the effort required to endure. For some in more privileged circumstances, particularly whites with very different access to jobs, housing, and medical care, the humor lay in viewing the struggles themselves. Others, however, such as Mrs. Frankie Hewitt, offered a more clear and honest appraisal of the

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appeal of *Don’t Bother Me I Can’t Cope* for white viewers. President and Executive Producer of Ford’s Theatre in Washington DC, Hewitt brought Urban Arts Corps to perform there in early 1971, after the play’s initial tour of New York neighborhoods, as part of an effort to move Ford’s into the contemporary theatre scene. This strategy was the brainchild of Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, who in 1968 had made the decision to have Ford’s reopened as a theater.

Hewitt embraced the goal of returning Ford’s Theatre to the center of D.C. cultural life, and sought out plays that could show “universal humanity and make it entertaining, and [could] also at times kid the human condition.” *Don’t Bother Me* caught her attention when she saw it in rehearsal at the UAC theatre on a trip to New York, and she decided to bring it to D.C. because it showed “the human experience of being a Black person.” But despite her intentions that Ford’s ramp up its efforts to “serve the community” by offering greater and more well-rounded representations of Black life, not everyone was excited by the move. Her husband Don Hewitt, for instance, did not see the theatre as a place for politics, constantly asking her why they could not just “some day go to some simple old play like ‘Follies’ or ‘Company’?” But he was the exception, as *Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope* played to capacity crowds and earned standing ovations during its fall 1971 run at Ford’s.

*The Politics of Coping*

54. Margaret Crimmins, “Good Vibrations at Cope,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, 14 September 1971: B1. The plays Mr. Hewitt would have rather seen were the Sondheim musicals *Company* and *Follies*, which debuted in 1970 and 1971 respectively. Ford’s would later have another Urban Arts Corps production, *Your Arm’s Too Short to Box with God*, in the summer of 1976.
Not that a perfect understanding of coping would have been necessary to appreciate the work of the play, whether in D.C. or New York. Most of Grant’s songs had multiple layers of meaning, and were universal enough that they offered something to everyone. Under Carroll’s guiding hand, the production as a whole made clear its strident political note of Black struggle. Even to white reviewers it was “a militant show but not at all bitter.” Times critic Mel Gussow, hardly a radical in his reviews, noted that the choreography by Beatty looked “like a W.P.A. Poster—melodramatic yet overly composed.” Gussow had viewed an early presentation of the “hand-clapping, foot-tapping, sky-reaching, finger-jabbing, body-swaying, ear-splitting musical revue” at the UAC’s own venue. He found that during rehearsals “in a snug little theater it nearly burst its seams. Don’t Bother Me belongs outside—without amplification—or in auditoriums.” Even more than But Never Jam Today, Carroll had planned Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope for public performances in open spaces. After an opening performance on October 3rd in the Central Park Mall, and shows on the 8th and 9th at the Lincoln Center Library and Museum of the Performing Arts, Carroll and her cast were ready to launch their second touring production of late 1970.

This early touring version was more politicized and direct than the later edition of Don’t Bother Me that played at Ford’s and on Broadway in the mid-1970s. A

57. “Urban Arts in Revue,” New York Amsterdam News, 26 September 1970: 22. This article lists Pearl Reynolds as the choreographer, although all other evidence agrees that it was Talley Beatty. Both Reynolds and Beatty had trained with Katherine Dunham.
number of songs, including the incisive “Liberated Woman,” were removed from the play between the 1970 New York neighborhood run and the premier in Washington D.C. in late 1971. But kids and local audiences saw a version of the play that even more than the Broadway version skewered racial stereotypes, challenged gender roles, and pinpointed the oppression to be found at the intersection of race, class, and gender. Grant’s songs were slyly direct, laughing knowingly at the very need for coping in a society that was experienced very differently by whites and non-whites. The lyrics were “dipped in vinegar, but so sugared that blacks laugh and whites clap,” finding the perfect balance at a time when “chichi is out and social consciousness is in-in-in.”

This was a fine line to tread. For socially conscious Black theater artists, there was an ongoing debate about the politics of Black performance. On one side lay a cadre of Black artists who insisted that Black theater should be a tool of enlightenment and liberation, driven directly by the needs of Black communities and at times delivered with the subtlety of a hammer. The focus was on the message more than on the artistry.

On the other hand, there were those who saw Black Theater as part of a larger politics of Black liberation, while demanding that it make “a dynamic statement and

58. Dan Dietz, Off Broadway Musicals, 1910-2007: Casts, Credits, Songs, Critical Reception and Performance Data of More than 1,800 Shows (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2010). Also deleted were “Universe in Mourning,” “My Love’s So Good,” “So Now You Come,” “Miss Bessie,” and “Jimi.” “Universe in Mourning” was subsequently re-added, as were “Lock up the Doors,” “Children’s Rhymes,” “Billie Holiday Ballet,” “Ghetto Life,” “Men’s Dance,” “Love Mississippi,” “Prayer,” and “Sermon.” “Fighting for Pharaoh” was retitled “Do a Little Living for Peace (Fighting for Pharaoh).”

be of itself an act of liberation. Vinnette Carroll and Micki Grant fell more to the latter, their efforts towards Black theater part of a broader multiracial politics that ultimately made a Black perspective visible to a wider audience. And yet they remained resolutely focused on the Black community when conceiving and planning UAC performances throughout the 1970s. Grant’s sly humor performed a double move, finding wry recognition with Black audiences while subtly probing the presumptions of white spectators.

Carroll and Grant were careful to enumerate the ways in which Don’t Bother Me should carry the intended message of Black empowerment while also making itself appealing to a multiracial audience. Their production notes, like those of But Never Jam Today, demonstrate that a central purpose of Carroll’s directorial work was to bridge the gap between the radical intent and Black-only purposes of more nationalist-oriented Black Theatre figures, and those who saw in Black Arts an opportunity to propose a new way of being and living that could include a broader vision of community. Carroll’s Black Theatre was primarily intended to offer training and professionalization in the theatre arts for Black and Brown youths, of course, but closely following that was a vision of the theatre as a place to effect transformative experiences that audience members would take with them after the performance was ended. Multiracial Black theatre included the relationship between cast and audience.

For Don’t Bother Me, the two women began by insisting that those involved in the production needed to take “extreme care” to insure that the performance be

primarily what they called “a hymn to us.” Even before the message of coping, or of the shared struggles of peoples of all races and ethnicities, what underlay the play was a focus on the dignity of Black people, on pride. The tributes to Black artistic and cultural production throughout the performance, through song, dance, and humor, were points of admiration, not ridicule. Performer and director alike had to collaborate to ensure that what Grant and Carroll intended as “tongue in cheek sequences, allowing Black people to find some humor in the difficulty of coping with the situations addressed in the play did not devolve into “minstrel turns.”61 The purpose of these mini-performances was to drive home the universality of artistic skill.

With performers demonstrating their mastery of these skills, Carroll wrote, they were simultaneously demonstrating that they had “conquered the technique and skill” necessary “to compete in the multiracial world.” Built into Carroll’s vision of Black Theatre, then, was an understanding that Black Arts were not an escape to an insular Black world, but one important strategy in reshaping the terrain of the societies in which Black people live. Artistic expression was a way to discover and display universal truths, and because of this, future directors (and scholars) of *Don’t Bother Me* must “not be trapped into thinking that the piece is simpler than it is.” The presentation was to be “philosophical,” but neither “ponderous” nor “patronizing.” It also had to “illuminate” the White audience and “bring pride and honor and identification to the Blacks.” *Don’t Bother Me* had to be done with taste and affection, and with “the realization that two Black women wanted young Black artists to have

material on which to sharpen their instruments and watch as their grandparents sit in
the audience and say, ‘Amen.’”

Both Carroll and Grant had a multiracial vision for the Black Theatre of Urban
Arts Corps. Carroll felt that the function of Black Theatre was to see Black people
performing the whole range of theatrical possibilities, performing the more equitable
world she wanted to see. She wanted a Black Theatre that dealt with fantasy, and
classics, and “all sorts of things, and not feeling all the time that we have to be
pounding our breasts, you know? Because that’s a part of it too, that’s a part of our
theatre, but it can’t be our whole theatre. Because there’s a fullness, and richness, to
Black people that needs… expression the same way as our need for the catharsis that
comes from doing plays specifically dealing with our specific problems. Quote,
‘problems,’ experiences… and not ‘problems’ as it relates to white people, do you
know what I mean? I would like to see us be able to do that.”

Urban Arts Corps centered performances of Black dignity and self-worth but made them accessible to
white audiences. Their offerings were no less concerned with Black pride and
consciousness than some of the more militant offerings but also allowed “a bit of
entertainment to creep in” and “whites in the audience to share in the experience.”

Carroll’s productions always sought to project the power and possibilities of Black
people, without losing sight of the structural conditions under which they had to live.

62. Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope, 65.
63. Vinnette Carroll, interviewed by Woodie King, Jr. (director), Black Theater: Interviews,
64. Edwin Wilson, “Miss Grant Can Cope,” Wall Street Journal, 21 April 1972: 8
Micki Grant’s work also sought a more equitable future without forgetting the injustices of the past and present. As a child growing up in Chicago, she had learned first-hand that sometimes “trying” was not enough. Her father, a master barber, struggled to find steady work his entire life. He did not complain, and Grant grew up thinking they were middle class only to realize in her late 20’s that they in fact had been poor and that her father’s economic opportunities were severely limited by his race. Even unaware of their class position, however, Grant recognized the relationship between racism and inequality during her childhood based on the representation of African Americans in the movies she went to see with her father. She loved going to the movies, but had trouble relating to the Black characters on screen because “they were always made to look so ridiculous, and I could never laugh at some Black man rolling his eyes and shaking his knees.” These excursions gave Grant the desire to become an actress, but also a critical perspective on Black representation.

Grant thought it was very important for Black audiences to see themselves depicted in a more realistic, positive light, but that in order for real change to be effected, white audiences needed to see and understand those depictions as well. Correcting corrosive and racist representations of Blackness was one of Grant’s driving forces. Like Carroll, Grant thought Black Theatre needed to be made available to a multiracial audience, where the transformation of consciousness that Urban Arts Corps set in motion could have a wider impact. Her vision of Black Theatre was expansive, organized around the idea that a Black perspective could reshape society in

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general, the idea that “the place for Black Theater is everywhere.” She also realized
that despite enclaves in areas like Harlem, UAC could not limit itself to Black
neighborhoods because there were Black people spread across other parts of New
York. On the other hand, not everyone in Harlem was Black. “If a playwright wants to
limit himself to a Black audience and a Black community, he has a perfect right to do
so,” she explained, “but I’ve always felt that the theater should be for the whole
community.”

As Grant explained it, reaching the whole community was the primary reason
behind UAC’s touring schedule as well as a factor in Urban Arts Corps’ downtown
location. She thought it vital that Black children have the opportunity to see Black
actors performing in settings outside of their own neighborhoods. Seeing performers
elsewhere helped to make real the possibilities of professional theater, and opened
young eyes to the wider city. She recalled “busloads of Black children” being driven
to UAC performances, and the “overwhelming… expression of awe” on their faces at
seeing “an image of themselves” on a stage.

Park and playground performances were a fundamental part of Urban Arts
Corps’ program, but why, she asked, should Black children be deprived of seeing
stage performances “just because they lived in another part of town?”Obviously, this
question points to a much larger inequality of funding, suitable performance spaces,
transportation, and a host of other factors that made life in poor Black neighborhoods
much different from the wealthier parts of Manhattan. But having young girls come up

66. Grant, quoted in Flatley, D1.
to her “weeping” after performances, saying “I was so proud when I saw your show,” served as a constant reminder for Grant that bringing Black youth to formal theatre settings had a different impact than taking the show to them.\(^{67}\) Certainly, seeing Black actors on the same stages and in the same neighborhoods where famous white actors performed must have inspired different dreams than seeing those same actors performing in the Black community. Performing in these theaters was an important part of building the multiracial world of Black Theatre that Urban Arts Corps pursued.

This flexibility on the part of UAC’s guiding spirits, Vinnette Carroll and increasingly Micki Grant as well, was different from the ideas of some of the more militant Black Theatre figures. For some of them, Black Theatre was for education rather than entertainment. With Urban Arts Corps, the entertainment was the education, and the success of UAC in charting its own course through the fraught worlds of New York Theatre and Black Arts a powerful political act in itself. Amiri Baraka’s Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School and Robert Macbeth’s New Lafayette Theatre, leading lights of the New York Black Theatre scene established in 1965 and 1966 respectively, help demonstrate this. Each was militantly Black, intended to function exclusively in and for the Black community, building consciousness and a Black revolutionary base. While those were important goals, they also jeopardized the long-term viability of their organizations, and each was shuttered by the early 1970s.\(^{68}\)

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67. Grant, quoted in Flatley, D1.
68. Amiri Baraka, interviewed by Woodie King, Jr. (director), *Black Theater: Interviews, v1* (Insight Media, 1978). Discussing the demise of groups like Black Arts Repertory and New Lafayette, Baraka says, “What was incorrect was that we took a wholly nationalist and cultural nationalist line.”
Urban Arts Corps, however, survived and thrived until the 1980s, when Carroll retired to Florida. Carroll’s more well-to-do upbringing and psychology training may have been part of her relatively expansive scope for Black Theatre. Grant’s came from a different perspective without which she “would never have survived,” from being an “eternal optimist… I believe there is room for all kinds of theater,” Grant insisted. “There’s room for angry Black theater, and there’s room for a show like ours, a show that has pride and dignity and music that is indigenous to our background.”69 They both agreed that their art needed to change attitudes on either side of the racial divide if it were to have a lasting impact.

Don’t Bother Me I Can’t Cope was intended to communicate Blackness “to everyone.” It was not supposed to be about separation, and Grant’s racial politics were well thought out. She understood Blackness as a collective rather than individual identity, even as she recognized the multiplicity and complexity contained within that identity. Grant knew she was Black, but refused to think of herself only as Black because she saw that as but a step removed from hating “a white man simply because he is a white man.” This helps to explain as well her vision of Black Theatre as encompassing a community wider than just Black people, and as one component of an inclusive, multiracial politics in which people helped each other pursue their potential. Despite her collective vision, however, Grant never lost sight of the material realities that she, her fellow performers, and Black folk in general had to face every day.

Stepping out onto the street with her white interviewer from the West 48th Street

69. Grant, quoted in Flatley, D1.
restaurant where they had met, Grant delivered the kind of ironic flourish for which she was noted by Don’t Bother Me critics: “You’d better flag the cab. He probably won’t stop if he sees me.”

Grant’s multiracial, collective politics and the revolutionary messages of Don’t Bother Me were readily understood and respected by seasoned Black activists and audiences. Influential critic, commentator, and teacher Clayton Riley, writing for the New York Amsterdam News in May 1972, found it an incredibly powerful and important piece of Black Theatre in which the “rhythm of one Black sector of America bears witness to itself…. And wondrous vibes sent out (received?) to a waiting audience. (Please us, and help us, please… to be happy, to forget, to hope for a little while.)” This was a powerful and radical interpretation of the intent of Don’t Bother Me, and a recognition of Grant’s utopian dreams. She was “a lifter of spirits … a vibrant enthusiast and believer in the value of life. And the music is for your toes, suited especially for all finger-pipers, hand-clappers, those who can still grin freely. And,” he closed, “how marvelous it is to be able to even some of the time.”

Community and Diaspora

Don’t Bother Me’s diasporic sensibilities came through from the very beginning, the politics of Harlem as a place where recent arrivals from the Southern US met long-time residents of Harlem, where West Indians and Africans shared the experiences of being simultaneously both Black and foreign. If blackness in US

70. Grant, quoted in Flatley, D1.
society had always been foreign, the other against which American was defined, in Harlem, the capital of the Black world, that was not the case. The gradations of belonging and foreignness were different in that context, and part of the effort of Black Arts and Black Theater was to build a diasporic understanding of the Black community that would bridge differences in the interest of a more unified front in the face of racism, oppression, and ongoing inequality. For Micki Grant and Vinnette Carroll, *Don’t Bother Me* was their first expression of this idea in a direct way. In *But Never Jam Today*, Carroll had hinted at a pan-African vision with Alice being crowned as Queen of Africa at the end of the play, but the issue was left hanging. The next piece that Urban Arts Corps presented, Grant’s *Don’t Bother Me*, continued Carroll’s rumination on the shape and future of pan-African politics and diasporic relations. In some ways, we can read Alice’s coronation in “Africa” to mean Harlem, especially given the way that Harlem is introduced early in *Don’t Bother Me*. As a place where Black peoples from around the globe meet and form community, the opening lines of *Don’t Bother Me* pick up where *But Never Jam Today* left off. With the play debuting mere weeks after the tour of *But Never Jam Today* ended, *Don’t Bother Me* can be examined as a “part two” of the earlier performance.

At the same time that Carroll and Grant worked in *Don’t Bother Me* to forge and put into practice a multiracial world shaped by a Black perspective, they also articulated the flexible and fluid boundaries of Blackness, particularly in a setting like Harlem where African-Americans mixed with Afro-Caribbeans, Africans, and the breadth of the diasporic community. Right from the beginning, *Don’t Bother Me* picks
up the African diasporic themes that emerged during the final scenes of *But Never Jam Today*. Grant’s second song in the new production was “Harlem Streets,” a paean to the neighborhood that had long served as home base for Black cultural activity in New York City. The song opened with lines quietly reminding audiences that the streets of Harlem of the early 1970s, an impoverished community perhaps most immediately remembered for the racial unrest of the late 1960s, had been famous for other reasons too: “Ain’t no sounds, ain’t no sights, like the sights and sounds of the Harlem Nights.”

The first verse immediately began to build an understanding of the Harlem community as at once unified and diverse. Listing a few of the languages that one might hear on the streets, Grant wrote of “Harlemese, and Georgia Drawl/ Swahili, too, and that ain’t all.” In two brief lines she tied together the histories and fates of an African diaspora, linking the struggles of Black activists around the globe during the 1960s as well as throughout the longer fetch of history. The 1968 uprising in Harlem, the violence against Civil Rights activists in the US South, and the CIA-assisted assassination of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba of Republic of Congo in 1961 were local phases of a global problem that Grant sought to address. Bringing these groups together around distinct yet related efforts helped move between specific ethnic identities and a broader Black struggle.

Yet another Harlem-associated figure stood in for the kind of force that could help to unite these various streams, as Grant’s next lines proclaimed. “On Marcus Garvey’s Holiday,” she penned, “if you ain’t West Indian, get out the way,”

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72. *Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope*, 65.
recovering a pan-African leader whose efforts in the early twentieth century had electrified audiences. Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association was a transnational movement with a much greater impact than even its prodigious membership roles suggest. As Grant hinted in her lyrics, in a place like Harlem that housed such a wide range of communities these different groups could become a single force with a single purpose if only for a short time like a holiday. But this kind of performative utopia, be it in the theatre or on the streets during “Marcus Garvey’s Holiday” parade, had echoes that lasted long after spectators and participants returned home.

Don’t Bother Me stood out to viewers as a “trip through all the aspects of blackness, from its inception in America through the islands, Harlem ghetto life, childhood, change, rhythm, love, fighting and praying.” Its musical selections and dance sequences were entertaining, but there were moments in between for “soul searching and deep thought.” Ultimately, the conclusion to be reached was that despite the troubles and struggles, the obstacles and barriers, “above and beyond the call of duty, regardless… ‘You gotta cope, I gotta cope, all God’s children gotta cope.’ And that’s what it’s all about.” This is an argument for perseverance, for refusing to quit, and for all the other messages of determination, dedication, and struggle that had sustained the Black freedom struggle since its “inception in America.” But it was also an argument for a finding a way in the multiracial world in which Carroll was so determined to help her charges find a foothold. Black thought and experience could

73. Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope, 65.
lead the way, but for it to be successful there needed to be a coalition or at least understanding among people about living together.74

Carroll’s vision of Black liberation relied on a multiracial coalition of people working for change. The first scenes of Don’t Bother Me, when the African diasporic community is name-checked, is the first stage in the process. It helped Black audiences reconsider their connection to one another, re-centered Harlem as a global nexus, and linked to a longer radical tradition. For white audiences, perhaps, the pan-African opening informed them of the great diversity within Black America, and reminded them of the global connections linking African Americans to a much wider world, that African Americans might not be fully included in US society but neither was blackness bounded by the nation.75

Don’t Bother Me also made a significant material impact, in addition to its discursive challenges to racism, sexism, and other forms of inequality. Like But Never Jam Today, Don’t Bother Me was originally a touring performance. However, the powerful multiracial vision of UAC’s Black Theatre productions and the ability of Grant and Carroll to educate rather than alienate white audiences quickly attracted attention from formal theatrical venues. Ford’s Theatre Society brought the play to Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D.C. in 1971 after founder and producing director Frankie Hewitt saw it in rehearsal in New York City. The rave reviews it received in D.C. (politics of that particular city cheering on a musical revue about Black survival

75. For a broader discussion of this stance in African American political thought, see Nikhil Singh, Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).
notwithstanding), Philadelphia, and Detroit helped to drive its success back in New York. The accolades for *Don’t Bother Me* would make Vinnette Carroll the first African American woman to direct on Broadway, and earned Grant both Drama Desk and Obie Awards for writing and composing.76

More important than those singular accomplishments are the ways in which the success of *Don’t Bother Me* in turn enabled the larger success of Urban Arts Corps. For several years, the play was one of the major sources of funding for UAC, its receipts helping to pay expenses, keep Corps members employed, and survive as an institution. Urban Arts Corps itself was the radical political expression, its existence and mission an even more dramatic and determined statement than those made by their performances. Directly, the play’s success brought attention to Urban Arts Corps, attracting young Black and Puerto Rican actors, technicians, and others interested in the theatrical arts. Indirectly, the play had even deeper and more far-reaching consequences. Its material impact on the Black community was larger than just offering training to talented youth. For those with experience already, Urban Arts Corps offered the opportunity to perform in a business where the recent growth in roles “but continued uneven employment of black actors” had “run head-on into the reality of a slow economy.” The Broadway run, which lasted for over 1000 performances from 1972-1975, provided long-term jobs for a wide range of support staff beyond just actors and technicians. These jobs are part of every Broadway production, but the success of *Don’t Bother Me* brought a politically-charged Black

Theatre troupe with a mandate for community involvement into this space for the first time. UAC’s employing Black workers in turn helped them to get other jobs after their stint with the Corps was over, or to qualify to receive unemployment benefits when necessary, a vital lifeline in an often brutal economic period of the mid-1970s.\textsuperscript{77} Carroll’s insistence from day one that Urban Arts Corps pursue a path leading to Black prosperity in a multiracial world rather than an inward-looking Black politics was one of the factors that helped her company endure.

\textit{Intersectionality and Liberation Politics in Don’t Bother Me I Can’t Cope}

Grant and Carroll ensured that \textit{Don’t Bother Me} centered the racial differences in US life. The songs in the play established this distinction before addressing the unique positions and experiences of Black women. One of the more overtly political songs in the play was “Looking Over From Your Side,” a piece that addressed directly the stark difference between White and Black perspectives on the conditions in the United States. Yet to do so, Grant chose a subject that could reach across the racial divide, even if in the Harlem context it was a definitively Black issue: housing conditions. The character Clinton sings that he couldn’t sleep the night before, because “rats were havin’ a party in the hall.” That is presumably one of the reasons that the city had recently condemned the building, as the singer lets us know. Yet rather than repair anything, the landlord simply raised the rent. With falling plaster, no heat or hot water, and broken windows, life in the rundown tenements of Harlem was no pleasant

experience. The first chorus took a “grass is greener” approach, singing “Lookin’ over from your side, things may look real fine, but if you were looking’ from my side, I bet you’d change your mind.” Unless one lived there, one could not understand, and Grant was sure to highlight the difference in opinion towards “historic” properties held by whites and the well-to-do.

Rather than seeing the miserable conditions of affordable housing in the few neighborhoods available and affordable for minority tenants, the addressee in the song calls the house “quaint,” and remarks how “it’s so old, it’s filled with history.” Where Clinton felt drafts that caused pneumonia, those on the other side simply saw a pleasant breeze, and turned their thermostat up. But Grant hinted in the final lines that if things didn’t change, the Black community might be prepared to turn the heat up too: “Lookin’ over from your side, it’s all peace and quiet, but if you were lookin’ from my side, you might even start a riot.” A simple song about a dilapidated apartment came to stand in for the severity of Black deprivation and offered a critical explanation of the Harlem uprising of 1968.78

The next selection, the title song “Don’t Bother Me I Can’t Cope,” worked to delineate the similarities experienced by white and Black across the color line regardless of race, and to a lesser degree class, due to the shifting nature of US society. The challenges to authority by the youth generation of the 1960s, the surge of women’s liberation activity, and of course the relative progress in civil rights for nonwhites in the nation all were part of a substantial upheaval during the decade that

78. Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope, 65.
some found more difficult to cope with than others as the 1970s dawned. In the play, the character Nat begins seeing a psychiatrist to address his difficulty in coping with the social and economic conditions under which he lived. In a verse about housing, he complains about his landlord selling the building without warning, and the new owner raising the rent without doing any repairs. This is compounded by Nat’s difficulty in finding work, and when he goes to the unemployment office to collect his meager assistance, the clerk has the “nerve” to ask Nat if he had looked for work “real hard.”

Clinton later talks of his boss, who denies him a raise “for the good of the nation, we’re in a recession and a raise is inflation.” Playing on the boss’ words, the singers replies “…you’ve made a good point, I must confess—My appetite’s inflated, and my stomach’s recessed, so guess who’s coming to dinner? ‘Cause I can’t cope.” The next verse features a domestic worker who is yelled at by her employer for “taking two breaks” during her all-day shit. After offering a laundry-list of things she did that day—including laundry—the worker sings “But I don’t blame you a bit, and tomorrow I’ll do better—because today I quit! Go find yourself another workhorse, ‘cause I can’t cope!”

Together, the vignettes of this title song serve several purposes. First they do the work of framing the difficulties of Black life as quotidian, and omnipresent despite even the characters’ best efforts. The problems facing the Black community in Don’t Bother Me are not of their own making. Rather, they are imposed from without and quietly structured by racist attitudes, from the skeptical unemployment clerk to the

79. Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope, 65.
80. Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope, 65.
wealthy homemaker who only understands her black employee as a “workhorse” for whom any moment’s rest is evidence of laziness or even malingering. “Don’t Bother Me” introduces this theme and exemplifies Grant’s skill at using a little bit of honey to temper the acidic bite of her commentary. Whites ideally found some understanding in the song, while Black and Brown viewers found a little catharsis in a shared experience. 81

There was more than just shared experience, however, for nonwhite audiences. The characters’ ability to speak back to authority and challenge injustice during the song, calling landlords, civic authorities, and employers to task also marked a refusal to accept further economic deprivation and social indignities. And as reviewers noted, Grant had great skill at presenting information through her lyrics and making it seem strictly positive, inspirational, and imbued with the limitless potential of American democracy, only to tweak the political thrust right at the end. 82 In the final verse of the song, Nat sings of returning to the psychiatrist’s office for a follow-up. This time, however, it is the doctor who needs therapy, laying down on the sofa and listing the problems he’s having to Nat. There was nowhere to park in his neighborhood, so he moved out to the suburbs but then the city raised tolls and closed tax loopholes. His son is using drugs, and is defiant about it—“pot or martinis, pa, we’re both getting high.” His daughter is pregnant, doesn’t know who the father is, and says “who needs one?” And to top it off, his wife is now “liberated”—a theme Grant would return to later in the play—which means the family has to eat out every night since she refuses

81. *Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope*, 65.
to cook, and she has replaced their matrimonial bed with twin singles. Just when one thinks that, perhaps, there will be some discovery of shared struggle, a masculine commiseration leading to an interracial alliance, Nat cuts him off. “Hold it brother,” he says, “I can’t cope. Your recitation has reduced me to tears/ You’ve got enough problems to last you for years/ Between yours and mine, it’s hard to keep track/ but I’m still one up on you: You ain’t black.”

Grant was sensitively attuned to the difference that race, class, and gender made on the lived experiences of the communities served by Urban Arts Corps. A number of Grant’s other songs in Don’t Bother Me directed audiences to the conclusion that opportunities were limited for Blacks in ways they were not for whites. Despite struggle, skill, and dedication, the Black characters of whom she wrote faced the added hurdle of racism in their attempts to improve their circumstances. For Carroll and Grant, the existence and success of Urban Arts Corps, as a group dedicated to prying open space in the theatrical world for Black and Brown workers, was central to challenging this racial barrier. As Urban Arts Corps presented plays that raised and addressed the issue, these very performances were part of that challenge.

Throughout Don’t Bother Me, the two women continued to lead viewers back to the ways that race and gender shaped and constrained the possibilities of Black life. In “Billie Holiday Blues,” for example, an exploration of hard work and determination in the face of opposition, we learn that “trying” just is not enough for some people, elaborating the lessons Grant learned from her father’s experiences. Echoing Carroll’s

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83. Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope, 65.
84. Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope, 65.
admonition that she would have to do more as a director with only one-third the resources because of the “double-whammy” of being a Black woman, Grant uses the figure of Billie Holiday to weigh in on liberal lip-service and the failings of recent legislation to enact substantive change. Working hard for Civil Rights or personal success was not enough, and “it takes a whole lot more to win, when the world can’t see beyond the dark brown wrapper you’re in.” But “some kind of livin’ beats any kind of dyin’ and singing’ when your heart aches sure beats the hell out of cryin’.”

Even if the late 1960s had seen a shift in the language used to discuss African Americans in mainstream society, this did not mark a real shift in behavior because “it don’t matter what they call you when they all treat you the same.” This is a point that Don’t Bother Me came back to several times, including two songs later in “Time Brings About a Change,” which offered reflections on the changing same of Black experience and white racism. In the opening verse, the singer tells a tale of when he was young and “blacks were still negroes,” he punched another kid in the face for calling him “black.” But today, he sings, his little brother came home “all in a pout,” saying “some kid called me a negro, so I punched him in the mouth.”

But Don’t Bother Me does not just leave the question at words and phrases that some today might dismiss as issues of political correctness. “Time Brings About a Change” also addresses more intentional and material ways of preserving white privilege. It includes a verse that contrasts a pre-

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86. Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope, 15.
87. Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope, 18.
white kids rode on a big yellow bus” but Black students “walked nine miles to school” with the current New York debates over school decentralization and busing programs that were part of United Bronx Parents’ project. Today, the song notes, whites have changed their minds, and begun to “fuss and cuss, because now they want to walk to school, and leave the driving to us.”

Making the argument that white society is interested in Black rights and equality only as long as they have no impact on white lives, Grant’s critique also encompassed housing. She touched on the titillating exoticism of hosting Black radicals that Tom Wolfe had recently critiqued in 1970’s “Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny’s,” and carried the observation further. While fleeting social contact was exciting, more permanent changes to patterns of interaction were met by white flight: “Somebody started a rumor that socializing with Blacks could be fun/ and pretty soon, as the word got ‘round, every cocktail party had one/… now all the good white folks have gone and left town, for it wasn’t fun any more/ when those fun colored folk left the cocktail party, and bought the house next door.”

Equality was a goal that white society espoused, but not something it was willing to put into practice.

Grant and Carroll were more interested in building Black pride and developing a strong community that could claim equality through self-determination. Don’t Bother Me I Can’t Cope was not just about pointing out the shortcomings of white society, even if that was a thread that ran throughout the play. Songs such as “You Think I Got Rhythm” confronted racial stereotypes and socioeconomic inequality by

88. Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope, 65.
89. Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope, 18.
educating audiences on the achievements and skills of Black scholars, activists, and others who had made important but little-known historical contributions. Sure, Black folks had historically performed manual labor, but that was something that Urban Arts Corps addressed and moved past almost immediately in these songs. “You think I can tote a barge? Well I can,” Edmund and Charlaine sang. However, they told audiences, they could also “lead millions in peace. And discover blood plasma. And conduct symphony orchestras. And make it to the North Pole”—the litany of Black accomplishments in the 20th century poured out.

Rather than looking to a distant African past for ritual or affirmation, like MacBeth’s New Lafayette Theatre’s Rituals, or other cultural nationalist touchstones, Grant located Black pride, dignity, and self-worth firmly in a recent United States history. Even in the face of the horridly oppressive conditions of the last hundred years, Don’t Bother Me I Can’t Cope called attention to Black successes against all odds. Grant was not willing to let listeners off the hook that easy, however, again tweaking white perceptions right at the end. As the performers complete the song and head off stage, satisfied that they have offered audiences substantial evidence of the things Black people can do well, they turn their heads, and over their shoulders speak the final line: “Oh…. AND pick cotton.”

Although race, class, and gender informed the entire text of Don’t Bother Me I Can’t Cope, the intersectional critique of the particular position of Black women in the 1970s is highlighted by the Micki Grant-penned “Liberated Woman,” a calypso

90. Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope, 65.
featured in early productions of *Don’t Bother Me I Can’t Cope*. As many of the songs did, “Liberated Woman” underwent multiple revisions during the process of writing the revue, and Grant’s notes leave evidence of some of the changes that she made. It is the only song with original lyrics and multiple versions preserved in the archival collection of Urban Arts Corps at the Schomburg Center, interesting given that the song was excised from *Don’t Bother Me* after UAC completed its New York City tour in 1971. When *Don’t Bother Me* arrived in Washington, D.C. to perform at Ford’s Theater, “Liberated Woman” was no longer part of the program, and would not return in subsequent productions. Nor does it appear in the published version of *Don’t Bother Me* or in the musical book. In the versions that Grant left, however, it is clear that her probing of the necessity of coping in *Don’t Bother Me* went beyond a racial dynamic.

The lyrics she wrote present a West Indian woman in New York City dealing with an unexpected “liberation” thrust upon her, given a freedom in name that turns out to trap her even worse than before. The song argues that liberation can only be truly meaningful when it is about self-determination and achieved through self-activity, and that liberation, freedom, and dignity mean different things to different people. Grant presents her own version of the critiques of feminism that would be brought by feminists of color over the next decade, again marked by the wry humor Grant could locate in everyday injustices, the humor that generates the smile necessary to cope. Liberation for a poor Black immigrant woman was a much different experience than liberation for a white college student or middle class housewife. Although this song did not appear in final versions, its message weaves throughout the
play, whether in Nat’s conversation with his psychiatrist, in the domestic worker’s debates with her spoiled employer, or in Salome’s clever critique of white disdain for Black assertiveness when she asks, “Lord…when they say I want too much too soon, all I ask is that You add fifty years to my life while I’m being patient.”

In the first line, Grant hints that perhaps the attraction of “liberation” is overblown, and while her lyrics make it sound as though she is invested in a kind of naturalized gender difference, the rest of the song reveals a deeper critique. “Mrs. Latour” sings that she thought she “understood” the difference between woman and man, but then she was told she wasn’t “liberated, and that’s when the troubles began.” She is not saying that men and women have their places in roles in society and need to stay in them, rather asking us to think about how the pursuit of liberation plays out differently over uneven social terrain. As Grant reveals in the second stanza, men posing as liberal-minded liberators but refusing to engage the structural dimensions of gender inequality can turn liberation against women, using the space carved out to reassert a variety of forms of domination and oppression. Taken to dinner by a lover who “agreed that I ought to be freed,” Latour told audiences, she did not know what to expect. Then he ordered expensive food and fine wine, and presented her with the bill, as though the right to pay for his pleasure were a measure of liberation as opposed to a transformation of oppression. She says a little liberation can both harassment and “a

91. *Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope*, 46.
big embarrassment,” and is compounded in the next verse by a new husband who tells her she’s “free to pay the rent.”

This theme of men exploiting liberation carries into the third verse as well. After her husband tells her she can pay the rent, he follows up by reminding her, “Ladies must still have the babies.” When “I gave him twins,” Latour sings, “he was thrilled. Now he tends the offspring while I am out working to pay off the hospital bills. I’m a liberated woman, but how was I to foresee when I asked for me rightful place, I’d be placed at the head of the family?” By the end of this third verse, the song is half over and each verse has been about a Black woman’s individual relationship with her partner.

But just as soon as she lays out one perspective, Grant snatches it back, using the rest of the song to critique much wider-ranging structural problems and lay bare the reasons that liberation for poor and working-class women of color could not be handled in the same way as for white and middle-class women. “Looking for improvement,” the singer tells us, “I called upon the Movement and told them my situation. They said, ‘Sister, you must come and march with us in a demonstration.’” But here is where her working-class status comes into play. Invited to join, she replies, “The hell you say! I work two jobs a day—I got to get up with the sun!” She can not afford to take the time off with her hourly wage, and working to make ends meet has, ironically, already made her “a model of equality. I’ve got so much freedom, it’s

makin’ a regular slave out of me.” The freedom to work meant little if she was still paid as a Black woman, a point that drives home the difference between the visions of liberation for Black and Brown women, dealing with both racial and gender oppression, and the relatively privileged project of white women’s lib.

In the final verse, Grant moves the focus of the song to a federal level, and ties the status of women to the US war in Viet Nam. Refusing to submit to the indignities of this incomplete liberation, Mrs. Latour is determined to prevail even in the face of a new form of oppression. But she reaches her final straw when “equality” means that she receives her draft papers in the mail informing her of her “right” to go fight in Asia to defend the system she has spent the rest of the song rejecting, and she tells us she could “hardly wait to de-liberate.” Turning back to the ways in which working women of color experience liberation differently from more privileged women, she says “Please, somebody, come and take back this freedom, and bring me back my womanhood!” The liberation that is being offered her is liberation from oppression without regard to race. A liberation for a Black woman that results in equal treatment to Black men is an incomplete liberation. It leaves her to still suffer the inequality of racism, and does not offer much more than the privilege of being seen as a genderless laborer rather than an equal to those offering her this limited liberation.

At the heart of this song is a message from Micki Grant that a strong, confident womanhood on the part of women of color is a form of self-determination that takes precedence over an outside liberation. Grant’s lyrics allow Mrs. Latour to ensure that

audiences do not take away from the song a sense that a woman of color who demands her womanhood is embracing a subordinate position. Rather, the dignity of possessing womanhood for Latour, as a Black immigrant woman, is superior to whatever ill-defined benefits would come from a women’s liberation that does not also entail racial liberation. As the song ends, she has taken back her womanhood, telling the audience that she is now “a de-liberated woman, as happy as I can be.” In the original lyrics the final line says “And I’ll smash anyone who tampers around with my femininity.”

However, as Grant went through the revision process and collaborated with Carroll in planning Don’t Bother Me, she made a few edits. Perhaps the most interesting is a change made to the closing line of the song. Recorded in the UAC archival collection on a copy of a page taken from a Don’t Bother Me booklet that predates the commercially published version, the revised version of the song ends with the line, “And I’ll use karate on anybody tamp’ring with me femininity!”

Grant’s turn from a generic “smash” as a form of physical resistance to the specification of karate as a martial art becomes important when placed in historical context. She was writing during the height of the anti-Viet Nam War sentiment in the United States, while many Black radicals around the country and in New York City in particular were preaching and practicing self-defense. The appearance of martial arts instructors, classes, and training centers in Black and Brown communities was one vector in a larger move towards self-discipline, militancy, and readiness that marked a variety of revolutionary groups in the late 1960s. Tying Mrs. Latour’s sense of self,

and her practice of self-determination and liberation, to martial arts, Grant’s revision used performance to link Black struggle in the United States to anti-colonial struggles and Third World liberation more broadly. As I argue in the next chapter, these politics also informed the strategies and goals of the largely Puerto Rican organization United Bronx Parents. Focused specifically on the struggle for bilingual education, United Bronx Parents’ fight for community control of Bronx schools was a local manifestation of the Puerto Rican independence movement, decolonization in microcosm.
Interlude: Guerrilla Galleries and
Subway Insurgencies

Maybe it was TAKI 183; maybe it was “TOP CAT rockin’ them tall letters from Philly.”¹ There are several nominees as the writer who changed the graffiti game in New York City. Graffiti’s origin tales are varied and contested, but the originator of the art is less important for this story than the dramatic changes that graffiti writing went through in the 1970s. Stylistically, writers moved from simple name tags to huge, complex, multi-colored collaborative pieces that took hours to complete. Spatially, they moved from tagging their own neighborhood blocks to “beautifying” the subway cars that carried millions of New Yorkers across the city every day.

Writers worked across the city, although the South Bronx would become a hotspot for the richness and variety of its pieces.² Whether tagging the building on the corner, or a train that would crisscross the city, writers’ pieces were about making themselves visible and claiming space in a city in which they were meant to be silent and invisible. Their additions to the local scenery were advertisements for their own value and self-worth, and for the creativity and dynamic power of their communities. Using public space and public transit as their billboards, they proclaimed that the South Bronx, Harlem, and other parts of the city would not be silent and invisible while their communities decayed from benign neglect.

2. In part because of the size of the subway layup yards where off-duty trains were stored. Located across the street from DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, it was a convenient target for those looking to write. See Austin, Taking the Train, 54-57.
Graffiti was also a response to capitalist intrusions into writers’ neighborhoods. “The proliferation of posters, advertisements, and signs” were “directly visible extensions of individual/corporate identities” into urban areas. For poorer communities, inequitably sharing in the largess of American society, this amounted to capitalist occupation. Graffiti writing, murals, tags, and the broad redecoration of urban space rejected the intrusions of capital. The space belonged to the people, and writers reclaimed it through their art in perhaps the most concrete demonstration of what Greg Tate meant when he said hip hop is about “reverse colonization.” Joe Austin notes that early writers were more interested in the aesthetics of graffiti in urban space than in “claiming some part of that landscape as exclusive territory.” They may not have consciously been out for territorial conquest, but their artistic expressions developed alongside and as part of a broader culture of decolonizing struggle in Harlem and the Bronx.

Using repurposed industrial tools to paint on improvised canvases, graffiti was a freestyle artistic form. Spray paint was intended for anything but artistic display, but writers elevated it from its utilitarian purpose. Seeking wider sprays and more consistent coverage, they experimented with delivery methods; the “fat cap” that made it possible to color large sections evenly was originally the nozzle of an oven cleaner can. Aside from the materials, the aesthetics of graffiti too were about freestyle. Writers competed to develop new lettering styles, to one-up and respond to each

3. Austin, 39.
5. Austin, 47.
other’s creations. Their use of popular imagery, incongruously appearing on subway cars and city walls, turned the symbols of capitalism and mainstream culture to their own ends. They crafted “wild style” masterpieces, densely-layered and highly-encrypted textual pieces that could rarely be read or understood by outsiders, or even novice writers. And sometimes, they made directly political statements: against police brutality, against imperialism, against racism.

After decades of being told they were not good enough, that they did not deserve better, that their pathological failings meant that they deserved their fate, young people in the South Bronx created a way to fight back. The fluidity of graffiti writing as an art form and as a cultural practice made it difficult to pin down. As the “urban crisis” of graffiti in the late 1970s and early 1980s demonstrates, the city was afraid that these rebellious youth might be the advance forces of a more concerted and militant opposition. The tags and larger pieces were their way of communicating. Their writing was “a recruitment poster” for others to join the search for an alternative, a message that said, “You are not alone in your rebellion.”6 Their paintings literally took over their neighborhoods, reclaiming them from the forces of neglect and oppression that had controlled them for years. They reached out through trains, buses, and other means of moving about the city to strike back at the imperial forces that controlled their communities, guerrilla armies announcing to the city that they were there and demanding change.

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6. Austin, 103.
The creative power and expression of graffiti art could not be contained in the streets. Writers took over any available public space—trains, walls, tunnels, storefronts. From there, this army burst into the world of art as a decolonizing, democratizing force. In another context, this movement of South Bronx art into Manhattan has been called a “territorial breach.” It can be considered part of a larger 1970s trend of unexpected, artist-organized exhibitions that critic Peter Frank called “guerrilla gallerizing.” At the same time, graffiti art was just beginning to move from the streets into gallery and exhibition settings. Writers were finding new kinds of fame through shows at Fashion Moda, the explosive multi-genre Times Square Show, and increased attention from the media and art world. Gallery owners and art dealers quickly began reaching out to cultural brokers like Fab Five Freddy about bringing shows to downtown galleries for collectors to view and purchase. It is easy to read this relationship as exploitative, an effort by the art world to capitalize on the latest hip trend. But it is also worth thinking about the move from the streets into gallery spaces as an artistic insurgency. Graffiti artists already were in control of the city’s mass transit systems, and now were advancing on the city’s high culture as well.

It was in this context that New York mounted The Second War on Graffiti in 1980-1981, right in the midst of the struggle against *Fort Apache.* Mayor Koch’s anti-graffiti alliance created a “war on graffiti” that extended the significance of graffiti beyond its impact on subway lines themselves. As Austin writes, the war was framed

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as a “crucial civic endeavor” that was about “quality of life”—making the city better for every resident, and improving its image to outsiders. This fails to account for the ways that graffiti had emerged as a quality of life issue in and of itself. Writers were claiming fame and dignity for themselves, for their social circles, and for their neighborhoods. They were striking back against a city that sought to isolate and silence them. The Second War on Graffiti was an imperialist project that must be connected to the resistance emerging from the South Bronx around *Fort Apache*. The city provided police support to the film crews, attacking the traditional protests of the Committee Against Fort Apache while also deploying police against the graffiti writers who expressed a decolonizing politics through visual culture.

Graffiti was seen as problematic and criminal because it defaced public property and made the city look like it was out of control. More importantly, though, graffiti was feared and hated because it demonstrated to New York residents that there was a bubbling, potent undercurrent of discontent and revolutionary possibility just below the city’s surface. Writers’ insistence on maximum visibility and system-wide saturation “heightened already existing fears over a loss of control of the urban landscape. If the city could not stop these young outlaws from writing all over trains and walls,” how far might this youth insurgency go? Had graffiti stayed in the South Bronx, in Harlem, in the other troubled frontiers regions of the city, where authorities and citizens alike assumed that New York’s problems were located, there would not have been such an outcry or declaration of war on graffiti. But because writers

10. Rose, 44.
communicated across the city through transit lines, because graffiti rolled into subway
stations every 7 to 10 minutes and reminded businessmen, housewives, and good
responsible taxpayers that just out of their vision there was a disenfranchised,
energetic, and growing mass of young people who desperately wanted something
different for themselves, it was a threat. Graffiti reminded the city that there were
people working to transform social and spatial relations in New York’s hinterlands.
How much of a threat might they ultimately pose to authorities’ power to control the
city?

11. Austin, 47.
On the morning of October 25, 1977, a Puerto Rican flag unfurled from the crown of the Statue of Liberty. A group of 28 activists led by Miguel “Mickey” Melendez, a former leader of the Young Lords Party, had taken over the iconic statue to demand the release of five Puerto Ricans detained for over 20 years, the longest-held political prisoners in the western hemisphere. Once the structure was secured, another group of activists held a press conference just across the Hudson River at Battery Park that was “swamped” by the media. Vicente “Panamá” Alba told them the occupation was intended to highlight the hypocrisy of the United States’ commitment to “liberty and justice for all” while Puerto Rican freedom fighters “languished” in American jails and the island remained “oppressed by U.S. corporations and armed forces.” Attention gained, the occupiers peacefully surrendered to FBI agents later that night.

As a piece of political theatre the event had a far-reaching impact, dominating the national news cycle and splashing front pages worldwide the next day with images of the flag-draped statue.¹ Three weeks after President Jimmy Carter’s visit to the South Bronx and promise to help that community, the takeover served notice to the US government and to Puerto Ricans alike that the city’s “Nuyoricans” had not forgotten

the ties that bound them to the island, nor ceased fighting for Puerto Rican independence. The attention that the occupation attracted was instrumental in Carter signing an executive clemency order in September 1979, granting the political prisoners unconditional freedom. For Oscar Collazo, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irvin Flores, Andrés Figueroa Cordero, and Lolita Lebrón, occupation as a strategy for Puerto Rican liberation had tangible, definite results.²

The takeover of the Statue of Liberty is the most famous example of Puerto Rican efforts to wrest control over their lives as a colonized people away from U.S. authorities in the 1970s. However, it was not the only time activists used the takeover of government buildings as a strategy to improve the lives of Puerto Ricans in the South Bronx and draw attention to the ongoing oppression of Puerto Ricans living on the mainland. In April 1978, six months after the Statue of Liberty occupation, a small group of women and children entered and occupied the recently-shuttered Early Childhood Center at 773 Prospect Avenue in the name of the South Bronx-based organization United Bronx Parents. Known informally as “la Escuelita bilingue,” or “the Little Bilingual School,” the Center had served since the beginning of the decade as a vital resource for children from Spanish-dominant households as they found their footing in the education system. In taking over the building and claiming it as a symbol of Puerto Rican community strength and hub of local activism after it was closed by the Board of Education, United Bronx Parents decolonized a small piece of

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² Collazo was in jail for his 1950 attack on Blair House, the temporary residence of Pres. Harry S. Truman. The others were arrested for the 1954 “United States Capitol shooting.” To highlight the struggle for independence they unfurled a Puerto Rican flag and fired 30 shots from the balcony into the House of Representatives chamber during debate over an immigration bill, wounding five.
land in the South Bronx. At the local level, independence for Puerto Ricans meant control over the institutions of their own communities.

Founded in 1965, United Bronx Parents was a largely Puerto Rican “grassroots organization working on community improvement in the South Bronx area with a special emphasis on educational reform” as part of the wider struggle for Puerto Rican self-determination. In the governance of the local school system, UBP saw the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico reproduced in microcosm. “Just as Puerto Rico has suffered from years of ‘injusticia colonial,’” Executive Director Evelina Antonetty told the New York City Commission on Civil Rights, “so the Puerto Rican child suffers in New York City.” Puerto Rican schoolchildren were treated like second-class citizens by overwhelmingly white administrators and teachers, punished for speaking Spanish, and taught that their history and culture were things to be ashamed of and forgotten. Parents were excluded from participating, told that their interference was inhibiting the children’s growth, and dismissed when they tried to raise concerns. United Bronx Parents saw ending these practices and transforming public education as crucial steps in changing the lives of Puerto Ricans in New York City.

This was a freestyle on the meaning of education. Rather than the “3 R’s,” education for United Bronx Parents meant a total system that challenged racial inequality, colonial control, and the wider structures of oppression inhibiting self-

determination for all peoples. Their Constitution declared that their first objective was to change the New York City education system “in order to assure the highest standards of education for Puerto Rican and other minority children,” a straightforward goal expected of a parents’ organization. To do that, however, UBP declared that they would unite across lines of “race, color, creed, and national origin,” and fight “for the abolition of the daily injustices perpetrated upon Puerto Rican and other minority peoples.” They also reserved the right to work with any group or agency, public or private, that could be used to further their objectives.5

Their clear call for organizing across lines of race and national origin highlights the ways UBP saw an internationalist approach to combating racism, imperialism, and oppression as vital to fights at the local level. Ideologically informed by “the Puerto Rican independence struggle and revolutionary nationalist movements of the 1960s, particularly the Young Lords and the Black Panthers,” UBP’s struggle for community control of local schools was their first step in the larger project to decolonize the South Bronx and win self-determination for the marginalized populations who lived there.6 Recent scholarship has demonstrated how United Bronx Parents worked in conjunction with other racial and ethnic groups, and organized to change the New York City school system to better serve minority community needs.7

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As the course of United Bronx Parents’ actions in the ensuing decade demonstrate, local organizing in the 1970s continued to pursue multiracial, decolonizing political projects. Their radical commitment to “any resources necessary” suggests the familiarity, flexibility, and creativity that defines freestyle politics. As Antonetty told her comrades, “each generation creates and lives its own political time.”

They needed to develop strategies to thrive in their own moment. Anything that could be turned to their advantage was fair game, regardless of its intended purposes.

This chapter first examines United Bronx Parents’ mission to redefine the quality and experience of public education for Puerto Rican children in the South Bronx. During the debates over New York School decentralization in the 1960s United Bronx Parents sought the more radical objective of community control, proposing almost full autonomy over the operation of local school boards. Under the city’s decentralization plan, local school boards would have some decision-making power but ultimately remained answerable to the New York City Board of Education. UBP countered that community school boards should have the authority to determine and set curriculum, hire and evaluate classroom teachers, and even oversee administrative and leadership positions like principals. It also meant that parents and community members would be encouraged, and even trained, to participate in the day-to-day functions of the school as well as their own children’s educations. Community control for United Bronx Parents meant decolonization of the South Bronx, starting with taking the education of local youth out of the hands of racist, imperialist bureaucrats.

8. Antonetty memorial cards, 1985; Diana Caballero Papers, Subject Files Folder 25, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY (Caballero Papers).
Next, I examine two particular projects to analyze the interconnected nature of UBP’s politics in action. First is their administration of the Summer Feeding Program starting in 1971, a Federal program to provide meals to children in need during the summer months when school was not in session. The lunch program expanded by the late 1970s to include three meals a day, and UBP ultimately served as the nation-wide administrator of the program. Not only did it feed children in the South Bronx, and across the city, it also provided hundreds of jobs in the community over the course of the decade. Capitalizing on the moral responsibility to feed children, United Bronx Parents spun the Feeding Program into a city-wide and then national program that created thousands of jobs in poor communities disproportionately impacted by reduced social welfare programs in the 1970s.

Second is the creation of two alternative institutions during the 1970s, carved out of spiritual and physical space that United Bronx Parents reclaimed in their neighborhood. La Universidad Urayoán was an independent college named after a hero of Puerto Rican resistance to Spanish invaders and intended to decolonize the minds of the South Bronx community. La Escuelita was Board of Education territory occupied and claimed by UBP, eventually becoming the organization’s headquarters and base for many of its social programs. As a freestyle on the conception of “educational reform,” these sites were a realization of their broader politics of education. It pushed past the classroom, cultivating a sense of dignity, history, and self-respect in the face of “daily injustices,” and challenging inequality in housing,
public health, employment, social services, and other arenas. The establishment of La Universidad and the takeover of La Escuelita were specific manifestations of UBP’s broader political struggle against racism, colonialism, and the abuse of Puerto Ricans and other minority communities at the hands of dominant society.

Given the male-dominated leadership of many of the radical and revolutionary groups most threatening to the US mainstream, perhaps it should not be surprising that organizations with overwhelmingly female leadership like United Bronx Parents should stand out. Ideas about gender roles and behaviors may well have made these groups seem less troublesome to authorities than those led by angry young men, as the Panthers and others were often characterized. As an examination of United Bronx Parents reveals, however, the women who led community-based organizations in the late 1960s and 1970s were often stronger, smarter, and generally more powerful than many expected them to be. From the dynamic Vinnette Carroll and her collaborator Micki Grant in Urban Arts Corps in the previous chapter, to Evelina Antonetty and her colleagues in United Bronx Parents discussed here, woman activists carved a distinct path through the difficult and crowded world of post-Civil Rights Era politics and activism. For Antonetty and United Bronx Parents, ideas about maternal responsibility inflected their efforts to improve the lot of Puerto Rican schoolchildren and to educate parents to advocate in their defense. In the South Bronx, concerned mothers could use their position to wage local battles in a larger fight against racism, imperialism, and inequality across the city and around the world.

The Politics of Radical Struggle in the War on Poverty

The War on Poverty during the 1960’s was one of the federal government’s approaches to dealing with persistent economic inequality and its attendant social unrest. It included a range of programs to encourage community improvement and the participation of the poor in efforts to improve their neighborhoods. As recent scholarship has increasingly shown, the War on Poverty also worked to avoid addressing structural causes to poverty, instead focusing on individual responsibility and self-improvement. Poverty was a social problem rather than economic in this line of thinking, and would be best addressed by programs that would help “train” the poor, particularly urban minorities, to be better citizens. War on Poverty programs built around community participation and self-help were meant to develop a renewed dedication to the promise of American democracy.

This was in part a response to the growing pull of radical movements among marginalized and disenfranchised populations across the United States. The radical politicization of young Black and Brown males in particular was seen as a threat to the government. Groups like the Black Panthers, US Organization, Young Lords Organization, and others drawing links between their own positions and conditions in the United States and people suffering under US policies globally—particularly in Viet Nam—were part of a growing international movement that linked racism, imperialism, and capitalism. As American Studies scholar Alyosha Goldstein demonstrates, the War on Poverty’s “initiatives to induce the participation of the poor”
were “catalyzed by the Cold War and the dilemmas of decolonization.” With the politics of global decolonization and Cold War imperatives shaping the programs for domestic policy-makers, grassroots activists and local organizations seen as risks for “radicalization” were also aware of and connected to transnational movements for justice, equality, and self-determination.

Policy-makers devised programs for the War on Poverty that would offer communities a hand up, a path to self-improvement through self-help. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 clearly emphasized the importance of poor people organizing on their own behalf and of “community action projects” to involved the poor in efforts to transform their lives, reincorporating them into the society from which they had been alienated. But the meaning of “self-help” had a different connotation for groups who had been hearing the term since early in the 20th century, and to whom it was alternately condescendingly paternalistic and an excuse to exclude them from meaningful equality until, in a circularly racist logic, they had made themselves equal. Struggles over the paths and purposes of War on Poverty programs were marked by “protracted tension between the conceptions of self-help and self-determination,” and the “elasticity and contingent meaning of these terms, with frequent rhetorical slippage between the two, served as the means for attracting the interest and commitment of those marginalized people identified as candidates for inclusion” in the national body politic.  

On the other hand, activists had clear ideas of their own about what these terms meant, as in United Bronx Parents’ elaboration of the differences between “decentralization” and “community control” in the debates over education practices in the South Bronx. These ideas were shaped in no small part by longer histories of fights over self-help and self-determination, and their respective places in not only Black struggle in the US, but the experiences of Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, and others vis-à-vis American imperialism in the long 20th century. If policy-makers and academics found slippage in these terms as an opportunity to hail marginalized communities as Goldstein suggests, then we must also consider the possibility that the organic intellectuals and grassroots activists leading these community movements saw the same slippages. In those slippages, there were crevices and cracks that could be pried open, opportunities to use Federal programs to create room for maneuver and to pursue political projects more radical than those intended by liberal policy-makers and War on Poverty bureaucrats.

Once community activists learned about and became involved in these programs, they often used the rhetoric developed and deployed by officials to wrest ever-greater concessions, resources, and power from the opportunities they were afforded. Using the example of JOIN (Jobs Or Income Now) in Chicago, Goldstein shows that activists realized that civic authorities often ignored the spirit of the Economic Opportunity Act, and “adopted democratic rhetoric without any attempt to allow a single decision to be made by the poor” affected by the programs.12 Officials

12. Goldstein, 8.
consistently moved to preserve power and centralized control, but progressive and radical community organizers used that same democratic rhetoric to explore new and unexpected ways of extracting more control for themselves than officials intended. United Bronx Parents, like other groups utilizing War on Poverty programs and similar liberal funding sources refused to be contained by the rather limited programmatic intentions, even if at first glance the official archival evidence suggests that they had incorporated themselves into the regime of governance the War on Poverty worked to construct.

Additionally, even community groups focused on local areas of influence like United Bronx Parents were already part of much wider debates about the nature of self-determination and struggles against racism and colonialism. For them, a drive for self-determination was something they had in common with oppressed communities across the city, the nation, and around the world, an outward-looking politics of local struggle. For officials, though, the intent of War on Poverty programs was inward: self-improvement, self-help, and self-government, in the individualist sense, were “at this historical moment to be the means toward decentralization and incorporation, even as the relative autonomy and collective action of poor people often proved more unruly and antagonistic than envisioned by liberal policy-makers.”

History of United Bronx Parents

In 1965 Evelina Antonetty was a concerned Puerto Rican mother in the Bronx, her daughter Lorraine like many children in the neighborhood attending a public school that her mother did not find adequately met her educational needs. Many of them came from Spanish-dominant or Spanish-primary homes, and the failure of South Bronx public schools to provide a bilingual education jeopardized their children’s success. But the elder Antonetty had also been a community activist since the 1930s; since the early 1960s she organized the South Bronx for the Puerto Rican Community Development Project, a War on Poverty program intended to build Puerto Rican identity and community strength.14

Drawing on this experience, Antonetty began participating in the Parent Teachers Association and soon became president of the local PTA. After finding wide differences of opinion between parents in the school district, she established a parallel organization called United Bronx Parents to pursue the remedies she thought were appropriate. It began as a volunteer organization staffed by Antonetty and a flexible group of other parents. Their primary frustrations, reflected specifically in the bilingual education problem, were the rigidity of a school administration reluctant to take input from Puerto Rican parents, “qualitative inadequacies” in the school’s classroom offering, and a general “unresponsiveness of the school system to the valid needs of Puerto Rican children in the school.”15

United Bronx Parents defined their home territory, the South Bronx, as an area bounded by 161st Street on the North, 134th Street on the South, Gerard Avenue on the West, and Hunts Point to the East. This was a section of the Bronx suffering economic deprivation more severe than perhaps any urban area in the United States, and certainly the worst in New York City. Redevelopment in Harlem drove Puerto Rican and other Spanish-speaking communities across the Harlem River throughout the 1960s, and “constant migration from Puerto Rico in reaction to the Island’s severe economic depression” further increased the population in the South Bronx. In 1970, US Census reports put the Puerto Rican and Spanish-speaking population at 53%, and that population would increase by more than a third again by 1976. United Bronx Parents became a central component of Puerto Rican resistance to local manifestations of deindustrialization and neoliberalism.

For a year, United Bronx Parents sought to move through administrative channels to effect changes, but frustrated with the glacial pace of progress they organized a “large number of Puerto Rican parents” and incorporated as a formal organization. Funding from the Office of Economic Opportunity allowed the group to move from the voluntary association of the previous year to a formal activist organization with a mandate to improve the educational opportunities and life chances of Puerto Rican and other minority youth in the Bronx. This early round of funding gives insight into Antonetty’s organizational acumen, as the United Bronx Parents would be very successful in securing grants and other resources from its inception, and

continuing today as UBP continues to grow and serve New York City. Over the following years, funding from the Departments of Health, Education, and Welfare, the New York City Addiction Services Agency, private philanthropies such as the Field Foundation, and groups like the Urban Coalition would provide the aid to support UBP programs.

Antonetty was the driving force, described by staff members and colleagues as “an extremely articulate, dynamic and aggressive woman.” She was “a determining force in the organization,” although nominally her decisions or suggestions had to be approved by the United Bronx Parents’ Board of Directors, a group that fluctuated from approximately a dozen to at times as many as thirty individuals. There were “people from the community,” often parents, who were nominated by community members, other members of the Board, UBP staff, or by the Director herself. This community-based board was in keeping with UBP’s insistent focus on community control, and throughout the organization’s first 15 years of existence all the organizing and training staff were “indigenous to the community.” When necessary, Antonetty and UBP could also turn to for “expertise, insight, new information, resources, criticism, and contacts” to a second, 40-member advisory board of professionals, academic, and significant lay people. In addition, Antonetty had been instrumental in the politicization of Richie Pérez and she also had him and the rest of the Young Lords Party in her “inner circle.” After the famous Bronx youth gang truce of 1971, a number of former gang leaders joined UBP as youth workers including Ghetto

Brothers vice president Benjy Melendez, giving the organization increased credibility and contacts in the streets.\textsuperscript{20} It was a broad, far-flung network of contacts to which UBP’s executive director could turn as needed.

Maintaining formal independence from radicals like the Young Lords was a strategic decision that allowed UBP to survive. To ensure their success, United Bronx Parents had to straddle a line between the liberal policies of governmental and philanthropic funding agencies and the more radical politics of liberation that ultimately undergirded the organization. Hot on the heels of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of the mid-1960s, the climate of liberalism that pervaded the United States during the decades helped make groups like United Bronx Parents, focused on “improving” their own neighborhoods and communities to better fit the expectations of “good Americans,” a safe bet for bureaucrats looking to demonstrate their willingness to help those who would help themselves.

While officials meant to screw identity and community down to the individual level, divorced of larger affiliations other than “American community,” local activists still looked outside and beyond, seeing their own struggles and local efforts as connected to broader movements, both within and without the United States. That is to say, despite the efforts of governance, no program was able to erase the pasts or histories of the aggrieved communities the War on Poverty was meant to “save”—and those histories shaped and directed community action in powerful ways, even if they were at times expected. The Black Panthers for example were a group that officials

\textsuperscript{20} Chang, \emph{Can’t Stop Won’t Stop}, 58-63.
must have anticipated would reflect on their own racial and class positions within the US and an international context when planning community programs. For groups like United Bronx Parents, whose radical anti-racist and anti-imperialist core was contained behind the normative visage of the “concerned mother” admired by and legible to liberal governance and normative society, the possibilities expanded for linking their own local struggles over the future of Puerto Rican children in the South Bronx to much more expansive fights for Puerto Rican independence, radical freedom in communities of color, and an end to a host of other social injustices.

Meanwhile, the lurking specter of racial unrest and urban uprisings, manifest in 1965 in Watts, Detroit, and other cities provided a counterbalance for groups like UBP. Urban uprisings in the years following the passage of the Voting Rights Act and Civil Rights Act demonstrated that mere legislation would not move the country toward meaningful equality. Militant groups like the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords emerged to challenge the deliberate speed of federal policy, practicing direct action and threatening real, revolutionary change. A turn to “law and order” politics followed as conservatives used coded racial language to blame liberal programs for creating a world where “nightmares of criminal chaos replaced dreams of a Great Society.”21 If the alternatives were rioting or the revolutionary mobilizations of groups like the Young Lords Party, then funding community-based initiatives with goals as seemingly benign as improving the lot of Spanish-speaking grade school students served government interests in several ways. They generated

positive press, demonstrated that officials cared about the conditions that were causing the racial strife, and they also—ideally—helped to raise a generation of non-white students who saw a benevolent Uncle Sam offering assistance to better their lives.

But despite appearances, these groups were not always focused on successful incorporation and integration to normative citizenship. They sometimes used the expectations of authorities to wrest resources for their own, more radical ends. When United Bronx Parents wrote the constitution to establish and formalize the organization in 1966, efforts to improve education for minority students in New York took center stage but the program quickly expanded in scope. Laying out a 10-point platform, they started with an effort to “affect such changes in the educational establishment… in order to assure the highest standards of education for Puerto Rican and other minority children in our schools,” but also to “assist all persons who have problems in education or any other aspect of life.” Formally focused on education, UBP understood that the problems of race, class, gender, and national status, among others, formed a complex web of which schooling was only one strand.

They elaborated on this analysis in subsequent points. A central component was an effort to reshape and rehabilitate the identity of Puerto Ricans and other oppressed populations, “to promote and reaffirm faith in the dignity and worth of mankind.”

**United Bronx Parents’ 10 Points** *(Article II of UBP Constitution)*

1. To affect such changes in the educational establishment of the City of New York in order to assure the highest standards of education for Puerto Rican and other minority children in our schools.

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2. To assist all persons who have problems in education or any other aspect of life.
3. To promote and reaffirm faith in the dignity and worth of mankind.
4. To help establish conditions under which justice and the equal rights of all individuals can be respected and maintained.
5. To promote social progress and the practice of brotherhood.
6. To unite our strength to eliminate discrimination for reasons of race, color, creed, and national origin in every field of human endeavor.
7. To devise ways and means for improving and initiating national, state and municipal legislation in the area of education, housing, health, labor, government and politics, child welfare, public services and civil rights.
8. To carry on activities intended to maintain, foster, and expand public awareness and involvement for the abolition of the daily injustices perpetrated upon Puerto Rican and other minority peoples, especially in the area of education.
9. To acquire real and personal property by purchases, gift, grant, devise or bequest, and to hold, own, accept and dispose of the same, and to have the right to raise funds.
10. To have the right and authority to carry on any and all legal activities it shall deem needful in furtherance of the aforementioned purposes, including the right to cooperate with any agency, bureau, division or subdivision of the federal, state, and local government, or with any or all other private agencies and organizations which might lend any assistance in the furtherance of its purposes.23

United Bronx Parents quickly moved to connect educational justice for Puerto Rican and other minority students to broader, more inclusive goals of equality, opportunity, and improved social relations. Article III of their Constitution formalized the global reach of this community organization. The Article declared, “Any person who is in accord with the principles, aims, and goals of this organization shall be considered a member at large.”24 There was no formal induction, no application for membership—if one agreed with the objectives of United Bronx Parents, one was a member regardless of background, occupation, or location.

Their predominantly Puerto Rican membership should not be seen as an indicator of a racially or ethnically bounded politics. Led by Antonetty’s multiracial vision as “an advocate for the Puerto Ricans, Blacks, and poor whites in our society who are systematically ignored and kept out of the mainstream of America,” United Bronx Parents understood that “all areas [of struggle] are inter-related.”

Having defined the physical, geographic boundaries of their community as noted above, they elsewhere defined their community this way: “COMMUNITY: South Bronx; New York City; North America; ‘New’ World (Western Hemisphere), Planet Earth. The approach is to develop a broader sense of community.”

Over the next decade, UBP would develop this wider sense of community, including other groups of people within the organization in more explicit terms. They also would broaden the community in terms of engagement, moving from education-focused efforts into health, housing, welfare, juvenile justice, nutritional access, and other projects.

Members developed a range of strategies on the fly, studying everything from education law to propaganda techniques in the early years of the organization. They quickly established a reputation for knowledge and determination, and became a

26. United Bronx Parents Manual, n.d.; UBP, Box 2 Folder 15, p. 6. The strikethrough of “North” may have happened after the document was written and was being reviewed, or it may have happened as the document was being typed. This latter would have simultaneously recognized and rejected the effort to categorize “North America” as different and distinct from the “other” Americas. Because the apostrophic offset of “New” does much the same thing, I am inclined to conclude that the strikethrough happened at the time of original typing. The political position inherent in this formatting is yet another example of how organizations like UBP and, in the next chapter Urban Arts Corps, could express their politics to sympathetic audiences while slipping them past readers who might have been hostile to a more plainly-stated radical politics.
resource for others in the community wishing to pursue similar goals. UBP disseminated information about its activities and offerings, including parent advocacy training, through “extensive use” of brief bilingual (Spanish-English) informational brochures, pamphlets, and flyers that covered current educational issues with a focus on the fight for bilingual education and the changing laws regarding education in New York more generally as decentralization moved forward. Especially early in United Bronx Parents’ history, these tactics helped spread word of its mission in the community. Interested individuals or parents’ organizations would contact UBP for training in advocacy and organizing in support of parent’s rights in their school.28

These “parent organizer trainers” were the “backbone” of the United Bronx Parents working staff. They did the bulk of the advocacy work, speaking for themselves and their community. With UBP guidance, parents across the Bronx became quite knowledgeable about many aspects of educational law and policy. This relationship meant that United Bronx Parents was “part of the community,” and created “an environment of trust” distinguishing this grass-roots, community-advocacy organization from “so-called do-gooders” and other well-intentioned groups like the South Bronx Frontier Development Corporation that would present challenges to UBP’s community-directed vision for the South Bronx in the years to come. By that time, however, United Bronx Parents’ status as a leading community advocacy

organization would be well established, its reach and influence “expanded far beyond what one would normally expect from a community-based group.”29

**Community Control as Decolonization**

The primary mission of United Bronx Parents was fighting for community control of local school boards. The City was changing the structure of public education, moving from a centralized model with all decisions made for the entire school system from one location to a decentralized model. Individual school districts operated by community school boards would have relative control over the basics of their local education, with the largest and most important decisions still handled in a centralized manner. As United Bronx Parents pointed out on several occasions, this meant not only split control, with final decisions being taken out of the local community’s hands, but also split finances. A large percentage of the Board of Education funding stayed with the central authority to fund administrators and other functionaries that United Bronx Parents saw as siphoning crucial monies away from those who needed them most—the students.

In one of their first campaigns, United Bronx Parents set out to battle against decentralization. Their goal was not to stop it but rather as their ally David Spencer, Chairman of the IS 201 Governing Board phrased it, “to carry it further. We call it community control.” Decentralization meant that school boards would be locally appointed or elected instead of assigned by the Central Headquarters, and that those

local boards would have some control over the selection of personnel, the allocations
of the budget, alterations to the curriculum, and deployment of local educational staff.
However, it also meant that Central Headquarters would retain “substantial powers”
over local schools. Central officials would be “able to remove any governing board,
even if it is chosen by the community.” Headquarters would also retain decision-
making power regarding teacher and supervisor “qualifications” and examinations.  
It would conduct centralized negotiations with the United Federation of Teachers, a
flashpoint of strife and turmoil perhaps best displayed in the Ocean Hill/Brownsville
unrest of 1968. Finally, the central headquarters would retain ultimate power over the
budget, deciding how much money each school district would receive, and over the
construction and repair of school facilities. For United Bronx Parents and their allies,
decentralization was an unacceptable attempt at ameliorative concession rather than a
fundamental transformation in the way that local schools served the needs of their
communities.

The alternative United Bronx Parents pursued was community control.
Community control advocates argued that the “structure of schools and schooling was
less important than who was allowed to occupy positions of authority.”  
This meant school districts would define their own boundaries, ensuring that neighborhoods,
blocks, and ethnic communities were not scattered across several neighboring districts
where the relative paucity of minority students could be used to excuse a lack of

Over Community Control in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, 1967-1971 (New York:
programs serving their needs. Districts would elect their own representatives rather than being subject to the whim of appointed administrators from outside the neighborhood. United Bronx Parents also envisioned a community control whereby the city Board of Education would transfer ALL powers to the local district. As UBP explained in one of their widely-distributed informational pamphlets, this would make the local district responsible “DIRECTLY to the State Education Department, and only the rules land regulations of the state will be binding on the local district,” pointedly noting “This is how it happens in the suburban communities.”

The question of funding was a central concern in the fight for community control. United Bronx Parents understood the impact that current funding structures dependent on the local tax base had on poorer districts. In a city-wide school system, they argued, money should be given “to each district EQUALLY on a per capita basis” and then local districts would decide how to best spend that money. United Bronx Parents demanded that each district have the right to consult with parents and teachers to identify local needs, hire and fire its own staff, and negotiate their own contracts. This would ensure the bilingual teachers and master teachers in short supply in the South Bronx would be paid more, improving retention. The right to directly purchase textbooks and supplies secure the proper materials for each district’s needs. Finally, local control cut the central headquarters out entirely, requiring each district

34. “Community Control Is Not Decentralization,” 15 September 1968; UBP, Box 4 Folder 1.
be responsible for following State Educational Standards for curriculum and for the qualifications and evaluations of all personnel.\textsuperscript{33}

These were issues that United Bronx Parents pushed and fought for from their founding in 1965. Pamphlets, posters, flyers, and other means were used to spread the word of their activities and attract interested parents and community members to the cause. As they fought to educate parents and make them advocates for their own children in local school boards, a number of issues connected to education arose. One was the question of how to deal with a largely Puerto Rican population that had long been told that they knew nothing about education, and that any parental interference in the school system would be to the detriment of their kids.

United Bronx Parents’ first challenge here was to get parents used to working on behalf of their children, which they did through their parent training programs. There were a number of approaches, classes, workshops, and training sessions that UBP used to make local parents their own best advocates.\textsuperscript{34} Community control meant self-empowerment and self-determination as part of a communal whole. Parents with the confidence to confront school officials and teachers, secure in the knowledge that they had the right to determine the course of their children’s educations, meant that change would continue even after UBP courses ended. Transforming the consciousness of the local parents had far longer-lasting impact than sending in “leaders” to make decisions for them.

\textsuperscript{33} “Community Control Is Not Decentralization,” 15 September 1968; UBP, Box 4 Folder 1.
The tactics developed by United Bronx Parents eventually extended far beyond the Bronx. Having completed the *How to Make a School Visit* booklet for the local Bronx community, UBP contracted with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to develop a similar manual that could be used across the country. United Bronx Parents’ approach to training parents to act as advocates for their children, and to monitor school, was refined to fit a wider variety of communities. This resulted in a *Parent Evaluation Manual* distributed to interested groups nationwide, and UBP staff offered technical assistance to these groups as well. By the late 1970s, United Bronx Parents had travelled across the United States conducting workshops and putting into place the same kind of locally-based, self directing groups that had been its hallmark in the Bronx in the late 1960’s. They trained Mexican American parents in California, Black parents in cities as distinct as Boston, Omaha, and Cleveland, Native American parents on a variety of reservations, and even “White middle class parents” in enclaves like Stamford, Connecticut, and Tuxedo Park, New York, among others.35

Parents received instruction on how to go into schools, make observations of classroom and administrator behavior, and evaluate the school’s curricula. UBP developed checklists and guidelines to rate teacher performance, ranging from academic capacity to the sensitivity and respect with which teachers dealt with students. Parents learned about education legislation, the limits of principal and administrator power, and all other aspects of the school system. The development of specific criteria, checklists, and logging strategies for each school district was

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important for the long-term objectives. Parents were not being trained to make subjective judgments. “The objective,” United Bronx Parents explained, was “to create a monitoring system which is supported by facts.”³⁶ UBP had a whole series of programs to teach parents a range of skills, all helping them stand up for their children’s rights. This was not the “self-help training” of War on Poverty programs that sought to improve the lives of the poor by teaching them to be better citizens and more hygienic mothers. This was a crash-course in self-determination, teaching parents to challenge the system, depose authority, and reclaim control over their neighborhoods. They were radically transformative rather than incorporative.

**Nurturing the Neighborhood: The Summer Feeding Program, 1971-1979**

A second program critical to United Bronx Parents’ quest for self-determination and community control was the Summer Feeding Program. Examining this program also underscores the connection between UBP’s local efforts for change and wider challenges to racial and economic inequality. Under this program, United Bronx Parents fed between 250,000 and 1 million children per year in the New York City area each summer during the 1970s. It was a huge undertaking, and helped launch United Bronx Parents from a local Bronx-based organization to a group whose programs reached across the city and eventually the nation. The Summer Feeding Program was part of a larger strategy of United Bronx Parents and their allies to wrest control over the Bronx into the hands of those who lived there. As with their plan for

³⁶ “History of United Bronx Parents,” n.d. (1973); UBP, Box 2 Folder 14, Centro.
community control of school boards, which allowed local parents and community members to make decisions about how to spend money in their own districts, helped secure funds for daycare operators and parents undergoing UBP training, and hired staffers from within the community, the Summer Feeding Program was an effort to improve both the life chances of local children and the economic opportunities of adults.

Behind UBP’s involvement in the program lay a firm belief that a feeding program would serve several important purposes. First, a hungry child is a child ill-equipped to learn effectively, and education was the driving force behind UBP’s existence. For many children, the Summer Feeding Program food would be the only complete, nutritious meal that they would have to eat that day. With more than 90% of the Bronx families served by UBP living in poverty, food was often in short supply.37

Second, the feeding program ensured that youths served by the program—as many as possible—would have to be present and accounted for at a given time of day. During the summer in particular, with schools out and recreational opportunities almost entirely absent from Bronx neighborhoods, this helped to keep kids away from gang activity, minor vandalism, or the other kinds of delinquent behaviors into which unsupervised adolescents often fell. For UBP, it was as much about protecting kids from a police force that expected criminal behavior from Black and Brown youth as it was preventing juvenile mischief. A feeding program that provided a haven for young

people helped keep them safe from the daily violence of life as a racialized minority in a neighborhood increasingly policed by authorities as a land of savages in revolt.

Finally, the Feeding Program provided hundreds of jobs in the Bronx and, as the program spread, in other economically depressed neighborhoods across the city. Feeding 250,000 children a day meant that a lot of meals had to be prepared, and United Bronx Parents went to great lengths to secure food service contractors from the neighborhoods being served. The program is an example of the variety of approaches the organization used to address the material conditions of Bronx residents at multiple levels. Drawing on what resources were available and reshaping them to fit locally-identified needs, United Bronx Parents’ ability to navigate liberal policies of inclusion in pursuit of a more radical politics of self-determination are instructive for reconsidering the paths of political activism after the 1960s.

In the spring of 1971, United Bronx Parents learned of the Special Food Service Program for Children. A federal pilot program started in 1968, it was intended to provide funding for meals and summer supervision for youths aged 3-21 in impoverished communities across the nation. United Bronx Parents investigated and found that although the program funding was available to all city and state governments, most were “reluctant to take on this massive project.” Specifically, the program was not being implemented in New York City, and “poor children would not

38. The Summer Feeding Program, or “The Special Food Service Program for Children,” was created in 1968, as an amendment to the 1946 Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act. The 1946 Act was originally passed, in part, to ensure that America’s children received proper nutrition and would grow up to be strong, viable candidates for the US military.
be fed that summer because no government agency would take on the responsibility.”

In the absence of any other effort and without knowing what the program’s requirements and execution would entail, United Bronx Parents applied directly to the federal government and immediately “got the ‘go-ahead.’” They worked quickly to develop a network of local vendors and suppliers who could ensure the creation and delivery of the required food on such short notice, recognizing that the program if successful would be “two-fold.” First, it would provide food to the poor, particularly the children for whose growing bodies and minds nutrition was essential. Second, the lunch program would provide jobs to the community. Aside from the 38 positions added to United Bronx Parents staff just to administer the program that first year, there would be hundreds jobs created in the rosters of local companies contracted to provide services for the Summer Feeding Program.

From the debut of the 1971 New York City Summer Feeding Program, it provided 280,000 children per day with nutritious meals in a supervised setting; by summer’s end over 6,000,000 meals had been served to the city’s needy kids. The impact of the program was immediate, and praise rolled in from around the city.

Reverend Gerald Vander Hart from DeWitt Reformed Church in the Lower East Side directly asked that the lunches be continued. The regular meals had a dramatic impact

42. “History of United Bronx Parents,” n.d. (1973); UBP, Box 2 Folder 14, Centro.
on youth participating in his Church’s program, generating improved attitudes and more agreeable interactions with staffers and among the young people themselves. From the 1300 St. Marks Avenue Block Association in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn came thanks for the lunches which brought “a little happiness to this poor community.” The Langston Hughes Cultural Center in Corona, Queens, the Carey Gardens Community Center in Coney Island, and the Goddard-Riverside Community Center, at 161 W 87th Street in Manhattan, among others, all wrote to express similar gratitude. This was truly a city-wide program, impacting youth far from the United Bronx Parents’ headquarters at 791 Prospect Avenue in the Bronx.43

This first-year success was not without its challenges, however. For their part, United Bronx Parents was frustrated by the rigidity of federal guidelines limiting Feeding Program participation to only “those youngsters involved in supervised recreation, education, or other group activities.” With the cuts to social service programs and the overwhelming poverty and need of the Bronx and other areas intended to be served by the Feeding Program, there were “never enough funds or programs to induce all the children in our poverty areas in summer activities.”44 Meanwhile, concerns were developing in the USDA about the “excesses” of the program, people taking food intended for the program and selling it on the black market or otherwise preventing it from being distributed to qualified children. A new list of USDA restrictions emerged for the 1972 program, including that “All children

43. Letters in support of United Bronx Parents, August 1971; UBP, Box 1 Folder 8.
44. Buen Apetito, 1971; UBP, Box 4 Folder 5.
must eat at the program site” and mealtimes had to be supervised. Children were forbidden from taking food from the “program site,” and could not save items for later in the day or to share with a family member or friend unable to participate in the program.45

These kinds of restrictions smacked of colonial surveillance and management in impoverished minority neighborhoods, and United Bronx Parents bristled at the revisions. They believed they had run a tight ship that benefitted all involved as efficiently as possible. UBP sent an open letter to members on April 26, 1972, urging the community to contact local Congressional representatives in support of the lunch program. The lunch program already was not funded well enough to serve all who were qualified under the program’s “supervised recreation” requirement, much less all those who needed the program. “Why is it,” UBP asked, “that when we need funds for our children’s survival there never seem to be enough? Why are their funds for moon trips and wars but not for more essential activities for all our children?”46

The call for support garnered a response two days later from Mr. L. Litvintchouk, Director of the Council of Brooklyn Organizations, Inc. Writing directly to Senator Jacob Javits, he reinforced UBP’s contention that the program was operating well and that changes would quite possibly be detrimental. Appealing to the concerns that originally motivated governmental action, Litvintchouk made three important points about “the needed benefits the program brings to a poverty stricken

45. Letter from USDA to groups applying for summer lunch program, 27 April 1972; UBP, Box 1 Folder 9.
46. Letter from USDA to groups applying for summer lunch program, 27 April 1972; UBP, Box 1 Folder 9.
area.” First, under UBP’s leadership the Summer Feeding Program made sure that hundreds of thousands of children in New York City received what may have been their only good meal of the day. Second, the labor of producing and distributing 100,000 lunches a day in Brooklyn and approximately 200,000 across the rest of the city created “desperately needed jobs” in disadvantaged communities and brought funds to local communities through payments to vendors. Litvintchouk pointed out that this under-appreciated aspect of the Summer Feeding Program served to upgrade “the entire structure of our economy.”

Finally, Litvintchouk made his most significant point: the Summer Feeding Program involved thousands of the most “desperate youth” of New York with youth centers, social programs, Church services, and the other kinds of facilities through which the lunches were distributed. The lunch program “helped to minimize the social and criminal dynamite which could have possibly ensued in our fair city.” Cleverly using the threat of mass racial unrest against the USDA’s efforts to revise and limit the Summer Feeding Program, he concluded, “This reason alone should elicit your positive response to our request.” While United Bronx Parents continued to use the resources of the Summer Feeding Program to further self-determination rather than the project of national incorporation federal officials intended the funds to support, allies like Litvintchouk helped buttress claims that United Bronx Parents was simply fulfilling the Program’s original purposes.

47. L. Litvintchouk to Senator Jacob Javits, 28 April 1972; UBP, Box 1 Folder 9.
48. L. Litvintchouk to Senator Jacob Javits, 28 April 1972; UBP, Box 1 Folder 9.
As the program grew in successive years, UBP supervised distribution of meals through more than 3,500 smaller organizations. The USDA continued to add what United Bronx Parents considered “unrealistic rules and regulations,” but despite these challenges the organization was still successful in delivering “a good quality and varied menu” to children around the City. In 1975, UBP was sponsoring the program for a 5th consecutive year. “We do anticipate the usual problems from USDA,” it informed members, “but we will not let this deter us from the goal to feed the children, and provide jobs for the community.” The Summer Feeding Program continued to be a way to both nurture children and provide economic opportunities in the neighborhoods served.

United Bronx Parents was effectively using this federal program to build economic strength, pride in community, and a broad base of political support because of the organization’s skill and determination in bringing change to the community. Their success attracted competing organizations from within the Bronx as well as the other boroughs in the City. The mid-1970s brought increasing numbers of applicants, and the “chaotic selection process” resulted in “new and questionable” sponsors being awarded contracts. United Bronx Parents was restricted to only serving children in the South Bronx by 1976, as competing groups claimed priority in their own neighborhoods. Despite dissatisfaction with the limitations imposed by these new policies, UBP still served 25,000 breakfasts and 40,000 lunches daily.  

49. Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, 16 March 1978; UBP, Box 1 Folder 4.
As a long-time sponsor, United Bronx Parents issued some recommendations to the USDA regarding “future sponsorship of the program.” Noting the difficulty of determining the legitimacy and reliability of many of the organizations applying for Feeding Program money, UBP suggested that participation “only be offered to legitimate community groups who service their community year-round.”

This suggestion certainly served UBP, as a group that fit that description, but it also assured that a program meant to better the lives of poor Black and Puerto Rican children in particular be administered by community groups whose full time efforts were devoted to this project.

After nearly a decade of trying to entice government agencies to take over the Program, the USDA was grateful for the input. Its efforts to further decentralize the program had also failed, attracting corrupt, incompetent, and simply inexperienced groups whose performance could not match the efficiency of United Bronx Parents. In a dramatic turn from the effort to cut United Bronx Parents out of the program following their 1971 success, the USDA in 1979 asked United Bronx Parents to resume management of the program for the entire city of New York, and furthermore, to serve as the national coordinating agency for the Summer Feeding Program. From the encouragement of Board of Education takeover in 1972, to the continuing hesitancy of the USDA in 1975 seen in the letter to UBP members, to assuming full-scale national administrative capacity in 1979, the growth and success of the Summer Feeding Program as managed by United Bronx Parents may be the most clear example

of the power of a determined community organization, in fighting for local self-
determination and neighborhood improvement, to impact a much wider area.

La Universidad y La Escuelita: Occupation, Nationalism, and Decolonization in Microcosm

United Bronx Parents also pursued several projects that took community control of education to new levels, breaking free of Board of Education oversight and establishing independent Puerto Rican-led educational institutions. It is important to consider these projects, particularly La Escuelita and La Universidad Urayoán, as directly informed by, and local manifestations of, the broader politics of Puerto Rican independence and decolonization. These are but two examples of how United Bronx Parents and other community organizations of the 1970s worked to reclaim control over their own neighborhoods and put self-determination into practice.

At the same time, they reveal the different workings of UBP’s politics of Puerto Rican and minority empowerment. La Universidad Urayoán, which began taking shape in 1973-74, was as much an ideological and spiritual undertaking as an educational endeavor. Established in 1978, La Escuelita was on the other hand very much about challenging municipal authorities’ control over the South Bronx’s physical space. The former shows efforts to reshape the consciousness of the South Bronx and the latter demonstrates how that transformation helped to generate more concrete means of fighting for community control and equality. Both evidence the multiple strategies of community activists as they sought to reshape their own lives and neighborhoods throughout the decade.
In the early 1970s, as United Bronx Parents became an established group with recurring annual projects like the Summer Feeding Program, ongoing GED and ESL Adult Education classes, and general community advocacy services, they began looking for new ways to expand their reach. The youth who were elementary students at the organization’s founding were approaching high school age by the early 1970s. Despite the progress in making South Bronx primary and secondary schools more responsive to the needs of the poor Black and Brown students comprising the majority of those enrolled, United Bronx Parents was ready to move “beyond petitioning [and] reforming” by 1973.\(^{51}\) Dissatisfied with the post-secondary options available to local youth whether or not they had completed high school, and frustrated at the lack of education and training opportunities for adults looking to increase their knowledge or job skills, United Bronx Parents began discussing how to best fill these gaps.

The solution they developed was La Universidad Urayoán, a locally-controlled, free “University of the People” that would offer a variety of courses from academic to vocational. Arguing that book learning and rote memorization were not the best ways for everyone to learn, UBP planned La Universidad as a project-based institution where students would “learn by doing the work that they are majoring in, under realistic conditions.”\(^{52}\) This learn-by-doing approach was tied to the school’s name. Urayoán was a “Cacique,” or leader, of the Taino people of Puerto Rico best remembered for his experiment in 1511 to disprove the belief that Spaniards were Gods. Urayoán had a Spaniard drowned and his body watched for three days to show

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that Europeans were only mortals. Naming the new community school after this Puerto Rican leader broadcast UBP’s intent to provide alternate forms of knowledge and education. La Universidad would be a site of resistance, its mission to “overcome theories of Puerto Rican inability and incapability.”

La Universidad Urayoán would matriculate a people “free from educational, political, economic, and social colonization.” Vocational courses such as Bookkeeping complemented academic standards like Anthropology, Political Science, Philosophy, and Math. But a particular focus was on Puerto Rican politics, identity, and history, with “Puerto Rico and the US Legal System” and “History of Puerto Rico” joining “Latin American History” and “Latin American Culture” classes. Another cluster included Theater Arts, Teacher Training, Physical Education, Journalism, and First Aid, vital components in building indigenous systems of health care, media, communication, and education in the South Bronx. From its beginnings as a free activist school run by volunteers, La Universidad Urayoán developed into a “fully accredited 4 year Community College” serving the political, intellectual, and vocational needs of the neighborhood.

United Bronx Parents is even better remembered for the takeover of La Escuelita bilingue, “the little bilingual school,” in 1978. This reconquest of space was perhaps the clearest example of the relationship between UBP’s local organizing and

its anti-colonial and anti-racist politics, and the organization articulated those connections throughout the process of securing this abandoned school building for its own purposes. If La Universidad Urayoán was a spiritual reclamation of the South Bronx in an attempt to generate a sense of self-worth and self-determination for the Puerto Rican population in particular and the rest of the neighborhood in general, then the physical takeover of La Escuelita was a logical progression.

On April 13, 1978, the Board of Education closed and vacated a small building at Prospect Avenue near 156th Street across from Public School 130. The one-story, U-shaped building had been the site of the Early Childhood Center for nearly a decade, its twelve rooms housing children from kindergarten through third grade. The programs there were a vital link in helping students from Spanish-dominant households transition successfully into elementary education. When the Board of Education closed La Escuelita bilingue, United Bronx Parents saw it as a direct threat to the community to which they were devoted, another front in the ongoing battle over the course of change in the South Bronx.

The annex had been built in 1970 to relieve PS 130’s crowded classrooms and provide help to those struggling with English-language instruction in the wake of the 1968 Bilingual Education Act, which provided federal funds for innovative programs addressing the needs of English-learning students. With enrollment falling by the late 1970’s there was space to absorb the Early Childhood Center’s students into the main

57. Notes on La Escuelita takeover, April 1978; UBP, Box 2 Folder 15. The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 struck down English-only laws that had been passed in many states during the World War I era. The law required equal opportunity for non-English-dominant students, but did not mandate bilingual education.
building of PS 130 where, as one school employee pointed out, the Little Bilingual School students would be easier to supervise. United Bronx Parents learned of plans to close the Center in the fall of 1977, but discussions to continue the school’s operation under UBP administration proved unfruitful. For its part, the BoE also was uncertain what to do with the building, offering it to both the High School and Special-Education divisions, only to have the space rejected by both.

Once La Escuelita was vacated on April 13, the modern, well-equipped building simply sat empty, unwanted by the city and unavailable to the community. Despite United Bronx Parents’ efforts in previous months the organization made no progress in gaining access to the facilities. In the difficult economic environment of the South Bronx, however, other forces availed themselves of the now-unused space. Vandals and construction thieves began to strip the building of its resources: copper piping and electrical wiring, ducting, and other materials valuable for scrapping.

Lorraine Montenegro, Antonetty’s daughter and now a UBP officer, visited the building on April 27th and noticed the missing wiring and piping. The playground was littered with asbestos sheathing stripped as vandals cleaned their take for transport to scrap-metal buyers. She rallied her forces to protect La Escuelita and on Monday, May 1st, a group of women and children moved into the former Little Bilingual School intent on staying and living there “to protect it from further raids.”

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59. Notes on La Escuelita takeover, April 1978; UBP, Box 2 Folder 15.
60. May Day, a central observation of the International Workers Movement and often a focal point of demonstrations by radical groups, was a most auspicious day for a takeover of State
the damage was worse than just piping and wiring: clocks, loudspeakers, alarm boxes, telephones, faucets, and even the sinks and strike plates on door frames had been removed.61 But some of the larger, more valuable equipment remained. The new heating and air conditioning units, the boiler, and the electrical plant were untouched, and the expensive Vulcan convection ovens and huge Traulsen freezer remained safe behind padlocked kitchen doors. To prevent further damage, United Bronx Parents decided that continuous occupation of the building was necessary.

Amidst the decay, destruction, and arson of the South Bronx, La Escuelita became a site where the neighborhood could make a stand. “I’m sure,” Antonetty appealed to local parents, “we know the condition of the buildings in the South Bronx. That is, whatever buildings are still standing. The South Bronx looks like a war zone.”62 Flyers distributed around the area announced, “United Bronx Parents has taken over the Little Bilingual School… WE’VE HAD ENOUGH! We cannot let them destroy this building! The destruction will stop here! Come and help us one or two hours to hold our little school. We want to use the little school for adult education classes. Come and register now!”63 Reclaiming this space would be an immediate and meaningful challenge to the destruction wrought in the Puerto Rican community by colonial neglect, deindustrialization, and neoliberal economic policies.

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61. Donald G. McNeil, Jr., “Women and Their Children Guard Vandalized School in the Bronx,” New York Times, 4 May 1978: B3. There was evidence that the thieves had used a key to gain entrance, as Montenegro reported that none of the locks had been broken or pried open, although it seems nothing came of this information that suggested inside involvement. 62. Notes on La Escuelita takeover, April 1978; UBP, Box 2 Folder 15. 63. “Attention Parents!,” n.d. (April 1978); UBP, Box 2 Folder 11.
The neighborhood network responded and soon roughly 25 people were in the building around the clock, spending the night and protecting against further destruction. With plumbing not functional, they relied on the kindness of the janitors at PS 130 who supported the UBP occupation to allow them into the school to use bathroom facilities. The occupiers guarded the school’s gate in shifts, their active presence dissuading the more ill-intentioned while welcoming those delivering food, blankets, and other necessities. The conditions were not the most comfortable but shows of support from the community helped, like the occasional surprise delivery of Chinese food. Marie Santiago, one of the occupying parents, summed up the experience. “I got two kids, and we sleep here—yes, on the floor. Honey,” she told a reporter, “you got to make do—care for an egg roll?” Agreeing with Santiago about the need to endure, Montenegro added, “If you don’t guard it, when there’s nothing left to take, they’ll burn it.” The support UBP received from the community in the weeks following the occupation show that this was a shared undertaking. 64

A Board of Education meeting to address the occupation was scheduled roughly two weeks after the takeover, for May 17th, then postponed to the 24th. In the meantime, United Bronx Parents continued to drum support and rally the community in defense of the South Bronx. Confident that only red tape stood between them and “a people’s victory,” UBP called on supporters to demonstrate “love and concern for this community, in our struggle to save all our communities.” They asked for letters of support to the Board of Education, and help in occupying the building around the

clock. They asked for volunteers willing to donate their time, their energy, food, “anything helpful. But most of all, support your community,” read one Community Press Release. “THE SOUTH BRONX HAS NOT DIED YET!”

The outpouring of support that followed delivered the building to UBP and the community. Volunteers spent the summer guarding it from further vandalism while repairs were underway. But it was not easy, even for an organization with such strong leadership and community support. Volunteers were stretched thin and tempers grew short. UBP officers increasingly relied on staffers, and were frustrated by the selfishness some displayed in trying to avoid overnight security shifts in the building. Working for United Bronx Parents, they reminded employees, was not “a factory or an office job…. We are in service to a disfranchised community at all hours.” After a tense few months, “undying thanks” went to UBP employees for the sacrifices they and their families had made. The end was in sight, and the building would have new gates and an alarm system installed by mid-October.

With the building fully secure, the need for around-the-clock protection disappeared. The next summer, United Bronx Parents celebrated the one-year anniversary of the takeover of La Escuelita. The building’s evolution into a community center, and the base for UBP’s Summer Feeding, Drug Prevention, and other programs, marked a dramatic shift from an abandoned space seen as surplus by

66. Employee Management Notes, “I am really appalled…,” 26 September 1978 (1); UBP, Box 2 Folder 13.
67. Employee Management Notes, “My undying thanks…,” 26 September 1978 (1); UBP, Box 2 Folder 13.

Now an established organization operating from a successfully decolonized space, United Bronx Parents began to seek a wider impact. Like several other groups in the early 1980s, they mounted concerted, ongoing attempts to link the youth to the older generation, and to craft alliances and relationships between the street culture of the South Bronx and the variety of institutional homes these organizations inhabited. Turning to popular culture, they increasingly waged their struggles in the realm of the representational, a strategy that would carry their anti-racist and anti-imperialist politics far beyond the geographic boundaries of the South Bronx as a founding member organization of the Committee Against Fort Apache in 1980, examined in chapter 5.
Interlude: Breakin’ Borders and Dancing Decolonization

Spinning, whirling, stopping precisely for a momentary pose or glare of derision at other dancers, and then withdrawing from the circle, breakers perform perhaps the most powerful and physically impressive element of hip hop.¹ It is at the same time the most ephemeral, the most difficult to preserve or communicate. Inverted, contorted, at furious speeds or superslow tempos, creating the illusion of joints where there are none and displaying flexibility unbelievable if not witnessed live, b-boys and b-girls practice an art predicated on moving through space in unexpected ways. The circles and spheres inscribed by their dancing bodies carve out spaces of personal dignity, the particular patterns of an individual breakers’ style symbolizing their relationship to their crew, opponents if in a dance battle, onlookers and audiences, and the larger world around them.

Whether gathered on a street corner or a school lunchroom, meeting to crib moves from Times Square kung-fu flicks, or demonstrating their skill as performers at club events, breakers constantly invented new ways to occupy public space in 1970s New York. Mr. Wiggles of the world famous Rock Steady Crew says he dances not just to entertain, but to leave a mark. To slam a move on the sidewalk so hard that it “splats,” leaving a psychic residue even after he has finished his performance.² Like

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¹ “B-boys” is the more generally accepted term, followed by “breakers.” Although the b-boy world of the 1970s was primarily “boys,” there were female dancers as well—“b-girls.” I tend to use “breaker” or sometimes “dancer” for gender neutrality.
other b-boys and b-girls in Rock Steady and other breaking crews in New York City, he recognized that dancing in public was always imbued with a spatial politics. Along with Crazy Legs, Frosty Freeze, and the other founders of Rock Steady, dance and movement had been part of his efforts to build new communities and patterns of social relations since the mid-1970s.

Breaking developed alongside the DJ, as these two elements of hip hop in particular performed a kind of pop culture pas de deux. The DJ keyed on dancers to see what kind of breaks really got them moving, working to find new ways to expand or extend those musical snippets. The dancers responded, further elaborating their moves and fueling the DJ’s efforts. The relationship between the two, the b-boy and the DJ, was a freestyle dialogue of sorts as they communicated across and through different modes of cultural expression. Longtime b-boys remember that in the early 1970s, breaking was more of a Black thing. By the mid-1970s, as the first generation of hip hop youth grew into their late teens and early twenties, breaking had become “played out,” passé, for Black partygoers. For an upcoming generation though—8, 10, 12 years old—breaking still had appeal. They were not old enough to go into the clubs that had started to host hip hop parties, but they could still dance. Outside, at school, in playgrounds and parks, kids began to carve out their own spaces.

Interestingly, it was a primarily Puerto Rican group of young b-boys who resuscitated the form. They were led by Crazy Legs, who had moved to Manhattan from the Bronx in the late 1970s and set out to recreate the community he had left behind. In 1979, he was gathering a small but rapidly-growing group of breakers
around him.\textsuperscript{3} Favorite meeting places were the Times Square movie theaters, where
they would watch the cheap kung-fu film marathons and then come out and practice
moves on 42\textsuperscript{nd} Street. The theaters were a gathering point for youth from around the
city, colonial subjects meeting surreptitiously in the metropole and practicing their
creative defiance. The dancers could cause quite a bit of misplaced concern over
assumed criminality, as seen in the police call that sparked Martha Cooper and Sally
Banes’ seminal article. But they were in fact challenging the social and spatial
relations that shaped their lives. Breaking was about occupying public space,
reclaiming territory for the neighborhood. Indoor recreational spaces in “economically
oppressed areas” are rare, and usually too small to host a large group of dancers.
Those that did exist often became spaces of surveillance.\textsuperscript{4} Performing outside in public
places, however, can be seen as more than simply a matter of convenience. In a
political climate in which the takeover remained a relatively common form of direct
action, youth descending on a street corner or subway platform is a closely related act.
As “unsanctioned public dance and public occupation of space,”\textsuperscript{5} their dramatic,
acrobatic moves performed a temporary decolonization. Crowds that gathered to cheer
or simply admire their efforts were a kind of community control in action.

While Puerto Rican activists were taking over the Statue of Liberty, and United
Bronx Parents prepared to occupy La Escuelita, Puerto Rican breakers and their
friends were traveling throughout the city temporarily seizing small territories for

\textsuperscript{3} “Rock Steady Crew,” accessed 6 September 2014, http://crazylegsworkshop.com/rock-
steady-crew/about-rsc.
\textsuperscript{4} Rose, 44.
\textsuperscript{5} Rose, 50.
themselves. Subway platforms and the aisles of cars themselves, playgrounds, parks, and street corners were common targets. A piece of cardboard thrown down on the concrete created an impromptu dance floor, a place to perform the worth, creativity, and vitality of Puerto Rican youth and South Bronx culture. Breaking was about innovation, surprise, “shock value.” Richie “Crazy Legs” Colon, founder of the Rock Steady Crew, says a b-boy always has to strive to “take your move to the next level. It’s about shock value, always shock value, but keeping it flavor and stylized and making it yours.” B-boy historian Jorge “Popmaster Fabel” Pabon expresses the spatial politics a bit more directly when he describes b-boys as being “on a mission to terrorize the dance floor and make a reputation, ghetto celebrity status.” Their unsupervised, exuberant bodies, physically pushing the boundaries of normative movement, challenged onlookers’ expectations of minority youth. Breaking was, quite literally, insurgent movement.

6. Chang, 117.
4.

Ghetto/National/International: Fashion Moda, Youth Culture, and Street Art in the South Bronx

In early 1979, Puerto Rican immigrant Rigoberto Torres was a high school student working part-time at his Uncle Raul Arce’s Fabrica del Carmen statuary factory in the South Bronx.1 Torres helped cast and produce the popular miniatures—Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and Elvis—sold at local botánicos alongside medicinal herbs, oils, and other alternative medicines and folk products. One day a cousin, whose travels as a taxi driver helped keep him aware of what was going on in the neighborhood, stopped by with interesting news. Over on Third Avenue, he told Torres, there was another man making molds and casts. He was working not in a factory but in a storefront show window, inviting in pedestrians from the street to have their faces preserved. Word had quickly spread through the neighborhood and local residents crowded the door, clamoring to have their own busts made.2

Intrigued, Torres soon headed over to the address his cousin provided. There he found a space identified by a hand-painted sign as “Fashion Moda.” As the teenager curiously strolled into the space, he saw a man who looked a little out of place: “white,

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downtown artist, twenty-nine, punk haircut, BFA from Cornell.”³ This was John Ahearn, the artist his cousin had told him about. He introduced himself, the two spoke excitedly, and within 20 minutes Torres was on his back breathing through straws in his nose as Ahearn made a cast of his face, his stylish mustache and wide smile captured in the drying medium. Torres proposed that they collaborate, his expertise in molding and casting a valuable addition to Ahearn’s own recent, self-taught practice. Ahearn jumped at the opportunity. Together they developed a quick and effective process for molding the faces of passers-by on the spot. From these molds they made positive casts, and then shaped and painted the faces of their friends and neighbors.

After several months of work, Ahearn and Torres presented the collection as the “South Bronx Hall of Fame” at Fashion Moda. Mounted on the white walls of the gallery space, the faces of dozens of South Bronx denizens were objects of admiration presented with dignity, in marked contrast to the media representations of the South Bronx as a place devoid of value that confronted locals on a daily basis. Artistically, this was a direct challenge to traditional uses of the bust form that privileged the wealthy and powerful members of elite society. The “amazingly lifelike portraits” of South Bronx inhabitants “grinning, playing jump rope, standing arm-in-arm” were a hit in the neighborhood and with a wider critical audience. The project spurred Ahearn and Torres, who continue to collaborate periodically, to international career, but attracted much critical attention to Fashion Moda as well.⁴ Literally placing the people

³. Lippard, Get the Message?, 182.
⁴. Grant application to Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of New York Seed Grants Program, n.d. (June 1979); Fashion Moda Collection, Box 3 Folder 12, Fales Library and
of the South Bronx on pedestals, this elevation of the everyday to the artistic served to reframe debates over the worth and value of a neighborhood that city officials and dominant discourse regularly condemned.

_Ghetto/National/International_

This chapter examines the avant-garde experimental art gallery Fashion Moda as one of the organizations that worked to change perceptions of and conditions in the South Bronx through artistic expression. Although Fashion Moda would become perhaps the most famous site for South Bronx art and culture during the late 1970s and into the 1980s, it was hardly the driving force behind the explosion of expressive culture that washed over the city from the South Bronx during those years. Fashion Moda was a conduit, an experimental gallery and “concept” that leveraged the authority and expertise of established players in the world of avant-garde art to present the indigenous artistic production of the South Bronx as culturally significant art in its own right. The graffiti art, brightly-colored street murals, and musical styles that marked Fashion Moda exhibitions predated the gallery’s foundation in 1978. Each of these were central elements of hip-hop culture, born in the South Bronx earlier in the decade and growing steadily as a youth subculture across the borough and into Harlem, Queens, and Brooklyn. Curated and displayed for the first time at Fashion Moda, where these exhibitions helped transform the way that the cultural production of South Bronx youth was perceived by those within and beyond the neighborhood’s

Special Collections, New York University (Fashion Moda); also Carey Lovelace, “S. Bronx Art: There Goes the Neighborhood,” _Los Angeles Times_, 2 September 1984: 81.
boundaries, the modes of expression or “elements” of hip hop culture were already part of the broader political context of struggle in the South Bronx.

However, graffiti was not the only way that Fashion Moda engaged these projects. The gallery came to the South Bronx as a decidedly anti-racist and anti-imperialist institution. This was not simply a political position Stefan Eins developed upon his arrival in the Bronx. The New York alternative art scene of the 1970s was generally interested in questions of authority, governance, and control over artistic production and value as part of a broader challenge to the politics of 1970s America.5 These projects had a particular resonance, however, in an area like the South Bronx that had been fighting against racist policies and for community control in a variety of ways for well over a decade by the time Eins arrived.

The attitudes that infused Fashion Moda from its establishment helped to mark it as part of the community, rather than yet another outsider showing up to dictate to the people of the South Bronx. In distinction to South Bronx Frontier Development Corporation, for example, an organization driven by a white savior narrative itself fueled by the frontier discourse swirling around the South Bronx in the 1970s, Fashion Moda worked to meet the people where they were. Jill Jonnes writes that by 1979 longtime Puerto Rican activists viewed those, well-intentioned or not, who proposed solutions but were not from the community as interlopers, just another “outside imperialist trying to tell the Puerto Rican South Bronx what to do.”6 This is one of the

few places where the attempts to address the South Bronx’s conditions from without are acknowledged and seen as imperialist in the way that groups like United Bronx Parents and others fighting for South Bronx self-determination saw them. Jonnes does not follow up this line of reasoning and one gets the sense that she found this position hyperbolic. However, given the repeated connections that Bronx activists make to independence, and the challenges they presented to the frontier rhetoric that positioned them as savages to be displaced in the interests of bettering the South Bronx, we should pay this position more attention.

Fashion Moda’s early and ongoing acceptance by the South Bronx community suggests that the way the gallery operated helped it avoid the “imperialist” claims that other outsiders faced. An examination of the exhibitions that Fashion Moda hosted or sponsored from the late 1970s through the early 1980s clarifies why this was the case. It is easy to see the ways that projects like the South Bronx Hall of Fame appealed to area residents and helped them to embrace Fashion Moda. The busts presented the gallery’s neighbors as objects to be admired, recognized the dignity and pride to which they were entitled, and were an interactive project that personally linked the community to the artists who had come to live and work among them.

Similarly, the “Graffiti Art Success for America” show in 1980 that would garner critical acclaim for both the gallery and the graffiti artists themselves was significant. Like the Hall of Fame, it rejected racist ideas about the South Bronx as vacant, unproductive, and destructive. Displaying the creative power of South Bronx

youth, “Graffiti Art” proposed that the works they generated need be considered alongside those manufactured by artists admired by the traditional art world.

However, if we broaden our analysis of Fashion Moda’s wider oeuvre, it suggests that the gallery pursued anti-racist and anti-imperialist objectives throughout its existence. The exhibitions and performances it sponsored are linked by a consistent engagement with ideas about the urban poor and about claims to power and control over physical space. Although not funded, a 1979 Department of Cultural Affairs proposal by Joe Lewis and Cara Brownell planned a freestyle modern dance performance based on and around the detritus, debris, and everyday space of the South Bronx. It would “appropriate playing fields, store fronts (in community centers, or vacated buildings), mall walkways, vacant lots, playgrounds/parks,” even subway stations, and “provide insight into potentialities for unused or abandoned spaces.” Of course, around the South Bronx and across the city b-boys were already performing their own “site dances,” reclaiming public space in dramatic ways, and “Site Dances” suggests perhaps the earliest attempt by Fashion Moda to engage nascent hip hop culture.

Other Fashion Moda projects were more successful in challenging the racialization of space in the South Bronx. In particular, these included 1979’s “Animals Living in Cities” and Paulette Nenner’s “Road Kill” show in 1981. Read in the context of the broader politics of the era, these pieces demonstrate that visual art was integrally connected to radical, transformative efforts in the South Bronx. Fashion

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8. “Site Dances” grant application, n.d. (early 1979); Fashion Moda, Box 3 Folder 12.
Moda represented a rejection by the South Bronx of a growing 1970s discourse that painted the area as a wasteland. Since the middle of the decade in particular, the South Bronx had become the paradigmatic examples of the failures of American cities. Presidents and presidential candidates rolled through the neighborhood, stopping for a photo op on the bombed-out blocks of Charlotte Street, wringing their hands and making vague promises to improve conditions. Media dispatches offered tales of an area culturally, socially, intellectually, and politically bereft of any redeeming values. This was not a community. This was not a neighborhood. This was a land of savages, a frontier almost too far gone to bother retaking.

South Bronx residents and some others had quite different ideas, however. The Bronx had been disproportionately impacted by deindustrialization, the recession of the 1970s, the concerted withdrawal of urban renewal funds by municipal and federal authorities, and by laws that allowed almost unrestricted abuses by landlords and property owners. Despite this, there were strong and determined grassroots efforts to improve life in the South Bronx. United Bronx Parents continued their projects, expanding into drug rehabilitation and battered women’s services. Tenants organizations and Church-based groups fought relentlessly against the attacks on housing stock and for other changes, as Jill Jonnes, Jim Rooney, and Evelyn Gonzalez have shown. The South Bronx refused to submit to benign neglect, battling overwhelming odds and institutional indifference to the plight of community residents.

In the late 1970s, at the height of the South Bronx’s reputation as a wilderness, a wasteland where nothing of value could grow, the role of organizations like Fashion Moda became ever more important. Without real recourse to authorities at any level, disillusioned by the empty promises of elected officials, expressive culture became an increasingly important tool in the struggle to improve life in the South Bronx. Hip hop was blooming in the South Bronx already. Fashion Moda brought the experimental approaches and critical perspectives of the alternative art-world of the 1970s to the area. The combined talents and exuberant enthusiasm of South Bronx youth culture and the recent art immigrants from downtown would result in some powerful productions. They would also have a dramatic impact on the way that the South Bronx saw itself, and how people from this area—and young people in particular—were viewed by the outside world. Fashion Moda was an important conduit through which these connections and challenges could flow.

**Founding Fashion Moda**

The brainchild of Austrian-born artist Stefan Eins, Fashion Moda was a physical location but also what Eins called a "cultural concept," an experimental space intended to bridge the gap between the avant-garde world of fine art and the everyday experiences of people in impoverished communities like the South Bronx, perhaps the most abject area in the United States by the late 1970s. The ideas that the founders brought to the South Bronx were diverse and esoteric; their creation of Fashion Moda was a

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10. Stefan Eins to Pamela Clapp, Program Director, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Arts, 15 March 1998; Fashion Moda Collection, Box 1 Folder 1, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University (Fashion Moda).
was a act of freestyle politics itself. Born in Austria, Stefan Enis studied theology at the University of Vienna before attended the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna from 1964–1967.\textsuperscript{11} That year he (like Kool Herc) relocated to New York, immersing himself in the downtown art scene. Cofounder Joe Lewis, a 25-year-old African American, was a poet, musician, and artist who had recently returned to his hometown after completing an MFA at Maryland Institute College of Art.\textsuperscript{12} Joining them as co-director soon after Fashion Moda’s establishment was 15-year-old Bronx native William Scott, presumably the man with his ear to the street. This seemingly incongruous team of directors would position Fashion Moda as a vital member of the South Bronx community. The gallery’s\textsuperscript{13} efforts to engage the people of the South Bronx, including collaborative community projects with artists like Lewis, John and Charlie Ahearn, and Jenny Holzer, were quite successful. Through Fashion Moda's first five years of existence, its impact was dramatic.

The gallery’s “unconventional ideas” about bridging South Bronx street life and “effete, avant-garde philosophy” had “repercussions both in the art world as well as the impoverished community” to which it was home.\textsuperscript{14} In 1980 for example the gallery hosted the first major exhibition of graffiti art in a gallery setting, Crash’s

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Although Fashion Moda was regarded as a “cultural concept,” and called itself a museum, a performance space, and a number of other terms, I will use “gallery” for simplicity’s sake while understanding that a gallery is still shaped and steered by guiding principles and the ideas that undergird its creation and existence.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Stefan Eins to Pamela Clapp, 15 March 1998; Fashion Moda, Box 1 Folder 1.
\end{itemize}
“Graffiti Art Success For America,” highlighting the primary and most clearly understandable of Fashion Moda’s objectives: to present the creative culture and artistic production of South Bronx residents as valid, meaningful, and important. Eins insisted on the dignity and artistic importance of the local community. The art world was rarefied, elitist, far beyond the financial scope of most people, and aesthetically, politically, and intellectually irrelevant to their needs. Fashion Moda sought to reshape understandings of art, to engage the local community in producing, identifying, and experiencing works of value.

To accomplish this, Fashion Moda operated at the edge of a "new frontier" of art, locating the South Bronx as the place most likely to produce something truly distinctive and original. The gallery was very specific about its use of “frontier” in its literature. The frontier was a positive place of possibility, a land of unlimited creative potential and an opportunity to transform ideas about the South Bronx and its inhabitants. This formulation of the “frontier” directly contradicted the sense that was emerging from municipal authorities and the mainstream press as they discussed the South Bronx. In official rhetoric, this frontier was a land of savages, its Black and Puerto Rican residents steeped in a pathological culture that would require the cleansing force of American paramilitary might to salvage.

16. Stefan Eins to Pamela Clapp, 15 March 1998; Fashion Moda, Box 1 Folder 1.
But for Fashion Moda, as for other South Bronx activists who would turn the frontier myth against itself in critical ways like the Committee Against Fort Apache in the following chapter, the South Bronx frontier was a contact zone where productive associations and alliances could be developed across a range of social divisions. Community members agreed, as the enthusiastic response the Fashion Moda’s openings generated demonstrate. They understood that this was not an institution arrived to exploit or condescend to them. Critics recognized this relationship as well, and the delicate balancing act that an outside arts organization faced when opening in an embattled area like the South Bronx. Lucy Lippard, renowned international critic of conceptual art, took note of efforts to bridge the “gap between artists and working people by putting art on a boulevard level” in the alternative art scene. Fashion Moda in particular, Lippard observed, was defined neither “by art nor by do-goodism. Its success stems from a genuine mesh of its own interests and those of its audience, and it avoids ‘cultural imperialism’ by respecting itself as well as its audience.”

The gallery drew international attention even in its earliest days, as Eins and Lewis worked to position it as a bridge between the local and the global from the beginning. As Lewis explains, “Ideologically, Fashion Moda was quadra-lingual with a global philosophical perspective that talked about multiculturalism before it was part of the larger conversation in the art world.” Fashion Moda’s name and logo, written in English, Spanish, Russian, and Chinese—“the languages of the world”—on all

17. Lucy Lippard, “Real Estate and Real Art a la Fashion Moda,” 181.
correspondence and ephemera, served notice that this was a grand plan. At the same
time, Fashion Moda's shows and exhibitions always remained intensely local, devoted
to works produced in, by, and about the South Bronx. Perhaps the most succinct
explanation is that the institution was "ghetto/national/international" in scope.\textsuperscript{19} It was
a place with a “special emphasis… on crosscultural, international communications.”
On a wide scale, Fashion Moda was “concerned with the wellbeing of mankind and
the wellbeing of the masses.” Locally, Fashion Moda pursued these goals through both
its institutional activities and its actual physical location, which founders saw as
important parts of “the revitalization of the South Bronx.”\textsuperscript{20}

In resolutely advocating for the value and significance of South Bronx art,
especially graffiti, Fashion Moda helped to focus and spread the political significance
of what many in the city simply saw as the activities of juvenile delinquents. Graffiti,
then, became part of an effort to reject characterizations of the South Bronx as crime-
ridden and morally vacant, and to respond to capital's intrusion into and destructive
impact on the community. Like Urban Arts Corps, Fashion Moda used artistic activity
to build a new sense of self-identity for young people in the face of rather precarious
life-chances. It opened up “new avenues for Black and Latino youth,” and its
“streetwise philosophy” helped the gallery become the earliest promoter of what was
at the time called “South Bronx culture,” the combination of graffiti, breaking, rapping

\textsuperscript{19} “Fashion Moda Concept/Words,” n.d.; Fashion Moda, Box 4 Folder 44.
\textsuperscript{20} Fashion Moda, Grant application to Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of New
York Seed Grants Program, n.d. (June 1979); Fashion Moda, Box 3 Folder 12.
and deejaying that would be known collectively as hip-hop once this vibrant youth culture burst the seams of the South Bronx and exploded across the globe.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{Fashion Moda as Concept}

The gallery was intended to be a part of the South Bronx community, not simply a business located there. Fashion Moda focused since its opening on providing opportunities for “community people” and neighborhood arts to display their work in a gallery setting.\textsuperscript{22} Obviously many South Bronx residents were practicing a range of expressive activities in the neighborhood, including the graffiti art that was increasingly seen as a problem and blight by municipal authorities, but this South Bronx gallery space provided a form of legitimation and authority. Eins and his original partner Hector Ortega planned the gallery as a “dynamic living enterprise,” a cultural community center that would teach art classes for both youth and adults, and host musical and other happenings in addition to its more traditional gallery function as a space for exhibitions of visual art. Instruction came from Eins, Ortega, and Joe Lewis and William Scott, who joined Fashion Moda as Co-Directors soon after the exhibition space opened. But much of the teaching would be done by artists from around the community who had started volunteering soon after the word of the opening of this unique “‘folk’ centered innovation” began to spread across the South Bronx.\textsuperscript{23} Local residents were welcomed, and became active participants not only as

\textsuperscript{22} Press release, February 1979; Fashion Moda, Box 2 Folder 14.
\textsuperscript{23} Press release, February 1979; Fashion Moda, Box 2 Folder 14.
passive viewers but as artists, creators, and exhibitors. This community involvement in the project was crucial to the founders’ vision for the gallery, which ultimately was about providing a place where locals and visitors alike could have the people of the South Bronx and “their heritage” presented “with dignity and esteem.”

When the gallery opened in a former Salvation Army building, many people thought the idea was “a little nuts.” The area was run down, there were no other art galleries or cultural spaces anywhere in the vicinity, and Eins had moved far from the East Village art scene in which he had thrived during the 1970s. But like other creative types interested in artistic activity as a vital front in the fight for social change, Eins had grown disenchanted with working in the rarefied bubble of the Village and preaching to the converted. A decade earlier, Leroi Jones had made a similar move, leaving the downtown Beat scene to start the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School, and to use Black theatre to transform the consciousness of the Black community rather than appeal to largely-white audiences. Selling this experimental “cultural concept” focused on transforming the attitudes in and towards the Bronx to funding organizations like arts councils and not-for-profit philanthropic groups was, Eins admitted, “a real long shot.”

But Eins’ connections and vision helped draw a group of artists to help, and his new South Bronx neighbors quickly realized he was serious about his intent to take

24. Stefan Eins to Pamela Clapp, 15 March 1998; Fashion Moda, Box 1 Folder 1.
their art and cultural creations seriously. If great art can come from anywhere,” he asked, “why not show it everywhere… Why not show the latest in contemporary art in a place like the South Bronx?” Eins and Lewis were committed to an expansive reconsideration of what constituted “great” and “contemporary art.” Fleeing the self-consciously avant-garde, “high-minded, exclusive approach” of the downtown art world, they was particularly drawn to the explosive power and vibrant colors of the graffiti that had been spreading across the city in recent years. The South Bronx graffiti scene was especially potent in the late seventies, a “phenomena” arisen from organic, grassroots artistic activity rather than the alienating, “high minded, exclusive approach of the art world.” Taking graffiti seriously as art, the Fashion Moda directors and collaborators made clear that they were intent on changing the way the South Bronx was seen by outsiders, as well as the way its residents saw and thought about themselves.

Announcing the opening of Fashion Moda in the spring of 1979, Eins and his colleagues were quick to make the connection between the local artistic efforts and arts activism that the gallery would lead, and to the need for larger structural changes in the Bronx, as well as nationally and internationally. Inverting dominant attitudes and media that characterized the South Bronx as a wasteland and a cancer infecting New York, promotional materials described Fashion Moda as having “taken root” in the neighborhood, from where it “promise[d] to spread throughout the city and

One of the main benefits of this spread was the increase in communication between the South Bronx and the world beyond its borders, an exchange that Fashion Moda’s directors hoped would lead to a change in perceptions of the area and its residents. The name Fashion Moda signified “communication without judgement,” and the gallery’s guiding principles proposed that “all forms of human creation deserve attention, whether from an artist’s studio, a scientist’s lab… or city streets.”

On the other hand, Fashion Moda’s dogged insistence on the dignity and worth of South Bronx residents, and its determined efforts to present their creative works as artistically significant, was hardly “without judgment.” The directors and participants in the Fashion Moda project throughout its history made strong judgments about the importance of this community and their creations. However, to understand how Fashion Moda sought to survive and even thrive in the environment of the time, we should read these kinds of statements as politically loaded. Featuring, as it did, exhibitions of forms like graffiti that fell into a grey area between “art” and “vandalism” required a certain flexibility to maneuver the dominant ideas that marked the art world, particularly with regards to race, class, and geography. Fashion Moda’s existence in the “frontier” of the South Bronx meant that its exhibitors, patrons, and neighbors were judged on a daily basis by the city at large. Bronx residents were seen as criminal, drug-addled savages, a drain on the city and its resources. In challenging these representations through artistic production and pride of place, Fashion Moda certainly was making a judgment about the supposed superiority of wealthier and

more sophisticated parts of society. The gallery may not have been as directly informed by radical anti-racist and anti-imperialist politics as other local groups like United Bronx Parents, but its efforts to transform attitudes within and towards the South Bronx were an important part of the neighborhood’s fight for survival in the late 20th century.

Clarifying the reasons that a space and an idea like Fashion Moda were so important, the directors explained that they were out to reclaim art for the people. Their “democratic approach” would present artwork that was relevant to the general public, both “appealing and affordable” to who could not pay the high prices demanded by the “traditional approach” that privileged the tastes—and budgets—of wealthy art-collecting elites.33 This was part of the purpose behind the move out of the crowded downtown Manhattan scene, both physically and socially removed from a large portion of the city. They wanted to bring art to an audience not normally targeted by nor seen as appreciative of formal art exhibitions, “beyond the existing art scene,” and open the doors of work and exhibition space to the range of artists across the city, and particularly in the South Bronx, who were creating art but lacked art-world connections. Like Urban Arts Corps and other cultural organizations of the 1970s, Fashion Moda believed that transformative possibilities lay within expressive culture. Bringing together artists and audiences, and cultivating these kinds of cultural forms of political organizing on the community’s turf and on its own terms marked Fashion Moda as distinct from many of its gallery contemporaries.

Fashion Moda worked to construct a different kind of arts organization, perhaps conscious of the dynamics of a European artist moving from downtown to start a gallery “for the people” in the South Bronx. But Eins and his collaborators went to great lengths to become part of the community rather than just another well-intentioned liberal group there to help them improve themselves. First was their intent to broaden community engagement with the arts simply by making art more readily available in the area. Second was the focus on providing a space for “indigenous” South Bronx artists to show, rather than focusing on bringing outside artists to deliver culture to the deprived populations of the area. Although Fashion Moda would eventually include artists from around the nation and around the globe, as part of the “ghetto/national/international” concept that underpinned the gallery’s philosophy, these displays were alongside or complementary to the native New York art usually showcased.

Part of the gallery’s anti-imperialist practice was its operation as a not-for-profit. There were obviously bills to be paid, obligations to meet, and most importantly programs to fund. The gallery did introduce street art into an institutional setting, placing pieces that would previously had been made available for free in public spaces to any interested enough to wander by and simply look at them in a controlled environment. However, in addition to the ideological shift that Fashion Moda hoped to make by placing “vandalism” in the privileged space of a gallery, there were financial considerations behind the move as well. On the one hand, Fashion Moda contributed to what would quickly become the rabid, rapid commodification of
graffiti in particular and hip hop culture more generally. On the other, however, the graffiti artists whose works they featured would normally have risked personal injury and incarceration while trying to produce their artwork, with no recompense save a fleeting fame. Fashion Moda sought to deliver a little fortune along with the pride of recognition—which was different in a gallery setting, where a graffiti artist could practice his or her art without fear of legal ramifications.

More importantly, Fashion Moda’s founders and directors remained aware of the contradictions that could arise from a grassroots-aligned, community-based “cultural concept” profiting from artists who were creating their works before the gallery even opened. To address these concerns, the gallery drew a clear distinction between the kinds of artwork sales in which it engaged. If an artist or group of artists held an exhibition of their works at Fashion Moda, then proceeds from the sale of any of those pieces went directly to the artist without any commission being taken by Fashion Moda. The only artworks from which the gallery made money were those donated to Fashion Moda explicitly for sale as fundraising pieces.

The institution itself ultimately provided most of its funding from cultural programs including the Bronx Council on the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and a range of philanthropic donations. Offering exhibition space without considering whether a show would be financially advantageous to Fashion Moda, the gallery gave artists “the utmost freedom in presentation of their works.”34 This made it a very different kind of opportunity for

34. “Fashion Moda Philosophy,” n.d.; Fashion Moda, Box 4 Folder 44.
artists than those exhibition spaces and galleries “where commercial interest prevails.” In fact, applications for funding from New York City’s Department of Cultural Affairs emphasized that Fashion Moda was “a museum of science, technology, art, invention, and fantasy” rather than an art gallery. The directors also recruited local arts figures for support in these applications, including South Bronx Cultural Center Consortium coordinator David Baez. Fashion Moda was a place where the artistic and cultural expression of the South Bronx would mix with the experimentation and projects of artists and thinkers interested in the struggles of the neighborhood around issues of poverty, racism, and urban renewal.

**South Bronx Hall of Fame**

One of Fashion Moda’s earliest exhibitions was the 1979 “South Bronx Hall of Fame” show, a collection of busts by John Ahearn. Soon after Eins opened Fashion Moda, Ahearn joined the collective, another artist from downtown seeking a less artificial, commercialized environment in which to work. Like Eins, Ahearn did not want to be merely an interloper and went to great lengths to become a part of the community. Sitting in the storefront window of the gallery several days a week, he asked any one passing by if they would allow him to make a cast of their face, or even larger portions of their body.

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36. Fashion Moda, Grant application to Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of New York Seed Grants Program, n.d. (June 1979); Fashion Moda, Box 3 Folder 12.
37. “South Bronx Show grant proposal,” 1987; Fashion Moda, Box 4 Folder 14.
Ahearn was soon joined by Rigoberto Torres, a South Bronx high schooler who brought a technical knowledge of casting and forming honed during work hours spent making miniatures of Jesus, the Virgin, and Elvis at his uncle’s statuary factory. Ahearn, who had only recently started casting as a result of building models for downtown filmmakers, welcomed Torres’ skill, and the two became partners. Together they developed a quick and effective process for molding the faces of passers-by on the spot. From these molds they made positive casts, and then shaped and painted the faces of their friends and neighbors. Word of the collaboration spread, and residents began arriving to have casts made. Within a few months, Ahearn and Torres had completed enough to mount the “South Bronx Hall of Fame” exhibition at Fashion Moda.

The exhibition rejected racist representations that dismissed the value of South Bronx residents, in part by challenging the history of the bust as art form. Confronting the privileging of wealthy and powerful elites traditionally captured in the bust, the “Hall of Fame” is an excellent example of Fashion Moda’s efforts to reshape perceptions of the South Bronx. Specifically, Torres and Ahearn’s project was a response to the open-air “Hall of Fame of Great American” on the Bronx Community College Campus. Established in 1900 as “a unique and patriotic reminder that this country’s phenomenal growth has been due to the vitality, ingenuity, and intellect” of residents.

the people represented, the BCC Hall by 1979 featured 98 famous Americans. Conspicuously, only eleven were female, two Jewish, and two African American, echoing the “flagrant historical biases in the nation’s self-image.” At Fashion Moda, Torres and Ahearn were honoring the vitality, ingenuity, and intellect of the South Bronx residents who continued to provide the foundation of the neighborhood.

Looking forward a decade, one can see this struggle reflected in the contestation and conflict at the heart of the climactic final scenes of Spike Lee’s 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*. In the movie, a central conflict is between the Italian-American owned Bedford-Stuyvesant restaurant “Sal’s Famous Pizzeria,” a holdover from an earlier generation, and the Black community that had moved into the neighborhood in recent decades. “Sal’s” hosted its own “Wall of Fame,” entirely peopled by Italian-Americans. As regular customers and current inhabitants of the neighborhood, several Black characters demand that Sal represent African-Americans on the “Wall of Fame.” On a hot summer night, this issue spurs racial conflict that erupts into violence. Without too much mental squinting, it is easy to understand how the South Bronx Hall of Fame, as a critique of the Hall of Fame of Great Americans, would have been met with a strong positive response by local residents.

The Hall of Fame show received positive reviews in a variety of New York media, alongside reassurances that the trip to the gallery was “short and perfectly safe.” This drew in visitors from across the city, but more importantly brought even

40. Samuel Anderson, “Inherent Vice.”
41. Andrew Russeth, “Casting Call.”
more local residents to the gallery. Torres and Ahearn continued casting and painting. The faces proliferated, populating the walls of Fashion Moda with the people who lived, worked, and played in the neighborhood the gallery had become part of. The face castings proved so powerful and popular that Ahearn and Torres continued to make and display them as part of the annual South Bronx exhibits until the mid 1980s.

After the initial show was over, the masks were moved “triumphantly” around the corner to 149th and Courtlandt and mounted on the outside of the Con Ed building. Their brightly painted surfaces and compelling shapes not only “transformed the bleak and shabby space,” they “also gave the impression that Earl and Butch, Cosmic, Willy, Big City, and Sonny had liberated Con Ed” through the power and presence of the South Bronx’s residents. Welcoming their neighbors in and making them the objects of admiration and as well as partners in artistic representation, the artists sutured the connection between the gallery and the streets.

“Graffiti Art: Success for America”

If the Hall of Fame busts had “liberated” Con Ed through their public display, then the graffiti art covering the South Bronx was liberating the whole neighborhood. The artists of the area were staking their own claims to belonging and ownership in the Bronx. Their murals, tags, and messages challenged a public landscape in which the only authorized markers were official signs highlighting the power inequalities they faced, or advertisements fueling capitalist exploitation. Following on the heels of the

42. Lucy Lippard, “Real Estate and Real Art a la Fashion Moda.”
successful “Hall of Fame” show, Fashion Moda’s 1980 show “Graffiti Art Success for America” presented the indigenous art of the South Bronx as something valuable and continued to build the message that the people of the South Bronx were worthy of respect and admiration.

The politics of the burgeoning hip hop youth culture in the South Bronx can be understood as closely related to the political objectives proclaimed by Stefan Eins and others involved in Fashion Moda’s founding. The gallery’s objectives to challenge the distinctions between high and low art, to de-privilege the moneyed spaces and faces that determined artistic value in the late 20th century, and to present the cultural production of the South Bronx on its own terms were well matched to an exhibition of graffiti art. An art sprung from and based in the conditions and possibilities of urban New York, graffiti had even had a noticeable presence during the ongoing struggles over the future of Morningside Park earlier in the 1970s.43 Graffiti really blossomed during a period when cuts to public education and youth cultural programs were dramatically reducing youth access to recreational and creative outlets. The colorful aerosol artworks that increasingly adorned the walls and trains of New York City were part of a longer tradition of graffiti, but the styles, approaches, and meanings had changed dramatically by the late 1970s.44

The South Bronx itself was one of the hubs of this evolution. A multiethnic movement that included African-American, Puerto Rican, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-

43. Morningside Park Workshop report, 21 May 1973; Collins Collection, Box 6 Folder 3.
Latino, white, and Jewish youth who came from poor, working-class, and middle-class families, graffiti was a way for young people from across the city to gain some fame in a city was too busy to notice them. Whether from demographics traditionally ignored and intended to be silent by American society, or middle-class youth disenchanted with the futures they saw laid out for them, a wide range of figures picked up spray paint cans and fat-tipped markers to announce their presence and connect with other youth in a complex pattern of recognition, challenge, and respect.

Writers themselves and fans of graffiti saw beauty and talent when they saw the brightly-colored train cars, wall murals, and smaller pieces that adorned spaces across the city. Authorities and plenty of city residents saw criminal acts of vandalism. Many others, however, were on the fence—the work might be colorfully beautiful, but was painted in public spaces that made it difficult to fully embrace. Encountering those pieces on a gallery wall, in an authorized space in which audiences could view them with less conflict over their location, meant that the pieces could be evaluated as works of art. Of course, graffiti was heavily dependent on context, its meaning tied to its placement on public transit, over corporate ads, or on walls in neglected or abandoned spaces as a grassroots form of urban beautification. But in a community-oriented gallery in the South Bronx where audiences drew primarily from the populations actually producing graffiti the disconnect was not as great as it would be, for example, in exhibitions at swanky midtown Manhattan galleries later in the 1980s.

“Graffiti Art Success for America” marked the moment when Fashion Moda fully emerged as an artistic institution intricately connected to the cultural and political
world of the South Bronx neighborhood in which it was located. The busts by Ahearn and Torres, extremely popular and received with pride by area residents, were still, primarily, the creation of an artist who had recently arrived and developed a project based on his observations of the area. They reflected the vibrance and dignity of South Bronx residents, but they were not a creation of the South Bronx.

Local graffiti artist Johnny “Crash” Matos curated the exhibition, in collaboration with the gallery directors. His knowledge of the graffiti scene, connections in the community, and legitimacy as a local grassroots artist helped to strengthen the relationship between the still-young Fashion Moda project and the community that housed it. The graffiti writers who showed in “Graffiti Art” were the first to have their aerosol works displayed in a context that presented them as artistic creations. For young people who had been painting as a way to get their names known, to share their talent and vision with other writers as well as the public at large, a gallery showing gave the opportunity for a different kind of public reception.

The show opened on October 18th, 1980, at Fashion Moda. Press releases and posters capitalized on the illicit nature of the graffiti subculture to date, announcing that opening would mark the day that graffiti went “legitimate.” This language echoed the headlines around the 1973 show at Razor Gallery, suggesting the ongoing struggle over the meaning of graffiti as art or criminal. Rather than painting in the dark of night on idle subway cars and abandoned tunnels, the artists were painting live on pieces of white plywood mounted on the gallery walls. “Crash” had selected a number

of well-known graffiti writers, including DISCO 107, FRED, FUTURA, LEE, MITCH 77, ZEPHYR, and LADY PINK, a young woman who stood out in the largely-male world of graffiti writing. Together they would make a visit to Fashion Moda “as colorful as walking through a rainbow.”

One of Matos’ pieces made the main purpose of the show clear. In large, clear letters, the word “graffiti” was written across the canvas, superimposed on a cloud with tendrils extending out towards the edges and surrounded by small clusters of circles or bubbles, a collection of relatively organic shapes complementing the blockiness of the lettering. The letters themselves were white at the top, darkening towards the bottom. Looking across the letters, the line separating the dark bottoms from the lighter tops formed perhaps a silhouette skyline. A second, slightly lighter line reminiscent of leaping flames evoked the constant presence of arson in the South Bronx, especially the famous nighttime footage of fires broadcast during Game 2 of the 1977 World Series.

Matos’ “graffiti” piece was a direct experiment with line, form, and color. It was neither an attempt to glorify his name nor some mysterious, nihilistic message, as much of graffiti was often categorized. Instead, Matos was weighing in on the growing debate over graffiti as an “urban crisis.” In the lower right quarter of the painting was his position made explicit: “GRAFFiTi iS A TRUE ART… THE ONLY CRiME iS PEOPLE NOT RECOGNiZiNG GRAFFiTi AS A TRUE ART!”

Matos’ position was complemented by the work of John Fekner, a conceptual artist who was one of what might be considered “alternative graffiti artists” participating in the show. Fekner’s “stenciled admonitions” were best exemplified by the pieces he painted on the walls of abandoned buildings that formed the backdrop for Ronald Reagan’s press conference during his 1979 campaign visit to the South Bronx. In huge block letters, Fekner wrote “Broken Promises” and “Decay,” rebuking Reagan and American democracy in general for its failings with regard to the people of the South Bronx and other urban areas.

For ‘Crash’ Matos, the graffiti writers in the show, and others who were part of this emerging subculture, aerosol art was their own form, a way to determine for themselves what the future of their communities would look like. And their understanding of life in the South Bronx was a more accurate, nuanced, and politicized story than the one being spread in official statements and the mainstream media.

The graffiti show was in many ways a realization of the links that Fashion Moda intended to forge, of a connection between the art world of downtown and the everyday world of Bronx youth. As legendary graffiti writer Daze recalled, “Here you had this European guy from Austria doing an art gallery in the middle of the South Bronx, which in itself wasn’t really an art destination for anybody… The smart thing he did, was that he didn’t really exclude the people in the neighborhood… A lot of the people in the neighborhood would wander into the space and wonder like, ‘What is this? What’s going on here?’ You know, they couldn’t really figure it out. It wasn’t

48. Joe Austin gives a brief discussion of the “Graffiti Art” show that places Fashion Moda in the context of the growing art scene’s interest in writers. Austin, 186-192.
really a store, and they weren’t really used to being in art gallery type situations. But little by little people kind of warmed up to it, and said ‘oh well you do art here, you show art? I do art too,’ you know, and Stefan would invite them to show their art.”

Daze himself was one of the local kids who wandered in and wondered at what Fashion Moda was.

Not only did they find themselves in a place that saw their artistic creations as more than vandalism, they also got to know other young, up-and-coming artists who visited Fashion Moda through the downtown connections. Daze, Lady Pink, Crash, and the rest got to “commingle and collaborate” with future art luminaries such as Jenny Holzer, Kenny Sharf, Judy Rifka, as well as those famous for straddling the line between conceptual art and graffiti like Keith Haring, Jean Michel Basquiat, and John Fekner.

At the same time, we must consider the fact that this show was happening during the struggle against *Fort Apache: The Bronx* that is the subject of the next chapter. That struggle, challenging racist representations of Black and Puerto Rican South Bronx residents, was making a wide impact on the city. It framed the fight against the movie as resistance to a “frontier” narrative that cast South Bronxites as savages capable only of destruction and criminality, tying racism to the history of US imperialism. The Committee Against Fort Apache was the result of a number of ongoing and overlapping efforts for self-determination in the South Bronx. Graffiti

writers’ exuberant creations were a visual reclamation of space, and the “Graffiti Art” show has to be understood as specifically anti-racist and mentally decolonizing in that context.

The opening of “Graffiti Art” pursued this goal in a couple of ways. In addition to displaying the works in an environment that allowed non-graffiti-writing community members and outside visitors to consider the aerosol creations as art in their own right, the show worked to build a broader sense of pride in the community. Music was part of this, and the performers selected for the show bridged gaps of generation, race, and gender. The all-female trio Y Pants was a New Wave group from downtown, experimental musician-artists featuring radical feminist lyrics accompanied by toy instruments. At the other end of the spectrum was the manic, frenetic, very South Bronx space-funk of Alfónica Timms and the Flying Tigers. More traditional folks had their tastes met by Rico and the Jazz Masters. People danced between sets and at the after-party to DJ Dan Graham and “DJ Hip-Hop,” who clearly had his ear to the streets.51 Rock, funk, jazz, hip hop, graffiti—community was being built and reshaped at Fashion Moda.

Later that year, Fashion Moda began to export that community to the wider world. From December 13, 1980 to January 8, 1981, the gallery mounted a downtown exhibition at the New Museum as part of the “Events” series. Capitalizing on the reception of the “Graffiti Art Success for America” show, the New Museum exhibition featured a blend of graffiti artists who had participated, including Crash, Pink, Daze, 

and Futura 2000. These were complemented by the works of more conceptual artists like Joe Lewis, Ahearn and Torres, Jenny Holzer, and Paulette Nenner who also were affiliated with Fashion Moda. The New Museum exhibition highlighted how effectively Fashion Moda managed to bridge the gap between the experimental downtown art world and the street art of the South Bronx. Events like the show at the New Museum flipped the presentation into a new context. The expressive culture of the South Bronx was being presented and regarded as worthy of the same critical attention and analysis that studio artists received.

The gallery success of graffiti art in the 1980s marked an important transition. At a gallery like Fashion Moda, graffiti exhibitions did the work that Eins, Lewis, and their partners intended. These shows reframed graffiti for both South Bronx residents and outside viewers. On the walls of a designated gallery space, the aerosol art became recognizable and something to be proud of. It demonstrated that the South Bronx possessed creative power, the capacity to produce original art, and challenged notions of the neighborhood as devoid of value. For the writers themselves, it offered a different kind of acceptance and perhaps validation, and opened new doors and possibilities for their futures. Combined with other shows with which Fashion Moda was involved, the gallery created a running dialogue about the nature of the relationship between humans and the built environment of the South Bronx. These works of art, dealing in metaphor and message, provided an opportunity to reflect as well on relations of power, on who should be in control of the South Bronx and the impact that had on indigenous residents of the area.
Urban Animals: Pests, Vermin, and Extermination in the South Bronx

Graffiti art, hosted at Fashion Moda or sprayed across the buildings of the South Bronx, was part of a struggle over how the community viewed itself and was viewed by others. The “South Bronx Hall of Fame” and “Graffiti Art Success for America” centered South Bronx residents in the creative process and presented the dignity of their lives and power of their productive capacities as a focus of these respective shows. Although these two might be Fashion Moda’s best-known shows in its early years, the gallery and its affiliated artists did not leave residents or graffiti writers to fend for themselves. Other exhibitions and installations that Fashion Moda hosted or sponsored featuring the works of artists from the downtown alternative art scene continued to center the struggle for life in the South Bronx.

A notable early example was the fall 1979 exhibition “Animals Living in Cities.” Organized by artist Christy Rupp, the show was critical of the destruction that humanity wreaks on the animal kingdom through its inexorable expansion and encroachment as well as its ruthless attempts to either domesticate or exterminate animal life. Rupp curated a group of artists from across the New York art community, and balanced them with scientific contributions from the American Museum of Natural History, the Bronx High School of Science, the Atlanta Zoo, the NY State Department of Environmental Conservation, the NYC Dept. of Health’s Bureau of Animal Affairs, and the Peregrine Fund of Cornell University, which is dedicated to the preservation of birds of prey. Framed as a belated inquiry into the “never seriously
disputed but... often... seriously neglected” idea that “humans should live in co-
existence with other animals,” the show argued for “the importance in our living space
of untamed animals such as rats, insects, and wild fish.”

The time and location of the exhibition, however, suggest that we might
productively read “Animals Living in Cities” as a meditation on the relationship
between dominant society and embattled areas like the South Bronx that were
regarded as problems in need of re-domestication or elimination. The show was
described as an investigation of civilization’s broader interaction with the animal
world, but needs to be considered in the context of urban renewal, the neoliberal
withdrawal of support services and social welfare programs from poor urban
communities, and the attacks on the South Bronx as the worst, most irredeemable
ghetto in the United States. Rupp’s formulation of the show framed the struggle as one
between mankind, striving for “superiority in the struggle for existence,” and the
“greater quantity of evolutionary material” that is labeled as “pests” and marked for
destruction. Aside from the “bugs, beetles, rodents, wild dogs and cats, many birds,”
and other animals intentionally targeted, the show also addressed the innumerable
other species affected by habitat destruction due to agricultural and urban designs.
Cities and corporations spend billions of dollars trying to eliminate these unwanted
creatures because “they do not want anything to impose on their living space that is
not entirely obedient.”

52. “City Wildlife Projects” press release, 1 October 1979; Fashion Moda, Box 5 Folder 14.
Given the history of the neighborhood in previous decades, it is not difficult to understand the links between the abstracted art-science fusion of “Animals Living in Cities” and the ongoing struggles of resistance and refusal that marked the everyday politics of life in the South Bronx. As a press release for the show noted, [dominant] society “cannot win. For all their powers of destruction, whether with pesticides, shotguns, antibiotics, poisons, traps, or simply the bulldozer,” dominant society cannot be successful in “trying to eliminate all apparent nuisances… The more we attempt to conquer an apparent enemy of the human race for the damage done to our ideas of perfect order, the more likely becomes our total demise.”

Rupp’s concept for the show also tied the management of animal species to the management of undesirable human populations in the United States. In an argument for the kind of multicultural world that Fashion Moda pursued more generally, “Animals Living in Cities” argued that neither could these animals be successfully eliminated from their habitats, nor could they be “confined in their wild state” to “reservations.” “We must accept,” Rupp argued, ‘untamable animals into our lives, into our economy, into our culture, into our productive lands, into our cities. We must accept them into our space.” During a decade when the most common metaphor used to describe the South Bronx and its residents was as a frontier territory of savages to be subdued, the show quietly critiqued the longer history of violence done to Native

54. “City Wildlife Projects” press release, 1 October 1979; Fashion Moda, Box 5 Folder 14.
American communities as well as the contemporary attacks on criminalized and racialized populations in New York City.\textsuperscript{55}

Joe Lewis’ contribution to the show is perhaps the piece that most clearly makes the point that the artists approached the “Animals Living in Cities” exhibition as an invitation to make critical commentary on the experiences of the city’s impoverished communities. The savagery and criminality attributed to South Bronx residents by authorities, the press, and popular media—exemplified in the recently-released film \textit{The Warriors} and the forthcoming \textit{Fort Apache: The Bronx}—marked them as subhuman. Lewis’s offering further suggests that the “Animals Living in Cities” show should be considered as operating at multiple critical registers.

The first was the announced revision of human attitudes towards animals, the obvious objective. The second commented on the separation of human society into the civilized and the savage, and argued for the right to existence, even flourishing, of those seen as beyond the pale of acceptable social norms. The piece was a “deadly-looking” steel rat trap. Crushed in its powerful jaws was a check, “neatly inscribed” and made out to “Landlord.”\textsuperscript{56} Here, the rat as undesirable animal in need of extermination is the residential landlord. This creature was notorious in the South Bronx for neglecting building maintenance, abusing tenants, and often firing their own buildings to collect the insurance money, forcing families onto the streets and further damaging the neighborhood. Lewis’ piece further elaborates a reading of “Animals Living in Cities” as a show critical of imperialist and genocidal U.S. attitudes towards

\textsuperscript{55} “City Wildlife Projects” press release, 1 October 1979; Fashion Moda, Box 5 Folder 14.
\textsuperscript{56} Judd Tully, quoted in promotional pamphlet for “Animals Living in Cities” exhibition, 1981; Fashion Moda, Box 5 Folder 18.
poor and non-white populations. In his estimation it was actually those in control, those who hold power, who were a plague on the South Bronx.

**Confronting the Frontier**

A similar artistic and political statement was made in Paulette Nenner’s autumn 1980 show “Road Kills.” Mounted six months into the ongoing South Bronx-based campaign against *Fort Apache: The Bronx*, Nenner’s art picked up on the battles over racism and imperialism as fought through the concept of the frontier that was at the heart of anti-*Fort Apache* mobilization. Her artwork framed the frontier war as an environmental attack, and turned to American Indian burial practices to engage the results of this “frontier war” on the residents—human and non-human—of the South Bronx.

“Road Kills” featured the piece “Fellow Victims of Silent Environmental War.” This was a collection of wild animals killed by cars on New York State roads that Nenner collected and brought to a rubble-strewn lot at 145th Street between Willis and Brooks Avenues in the South Bronx. Nenner’s work referenced Native practices, constructing what she described as a “burned funerary mound,” placing the dead above ground to be seen and mourned, to “show us as we destroy our fellow creatures so we destroy ourselves. This destruction is nowhere more evident than in the South Bronx.”

of earth, bricks, and rusted auto parts—a burial of animals, on a site where people could no longer live either.

Affiliated with Fashion Moda, Nenner’s work was part of the gallery’s larger political and artistic purpose: to draw attention to the conditions in the Bronx, by focusing on the power of local artists, particularly those developing local forms—like graffiti—that elicited little notice from the fine art establishment. It also engaged the ongoing struggle over the meaning of the frontier in this New York artistic outpost. Fashion Moda regularly employed the language of the frontier in its planning and publications. The South Bronx was “becoming the new frontier for New York avant garde art.” But as Fashion Moda used it, the frontier did not carry the need for eradication of the natives in order to produce something of value and order.

Fashion Moda was instead “an integrated, experimental museum,” a “focal point for a new free spirit in the art world.” It was a place of possibility, where folks might learn from past mistakes and instead live together. And as press releases noted, on the streets of the South Bronx, where dominant discourse would have had one believe everything was destroyed as soon as darkness fell, after being up for a month this art installation “hadn’t been disturbed by a respectful South Bronx community. The artistic community is also now being given the opportunity to raise their consciousness about environmental destruction."58 The residents themselves were part of the environment, and they already knew it was threatened—particularly by racist attitudes that treated them as hazards to be removed.

Even more insidiously racist and imperialist were notions that regarded South Bronx residents as invisible, the land as abandoned. This too echoed historic imaginings of the US frontier as the nation expanded westward. And just as Manifest Destiny was historically the noble pursuit of a divine mission rather than a genocidal wave of racist aggression—even if it was, in fact, actually that—well-intentioned liberals could easily be swept up by the urge to “save” the people of the South Bronx.

These attitudes sometimes tipped into racist beliefs and practices, as in the efforts of the Bronx Frontier Development Corporation. Established in 1975 by Irma Fleck, an activist from the days of the “old Jewish Bronx,” and Jack Flanagan, a community affairs cop from the 41st Precinct—“Fort Apache”—its major goal was to “assist in the redevelopment of the South Bronx.” The Frontier “Ranch” at Hunt’s Point would eventually grow into the largest composting operation in New York City. However, more often than not the Corporation seemed to ignore previously existing community-based organizations in favor of its own proposals and solutions.

The Bronx Frontier Development Corporation, despite its claim to “promote positive images” of the South Bronx, justified its intervention by narrating themselves as frontier pioneers in the tradition of Manifest Destiny, pushing into virgin land not used properly by any natives who may live there. One fund-raising appeal expressed it like this:

Dear Friend,
The pioneer spirit — for centuries, it has made America’s wilderness bloom.

59. Jill Jonnes, We’re Still Here 300-301; Kathy Goldman to Evelina Antonetty, n.d.; UBP, Box 3 Folder 13.
The first pioneers turned the rocky fields and thin soil of New England into successful, self-sustaining farms. Two centuries later pioneers in the Southwest and California were producing an abundance of crops on land which once was parched, forbidding desert. Five years ago, a dedicated group of resourceful pioneers began the arduous task of reclaiming a new kind of American wilderness — the devastated South Bronx of New York City. Empty, derelict buildings, rubble-filled lots, grinding poverty — all make this corner of America as awesome and challenging as any desert or mountain range that earlier pioneers faced. But the greatest challenge of all is the fact that for years, the South Bronx has been a wilderness of the human spirit.60

This last sentence is the one that, for obvious reasons, long-standing community organizations like United Bronx Parents found most offensive.

Kathy Goldman, Director for the Community Food Resource Center, Inc., wrote in a personal note to UBP head Evelina Antonetty after receiving a fund-raising request from BFDC that she found the organization’s message “so awful that I thought you should see it (in case they didn't mail you the funding letter).”61 UBP records suggest that they did not. This was perhaps because they knew that it would antagonize UBP given their long involvement in efforts to provide nutrition and health education in the South Bronx through the Summer Feeding Program and other initiatives. BFDC targeted outside groups like the Community Food Resource Center, in lower Manhattan next to City Hall, and the Ford Foundation for funding. But they did not try to use their frontier-savior language to engage other already-existing community organizations in the South Bronx.

By late 1980, UBP was heavily involved in the campaign against *Fort Apache*, and found its resources stretched thin when confronted with another Bronx Frontier plan, this time a food-education program “so that Hispanics can be taught how to eat.” The plan would introduce unspecified “new foods” and change the diet of the South Bronx. In true frontier fashion, it even featured a “Chuck-wagon” that would roam the neighborhood offering the natives instruction on how to cook healthy American food.

Because their community was being targeted, several Hispanic organizations prepared a critique of the Bronx Frontier plan that they shared with the Ford Foundation, target of the Bronx Frontier proposal. Joining United Bronx Parents were the West Bronx Puerto Rican Cinema Adult Center, the Coalition in Defense of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Rights, El Comité, and Universidad Urayoan, now operating separately from UBP under the direction of Rosa Escobar. This group highlighted four major problems with the proposal, each of which contradicted the efforts of United Bronx Parents over the previous 15 years.

First, the Bronx Frontier proposal was “based on racist assumptions and falsehoods” and assumed that Puerto Ricans had poor health because of their “dysfunctional eating habits.” The reviewers pointed out United Bronx Parents had been “for many years involved in nutrition education, drug prevention, day care, and at no time have we even been asked to comment on this [Bronx Frontier] program. Besides being outright racist, it is an insult to our community that no one has bothered to consult us regarding our diet.” The food issue itself was part of the same colonizer mentality that CAFA was battling. Again, the residents of the South Bronx were being
cast by well-intentioned white liberals as backwards primitives who had to be taught how to care for their land and for their bodies, by helping them develop habits that were “more like those of most Whites.”

The Bronx Frontier proposal also placed the blame for poor nutrition on individuals, ignoring the structural constraints the limited the affordability or even availability of healthy food options in the South Bronx. The plan was to be implemented at four “demonstration” schools, and one critique from the Puerto Rican groups was that these kind of trial outposts had been established before. The problem was not will, the problem was “cost of food inflation and budget cuts” made it difficult for school boards to institute sweeping changes at the local level. Bronx Frontier was applying for grant money to demonstrate what South Bronx schools had known for years—that they needed more funding in order to provide better food. But Bronx Frontier had no proposal on how to get that money. Finally, Bronx Frontier’s plan put responsibility primarily in the hands of “school bureaucracy” rather than the engaged, trained cadre of parents that UBP had spent a decade developing. The “main focus” of the plan was the “school staff”; the Chuckwagon Advisory Board would be appointed by the Superintendent. But the major form of parental involvement was “to purchase breakfast and eat with their children.” In essence, teachers were being paid to be trained as nutritionists, while parents were asked to come pay for school breakfasts.

Aside from the fact that this was “not legal,” most parents would not be able to afford to do this even if they were allowed.63

These critiques were strong enough, and perhaps the organizations that offered it well-known enough to Ford Foundation officials, that the Program Officer Sharon Franz side-stepped a direct response. Instead, she replied to Antonetty, letting her know that the Foundation had forwarded the critiques directly to Bronx Frontier officials for comment. Several weeks later, Flanagan and his colleagues had yet to respond. Deep in the heart of the anti-*Fort Apache* campaign, with the movie’s premiere quickly approaching, Antonetty wrote back to Franz. She did not want “another dragged-out battle,” and for the moment they needed to conserve their resources. “As far as our organizations are concerned,” Antonetty told her, “we have enough upheaval with the movie *Fort Apache*…. We would like to concentrate our efforts” on this immediate threat “rather than dragged out battles with so-called ‘do gooders.’” Fighting the unconscious racism and imperialist attitudes of well-intentioned white liberals was such an all-consuming project that South Bronx activists had to pick and choose their battles carefully.64 In 1980-1981, almost all their energies were focused on the fight against *Fort Apache*.

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63. Evelina Antonetty to Sharon L. Franz, n.d. (January 1981); UBP, Box 3 Folder 13.
64. Evelina Antonetty to Sharon L. Franz, n.d. (January 1981); UBP, Box 3 Folder 13.
Interlude: Rapping Radical Dreams

and Multiracial Microphone Politics

When Coke La Rock first grabbed the mic while Kool Herc played his sister Cindy’s birthday party, he was the hype man for his homeboy Herc. “Rock rock and you don’t stop!” he shouted, encouraging the crowd to dance even harder. Little did he know that by the time decade was out, this sidekick status would become the focal point of commercial efforts to capitalize on hip hop culture. But in some ways the emergence of the MC as the recording star would expand rappers’ opportunities to shape the way their audiences interacted with the world around them.

The connection between rapping and community organizing are perhaps the easiest to see of all the elements of hip hop. The MC, the “master of ceremonies,” has always been charged with hyping up the crowd, extolling the skills of the DJ he or she is performing with. Before the move of hip hop music to commercial, recorded offerings in 1979, rapping was more of a filler, patter on the microphone during the music that called to the audience, hyped them to a change in the music, or reminded them to show their appreciation for the DJ: “everybody SCRREEAAMMM!!!”

The MC functioned as a go-between, mediating the relationship between the DJ and the audience. Rhythmic vocals followed the DJs beat, as did the dancers. When the beat hit a crescendo, the MC might call for audience response, pushing the energy level even higher. But the audience inspired the DJ too; Coke La Rock remembers that “Rock, you don’t stop!” was a spontaneous response to an audience rocking in unison,
won over by the spirit of Herc’s sonic exhortations. DJ, dancer, MC, a three-way freestyle with each element feeding off of and reinforcing one another, community created anew at a hip hop jam.

As the role of the MC evolved, he (and less frequently although more often than popular history remembers, she) moved beyond these simple phrases. More complex, developed rhymes, boasts, and story-telling emerged, part of a long line of Black verbal traditions. On their own, these masculine claims to dignity, power, and self-importance can be read as small instances of refusal in a society bent on silencing minority youth. As Tricia Rose notes, “Rappers offer symbolic prowess, a sense of black energy and creativity in the face of omnipresent oppressive forces; others listen to rap with an ear toward the hidden voices of the oppressed, hoping to understand American’s large, angry, and ‘unintelligible’ population.” The MC’s powerful presence on the mic performs a pride in self that audiences can vicariously share, a declaration of creativity and self-worth in defiance of dominant stereotypes.

But the MC plays a more specific role in terms of freestyle politics. The word choices, references, and messages that the MC selects for a verse, pre-prepared or truly impromptu “freestyle,” are intentional. They are based in a worldview shaped by his or her environment, understanding of that environment, and its social, political, and economic contexts. Despite the individualist ethos that might seem to undergird hip hop culture, it has always been a world of exchange. Style is a shared sensibility. MC’s paid attention to each others’ styles, just as did DJ’s, b-boys, and graffiti writers.

2. Rose, 19.
They also spoke to the DJs. What emerged, if we look, were hints of a multiracial, decolonizing politics, articulated through language that challenged the racialization of space. The expansive, inclusive worlds that DJs like Kool Herc, Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa sonically constructed through their musical collections were freestyle politics in action. When Bambaataa mixed new-wave, punk, James Brown, and native drumming, he temporarily built a multiracial world in the South Bronx, its borders far beyond the boundaries of the borough. When Flash mixed Chic’s “Good Times,” Blondie’s “Rapture,” and Queen’s “Another One Bites the Dust,” incorporated “Rapper’s Delight” and other early hip hop records, and laid them over with vocal samples lifted from the 1980 film Flash Gordon (“aaaaAAAAaaaah, defender of the universe!”), his “Adventures on the Wheels of Steel” took listeners to a space where people of all kinds themselves (re)mixed in a multiracial future-present.

I elaborate here because MC’s played an important role in articulating these political visions. When “Rapper’s Delight” dropped in ’79 as the first rap record, it began by hailing the multiracial world that hip hop could become: “I am Wonder Mike, and I’d like to say ‘hello,’/ to the black, to the white, the red and the brown, the purple and yellow.” Later that year, when Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five offered “Superrappin’,” it was another instance of hip hop culture rejecting dominant society’s spatialization of race, and racialization of the South Bronx in particular. The opening bars of the song made it clear:

Italian, Caucasian, Japanese/
Spanish, Indian, Negro, Vietnamese/
MC’s, Disc Jockeys/
To all the fly kids and young ladies…
Through hip hop, Bronx youth envisioned themselves as part of a far wider, freer world than the one they presently inhabited.

When Bambaataa dropped German band Kraftwerk’s own anthem to a borderless world, “Trans-Europe Express,” on his turntable, this vision expanded even more. Combined with Japanese group Yellow Magic Orchestra, Kraftwerk formed the basis of Bam’s magnum opus “Planet Rock.” Bambaataa sonically called into being a decolonized world where everyone could mingle and party together, determining their own lives. He relied on the Soulsonic Force—MC’s Pow Wow, GLOBE, and Mr. Biggs—to recruit residents to his world party:

Just start to chase your dreams/
Up out your seats, make your body sway/
Socialize, get down, let your soul lead the way/
…Love, life, live/
Come play the game, our world is free/
…No work or play, our world is free/
…Be what you be, just BE!

This is just a sampling, but with the freestyle politics of the 1970s Bronx in mind, the lyrics MCs delivered at parties and on records reflect a different meaning. It is easy to understand the politics explicit in the biting social critique of Melle Mel’s raps on “The Message”:

broken glass everywhere/
people pissin’ on the stairs you know they just don’t care/
I can’t take the smell, can’t take the noise/
got no money to move out I guess I got no choice/
…Don’t push me, ‘cause I’m close to the edge/
I’m trying not to lose my head/
It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder/
How I keep from going under
The song is often regarded, justifiably, as the first “political” rap song. But widening our vision of what constitutes the political in hip hop culture offers a new perspective on the work rappers have been doing since hip hop’s earliest days. Freestyle politics, with its focus on multiracial community, decolonization, and spatial relations, opens this frame. And as the final chapter shows, helps reveal how even the most seemingly party-oriented songs can be deeply rooted in the particular struggles of a specific time and place.
It was a little after 7:00 pm on a Tuesday night in January 1981, and radios around New York City were turned to WBAI-FM for Mimi Rosenberg’s popular program, “Building Bridges: Your Community and Labor Report.” From transistor radios, car stereos, and the large portable “boom boxes” increasingly popular among the city’s youth came the instantly recognizable bassline of famous rap group Sugar Hill Gang. But the rapped lyrics accompanying the track were not the party boasts associated with the group’s smash debut, “Rapper’s Delight,” the record that introduced the world to the new youth culture of hip hop recently erupted from the South Bronx. Instead, this was a politically-charged protest song written by the Committee Against Fort Apache and intended to drum up support for the strong and growing movement against the forthcoming Time-Life movie *Fort Apache: The Bronx* starring Paul Newman. The first verse introduced listeners to the subject at hand, telling them this was a call to arms:

2. “Chronology of the Committee Against Fort Apache From January to April 1981,” April 1981; Diana Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 15, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, New York, NY (Caballero Papers).
C’mon everybody, and follow me
I’m gonna take you to the movie all for free
Don’t be alarmed. Don’t be surprised,
If we all wind up hangin’ out outside.
I ain’t payin’ and neither are you,
We’re gonna make sure this movie’s through.
Cause what I’m sayin’, I’m sure you’ll agree
Is to boycott the movie Fort Apache.

And then came the urgent, energetic chorus: “We’re gonna run, jump, stomp/ to the
Fort Apache boycott.”

Two days later, the January 15 issue of Latin NY, one of the city’s most popular magazines for Latina/o audiences, carried the full lyrics to the “Fort Apache Bop” on the back cover. Inside was an article updating the current status of the ongoing fight against Fort Apache: The Bronx. Since March of 1980, the Committee Against Fort Apache, a coalition of community groups and individuals, had been working to stop the film’s production. The Committee Against Fort Apache (CAFA) challenged the movie’s racist representations of the South Bronx’s Black and Puerto Rican residents, its “negative stereotyping that influences white American attitudes and behavior towards us.” CAFA charged that Fort Apache, by presenting New York’s communities of color as “animals and savages,” would “provide a rationale for the proposed budget cuts in health care, education, and essential services. Because if we are animals, we don’t deserve any basic human and civil rights.” In the wake of Ronald Reagan’s recent election and his campaign promises to “make America great

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5. Undated notes; Caballero Papers, B 12 Folder 5.
6. Undated notes; Caballero Papers, B 12 Folder 5.
again” in part by eliminating social programs that made people “dependent,” these kinds of cultural representations would have disproportionate impacts on those communities already struggling the most.

For those who were not yet aware of CAFA’s activity, the “Fort Apache Bop” summed up the movement in three additional verses. The second verse told listeners that producer David Suskind was making “a movie about you and me.” But he was a predatory capitalist exploiting them for financial gain. *Fort Apache*’s South Bronx had “pimps, whores, tramps, and dogs/ junkies, pushers, scum, and hogs/ All of this, they say we are/ And we don’t even have a star” in the movie, its lead characters all played by white actors. The third verse declared the scope of the boycott effort: “We respect our community” and “we don’t want this movie here/ we gonna stop it east, we gonna stop it west/ we gonna put Time-Life right through the test/ We gonna stop it north, we gonna stop it south/ We gonna make Paul Newman shut his mouth.” It also expanded the scope beyond *Fort Apache*, mentioning *Tarzan*, *Beulah Land*, *Fame*, *Amos and Andy*, and *Charlie Chan*, as by the turn of 1981 CAFA had allied with a variety of other groups challenging racist, sexist, and homophobic films. In the final verse, the “Fort Apache Bop” told listeners that CAFA could use their help to show the “truth and what we believe/ show the world what we’ve achieved/ how hard we work in

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every way/ Just to make it to the next pay day.”¹¹ And that same pride and
determination would fuel the boycott efforts, as the song concluded with a direct
message to film producers:

Show the dignity of our life
And we’ll be glad to pay the price
Cause if you turn around and mock it
Gonna hit you right square in the pocket.¹²

The “Fort Apache Bop” was a stroke of genius. Hip hop was still in its infancy,
the number of records officially released still tiny. But locally in the South Bronx and
across New York City, the streets were buzzing with the energy of this new youth
culture. Using this to their advantage, the Committee Against Fort Apache had written
and recorded the “Fort Apache Bop” in December 1980. This debut broadcast was the
most recent attack in a multi-pronged approach that CAFA had planned in March of
1980 to challenge Fort Apache’s production and distribution. One of their primary
objectives was to “develop our community’s ability to use the media” as a weapon
against mainstream representations that denigrated them. A catchy, forceful salvo fired
just before Fort Apache: The Bronx’s scheduled premiere on February 6th, the “Fort
Apache Bop” was specifically developed by CAFA in “Rappers-style” to be deployed
as “a new kind of educational weapon.”¹³ The battle for the future of the South Bronx
in the 1980’s was going to be waged in large part on the terrain of popular culture.

¹³ CAFA Bulletin, 13 April 1981; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 5, p. 7.
Focusing on the film *Fort Apache: The Bronx* is important for a number of reasons. First are the ways that the mobilization against the film focused the variety of ongoing struggles against racism and imperialism that marked the South Bronx throughout the 1970s. Coming at the end of a 1970s decade often remembered as period of radical decline and conservative retrenchment, the mobilization against the film highlights instead how a variety of groups that had been quietly laboring for change, pursuing particular projects that escaped national attention throughout the decade, could quickly coalesce into a broader movement in a moment of crisis. The Committee Against Fort Apache materialized almost overnight, but it did not appear out of thin air.

This argument about how social movements survive in hostile times is further illuminated by examining the specifics of how anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggles played out through the film and protests against it. *Fort Apache* explicitly constructed the South Bronx as a site of frontier violence. The Bronx was repeatedly referred to as a land of savages—the police force of the 41st Precinct the cavalry, the Precinct house itself, nicknamed “Fort Apache,” the last outpost of civilization. If the Bronx were to flourish, it would be up to these embattled troops to make the land safe for democracy.

Second, the film was an obvious target for local activists. Intended for mainstream distribution, and absolutely flattening the population of the South Bronx into one-dimensional characters, it provided a point of engagement for virtually any group or individual fighting for social justice.
Third, it reminds us that popular culture often is at the center of struggles over the paths and possibilities of larger society. As George Lipsitz has of course noted, “popular culture ain’t no sideshow.” Its flexibility makes it a tool that can be used by folks at all points on the social register, and provides a powerful weapon to those circumscribed from traditional channels of political power. The filming of *Fort Apache* shifted the terrain of struggle in the South Bronx squarely into the realm of representation, allowing anti-racist and decolonial activists to bring a range of political strategies—“both legal and illegal” to bear, from the traditional—marches, appeals to elected leaders—to alternative forms of protest, in particular through the use of the emerging youth cultural practices of hip hop.\(^{14}\)

Together, these points of analysis help to unpack the relationship between specific mobilizations and the longer legacies of organizing and resistance that shape social movements over time. The Committee Against Fort Apache (CAFA) reached beyond the borders of the Bronx to build a multiracial coalition. The frontier narrative of the film invited the anti-imperialist critiques and decolonizing practices New York activists had been developing for years. Folks involved in the efforts against *Fort Apache* worked on the fly to develop innovative and effective strategies that drew upon but did not duplicate those of previous generations of activists. Freestyle politics lay at the heart of the fight against *Fort Apache: The Bronx.*

*The Bronx in the 1970s: Why Fort Apache Mattered*

\(^{14}\) CAFA Bulletin, 13 April 1981; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 5, p. 7.
Between the late 1960s and the release of *Fort Apache* in 1981, a variety of struggles ranged across the city over space, access, and control of local institutions. The stakes of these contests were frequently expressed within a frontier discourse. Civic authorities, conservative business and institutional leaders, and even well-intentioned liberals expressed their various urban renewal and revitalization projects as positive projects of expansion, meant to save the savage, helpless, pathological residents of these areas from themselves, and rebuild the imperiled city as a clean, orderly bastion on a hill. On the other side, a constellation of grassroots organizations, community cultural institutions, radical political groups, and youth culture innovators struggled against these efforts. They rejected the white supremacy inherent in this return to a frontier ideology, instead reading these projects as imperialist aggression. Rather than urban renewal, this was “Negro removal,” a contemporary Trail of Tears that threatened local ways of life, relied on racism, sexism, and classism to exclude their communities from exerting meaningful control over local institutions, and attempted to whitewash both the longer history of the United States and the contemporary moment to justify attacks on, and withholding of services from, marginalized populations.

By the mid-1970s, the South Bronx was emblematic of the stresses of deindustrialization and a conservative move in the United States more broadly. Rampant disinvestment, white flight, and the creative destruction of Robert Moses in his multiple capacities overseeing New York City planning, left the area in shambles. As jobs disappeared, the Cross Bronx Expressway rent neighborhoods asunder.
Massive unemployment and economic deprivation were compounded by Gerald Ford’s refusal to bail out a bankrupt New York City. Those who could flee, did, replaced by immigrants from Harlem and the Caribbean. Rents dropped as the South Bronx went from a relatively desirable place to live, to a last resort. Landlords, faced with declining rents, saw little reason to maintain buildings, instead wringing out what rents they could get from tenants who lacked better options, and then torching the buildings for insurance money when they were long past habitable. “In a frenzy of arson, greed, and destruction, many willingly reaped the gains… while others pretended not to see. And so the tragedy unfolded, and—perhaps unique in the history of civilization—a citizenry annihilated its own city for profit.”

The South Bronx became the poster child for what was wrong with American cities, Jimmy Carter standing in front of burned-out buildings in 1977, highlighting the degree to which the area had been abandoned by authorities. The horror was increased by Howard Cosell’s famous “Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx is burning!” pronouncement during the 1977 World Series. Not to place too much blame on the residents of the South Bronx, but the neighborhood certainly faced its share of struggles. Jonnes’ narrative and many other tales of Bronx history confirm this. Even when written from a sympathetic perspective, the “problem” of the South Bronx was always its people, unable to stop their own destructive behavior, incapable of the civil behavior necessary to stop the decline. These are the narratives that drove the formulations of the area as a wild frontier, the tales that told New York residents that

the only thing keeping the city safe from the savage hordes massed along the bank of the Harlem River was the police of the 41st Precinct, a modern-day cavalry on a mission to subdue the South Bronx.

In this context, it is easy to understand how throughout the 1970s, the language of “frontier” became common for explaining the work ahead in reclaiming New York City. Other scholars have argued that metaphors of war and disease were the most common expressions of inner city blight. Produced in film and other popular media, the news, and in political discourse, understandings of urban neighborhoods as “war zones” and “cancers” threatening civic health reinforced the combative, threatening image of the US’s non-white residents. However, focusing on these approaches leaves us with a rather top-down understanding of the fight for survival in the inner city. These frames leave little room to investigate how local communities and grassroots activists fought back. While the rubble-strewn streets of the South Bronx looked like a “war zone” to some, the language of military conquest was perhaps too divisive in the wake of Vietnam; rather, the benevolent expansion of the United States through Manifest Destiny, across the untapped frontier, was used to describe approaches to the South Bronx.

Frontier language, from civic authorities and the mainstream media, failed to account for the vocal, active, and powerful responses of the “natives,” as South Bronx residents of every stripe refused to have overlaid onto them a national mythology that cast them as backwards savages, to be removed for the betterment of the nation. To think about the persistence of the South Bronx as a strange, other, frontier world,
consider the words of Daniel Patrick Moynihan. In the 1986 preface to Jill Jonnes’ *We’re Still Here*, he talks about growing up in the 1930s and understanding the Bronx as “a place. Not everybody belonged there, nor felt free to sojourn… a place that lived somewhat by itself and by its own rules.”

It was a place where “Obedience to law, and by extension a sense of obligation to others… the foundation of any civil order of men and women… ceased to be the condition of society.”

Moynihan’s memories, perhaps not surprisingly, echo both the “tangle of pathology” for which he is perhaps most (in)famous, but replicate the very characterizations against which CAFA spent the early part of that decade battling.

By turning our analysis instead to the frequent description of places like Harlem and the Bronx as frontiers to be “subdued,” we have an opportunity to see how marginalized groups used an idea with a complex and shifting meaning to maneuver themselves onto the other side of the argument. As I will argue, these activists continually rejected the racism and violence inherent in the frontier discourse that swirled around them. The South Bronx was NOT a frontier and could not be understood as such; its inhabitants were not savages, but good, hard-working people wrongly characterized by a racist establishment governed with an imperial mindset.

However, at times, these activists did engage the frontier myth in a different way, particularly through a sophisticated use of popular cultural forms. By upending the frontier myth from a “native” perspective, representing themselves as either modern-day noble savages and/or the cowboy as a violent, racist, sexual predator,

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17. Jonnes, xviii.
residents of the South Bronx claimed they were the good guys, besieged by an invading army. As artist Jerry Kearns expressed it in a proposal for a multi-media performance on the racism and sexism of the film, “FORT APACHE, THE BRONX comes at a time when our communities are under attack from every side.”

Perhaps the best example of the oppositional power of art in the fight over *Fort Apache* came from youth culture. Even more powerful than the CAFA-produced “Fort Apache Bop,” the result of an organized effort led by experienced, longtime community activists, was another song from Sugarhill Gang. Their 1981 hit song, simply titled “Apache,” was written and recorded in the political climate of the anti-*Fort Apache* movement but not directly associated with it. Analyzed in the context of its production, I argue the song should be read as a brilliant inversion. Aligning the Black and Brown residents of the South Bronx with the Native Americans who were the targets of historical frontier expansion, Sugarhill Gang’s “Apache” exposed frontier ideology as an expression of white supremacy and reframed the terms of racial identity and struggles for justice as the United States entered the Reagan era. It also demonstrates that hip hop culture was more than the creative expression sprung from the frustrations of postindustrial New York City. It was a politicized youth culture from the start, formed at the nexus of historic African American struggles in the city, waves of immigration from recently independent Caribbean nations, the enduring importance of anti-imperialist and colonial independence efforts among both Black

and Brown communities, and ongoing critiques of the historic relationship between the United States and nonwhite peoples seen as barriers to Manifest Destiny.

**The Committee Against Fort Apache**

The most glaring example of the ways that ideas about the frontier were applied to contemporary nonwhite populations in the late 1970s is *Fort Apache: The Bronx*. Shooting for the film began in March 1980, based on the book *Fort Apache* written in 1976 by retired South Bronx lieutenant Tom Walker. As a memoir, Walker’s book revealed the degree to which authorities, and the police in particular, employed frontier language. “The idea of the police as civilization's last line of defense against hordes of murderous savages taking over the city is presented over and over again,” criticized Union Patriotic Puertorriqueña. Walker made constant reference “to ‘cowboys and Indians,’ John Wayne, and what the American historians and media have labeled the ‘taming of the wild west’—but which we now recognize as the genocide committed against the Native Americans… The police saw the south Bronx as the ‘last outpost,’ a ‘frontier’ area populated by savages; and so they named the 41st Precinct Fort Apache.”¹⁹

The experienced, proud activists of the South Bronx refused this position. Union Patriótica Puertorriqueña declared it “racist propaganda…the politics of the KKK & the Nazi’s—but packaged in a different form.” They circulated an analysis of the book around the Bronx on February 26th, 1980, and called for a meeting to discuss

¹⁹ Union Patriótica Puertorriqueña, “The Movie Fort Apache is a Racist Attack on Puerto Ricans and Blacks,” 26 February 1980; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 6.
opposition to the film, declaring, “We will not sit idly by…. We will not cooperate
with our own destruction.”20 At a community meeting at Lincoln Hospital the
following week, the Committee Against Fort Apache formed from a coalition of
community groups and concerned individuals.21 The primary objections that emerged
from the meeting were how the screenplay “stereotyped Puerto Ricans and Blacks as
violent savages, lied about the reality of the Puerto Rican and Black communities,
presented a biased view of our history, and glorified the police and justified their
brutality…. Not only does it represent vicious stereotypes of our people, most
particularly of our women and children, but it also offers racist views on crucial issues
affecting our survival: housing, hospital care, police brutality, and unemployment.”22
By the fall of that year, CAFA had become a powerful force, protesting anywhere star
Paul Newman or others associated with the film appeared in the city, traveling the tri-
state area educating communities on the racism of the film, and picketing shooting of
the movie itself.

The Committee Against Fort Apache laid out clear goals at their first
organizational meeting at Lincoln Hospital. The first order of business was to demand
an immediate halt in production. They sent telegrams to Time-Life, producer David
Susskind, and star Paul Newman asking for meetings to discuss the film and its
message, and its impact on the community and on social perceptions of Black and

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20. Union Patriótica Puertorriqueña, “The Movie Fort Apache is a Racist Attack on Puerto
Ricans and Blacks,” 26 February 1980; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 6.
21. “Chronological History of the Committee Against Fort Apache,” n.d. (June 1980); UBP,
Box 8 Folder 7.
22. “Questions & Answers about the movie ‘Fort Apache,’” 4 August 1980; Caballero Papers,
Box 12 Folder 5.
Puerto Ricans more generally. While waiting to hear back about the possibility of in-person negotiation, the Committee also began preparing a lawsuit against these parties to force the cessation of filming through the courts. Beyond this, the Committee laid out four additional goals, and the organizational and activist experience of CAFA’s membership shows in the strategies they pursued. Each of the four goals placed the rising resistance to *Fort Apache: The Bronx* in relationship to broader efforts for change in the community. The Committee’s objectives were clear and direct, but they were not limited to the immediate context of the film itself. They show CAFA thinking about long-term strategies for organizing the South Bronx and challenging racist, sexist, and xenophobic representations in popular media, and they demonstrate a clear understanding of the significance of culture as a terrain of struggle in the 1980s.

First, CAFA would educate the community “about the effects of media stereotyping” and teach them about the connections between the film and the “overall situation” facing the South Bronx, “the deterioration of our living conditions, the rise of racism and police brutality.” CAFA would also use the mobilization against *Fort Apache* to “organize community resistance” and “build higher levels of unity between the Puerto Rican and Black communities through common struggle.” Connecting the experiences of these groups, and bringing them into a more firm and established cooperation with each other, was a central component of the response to the film’s production. They recognized that “mass struggle was key,” so “mass outreach in the
community and mass mobilization were primary.” As CAFA grew, this attention to multiracial organizing would help bring a wide range of people from around the US and overseas into a coalition of resistance.

Finally, the Committee pledged to “develop our community’s ability to use the media,” learning to use the same tools that were used to attack them in the community’s defense. While “understanding that this is a double-edged sword, and more often than not, it works against us,” CAFA also understood strongly the power of culture and representation to oppose a more powerful, wealthy force. Traditional organizing would be central to the efforts against *Fort Apache: The Bronx*, but it would be built in combination with and complimented by expressive culture.

The best historical account of the battle against *Fort Apache: The Bronx* is CAFA member and former Young Lords leader Richie Pérez’s 1985 essay. His description of the day-to-day opposition to the film, the boycotts, meetings with entertainment executives, and the efforts to educate the community about the implications of the film recalls the multiple styles of struggle the Committee and its allies practiced. Pérez wrote, “What set the context and gave all this real impact was the continuous opposition to the film in the streets of the Puerto Rican and black communities. Hundreds continued to march in ‘Stop Fort Apache’ protests. Thousands signed petitions against the film. Tens of thousands of leaflets were distributed at

23. “Chronological History of the Committee Against Fort Apache,” n.d. (June 1980); UBP, Box 8 Folder 7.
beaches, community block parties, and at any activity where people gathered. Musicians and poets staged a ‘Stop Fort Apache Cultural Arts Festival,’ attended by hundreds. Physical disruptions occurred whenever protestors were able to find out the shooting schedule in advance. CAFA members chanted, “Fort Apache we reject, treat our people with respect!” They carried posters that read “Paul Newman—from Liberal to Racist for $3 Million,” and “Indians are Not Savages—Neither Are We.”

The membership of the Committee Against Fort Apache helps demonstrate the array of organizing and protest strategies and tactics that CAFA could employ. Drawn from across the city, the Committee represented a variety of perspectives, constituencies, and professions. Equally diverse were the particular interests and organizational purposes that drove them to unite as a single-minded force against Fort Apache: The Bronx. Former Young Lord, radical educator, and community activist Richie Pérez took a leadership position. United Bronx Parents, led by Evelina Antonetty who Pérez credited for his politicization fifteen years earlier, brought its dynamic, multiracial membership. The Black and Latino Coalition Against Police Brutality is self-explanatory. Other groups included MEChA, the Community Organization of Progressive Dominicans, the Union of Patriotic Puerto Ricans, a number of local planning boards, teachers’ organizations, and the anti-racist white organization PAWS—People Against White Supremacy.

25. Pérez, “Committee Against Fort Apache.”
26. Pérez, “Committee Against Fort Apache.”
27. “Questions & Answers about the movie “Fort Apache,” 4 August 1980; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 5.
To these were added the Association of Hispanic Arts, AFRAM Associates, Black United Front, the professional organization of Puerto Ricans in the Behavioral Sciences Bohique, Inc., Coalition in Defense of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Rights, the militant Puerto Rican Independence organization El Comite—MINP, Independent Brooklyn CORE, New Rican Village, Puerto Rican Educators Association, and United Tremont Trades. Taller Boricua and El Museo del Barrio were well-known institutions in East Harlem that joined the Committee, their defense of Puerto Rican self-determination tied to their understandings of the representational importance of cultural production.  

CCNY’s Students for Bilingual Education as well as Planning Boards 1, 2, 4, and 6 from the Bronx joined the Committee, and a number of respected public figures joined in condemning the movie. City Councilmen Gerena Valentin and Wendel Foster joined Congressman Robert Garcia and State Senator Olga Mendez as elected officials supporting the boycott. Herman Badillo, former Congressman and longtime Bronx politician and activist, now lawyer and host of the “Urban Journal” talk-news show, threw his weight behind the effort with segments on his popular television program. The General Welfare Committee of the City Council offered its own opposition on May 15, 1980, passing a bill “condemning the racism of Fort Apache and calling all New Yorkers to boycott the film.” Fathers Morales of St. Ann’s Church and Gonzalez of St. Pius’ as well as Reverend Neil A. Connolly, whose Roman Catholic Vicariate of the South Bronx represented 24 churches, spoke out to their congregations and others

about the moral reasons for the boycott. The Medical Board of New York Medical College and the New York State Nurses Association, District 13, both opposed the characterizations of the community as well as way the medical profession was represented. *El Diario-La Prensa* and *Latin New York* magazine provided media outlets for the Committee’s announcements and regularly condemned the film. Helping shape the information that these media delivered, as well as the materials the CAFA distributed, were Committee member organizations including the Puerto Rican Institute for Media Advocacy (PRIMA) and the Visual Arts Research and Resource Center Relating to the Caribbean.29

**Educating the Community**

Once CAFA had laid out its objectives, the group developed and deployed a multi-pronged attack to raise awareness and muster support against the film. Not only did the film present “vicious stereotypes” of Blacks and Puerto Ricans, but it also offered “racist views on crucial issues affecting [their] survival,” from housing and medical care to police brutality and unemployment.30 That attitudes presented in the film would further solidify dominant conservative (white supremacist) ideas about the kinds of treatment that non-white populations deserved. With the first goal the cessation of production to give the city’s Black and Puerto Rican communities an opportunity to review the script, fifteen Committee members met on March 13th with

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29. “Questions & Answers about the movie “Fort Apache,”” 4 August 1980; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 5; “Chronological History of the Committee Against Fort Apache,” n.d. (June 1980); UBP, Box 8 Folder 7.
30. “Brief History and Recent Activities,” n.d. (December 1980); UBP, Box 8 Folder 7.

Their request to immediately halt production was refused. Fiorello was sensitive to concerns about misrepresenting the Bronx—he had lived there when he was young—but his “liberal, social worker mentality” left him unable to comprehend why South Bronx residents were not excited at the prospect of the jobs the filming brought with it, or the attempt to show the world the “problems” facing the neighborhood. Watkins simply did not understand the protests over what he repeatedly described as “merely a tender love story between a cop and a Puerto Rican nurse.”

Time-Life could not simply stop production, CAFA was told. Their concerns would be presented to the invested parties, but it was out of his hands. Meanwhile, filming continued. Word reached the Committee through the grapevine that crews would be shooting the night of March 21st at 149th Street and Third Avenue. CAFA mobilized a group to descend on the film crew, and they surrounded Newman’s car, forcing police to intervene and “rush him out of [the] area.” A press conference at Lincoln Hospital the next day continued to rally support for the boycott. The Committee was finalizing the lawsuit to stop production of the film, and filed it on March 24th with the New York City Supreme Court at the county courthouse in lower Manhattan.

32. “Chronological History of the Committee Against Fort Apache,” n.d. (June 1980); UBP, Box 8 Folder 7.
Fort Apache opponents also held a substantial demonstration outside the courthouse, aware of the media possibilities in this location so different from the Bronx filming sites at which they had been protesting. Time-Life brought in hired Black and Puerto Rican high school students from the South Bronx to hold a counter-demonstration. When they arrived, CAFA members gave these students the short version of the Committee's analysis of the film. The students turned on their employers, chased a Time-Life publicist out of the courthouse, and then told the assembled press how they had been hoodwinked by the production company.

Time-Life was determined to work against the Committee behind the scenes. Quietly over the last week of March 1980, various CAFA activists were contacted through an intermediary to see if they could “be bought off.” Time-Life also brought on board a new public relations firm specializing in the Spanish-language press. Initially, they succeeded in getting two articles published in El Diario that were more favorable to the film than previous pieces. However, “they were unable to find any individuals or organizations that would defend the film publicly” despite contacting a number of politicians and community groups in a desperate attempt to find a Black or Puerto Rican voice to support Time-Life’s position. The small bit of favorable coverage they managed to get into El Diario was contradicted the next week, as the April 3 Village Voice came out in support of CAFA’s position against Fort Apache: The Bronx.

34. “Chronological History of the Committee Against Fort Apache,” n.d. (June 1980); UBP, Box 8 Folder 7.
The growing publicity over the protests against the film, aided by coverage of the lawsuit filing and the *Voice* article, spurred a busy April for the Committee. They pursued several avenues simultaneously, drawing on the varied experience and specialties of the Committee’s members. Some hit the streets on a “leafletting offensive,” spreading info about the film and announcing an April 12 public hearing called by Bronx councilman Gerena Valentin.\(^{35}\) Others crashed a Paul Newman press conference he had called to defend himself against charges of racism for his role in the film. Pickets and flyers accused him of profiting from this racism, declaring “Paul Newman—from Liberal to Racist for $3 Million!”\(^{36}\) The Committee also went to work on *El Diario*, demanding and receiving equal space to air their position on *Fort Apache*. This resulted in an April 10th full-page article explaining the community’s opposition, which was reinforced by an editorial the next day siding with the Committee Against Fort Apache. Even though other outlets like the *New York Post* condemned the Committee’s efforts, the increased media attention drew a growing number of people into the fray.

CAFA also made clear that this was not the first time that non-white communities had opposed films that misrepresented them, especially in New York. *Birth of a Nation*, they told audiences, had sparked protests so severe they turned into riots in 1915. In 1939, *Gone With the Wind* was faced with protests strong enough to convince its producers to remove some of the most offensive scenes, and New York pickets were central to the effort. More recently in the 1960s and 1970s films like

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35. “Chronological History of the Committee Against Fort Apache,” n.d. (June 1980); UBP, Box 8 Folder 7.
36. Pérez, “Committee Against Fort Apache.”
Badge 373, another anti-Puerto Rican film, had been boycotted and driven out of New York by organized protests. On the West Coast, Chicanos had opposed the movie Boulevard Nights over its “sensational and negative treatment of Chicano youth” and were able to force it to close in a number of cities. Protests against NBC’s slavery drama Beulah Land and a new Charlie Chan movie were happening concurrently with CAFA’s efforts, and they were joining forces with the Black and Asian activists challenging these productions.

They tied these critiques to both Fort Apache and the longer history of racism, imperialist, and genocide that connected all these films to contemporary treatment of nonwhite populations. Committee member Diana Caballero pointed out that young people in the United States were taught that “killing indians is part of the American way of life.” The film perpetuated the stereotype of “Native Americans as bloodthirsty savages, treacherous, killers of innocent women and children, redskins, drunkards and rapists…. The fact that the Native Americans were defending their homeland against white invasion” was never a part of Hollywood representations. Caballero argued that Fort Apache continued this legacy. By associating Bronx residents with the frontier myth of Native American savagery, the film depicted them as “something opposite good, as an omnipresent threat to civilization.” Fort Apache suggested that the South Bronx and its Black and Puerto Rican residents needed to be destroyed to protect New York, and by extension the nation.

38. Handwritten notes, n.d.; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 5.
The Committee used these examples to rouse people from passivity, encouraging them to recognize that they could change the way the world saw their communities and demand dignity and respect. CAFA called for a boycott, the easiest way for most people to oppose the film. “By refusing to see the movie,” they declared, “you will be making a statement that our community will not tolerate racist stereotyping against us. We will not pay to see ourselves degraded.” It was a way of “hitting the film-makers in the pocketbook.” Already, pamphlets noted, producers had started to take notice after a few months of Committee activity. One, making a movie about the Lower East Side, had told the *New York Times* that he was “spending half his time” trying to “satisfy the community” because he “did not want to go through the same problems that *Fort Apache* had in the South Bronx.” While this was not the same as actually understanding the ways that film was used to reinforce stereotypes about nonwhite communities, this director at least recognized that there were struggles over the meaning of media representations and was trying to negotiate them. This was evidence that “We can stop this film.”³⁹ Supporting the Committee Against *Fort Apache* and helping build the boycott, they argued, was an effective strategy for pursuing increased self-determination for Black and Brown communities.

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³⁹ “Questions & Answers about the movie “Fort Apache,”” 4 August 1980; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 5.
Committee members also worked hard at the street and community level to garner support. They spent lots of time “organizing on a one-to-one basis” and carried out numerous “door-to-door offensives.” Certain groups were targeted for special outreach and attention, including community planning boards, school boards, teachers groups and student organizations, unions, day care centers, health workers, and media and arts groups. Many of these groups wound up becoming members of CAFA as the movement grew, or hosted repeated presentations by the Committee.

CAFA’s outreach efforts were bearing fruit. The April 12th public hearing called by Councilman Valentin was held at Lincoln Hospital, historically a site of Puerto Rican struggles for justice and the same hospital taken over a decade earlier by the Young Lords. It was the major hospital in the area, and clearly was represented in *Fort Apache* as the location from which corrupt doctors and nurses provided the South Bronx with its supply of heroin. Over 125 people attended, and more than 30 testified as to the impact the film would have on the community and on public perception.

“CAFA worked hard to build this” hearing into something significant, and “it was a success.” Five days later, Tom Walker, the former cop who had written the book *Fort Apache*, publicly denounced the film and said he was going to sue Time-Life himself for stealing and corrupting his text. Walker’s disassociation was echoed at the end of the month by the NYPD’s Hispanic Society, some of whom had been assigned to

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40. Pérez, “Committee Against Fort Apache.”
41. “Chronological History of the Committee Against Fort Apache,” n.d. (June 1980); UBP, Box 8 Folder 7.
guard filming sites and others sent undercover into CAFA meetings. The Hispanic Society publicly condemned the film, agreeing with CAFA’s assertions that it promoted racist, derogatory stereotypes about Blacks and Puerto Ricans.  

The momentum continued with an April 19th march of over 350 people through the streets of the South Bronx where the film was to be shot. Rev. Neil Connolly, Roman Catholic Vicar representing 24 churches in the area, spoke vehemently against the film. It was “obsessed with scars only,” he told the determined crowd, and deliberately ignored “the thousands of church-going people, dedicated community workers, self-sacrificing parents” fighting every day to improve life in the South Bronx. “We are outraged at Time-Life Films,” he concluded, “for continuing to beat the drums of racism and classism for the price of a dollar.”

Support in the community was growing for the Committee’s efforts, but the Courts saw it differently. The case against Time-Life was thrown out on April 21st, the charges dismissed as “speculative connotation” and “ideological innuendo.” The ideological innuendo, of course, was precisely what CAFA was arguing, but the failure of the Courts to see how popular culture might reinforce negative stereotypes was something that the Committee anticipated. They considered their ability to tie Time-Life up in the legal system for several weeks to have been a success of its own, not to mention the media attention that the case garnered for their cause.

42. “Chronological History of the Committee Against Fort Apache,” n.d. (June 1980); UBP, Box 8 Folder 7.; Pérez, “Committee Against Fort Apache.”
43. “Chronological History of the Committee Against Fort Apache,” n.d. (June 1980); UBP, Box 8 Folder 7.; Pérez, “Committee Against Fort Apache.”
44. Pérez, “Committee Against Fort Apache.”
The court defeat hardly caused a blip for the Committee. The same day the decision came, they launched a three-day “Stop the Movie Fort Apache Arts Festival,” cosponsored by New Rican Village. Held at Soundscape at 500 W 52nd Street in midtown Manhattan, the three-day event brought together a number of writers, artists, and performers to rally support for CAFA from across the city. Music was provided by Libre and Friends, jazz flutist Dave Valentin, and famed percussionists Rafael Cortijo and Ray Barretto. Americo Casiano, Gylan Kain, and Pedro Pietri provided poetry. Starting at 9 pm each night and free to all, the festival mixed music, poetry performances, and political organizing. New Rican Village’s position as a center of Puerto Rican and Latin culture in New York City, coupled with Soundscape’s rapidly-growing reputation for multicultural mixing, made the Arts Festival an excellent way to move the anti-Fort Apache struggle into new audiences and gain additional support. Hundreds attended the Festival, and each night the Committee made a presentation about the importance of fighting Fort Apache.

CAFA made regular appeals to the South Bronx community, as well as to potential allies beyond its boundaries, to join them in opposition to the film. Holding true to the expressed goals of the Committee, they kept a clear focus on popular

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46. Co-led by Manny Oquendo and Andy González, Libre and Friends was a loose collective based on Oquendo and González’s group Libre (formerly known as Conjunto Libre). Accessed 12 September 2014, http://vimeo.com/77928556
47. Arts Festival flyer, April 1980; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 5.
culture as a terrain of struggle, a place where ideas about the future of minority populations would be hashed out. The film was not just about the South Bronx, it was about all Black and Latina/o communities. As CAFA’s success in connecting with activists far from New York suggests, the film was threatening to New York communities, but also had shaped and reinforced ideas about non-white populations even outside the United States. The Committee’s attention to the ways that frontier discourse was used to justify and excuse the “brutality” that faced South Bronx residents also shows that CAFA was aware of the historical legacy of this othering. They rejected the film’s characterization of their communities as savages, but not by distinguishing themselves from Native Americans as other groups have so often joined in oppressing other minorities as they sought acceptance in US society. Instead, they loudly denounced all racist justifications for violence and marched with pickets declaring, “Native Americans aren’t savages, and neither are we!”

The Committee was clear that the film was about more than the South Bronx. On May 6th, CAFA had a member in San Francisco meeting with Asian-American groups organizing against a revival of the racist character “Charlie Chan.” A few days later, demonstrations began in San Francisco. This cluster of organizations would become the Coalition of Asians to Nix Charlie Chan (CAN Charlie Chan), and would work in cooperation with the Committee Against Fort Apache over the next year. At the same time, CAFA’s continued to recruit support from the community most directly impacted. With a long legacy of marginalization, exclusion, and neglect, South Bronx

residents both Black and Brown were likely to understand personally the kind of attitudes *Fort Apache: The Bronx* reinforced. Harassed by police and looked down upon as objects of pity (at best) by elected officials, residents already knew that their neighborhoods were regarded as “garbage dumps where only violent savages, prostitutes and degenerates live.” When CAFA pointed out that the film “denies our humanity” and depicted them as “‘animals’ who would destroy themselves and the community” if the police-cavalry did not stop them, few if any found grounds to argue with these conclusions. However, people may not have thought through the ways that these kinds of representations “justified... the brutality of polices,” blamed urban communities of color for their “worsening conditions,” and “set public opinion against our struggles for survival and advancement.”

CAFA’s success expanding beyond the Black and Brown South Bronx and organizing with activists from marginalized and oppressed groups across society was the result of their linking the racialization of the South Bronx to US imperialism more broadly throughout the 1970s. Freestyle politics paid dividends for growing the coalition against *Fort Apache*.

On May 16th, the filmmakers set up right outside of the United Bronx Parents daycare center on 162nd St. and Winchester Ave. to film a prostitution scene and were challenged by local residents who objected to having “their homes depicted as places of prostitution.” Unable to film amidst the chanting of more than 100 protesters, the film crews retreated to their trailers, not emerging until hours later and only after a substantial police contingent arrived to cordon the area for their safety. Filming after

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49. “Questions & Answers about the movie “Fort Apache,”” 4 August 1980; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 5.
that could continue only under armed guard, and protesters called it a victory that it took more than five hours to shoot a scene that only lasted three minutes of screen time.\footnote{51}

The ongoing protests in the community moved Bronx Congressman Robert Garcia to defend his constituents. He held a press conference on the steps of the 41\textsuperscript{st} Precinct on May 19\textsuperscript{th}, condemning the movie and calling on officials to withdraw Time-Life’s permits for making the film. Garcia directly connected the treatment of the South Bronx and the experiences of native peoples a century earlier. “Fort Apache, of the Bronx or of any other town in America, stands for what it wrong in our country,” Garcia declared. “As the early Fort Apache of the West cut down minority Americans who fought and demanded equal rights and justice in their country, today’s Fort Apache again has minorities fighting and struggling against the same prejudices and stereotype injustice.”\footnote{52} The next week, a march of 120 moved through the Fort Apache area itself, carrying an effigy of Paul Newman and chanting, “‘No se necesita, pelicula racista!’—‘We don’t need racist movies!’\footnote{53}”

The Committee sent members to leaflet a dinner hosted by the Puerto Rican Day Parade Committee on Friday June 6th, then tabled during the parade that Sunday. CAFA also had a contingent in the parade as it marched up Fifth Avenue. They carried a banner against Fort Apache, and received an “overwhelmingly positive” response from the hundreds of thousands of spectators. The next day, CAFA joined a

\begin{footnotes}
\item[51] “Chronological History of the Committee Against Fort Apache,” n.d. (June 1980); UBP, Box 8 Folder 7.
\item[52] Congressman Robert Garcia, Press release, 19 May 1980; UBP, Box 8 Folder 7.
\item[53] “Chronological History of the Committee Against Fort Apache,” n.d. (June 1980); UBP, Box 8 Folder 7.
\end{footnotes}
demonstration against Mayor Koch, where they shared their anger over *Fort Apache* with a different audience. On Wednesday, it was back to the 41st Precinct, protesting recent police beatings of Puerto Ricans in the Aldus Street area. On June 22nd, the Committee leafletted services at San Juan Batista Episcopal Church at 948 E. 156th Street in the Bronx. This marked the beginning of a month of activity that saw CAFA move into many different avenues of engagement. June 26th was a dance thrown by the Puerto Rican Educators Association, a well-established group fighting to improve general living conditions in New York. CAFA made a brief presentation, and helped distribute copies of the PREA newsletter with a lead article on *Fort Apache*. PREA donated the money raised by the dance to CAFA’s effort, providing material support as well as their participation.

For the next round of leafletting, presentations, and tabling, CAFA produced “Boycott *Fort Apache*” t-shirts for activists to wear and distribute. They took these to additional events at New Rican Village, and the August 2nd CAFA-fundraising picnic hosted by Students United for Bilingual Education (SUBE). Later that week found them at the New York Coliseum for the Hispanic World’s Fair, where the crowd of 80,000 attendees provided plenty of opportunities to recruit opposition to *Fort Apache*. At the same time, CAFA had delegates actively working the streets in the South Bronx at the “People’s Convention,” formally known as the Counter Convention of the Coalition for the People’s Alternative. Opposing the Democratic National Convention

54. “Chronological History of the Committee Against Fort Apache,” n.d. (June 1980); UBP, Box 8 Folder 7.
at Madison Square Garden, the People’s Convention was set in the devastated blocks of Charlotte Street that had hosted President Carter’s visit in 1977.\(^{56}\)

Ronald Reagan stopped by on his campaign tour on August 6th, two days before the convention officially opened. Against a backdrop of buildings with the John Fekner pieces “DECAY” and “BROKEN PROMISES” painted in huge block letters, Reagan was booed by a hostile crowd chanting “You ain’t gonna do nothing!” and “Go back to California!”\(^{57}\) Hundreds of “alternate representatives” came to the tent city erected to host them. The Coalition brought together activists “from the labor, tenant’s, neighborhood, Black, Native American, Hispanic, Asian-American, women’s, lesbian/gay, peace, anti-nuclear, elderly, religious left, international solidarity, civil liberties, and left movements.”\(^{58}\) Highlighting the contradictions between the unfulfilled promises of democracy and the ongoing reality of the South Bronx, this was a prime space for CAFA to recruit allies on its home turf.

With six weeks of steady street-level work to spread the word, CAFA started an additional layer of organization. CAFA first reached out to other community groups on August 11th, working to establish links in El Barrio. This expanded their reach beyond the Bronx, and was instrumental in building the broader coalition that would challenge *Fort Apache* at the citywide level. By August 22\(^{nd}\), CAFA representatives were in San Francisco a second time, meeting with CAN Charlie Chan, one of a number of groups concerned with minority representation in the media with whom

\(^{56}\) Coalition for a People’s Alternative in 1980, *Manifieste su Opinion*, 1980; UBP, Box 8 Folder 8.

\(^{57}\) Jonnes, 333, 336.

\(^{58}\) “Convention del Pueblo 1980” poster, 1980; UBP, Box 8 Folder 8; Jonnes, 341-342.
CAFA would partner in the coming months. Six days after the CAN Charlie Chan meeting, CAFA members were active participants in a Women Against Pornography protest against the film “Dressed to Kill.” They wrapped up the month with a poster display, literature table, and leafleting at the annual Fiesta Folklorica in Central Park on the 31st. 59

Meanwhile, CAFA was planning another kind of outreach during the month. They were preparing a slide show about the South Bronx and media representation that would be a more powerful visual tool at meetings and events than the posters and leaflets they had used to date. Some of the more musically inclined members of CAFA were considering other ways to spread the message, the sonic networks of New York City a particularly effective way of reaching potential allies and keeping people engaged. Among the projects they were working on were the “Fort Apache Plena” and, catching the pulse of New York City’s youth, the “Fort Apache Bop.” 60 The latter would become what may be the first historical instance of hip-hop being used as an explicitly political tool by activists for social justice.

*From Protests to Premiere*

1981 started off with a bang. CAFA had gathered a wide range of support during the fall of 1980, and started the new year with a redoubled attention on the presentation and reception of *Fort Apache*. The efficacy with which CAFA had

articulated their seemingly isolated struggle over the representation of the Black and Brown residents of the South Bronx to broader ongoing fights against racism, imperialism, and the oppression of minority populations was reflected in the constellation of supporters and allies they relied upon. The year began with preparations to stop screenings of the film wherever possible. The first target was the Gemini Theater, in midtown Manhattan, where a pre-release screening for the community was supposed to be held. When Time-Life and the theater owners cancelled the screening and tried to set up another “for both ‘pro’ and anti-*Fort Apache* groups,” CAFA was incensed. This was an attempt to dilute CAFA’s organizing against the film by bringing in sympathetic (read: racist) viewers to counter the arguments against *Fort Apache*. Three days later, on January 8th, CAFA was protesting the unplanned rescheduling outside the Gemini, with a hundred people braving temperatures in the single digits to voice their displeasure.\(^{61}\) Committee members crashed a press screening of the film at the MGM building the next day, distributing leaflets to Time-Life’s invited audience until police were called.

The rapidity and reach of CAFA’s organizing was demonstrated the weekend of January 10-11, 1981. Twentieth-Century Fox, now handling distribution of the film, held a special press weekend event and screening of *Fort Apache: The Bronx* at the Hilton in Atlanta, Georgia. Intended to generate positive reviews, the event was held down South in part to avoid CAFA protesters and the expense of travel made the move partially effective. CAFA did send one representative, and also had ally Juan

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\(^{61}\) “Chronology of the Committee Against Fort Apache From January to April 1981,” April 1981; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 15.
Gonzalez, now reporting for the *Philadelphia Daily News*, in attendance on his own press credentials. The Committee amplified their efforts in Atlanta by coordinating with a Black activist group in the city who offered a physical presence, and legal resources if necessary, outside the hotel. The CAFA rep, armed with official-looking press packets, stood outside the hotel and delivered them to the invited journalists and critics as they boarded a bus to be taken to the screening. This information generated a lot of discussion and debate aboard the bus, “sympathetic reporters” later confirmed to CAFA, and led several writers to contact the CAFA agent at the hotel for an interview.  

At a press conference held that Sunday featuring Paul Newman, director Dan Petrie, and Peter Tessitore, one of the cops on whom the film was based, many of the questions asked them to address the protests and community opposition to the film. Half of the press conference was taken up with questions about opposition to the film. Newman was “visibly angry,” Petrie “stunned,” and the Twentieth-Century Fox reps were “very upset.” Petrie stammered that they had made changes in response to the protests, contradicting their own claims that it was just a “small but vocal minority” who were causing trouble for the film. The producers had made some changes in the script, and rewritten the final lines of dialogue to project a “hopeful” message for the South Bronx.  

On the other hand, Petrie told reporters that they had almost been chased out of the South Bronx by “a mob” that descended on them during filming—this was the

62. “The Selling of ‘Fort Apache,’” January 1981; UBP Box 8 Folder 7; see also Pérez, “Committee Against Fort Apache.”
May 16th confrontation outside of the United Bronx Parents daycare center on 162nd St. and Winchester Ave. stopped by local residents who objected to having “their homes depicted as places of prostitution” intervened to stop the filming. After the meeting ended, reporters rushed to talk to the CAFA rep waiting in the lobby but he was surrounded and removed by plainclothes Atlanta police who threatened him with arrest. The nationwide press was now aware of the degree and seriousness of the protests, and the tenor of their reporting had been influenced by the “black and Latino unity” that had made CAFA’s efforts in Atlanta possible.⁶⁴

Back in New York, Time-Life made another attempt to turn the community against CAFA. January 22nd found the production company holding a community screening at the Lincoln Center, with a specially-invited list of South Bronx neighborhood leaders and community groups. The Committee, however, obtained copies of the invitation, duplicated them, and used them to gain access to the screening where they distributed anti-Fort Apache leaflets.⁶⁵ They then held a meeting at the nearby offices of Channel 13. Despite Time-Life’s hope that their invited guests would endorse the film and dismiss CAFA as a “small, unrepresentative group,” after the screening “more than forty representatives of community planning boards and educational, media, religious, and civil rights groups angrily denounced the movie and its promoters.”⁶⁶ Rather than dividing the community, the invited screening—with

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⁶⁴. “The Selling of ‘Fort Apache,’” January 1981; UBP, Box 8 Folder 7; see also Pérez, “Committee Against Fort Apache.”
⁶⁵. “Chronology of the Committee Against Fort Apache From January to April 1981,” April 1981; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 15.
⁶⁶. Pérez, “Committee Against Fort Apache.”
CAFA intervention—served as a rallying point and united the Puerto Rican South Bronx even more strongly.

The momentum from these events fueled the Committee, and the final weeks of January were a flurry of activity as they launched a full offensive across the city. CAFA printed and distributed thousands of “Boycott Fort Apache” stickers. Street teams blanketed communities with leaflets and information in El Barrio, the Lower East Side and along 14th Street, and in Brooklyn. This was supported over the airwave by the popular labor and community affairs program “Building Bridges,” hosted by Mimi Rosenberg on WBAI. On the 31st, “Building Bridges” aired a show taped in December. The episode focused on racism, sexism, and inequality in film and television. The Committee Against Fort Apache was joined by Women Against Pornography, opposing *Dressed to Kill*, by Gay and Lesbian Film Makers (*Windows, Cruising*), Organization of Asian Americans (*Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan*), and the Cultural Front of the Black United Front (NBC’s *Beulah Land* miniseries). This broadcast also marked the debut of the “Fort Apache Bop” recording that CAFA had recently completed, formally introducing the hip hop song as a political tool.

Broadcast and print media coverage followed from a variety of other sources. WKCR hosted a 3-hour show on February 2nd that featured CAFA responses to call-in questions as well as a rebroadcast of a segment of Herman Badillo’s man-on-the-street “Urban Journal” from May 1980 focused on *Fort Apache* protests. February 4th brought an article from Marva York in the *Daily News* and a taped interview for

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67. “Chronology of the Committee Against Fort Apache From January to April 1981,” April 1981; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 15; WBAI had also hosted the Young Lords’ “Palante” radio show in the early 1970s.
Channel 13 news, the same station that hosted the community meeting after Time-Life’s screening for potential South Bronx allies. A CAFA chapter in Boston was also established. The next day Roger Dawson, longtime host of WJIT’s top-ranked, bilingual salsa and merengue program, made multiple on-air announcements about the boycott. CAFA had effectively gotten its message out to a wide and diverse audience, through channels they trusted, just in time for a showdown over the film’s opening.68

*Fort Apache* was scheduled to premiere on February 6th, and CAFA was there with signs in hand picketing the opening. The Committee claimed its first victory in the battle against *Fort Apache: The Bronx* that day. They shut the theater down and the film never showed there, instead making its debut at Loews Orpheum cinema slightly north. CAFA protesters followed, and 350 marched on the theater as the film began to roll.69 They had been circumvented by the last-minute move, yet were determined to have their voices heard by moviegoers. For three days, they picketed the Orpheum, and “extensive media coverage educated hundreds of thousands more about the protests.”70 CAFA’s goal of using the media to its advantage was starting to bear fruit.

The Committee’s work to establish relationships with outside groups was also paying dividends. The Gemini and Orpheum protests were reflected in a number of cities. In Pennsylvania, the Philadelphia CAFA chapter postponed the opening for a week. Their efforts were so effective that they were hit with an injunction limiting the

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68. “Chronology of the Committee Against Fort Apache From January to April 1981,” April 1981; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 15.
69. “Chronology of the Committee Against Fort Apache From January to April 1981,” April 1981; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 15.
70. Pérez, “Committee Against Fort Apache.”
protest to four picketers at a time, a minimum of 100 feet from the theater. In Hollywood, MEChA demonstrated on opening night, following up on the resolution made by 40 MEChA chapters at the 1980 conference to support the boycott in whatever ways possible. The mere threat of demonstrations postponed the opening of *Fort Apache* in Jersey City, and when it finally debuted New Jersey CAFA members were joined by protesters from New York. Students at SUNY campuses including Binghamton and New Paltz successfully stopped showings in their towns. Organizing, demonstrations, and protests also took place in Rochester, Miami, Boston, Albuquerque, among others. Lateral protests were effective as well. A “benefit showing” of *Charlie Chan and the Curse of the Dragon Lady* at the Ziegfeld Theater organized by Montifiore Hospital for February 8th was also cancelled. CAFA’s presentation to the Social Medicine program earlier in January proved instrumental in this CAN Charlie Chan-led effort.

Building on the success of the Gemini protest and the attention the actions at the Orpheum garnered, the Committee Against Fort Apache continued to widen their reach. Over the following weeks, CAFA members appeared on Channel 7’s “Page 7”, a 1/2 discussion show with audience questions hosted by Ernie Anastos, and did an interview with Diane Lacy on her WWRL call-in radio show (both Feb. 15), and taped a Spanish-language interview for Channel 47 and an interview for WWRL broadcast during morning rush hour (Feb. 17). February 18th, Channel 5’s midday show featured

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71. CAFA Bulletin, 13 April 1981; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 5.
72. Pérez, “Committee Against Fort Apache.”
73. “Chronology of the Committee Against Fort Apache From January to April 1981,” April 1981; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 15.
the Committee Against Fort Apache members, Marilyn Smith co-chair of the Longwood Historic District Community Association in the heart of the 41st Precinct, and Dr. Friedman from Prospect Hospital. They faced off in a heated debate against *Fort Apache* producer Marty Richards, former Detective Thomas Mulhearn on whom Newman’s character was based, and Ralph Nieves, a police officer serving as the film’s technical advisor, with both pro and con voices from the audience. Later that evening, CAFA members further defended their position on the WBAI call-in show “Illuminations.”

CAFA’s radio and television blitz started to pay dividends beyond airtime for formal members of the Committee. They were garnering support from allies and other interested parties. Former Young Lord Pablo “Yoruba” Guzman appeared on a February 23 call-in show on WLIR to offer his analysis of the film and support CAFA’s efforts. WBAI, clearly on the Committee’s side, aired a live “Newyorican Express” on February 27th featuring two CAFA members as well as two community relations officers from “Fort Apache” itself, both of whom were Puerto Rican and strongly opposed the film.

Additionally, this increased presence resulted in a number of requests for more information. These presentations, appearances, and slide shows helped further develop the multiracial coalition that was instrumental to CAFA’s plans. During the first weeks

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74. “Chronology of the Committee Against Fort Apache From January to April 1981,” April 1981; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 15.; Smith was co-chair of the Longwood Historic District Community Association; see David W. Dunlap, “South Bronx Neighbors Hold Devastation at Bay,” *New York Times*, 10 October 1982: 54.
75. “Chronology of the Committee Against Fort Apache From January to April 1981,” April 1981; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 15.
of March 1981, the Committee traveled to a number of destinations. They presented on “Racism and the Mass Media” at the Third World Law Students Conference at Columbia University, reestablishing the community-campus connections that had flourished a decade earlier. At Museo del Barrio, there was a presentation for International Women’s Day. Following a TV appearance in Springfield, Massachusetts, CAFA at the “Racism and Sexism Symposium” at University of Massachusetts, Amherst where symposium’s exhibit had a significant portion devoted to *Fort Apache* struggle. They also participated in a debate about the 1st Amendment and media racism at New York Law School, alongside CAFA attorney Williams Kunstler from the Center for Constitutional Rights, Vernon Mason of the National Conference of Black Lawyers, and the American Civil Liberties Union.76

March 19th found them back in the streets, in a demonstration with Women Against Pornography against *Lolita* that was “militant” enough to close the play down within several days. They celebrated this success by crashing *Fort Apache* producer Marty Richards’ birthday party at the swanky Jacques Restaurant in midtown, infuriating Richards and forcing him to run through picket lines to get into his own party. Despite aggressive behavior by his bodyguard and restaurant security, picketers kept their cool and avoided arrest by police who showed up to defend the producer. Gossip columnists ridiculed Richards the next day for crying, “It’s humiliating!” about being confronted by the protesters. The *Daily News* remarked, “Picketing birthday?

76. “Chronology of the Committee Against Fort Apache From January to April 1981,” April 1981; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 15.
That takes the cake!” Puns aside, the protest was quite serious. CAFA materials distributed at the protest declared there would a “personal price” to pay for him and “other racist profiteers” who used “liberal platitudes” to disguise their appeals to the “most reactionary sentiments” in the nation. They did not make threats, but hinted strongly that there might be more than just film boycotts on the horizon.

**The Other Side of the Sword: Media, Cultural Production, and Resistance**

In addition to the attention these kinds of guerrilla acts attracted, CAFA’s presentations and discussions were where they really pursued their goal of teaching their communities about the political power of media representation. As a community struggling against overwhelming odds, the South Bronx was doubly victimized by a power structure that left it short of resources, and a media that showed the community as deserving of its problems. The Committee’s ability to analyze the ideological work done by mainstream media representations of the South Bronx, including not only the film but also newspapers and magazines covering the film, was central to building an oppositional movement that stretched beyond the community’s borders.

Community protests in March 1980 had forced Time-Life to abandon an early publicity campaign. CAFA and allies rallied against ads calling the South Bronx a “40-block area” of “youth gangs, winos, junkies, pimps, hookers, maniacs, cop killers, and the embattled 41st Precinct, just hanging in there.” Subsequent ads concentrated on

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77. “Chronology of the Committee Against Fort Apache From January to April 1981,” April 1981; Caballero Papers, Box 12 Folder 15.
Newman’s appeal and downplayed the setting of the film as a focal point. However, Time-Life’s info packets for journalists contained enough information to make it appealing, and some—particularly gossip columnists—stated promoting the film after advance viewings.

This was an early opportunity for CAFA to educate about the power of media to influence and change perceptions. They did a racial analysis of the journalists to make clear to their own communities and to other audiences the ways that *Fort Apache: The Bronx* would negatively impact perceptions of the neighborhood. The early approach of using gossip columnists was part of an “overall strategy” by Time-Life to build “an audience that will eagerly await the film.” The Committee pointed out in their flyers the need to “examine what messages these white ‘journalists’” took from the movie and the info packets. This would reveal what messages and ideas the journalists, in turn, “broadcast” through their columns and magazines, what messages “many other whites will receive from the movie.” The work that the gossip columnists and other advance journalists did established the terms on which most viewers would consume, digest, and comprehend the film, and CAFA was aware of the large audiences reached by these fan magazines.

By the time audiences saw the film, they were already prejudiced to see to a land of lawless savagery. This is what the Committee Against Fort Apache was battling in the media. *New York* magazine was calling the 41st Precinct “the city’s most
dangerous beat.”\(^81\) The article did acknowledge protests against the film, but urged audiences to see it and make up their own mind. CAFA pointed out that if this were the strategy, Time-Life would have already made their profits by exploiting and denigrating South Bronx residents, and it would be too late: “everyone does not have to take poison to know that it kills. Once the movie has been seen and analyzed, we don’t have to all see it.” Other publications did not even go so far as to acknowledge the protests, instead telling readers that the South Bronx actually benefited because the film-makers engaged them in a “learning process over filmmaking.” Any education was a boon to the area, the entertainment rags claimed. The South Bronx was “a place where New York’s finest have to be the cavalry coming to the rescue, because at Fort Apache crime is a way of life” and “citizens ignore the law in order to survive.”\(^82\)

Significantly, the two major entertainment magazines hyping the film, Gossip and Rona Barrett’s Hollywood, were published by the same company and shared offices. They are “obviously put out by the same people,” CAFA highlighted, but as separate publications “they give the impression of widespread praise for the movie.” Over at the Daily News, columnists were “running a heavy hype” of the movie that would “repel” viewers with is “graphic display of violence” and “realistic illustration of how seamy life can be just a short distance from the glamor of Manhattan.” The Committee’s analysts picked up on this, arguing that the message it carried was that


life in the South Bronx would “repel” the average white citizen because life there was “one scene of criminal violence after another.” On top of that, these articles carried the implicit threat that the savages of the South Bronx could cross the river and invade Manhattan, threatening the normal, law-abiding citizens to whom Bronxites were being compared. With write-ups like this, it is easy to understand how audiences were being preconditioned to view the film in a certain way, reinforcing the importance of the Committee’s efforts to delay the films release and boycott its screenings.

However, the Committee’s determined organizing and concerted campaigns began to pay dividends, even in the mainstream media previously criticized for running *Fort Apache* advertisements. The opening of the film found a number of press outlets viewing the movie in the context that CAFA had worked for a year to establish. Many reporters and critics came out of their screenings agreeing that the protests against *Fort Apache: The Bronx* were justified, and that the film did serve to reinforce racist ideas about the people of the South Bronx and by extension Black and Brown communities across the United States.

CAFA’s efforts to gain community control over media spin and representation of the South Bronx extended beyond CAFA-affiliated journalists by early 1981. The *Washington Post* declared the film exploitative, full of “gratuitous, grandstanding sensationalism.” *Newsweek* opined that the film could “only reinforce the groundswell of hostility toward America’s internal Third World,” and the *Wall Street Journal* concurred that it could only result in “the hardening of preconceived notions

and the reinforcement of prejudice.”\textsuperscript{85} It was not “just another harmless look at neighborhood crime,” noted \textit{Jewish Currents}, but a point of view encouraging “deep hostility to minority groups.” The dire straits of the South Bronx were unlikely to improve under Reagan’s “budget-balancing act against the minorities and the poor,” and were “sure to get worse once this film is shown in areas already hostile to New York.”\textsuperscript{86} Philadelphia City Councilman John Anderson told the \textit{Philadelphia Daily News} that the movie was “an attack on urban centers. It validates the efforts to ignore the cities by saying they are beyond hope.”\textsuperscript{87}

The mobilization against \textit{Fort Apache} did generate a discussion about race, space, and the future of nonwhite populations. Importantly, this conversation moved beyond the circles of CAFA and raised questions elsewhere. Like other publications, the \textit{Jewish Current} review went far beyond the talking points distributed by CAFA, and these more critical reviews demonstrate that the Committee’s efforts had an impact at the national level. David Platt wrote that the movie was the work of racists who neither knew nor cared of the difference between tribes and the unique histories they carried. “They’re all Apaches” to the filmmakers, and “the U.S. Cavalry approach to ‘Apaches’ is all that matters.” He drew the connection between historic depictions of native peoples, and how \textit{Fort Apache: The Bronx} and related productions represented Black and Brown efforts for justice. Despite the film’s opening admonition—added following CAFA demands—that the movie was not about the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[87] “The Selling of ‘Fort Apache,’” January 1981; UBP, Box 8 Folder 7.
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neighborhood’s “responsible” residents, a critical scene in the film shows the police attacking and beating the representatives of the “South Bronx People’s Party,” a fictional composite of area activists. “As in the old ‘Apache’ films,” observed Platt, ‘the audience is kept in the dark about the true nature of the injustices which motivated the formation of the War Party or the People’s Party.” He concluded with a call for all Jews to join in the movement against the film for its efforts to “degrade and dehumanize,” and in “categorically rejecting” the idea that the South Bronx was “forbidden ‘Apache’ territory.” It was, rather, yet another place where minorities suffered at the racist hands of “the forces of law and order.”

Cultural critic Lucy Lippard argued in *Artforum* that the film demonstrated how laws and justice were being differentially applied in the United States, and that artists needed to find common cause with oppressed communities. “As we should have learned from American history,” she wryly noted, “it’s not the soldiers in Fort Apache who need protection; it’s the Indians who are under siege.” This shift in media discussion did not turn the nation’s urban policies around. It does demonstrate, however, that in the face of racial hostility or at best utter apathy, a concerted grassroots effort could shift the terms of public dialogue. In the political climate of the United States since the late 1960s, this is a significant accomplishment.

With *Fort Apache: The Bronx* at long last opening around the country, the protests to stop the film effectively transitioned into a media awareness campaign.

independent of CAFA. Journalists and critics unaffiliated with the Committee wrote reviews that framed the film in the context CAFA had been fighting for it to be seen. By the end of March, the Committee was working to leave a more lasting impression that built on their critiques of *Fort Apache*’s racist and imperialist messages.

Committee members met with the Council on Interracial Books for Children about an article appearing in the Council’s *Bulletin* that would offer analysis of media racism, and in early April returned to the Council with a slide show and presentation about *Fort Apache* specifically to provide examples. They next day they presented the slide show to an Adult Education class at New York Technical College, to a positive response. April 13 found them at Intermediate School 188 (W. 114th Street and 7th Ave), where students were to watch *Fort Apache: The Bronx* for a class project.

Having transferred the analysis to the next generation of budding activists, CAFA held its last official meeting that night. They finalized and approved a resolution about the film to be presented at the upcoming 1st National Puerto Rican Convention in New York on April 25-26, they celebrated their accomplishments over the previous 14 months. For a grassroots community group squaring off against a multinational media powerhouse, their results were quite remarkable.

For those who need to identify definable winners in particular battles of the ongoing struggle for justice, equality, and freedom, we should look to the Committee’s self-assessment. Their goals were to temporarily halt production while the community reviewed the *Fort Apache* script, to educate the community about the power of media representations, organize community resistance, build multiracial unity “through
common struggle,” and develop the community’s ability to use the media. Each of these was undeniably met. Despite the film’s eventual production and distribution, the Committee and the larger community could take pride in having accomplished what they set out to do. The pride, dignity, and confidence that this helped generate in the community provided an even firmer organizational foundation for whatever the next project would be.

In the long run, of course, *Fort Apache*—despite what its producers considered a disappointing box-office showing—was a film that heavily influenced the way that the US population in general understood Black and Brown urban communities. The film fueled suspicion and fear of minority populations, and helped justify Ronald Reagan’s ongoing and escalating attacks on social services and programs intended to benefit those very communities.90 On the other hand, the Committee Against Fort Apache helped galvanize a new generation of activists, and strengthened existing connections that had grown distant and tenuous over the previous decade. A new wave of determination flowed through many of the organizations that were affiliated with CAFA, and over the following decade, despite the Reagan administration’s willful abandonment of inner cities, things almost imperceptibly began to tick up and improve in the South Bronx.91 Steeled and charged by the power and measured successes of the anti-*Fort Apache* movement, community activists and South Bronx youth culture alike gained more visibility as they continued to challenge characterizations of the South Bronx and worked to transform their lives.

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91. Jonnes, 376-388; Evelyn Gonzalez, 135-144.
Sugarhill Gang’s “Apache”: Political Hip Hop in Context

Clearly, CAFA made a conscious choice to widen their appeal and reach in the city, particularly among young people, in basing “Fort Apache Bop” on the music of Sugarhill Gang. The popularity and cross-over musical appeal of Sugarhill Gang’s 1981 song “Apache,” grounded in an instantly-recognizable bongo drum loop based on a 1973 song of the same name by the Incredible Bongo Band, offers one explanation for the selection. The Incredible Bongo Band version had been a staple selection for DJs at house parties, clubs, park jams, and other gatherings in the Bronx since its release. Kool Herc is credited with first playing it at a dance club soon after its release, at the Hevalo on Jerome Ave in the Bronx, but other DJs relied on it as well. The heavy Caribbean presence in the South Bronx during this period also helped make a bongo-driven song familiar and helped it find some purchase with a slightly older group who may not have been as enthralled by hip hop and the new rap trend. A more circuitous explanation might even look to the coincidence that “Apache” was released the same year as the Battle of Wounded Knee, when Lakota tribal members and the American Indian Movement fought US Marshals, the FBI, and other law enforcement agencies for control of the town of Wounded Knee, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

92. I am not actually certain the song is based on “Apache.” Despite the metric similarity between “Apache” and “Fort Apache Bop,” I have yet to hear “Fort Apache Bop,” and therefore cannot confirm the beat. “Apache” was not officially released until April 1981, but Sugarhill may well have performed it locally before then. However, neither of Sugarhill’s other previously released singles is even close to fitting the meter of “Fort Apache Bop” lines.
The original “Apache” on which the Sugarhill Gang version was based had a longer history, too. In a loose parallel to Bambaataa’s reaction to *Zulu*, Jerry Lordan wrote “Apache” after seeing 1954’s *Apache* starring Burt Lancaster as Massai, the last Apache left after Geronimo’s surrender to US forces in New Mexico in 1886. The Shadows took their version of “Apache” to number 1 in England in 1960. In 1973, the Incredible Bongo Band, a novelty studio band led by Canadian Michael Viner, remade it with a funked-up flavor and although never released as a single it quickly became a standard for hip hop DJs like Kool Herc, who pioneered its use in the club scene, isolating the drum breaks to send his audiences into a dancing frenzy. As music writer Michaelangelo Matos has pointedly put it in an essay on the song’s history, “a record written by a white Englishman imitating Native Americans as portrayed by white Americans and made famous by a Dane with a vaguely Hawaiian sound, arranged by a Canadian, became the biggest record in black New York.”

Even before Sugarhill Gang got ahold of it and transformed it into a rap song critiquing racial contests on American frontiers, “Apache” was the result of the unanticipated affinities and incorporative practices that fuel freestyle politics.

On the other hand, we have to take seriously the release of Sugarhill Gang’s song in the midst of the very public disputes being waged over the filming of *Fort Apache: The Bronx*. Sugarhill Gang may have been a studio executive’s creation, assembled by Sylvia Robinson in an early (and very successful) attempt to capitalize on the youth culture rumblings booming out of the Bronx. But the same ability to

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aggregate and translate snippets of street culture into the multi-platinum smash hit, “Rapper’s Delight,” that was Sugarhill Gang’s first record might well have been part of the decision to make “Apache.” A popular record all the DJ’s were using, a charismatic crew of rappers, and an old cowboys-and-indians theme that begged for exploration were all the ingredients needed to put “Apache” together. The atmosphere of protest and struggle that suffused the Bronx and other parts of the city helped ensure that the song would draw many local ears even if it did not become a hit with a wider audience—although it did. That same atmosphere begs a critique of the song itself.

The Sugarhill Gang’s 1981 remake of “Apache” lampooned the relationship between the Lone Ranger and his ambiguously indigenous sidekick, Tonto, to upend the racial hierarchies on which the frontier myth depended. It is a three-piece suite. The first and final verses are delivered from a Native American (read: nonwhite) perspective, rappers Big Bank Hank and Wonder Mike creating a multiracial cast through their performances. They each present the Indian as neither savage nor violent. Instead, they are intelligent, honorable, and creative. They also exhibit a keenly developed sense of justice, which can be achieved through violence or by simply ridiculing white supremacy out of existence. The middle verse works to dismantle white supremacy itself. Through the character of the Lone Ranger, dominant narratives of the frontier are reconfigured as tales of deceit and exploitation. Master Gee, as the Ranger, offers an implicit critique of imperialism couched within a performance of normative masculinity.
In the first verse, rapper Big Bank Hank takes the native side, questioning “Kemosabe’s” right to be in charge, saying “I’m Big Bank, I AM the Chief.” In this battle for primacy on the urban frontier, he is quicker to adapt, too—“I never need a horse…I pull up in my new Seville.” By the end of the verse, he has ensured that his tribe will go down in “the hall of fame, ‘cause [he’s] the one who shot Jesse James.” Verbally eliminating an iconic white outlaw—a Confederate veteran at that—from the community, Hank leaves it to his partners to unmask the Lone Ranger.

Master G obliges in the second verse. Assuming the role of Kemosabe himself, he is out to show his virility and charm as the “Rapping Ranger.” The virtue and wholesomeness of his white masculinity, though, is immediately exposed as having been built on the exploitation of women and non-white peoples. He first induces a medicine man to give him special charms that will allow him to seduce Indian woman. Once he gets them to “come inside [his] tee-pee,” he reveals himself as a scoundrel only out for sexual conquest: “I sting squaws, then run away/ ‘Hi Ho, Silver!’ is what I say.” As the iconic white hero, Master Gee’s Lone Ranger tames the frontier through sexual violence against nonwhite women.

The last verse confirms the Ranger’s fall from iconic status. Wonder Mike takes the microphone and plays the role of Tonto himself. Fed up with Lone Ranger’s racism and sexism, he challenges Kemosabe to a showdown. But this is the South Bronx frontier, and Tonto wants to settle it with a dance contest. Kemosabe climbs down from his horse and takes off his mask, and Tonto soon exposes him as no superhero but just an average white man. The Lone Ranger dances first, but all he can
muster is the Monster Mash, which may have been a graveyard smash in the early 1960s but in the South Bronx by 1981 it was just dead. Tonto hears the beat, and goes “slam dunk/ do the Jerk,” a dance that had maintained its popularity and been incorporated into b-boys. Tonto emerges clearly victorious, in part due to his more finely-developed sense of rhythm and movement. His freestyle approach to the contest bridges the historic past and the contemporary moment. He raps that he communicates through a microphone that sends smoke signals, and is so funky that he will “rock you out of your moccasins.” By the end of the song, the urban(e) “Apache” is the coolest kid on the block. The frontier attacks on the South Bronx had been turned against themselves.
Conclusion

Sugarhill Gang’s “Apache” was officially released in April 1981, just as the Committee Against Fort Apache was completing its run. One of CAFA’s final acts was to submit a plan for future action to the First National Puerto Rican Convention held April 25th and 26th at Paul Robeson Intermediate School in the South Bronx. They proposed a plan of future action against television broadcasts of *Fort Apache* as well as a more general continued struggle against racism in the media led by a national task force. Some CAFA members also joined former Young Lords and other radicals, including Juan Gonzalez, in forming the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights later that year.¹ Both of these would have meaningful and lasting impacts on organizing in the Bronx.

The struggle over *Fort Apache* formed larger frames of struggle beyond the South Bronx, and continued after CAFA officially disbanded. Art critics, activists, and others working towards social justice and against the consolidation of conservative power carried by the Reagan coalition recognized the significance of the protests against the film. As critic Lucy Lippard wrote with Jerry Kearns in *Artforum* in late 1981, *Fort Apache* was not ‘just another film’—or some isolated example. It is one of a million little pieces bing fit together into a terrifyingly repressive pattern that reinforces the racism and sexism necessary to maintain the status quo. It rationalizes and reaffirms the reasons why those who are on top are on top, and keeps down those who are down. CAFA and organizations like it emerge to interrupt the flow of

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misinformation, to replace the absorption of distorted facts and false values with the tools for questions, analyzing, and resisting them.”

Drawing on youth slang, Lippard talked about this process as “cashing in a wolf ticket.” The “wolf ticket” is a boast, a bluff, “mind and mouth defeating stronger opponents by huffing up and blowing them away.” Cashing in a wolf ticket is “winning against the odds. You get sold a wolf ticket, and you get embalmed in the status quo forever. You cash in a wolf ticket, and you get a shot at social change.” In the wolf ticket, Lippard identified the interruption and reinterpretation, the freestyling, that had helped CAFA hold its own against the monstrous multinational Time-Life for more than a year. The connection to youth culture was significant. At all levels—the street, the community center, the art gallery, and in the media—New York City activists continued to push radical political projects and struggle to reshape their lives through creativity, innovation, and by looking across genres and remixing their struggles with others to try new kinds of organizing and mobilizing.

“Apache” itself though did a lot to keep the political momentum going. In a city saturated for a year and a half with debates over the negative representation of the South Bronx as a frontier, the song’s repositioning of the frontier as a place of innovation and creativity shifted the possibilities. People across the Bronx, the city, and the nation spent 1981 dancing to a song that was the result of a political freestyle against a racist film. Media accounts were questioning the film’s accuracy and

political purposes. America’s dance floors were filling with multiracial crowds getting down to a song that made being a frontier-dwelling Indian a point of pride.

The mobilization that happened in the South Bronx in 1980-1981 continued the legacy of struggles started much earlier. Central activists in the Committee Against Fort Apache, including Richie Perez, Juan Gonzalez, and Evelina Antonetty, had histories reaching back to the Columbia strike and even before. Across the years in between, they had continued to pursue particular visions of multiracial, decolonizing politics and challenge the relationship between race, space, and power in New York City. When they organized against *Fort Apache: The Bronx*, they brought a new generation into that struggle. Their experience taught them that culture was an important terrain of struggle; their attentiveness to their community told them that hip hop was a significant emerging vehicle for mobilizing.

In the years that followed, hip hop culture would explode beyond the boundaries of the Bronx, becoming the most powerful popular cultural force of the late twentieth century. Hip hop would be capitalized on, commercially exploited, and subjected to pressures the culture had not faced through almost the first decade of its existence. But the freestyle politics that had shaped its birth and evolution would never be eliminated, even if they became at times more difficult to locate or complex to decipher. Some MCs would return to the frontier narrative that fueled early ‘80s mobilizations, continuing to reshape ideas about racial identity and national belonging. Songs like Kool Moe Dee’s “Wild Wild West,” Sadat X’s “Black Cowboys,” and the soundtrack to Mario van Peebles’ film *Posse* all fall into this category. Other crews
like Public Enemy, Run-DMC, and the X-Clan would make different political, economic, and cultural critiques of racism, imperialism, and oppression in the United States. Still other young people today continue to rely on hip hop culture for artistic and political expression in marginalized and oppressed communities around the world. The multiracial, anti-imperialist milieu of hip hop’s birth should inform our analysis of hip hop’s ongoing political importance in times and places far from the South Bronx.

On the other hand, the South Bronx very much remained a front of struggle. In 2008, Kool Herc, who had made very little noise since a stabbing in the late 1970s, was back front and center at 1520 Sedgwick. The apartment building was at the center of a furious fight by its tenants-turned-activists to protect it from sale to an investor who planned to move it out of New York’s affordable-housing program. The irony of the house that built hip hop in turn helping to rejuvenate the neighborhood enough to find itself threatened by gentrification was not lost on Herc. At a press conference in August 2008, Herc stood in front of the building under a handmade sign reading “Save the Home of Hip Hop.” “This is not just about 1520,” he said. “This is going on throughout the city. I lived here once, and we’re not going anywhere. I’m here for the fight, and I’m not giving up.”

Kool Herc had not disappeared in the interim. He had gone subterranean, flowing along below the casual observer’s register. He was there, living at street level but just not in the spotlight. Like the activists that this project examines, largely overlooked in histories of the 1970s but insistently, consistently engaged in

community organizing throughout the decade, he did not attract a lot of attention in the interim. But when the moment arose—*Fort Apache: The Bronx*, a threat to the house of hip hop—they emerged, the power of that long-term organizing ripe with possibility. In an increasingly-connected world, it may be that this works to our advantage. We can pursue our own projects while remaining abreast of struggles elsewhere, but when they need to coalesce, they can do so rapidly: the Compton Cookout, the Arab Spring, Ferguson. There are times when large, single-issue protests need to happen, but developing many styles of struggle is crucial to our long-term survival and dreams of a better world.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


