

BLACK FAITH

The Rev. Albert B. Cleage Jr.,
 Black Christian Nationalism, and the
 Second Civil Rights Community in Detroit

By the late 1960s, the Rev. Albert B. Cleage Jr. had become a leading figure in the movement to link African American religion and Black theology with Black nationalism and Black power. He was, notes theologian James H. Cone, “one of the few black ministers who has embraced Black Power as a religious concept and has sought to reorient the church-community on the basis of it.”¹ He was also one of the most controversial religious activists to appear on the national scene in the midst of the “long hot summers.” For Cleage, who disputed nonviolence’s value as either a political strategy or a philosophy, the urban rebellions of the late 1960s were just a “dress rehearsal” for the real revolution yet to come. Violence was undesirable but necessary if rapid change was to be achieved. It was the duty and destiny of the Black church to serve as the cornerstone of the new Black nation that would emerge. In preparation, Cleage used his own church and congregation to inaugurate the Black Christian nationalist movement. “We reject the traditional concept of church,” Cleage explained in his 1972 book *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church*.

In its place we will build a Black Liberation movement which derives its basic religious insights from African spirituality, its character from African communalism, and its revolutionary direction from Jesus, the

Black Messiah. We will make Black Christian Nationalism the cornerstone of the Black man's struggle for power and survival. We will build a Black communal society which can protect the minds and bodies of Black men, women and children everywhere.²

Cleage had not completely rejected the notion of racial integration early in his career during the 1950s. He began his clerical service as a local activist struggling to win converts, both religious and political. A minister, organizer, and ideologue, over time Cleage helped to define an emergent Black nationalist perspective within the city's civil rights movement. Both inside and outside the movement, Cleage was commonly regarded as an enigma: a Christian minister who contended that almost everything about traditional Christianity was false; a Black nationalist who by outward appearances could "pass" for white; and a self-styled champion of the poor, the marginal, and the dispossessed with impeccable middle-class credentials. Few commentators and even fewer critics failed to mention Cleage's light skin color in particular.

Grace Lee Boggs, for example, describes Cleage as "[p]ink-complexioned, with blue eyes and light brown, almost blonde hair" (his eyes were in fact gray). His first biographer, journalist Hiley Ward, a religion writer for the *Detroit Free Press* in the 1960s, contends that Cleage's light complexion left him with "a lifelong identity crisis."³ Ward, who seems obsessed with Cleage's coloring, describes the reverend's mother, Pearl Reed Cleage, as white in appearance with very thin features: "My grandmother was a Cherokee Indian," he quotes her as explaining, "my father was a mulatto, and my mother was a very fair lady." The rumors that Pearl Reed Cleage forbade her seven children to play with children who were visibly darker than they, and that the Cleage family was (as the *Michigan Chronicle's* Louis Martin asserted) "the fair mulatto type, not too interested in unions," seem to be the products of unjust presupposition and bias.⁴

Friends, family members, and associates at the Shrine of the Black Madonna have described the role of race, class, and family in Reverend Cleage's life very differently. According to his sister, Barbara (Cleage) Martin, "we never passed. We never even tried to pass." Martin recalls her mother giving lectures on Black history at nearby Wingert Elementary School; other sources cite Pearl Cleage's efforts to get the Detroit Board of Education to hire Black teachers and provide a decent education to Black children. Similarly, their father, Dr. Albert Cleage Sr., is described by his children and family friends as a dedicated "race man," who, though not a member of the UNIA, was sympathetic to Garveyism.

According to an official publication of the shrine, these “early impressions of racial pride and civic duty influenced young Cleage’s thinking and shaped his outlook on life.” Both versions of the early raw materials that helped to form Reverend Cleage probably contain a mixture of truths, falsehoods, evasions, and misunderstandings.⁵

Cleage himself has left a scant written record on the question, but his statements and pronouncements make it clear that he regarded intra-racial color stratification as a manifestation of what he called “the declaration of Black inferiority.” He seems to have simply accepted as axiomatic the idea that “we are all colors. . . . We are mixed up with everything under the sun, but we are all black.”⁶ “You can mix all the hues of the rainbow,” he said on another occasion, “and if at the end you add a little Black, you are Black. Black is not only beautiful, Black is powerful!” While the color of God was not a subject on which he tended to linger, he did periodically extend his reasoning to the godhead. If, as Genesis tells us, man is made in the image of God, Cleage suggested, then we must look at man to see what God looks like. Since there are “black men, there are yellow men, there are red men, and there are few, a mighty few white men,” then God must be “some combination of this black, red, yellow and white.” Since, further, under American law “one drop of black makes you black,” then at least under the standards established in the United States “God is black.”⁷

FIRST SON

It is interesting to speculate about the degree to which Cleage’s theological reasoning is rooted in his own autobiography. His political theology changed (he would probably have said it evolved) over time, and he seems to have been in constant dialogue with his past—rejecting some elements and embracing others and subtly re-creating himself in the process. Some of the aspects of his life that strike us as contradictory and paradoxical were, for Cleage, opportunities for personal, political, and spiritual reflection and growth. If this is the case, then the only way to understand Reverend Cleage’s political theology is to start with his biography.

Fortunately, Cleage’s early life is relatively well documented. He was undeniably the product of a very close-knit family, the eldest of the four Cleage boys and three girls. The family traced its roots as far back as Athens, Tennessee—the small town to which his grandfather, Louis, an ex-slave, had drifted after the Civil War. It was there that Louis met and married Cecil, an ex-slave fathered by her white owner. Reverend Cleage’s father, Albert Buford Cleage Sr., was the youngest of Louis and

Cecil's five sons, born and educated in Tennessee and later trained as a physician at the Indiana School of Medicine, where he received his medical degree in 1910 and then interned at the city hospital. Albert Jr. was born in Indianapolis one year later in June 1911. When the opportunity to establish a private practice in Kalamazoo, Michigan, presented itself, Dr. Cleage and his wife Pearl moved the family north. The senior Cleage was well regarded in Kalamazoo, where he served as the town's only Black doctor; but Detroit, a larger city with more opportunities, was where the family chose to settle for good.⁸

Dr. Cleage readily integrated himself into the life of Detroit's expanding Black community, becoming a charter member of St. John's Presbyterian Church, active in the St. Antoine (segregated) branch of the YMCA, and a founder of Dunbar Hospital, the city's first Black health care facility. Frustrated by the difficulty of obtaining treatment even at those Detroit hospitals that would admit African Americans, Cleage and a small group of his fellow Black physicians founded Dunbar Hospital in the city's St. Antoine district in 1918. Dunbar received funding from the Community Chest Fund, a public charity, and in its first five years cared for over three thousand patients. In 1928, the hospital moved to a larger, adjacent facility capable of keeping up with the high demand for its services. The decision to found a Black hospital was not uncontroversial. Some in the community, such as Snow F. Grigsby, believed that to do so was to admit defeat in the fight to desegregate the city's hospitals. Grigsby, the founder of the Civic Rights Committee, denounced the Dunbar plan as a "Jim Crow' set up." Dr. Cleage, however, regarded the establishment of Dunbar Hospital as the most practical and expedient means of providing Black health care, as well as training and employing Black doctors and nurses.⁹

Dr. Cleage's educational attainments and social activities earned him ready admittance into the city's African American elite. His ideas seemed to be in line with the ethic of collective self-help and community building that guided local activism in the years before the Depression, unionization, and world war so altered the political landscape. He built up a thriving private practice and established a good reputation in Republican circles, founding a Black Republican club in the 1920s. In 1930, he was actually appointed to the position of city physician by Charles Bowles, a white Republican mayor widely reputed to have close ties to the Klan—an accomplishment for which Reverend Cleage remembers being congratulated with fairly regular beatings from his classmates on the way home from school.¹⁰ As the city sank into the pit of the Great Depression, and the Black presence on the city's welfare rolls rose to a

staggering eighty percent of the total, Dr. Cleage was hired at a salary of \$3,000 per year—an income and resulting social status that placed his family way above the norm. As a result, and unlike Charles Hill, Albert Cleage enjoyed a relatively stable childhood marked by all the benefits of the middle-class environment his parents were able to provide.

The Cleages' elevated social status did not, however, fully protect them from the ravages of racism. On the one hand, they owned their own home in the west-side Tireman neighborhood (a roomy house with a sizable porch on the corner of Scotten Street and Moore Place, a block from Hartford Avenue). And Dr. Cleage's practice catered not only to Black patients but to white ethnic ones as well. "I'd go with him [on house calls] many a time," Reverend Cleage told his biographer, "on Sunday afternoon through Polish, Irish, and other districts, and people would call out and hold up their babies which he had brought into the world and say, 'See how much they like you.'"¹¹

On the other hand, Cleage records painful memories of racism, especially at the schools that he and his siblings attended, including Wingent Elementary and Northwestern High School. Barbara Cleage Martin noted that her brother was not allowed to work on the school newspaper because of racial prejudice and that while classroom seating for white children was alphabetical Black children were relegated to the back rows. Years later, when he took on the School Board over its complicity with racist practices, Reverend Cleage would make reference to these experiences—in many ways carrying on the fight started by his own mother.¹²

It is also certain that Albert Cleage Jr. and his siblings were devoted to their mother, who doted on them even as she ruled the household. Pearl Cleage oversaw every aspect of the children's lives, from their schooling to their choice of playmates. All of her children were educated in public, and predominantly white, schools, and she remained on guard for any evidence of educational discrimination. She also saw to the children's religious education, "schooling him [Albert Jr.] in the exercise of faith," writes biographer Hiley Ward.¹³ Dr. Cleage had always been reasonably active at St. John's, but young Albert had an especially strong ecumenical bent and seems to have been particularly drawn to churches and ministers with a strong interest in young people. In 1928, while still at Northwestern High School, Albert Jr. became the chairman of the Youth Group at nearby St. Cyprian's Episcopal, which was pastored at the time by Fr. Malcolm Dade. Later, during his years at Wayne University, Cleage became the unofficial youth pastor at Horace White's Plymouth Congregational and director of the Plymouth Youth League. Rounding

out his association with Detroit's trio of activist Black ministers, Cleage attended various events and meetings at Reverend Hill's Hartford Baptist and later claimed that Hill was one of the two men who had most forcefully shaped his ministerial life.¹⁴

The other was the Rev. Horace White. Cleage was very active at Plymouth and once dreamed of succeeding White as pastor. White seems to have influenced the young Cleage's interests not only in the ministry but in social work as well. As an accredited psychiatric social worker at the University of Michigan, White had helped to found the Lapeer Parents Association, the first of a series of organizations incorporated under the Michigan Association for Retarded Children, and Cleage himself later majored in psychology at Wayne University and worked for a time as a city social worker.

Like the young Reverend Hill, Cleage took an indirect path to the ministry. From 1929 to 1931, he ran a booking agency for small musical combos, including the jazz band put together by Gloster Current, then executive secretary of the local NAACP. Cleage also tried his hand at a career as a drummer. In both of these capacities, he spent a great deal of time in the small jazz and blues clubs of Paradise Valley—early experiences that probably account for his continuing interest in jazz as a distinctively Black cultural product.¹⁵

The course of his formal education proved equally erratic. Cleage attended Wayne sporadically from 1929 to 1938, leaving at one point to attend Fisk University for less than a year before returning home to his close-knit family. During these educational wanderings he studied with some of the nation's leading sociologists, including Donald Marsh at Wayne and Charles S. Johnson at Fisk. After returning to Detroit, Cleage also took a position as a caseworker for the Detroit Department of Health until he became too discouraged with the "band-aid" approach of social services.¹⁶ By the time he gave in to the call of the ministry and entered the seminary at Oberlin College in 1938, Cleage was already steeped in sociology, social psychology, and at least an outsider's view of the traumas of urban life, particularly its effects on children.

There is a suggestion in Cleage's reminiscences that he felt religion and political struggle would be more effective in fighting those traumas than social work. As he would later characterize it, "I was a sociologist and a psychologist before I became a religionist, so I had more to unlearn! I went into the church because I could not see anything that you could do for Black people with white-oriented sociology and psychology, but it still had to be unlearned."¹⁷ While at Oberlin, Cleage worked for two years as a student pastor at Painesville, Ohio's Union

Congregational Church, where he created a smaller version of the sort of comprehensive youth ministry that he would later sustain throughout his ministerial career. When he received his degree in divinity in 1943, it included, significantly, an emphasis on religious education.

For all of his grounding in practical concerns, Cleage also acquired a reputation among his peers as an intellectual. He was a voracious reader, more interested, he once said, in reading books than actually acquiring degrees.¹⁸ And the approach that he evolved over the years to theological questions integrated both intellectual and pragmatic dimensions, incorporating but also reaching beyond the social gospel perspective deployed by his role models, Reverends Hill and White. During his time at Oberlin, for example, Cleage began to blend his interest in religious education with an exploration of theological neo-orthodoxy. The neo-orthodox theology of Reinhold Niebuhr and German theologian Karl Barth had become extraordinarily popular in American seminaries of the late 1930s and early 1940s, and Oberlin was no exception. Neo-orthodoxy was seen in these spiritual communities as a realistic remedy to the excessive utopianism of the social gospel, dismissing as unrealistic the social gospel's conception of human nature and its suggestion that the Kingdom of God could be created on earth. Since God's will could not be fully comprehended due to the limited capacity of man, the neo-orthodox camp claimed, His Kingdom simply could not be man-made.¹⁹

Even as he was absorbing the lessons of neo-orthodoxy, Cleage was also developing a fascination with the darker side of existentialism captured by John Paul Sartre in plays such as *No Exit*. In Cleage's mind, the two strains of thought naturally merged. While the social gospel saw human nature as essentially good and society as radically reformable, neo-orthodoxy emphasized the inherent sinfulness of men and women and the essential immorality of societies and social groups. Social relations were particularly problematic, given their roots in inequality and coercion, masked by pernicious ideologies such as racism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia.²⁰ This fit neatly with the lessons of existentialism. "This creating hell for each other," said Cleage, in reference to *No Exit*, "is terribly true, though people wish to think something else." God does not operate *deus ex machina*: "nobody is really outside to straighten out the situation if people themselves do not do something."²¹

Cleage's experiences as a caseworker in 1930s Detroit may have contributed to this view of social problems as too intractable to be resolved by moral suasion alone. "I read Niebuhr for a time, especially as an antidote to the social gospel," Cleage said. "Horace White was essentially social gospel, which had little connection with reality. It was utopian, full

of action but not much realism." Similarly, Cleage could say that while he admired the "radicalism" of Reverend Hill's politics the problem was that he "would become evangelical on Sunday morning."²² Healthy realism for Cleage meant meeting power with power, the sort of realism necessary for revolutionary struggle. In this aspect, at least, Cleage resembled A. Philip Randolph during his call for the (first) March on Washington in 1940. But over time Cleage's stress on realism would become the basis for his religious and political critique of Martin Luther King's second March on Washington in 1963.

"We've got to make sure the definitions of human nature and society are both sound," Cleage argued. "This was the problem of Dr. King. He was not realistic. You can hope for change, but it must be predicated on reality, not what we dream of." Cleage suggested that all of the "white liberals," who were more enamored of King's dream than of reality, "ought to all go back and read Niebuhr because they react when you say all whites are part of immoral society."²³ While Cleage was certainly critical of King's political and philosophical intentions, he was not so adverse to the unintended consequences of King's activism. In a powerful sermon preached just days after King's assassination in 1968, Cleage noted that every time King staged a nonviolent, peaceful campaign the nearly always violent white reaction "enabled us to see white people as they really are. All the dreams and myths that we picked up in our churches . . . disappeared, because in these confrontations we began to see white people unmasked." To this extent, Cleage credited King with helping to speed the creation of a Black nation. Across the country, those who reacted with anger and violence to King's murder, those who "marched, the people who looted, and the people who burned were in a deep sense," Cleage concluded, "his [King's] disciples."²⁴

When Cleage was ordained in 1943, his emerging political theology was still largely an academic matter, and his articulation of Black nationalism lay more than a decade in the future. But even at this early stage his experiences essentially confirmed his theological outlook. Cleage was ordained and married in the same year, to Gladys Graham, whom he had met at Plymouth Congregational. (The Cleages divorced in 1955 after having two children, Kristin and the poet and playwright Pearl.) At age thirty-two Albert Cleage Jr. began his ministerial career in earnest, accepting his first pastorate at the Chandler Memorial Congregational Church in Lexington, Kentucky, where he passed an uneventful year before receiving a call to serve as interim copastor of the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco. Cleage had been recommended for the new position by Charles S. Johnson of Fisk, and he agreed to serve until

Howard Thurman, the noted Black theologian, could finish his term at Howard University. Cleage's time with the fellowship was short but instructive. The fellowship, like all of the other "all peoples" congregations that appeared during the 1940s, was based on the assumption that interracial brotherhood could be hastened by breaking down the racial barriers between Black and white Christians.²⁵ When Cleage arrived, the recently formed congregation numbered about fifty members. But if the young pastor arrived with an open mind, he soon soured on the fellowship's interracial makeup. Looking back on the experience, he later denounced the notion of an interracial church as "a monstrosity and an impossibility." "I've had a lot of experience with white people in church," Cleage remarked during one of his later sermons, "and usually white people don't understand black people even though they go under the banner of being Christian."²⁶ Cleage saw an artificiality in the style and substance of fellowship worship and a lack of concrete involvement in social problems. He was particularly annoyed with his white copastor's (Alfred G. Fisk, a Presbyterian professor of philosophy at San Francisco State University) avoidance of such issues as Japanese internment and the treatment of Black soldiers and war workers. The two men also found themselves at odds over their theological focus. While Fisk preached the glories of Heaven on alternate Sundays, Cleage gave them Hell. When Howard Thurman arrived to take up his post, Cleage quickly departed.²⁷ Although their paths crossed only fleetingly, any connection between Cleage and Thurman is suggestive.

By the early 1940s, Howard Thurman was probably the most celebrated African American theologian and mystic in the nation. He had already made a pilgrimage to India to meet with Mohandas K. Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, the poet of India, who, Thurman wrote, "soared above the political and social exclusiveness dividing mankind" and moved "deep into the heart of his own spiritual idiom and came up inside all peoples, all cultures, and all faiths." Much the same can be said of Thurman himself. Inspired by Tagore, the American composed his own poetic excavations of inner spirituality, hope, sorrow, and the will to love.²⁸ As his poetry and prose make clear, Thurman considered mysticism not an introverted rejection of the social world but rather the path to a more profound engagement with society and an avenue for social change.²⁹

Born in Dayton, Florida, on November 18, 1899, Thurman was reared by his grandmother, a former slave, who taught him to read from the Bible, out loud, and encouraged the development of his intellectual and spiritual gifts. Educated at Morehouse, Columbia, and the

Rochester Theological Seminary (an intellectual center of the social gospel), he accepted his first pastorate position in Oberlin, Ohio, in the late 1920s—a full decade before Cleage traveled there to study at the seminary. Thurman became a prominent leader in youth movement circles and a sought-after speaker on the YMCA lecture circuit, particularly among interracial audiences. In the late 1920s he was appointed to the board of the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), the organizational progenitor of CORE. A strong advocate of theological training at Black colleges, Thurman served as a professor of religion and director of religious life at Morehouse and its sister school, Spellman College, from 1928 to 1932, after which he became a professor of Christian theology at Howard University and later the first dean of Howard's Rankin Chapel.³⁰

It was following on this impressive list of achievements that Thurman decided to accept an invitation from Albert Fisk and A. J. Muste to the copastorate at the Fellowship of All Peoples. While Cleage denounced the idea behind the fellowship as a nightmare, Thurman wrote that an interracial church was “a dream which has haunted me for ten years.” All Peoples was very much in keeping with the senior theologian's dedication to what he called “a creative experiment in interracial and intercultural communion, deriving its inspiration from a spiritual interpretation of the meaning of life and the dignity of man.”³¹ This experiment was necessary, in Thurman's view, for the full flowering of democracy. In this belief, at least, Thurman was closely aligned with advocates of the social gospel such as Reverend Hill.

And yet, despite the obvious differences, there are also very interesting similarities between Thurman and Cleage. Both men, for instance, drew a careful distinction between Christianity, on the one hand, and the religion of Jesus, on the other, believing the former to be a corrupting influence on the latter. In his best-known book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), Thurman insists that we examine the “religion of Jesus” against the backdrop of the historical Jesus in order to “inquire into the content of his teaching with reference to the disinherited and the underprivileged.” For Thurman, the three most important facts about Jesus, the man, was that he was a Jew, poor, and a member of a despised and marginal minority group. In a sentiment that was later echoed in Cleage's political theology, Thurman lamented the severing of Jesus from Israel and the Old Testament from the New. “How different might have been the story of the last two thousand years on this planet grown old from suffering,” he writes, “if the link between Jesus and Israel had never been severed!”³² Cleage was equally disparaging of any attempt to place the New Testament above the Old and insisted on a political and

familial link stretching from Abraham through Moses, the Prophets, and Jesus. All were members of the Black Nation Israel, which the Lord promised to make holy and great. In their attempts to preserve and highlight the religion of Jesus, both men were also leery of (Thurman) or even downright hostile toward (Cleage) the Apostle Paul.

This aversion to Paul is, like the conflation of Jesus and Moses and the stress on the Old Testament, a fairly common historical tradition in African American Christianity. Thurman's grandmother had him read the Bible out loud—with the exception of Paul. Having been enslaved, she explained, she had heard enough about the apostle's justifications for the peculiar institution; now, free, she felt no need for further exposure to his writings. Cleage, too, held Paul responsible for just about everything that had gone wrong with the religion of Jesus, the Black Messiah; it was Paul who had introduced the emphasis on individual salvation and created a bastardized religion, Christianity, suitable for white Rome and the gentile world. In perhaps an overly dualistic formulation, Cleage asserted that "white Christianity" was based in the New Testament, in the Epistles of Paul, where a "faith in universal brotherhood" was offered as an "escape from the guilt of white racism." On the other hand, Cleage said, Black religion was essentially based on "the Old Testament concepts of the Black Nation Israel" and the collective struggle for liberation. Accordingly, Cleage's sermons were filled with allusions to the Exodus and the ethical pronouncements of the prophets.³³

In later years Cleage would pull away from the limelight to build the Black Christian nationalism movement and, like Thurman before him, would turn to poetry to capture his own mystical experience of the divine. In a Thurmanesque move, Cleage came to see the experience of God and love as the basis of revolutionary transformation and a program of self- and communal actualization as ultimately more important than institutional strategy and tactics. In one of his poems, "The Messiah," written in the 1980s, one can clearly see the merger of Cleage's two phases. In the first stanza the narrator has awakened to the realities of Blackness that surround him but has not yet learned the true path to enlightenment.

I am Black,
 I am Oppressed
 And I seek to end my oppression.
 I would strike out against it,
 But I can neither understand it
 Nor face it.

Certainly I must change
 Both myself
 And the society in which I live
 But the nature of change evades me,
 And all of my efforts have been in vain.

In the second stanza, the narrator has made an important discovery and been transformed. The “I” has become “we.”

As we feel today,
 So men felt 2,000 years ago
 Until a child
 Created out of the very substance of God
 Discovered his inner Divinity
 And changed the world.
 Who can foretell the birth of one
 Who is to be anointed Messiah,
 With power for the powerless,
 Healing for the sick,
 And Liberation for those in chains?
 ‘What I do ye can do, and even more.
 The Kingdom of God is within you.’
 So every town and Ghetto
 Is Bethlehem.
 And every child born of a Black Madonna
 Is a new MESSIAH . . .
 Only waiting to discover
 His inner Divinity.³⁴

This transformation was still unimaginable at the time of Cleage’s departure from All Peoples. For the time being, he crisscrossed the country, accepting the pastorate of Chandler Congregational Church in Lexington, Kentucky, where he remained for less than a year, and then returning to California to enroll in the graduate program in visual education at the University of Southern California’s cinema department. Always keenly interested in education, Cleage was hungry to explore the potential visual techniques in religious education. More pointedly, he was interested in religious filming, “in trying to find a way to touch the black man en masse.” Taking technical classes in cinematography during the day (including a seminar with Cecil B. DeMille), at night Cleage returned to the familiar terrain of jazz clubs, this time as a photographer.

He also preached throughout the surrounding area and developed a network of contacts in the radical intellectual and religious communities around Hollywood. Unfortunately, filmmaking soon proved too expensive a pursuit, and the doctoral course work too time consuming, and he left the program toward the end of 1944.³⁵

Once again Cleage turned to the ministry, accepting the pastorate of the 124-year-old St. John's Congregational Church in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1945. It was there that he first used his religious position as a springboard for political activism. During his five years at St. John's, Cleage served on the Executive Board of the local NAACP, as well as its Legal Redress and Housing Committees. He was also simultaneously involved in the Roundtable of the Conference of Christians and Jews, the YMCA, and the American Red Cross. While he was locally regarded as an outspoken or even blunt opponent of police brutality, employment discrimination, and racial segregation in public housing, none of his activities at this time placed him outside the mainstream of post-World War II civil rights activism.

Cleage's engaging personality and preaching style, as well as his successes in increasing membership and the value of the church's property, fueled his reputation as a pastor. Under these circumstances, it seemed only natural that he would also be involved in civil rights work. But his future radicalism was clearly incubating, and when Hiley Ward interviewed some of Cleage's Springfield parishioners a few pointed out that he did not place much faith in local whites.

It appears that Springfield had a miniature version of the Ford-Black Ministers alliance, which had long dispensed employment opportunities in Detroit area plants. Cleage must have seen the basic similarities between this large patronage system and the smaller one in Springfield. Whereas Detroit's alliance was controlled by ministers such as the Rev. Robert Bradby of Second Baptist, Springfield's had been governed by the Rev. William N. DeBerry, Cleage's immediate predecessor at St. John's.³⁶ "DeBerry was a big black god and ran much of the town," recalled one older congregant. "You couldn't get a job washing dishes unless DeBerry said so." But the youthful Cleage took his predecessor on, launching an investigation into DeBerry's handling of the church's property and tax evasion that eventually resulted in a lawsuit. The church and the entire community were deeply divided over Cleage's challenge, and the young pastor made some powerful enemies. Once the suit was settled in Cleage's favor, however, he racked up a series of successes in helping St. John's to increase its real estate holdings and extend its outreach programs. One former congregant remarked that

Cleage “recognized and fought against the system by which whites controlled blacks,” most likely a reference to the reverend’s willingness to challenge the Springfield city government’s exclusion of Blacks from its new public housing developments and to create new opportunities for Black employment in downtown stores.³⁷

The outward differences between Cleage and Reverend Hill were still relatively minor at this point. Certainly there were theological divergences. Cleage was critical of Hill’s social gospel roots, while Hill was clearly more comfortable than his junior colleague with the idea of an interracial church, having in fact supported the establishment of an All Peoples congregation in Detroit (a local religious institution that grew out of the Rev. Claude Williams’s People’s Institute of Applied Religion). And yet, if Cleage had been in Detroit at the time, there is a very strong possibility that he would have embraced the same sort of activism favored by Hill and the city’s early civil rights community.

And Cleage did want to be back in Detroit. But it was not until 1950 that an opportunity presented itself. When the members of St. Mark’s United Presbyterian mission in Detroit began to seek a new pastor in that year, a good deal of support was voiced on Cleage’s behalf. Having passed an examination conducted by the Presbyterian hierarchy, he readily accepted the position. Finally, after years of crisscrossing the country, Cleage was back home.

Things went well at first. Cleage joined the Detroit NAACP and was put in charge of the organization’s membership drive. A sermon he preached on the evils of America’s materialistic standard of values and the lack of concern for “the teeming masses of our underprivileged brothers” was well received and noted in the pages of the *Michigan Chronicle*.³⁸ Yet he once again found himself chafing at his congregants’ “Sunday piety.” Meanwhile, the Presbytery was doing everything in its power to discourage Cleage’s political activism in the local NAACP. Frustrated, Cleage led a group of dissenters out of St. Mark’s Presbyterian to form a new congregation, St. Mark’s Congregational Church. He clearly saw this as not only a religious move but a political one as well. “It was never my intention to destroy St. Mark’s,” he later mused.

I have a lot of mixed feelings about that. I had a vision and strong feelings about what a church should be that had been developing for a long time. In Detroit, my ideas developed rapidly and the same thing probably would have happened no matter where I was. . . . It wasn’t a big glorious thing. It was very difficult and emotional. I had friends and people of whom I was very fond at St. Mark’s.

Lacking a permanent physical structure, the small congregation held services around the city until 1957, when it secured the former Brewster-Pilgrim Church in the Twelfth Street district, on Linwood at Hogarth Street, and adopted the name Central Congregational.³⁹

For the first time, Cleage was given the opportunity to build a church from the ground up, giving it his own distinctive theological and ideological cast. Central's blend of theology, social criticism, and community organizing attracted a large following of young professionals and residents from the Twelfth Street district and across the city during the late 1950s. Reverend Cleage was particularly proud of his youth ministry, which was reported to be the largest such program in the area. "I believe I have been able to communicate with these young people," he remarked, "and know their problems."⁴⁰

Kenneth Cockrel recalls that there was a fair amount of gang activity in the neighborhood around Central; there were "the Unos and the Shakers and the Chili Macs" while he was a student at Northwestern High School. Cleage "played a role" in deciding what kind and degree of police presence was necessary to control the gangs at Northwestern.⁴¹ Central's growth was also fueled by its Parish Visitation Program. Reasoning that the "half a million Black people in the five-mile radius surrounding the church" were all part of Central's parish, and thus his congregation's responsibility, Cleage sent teams of congregants into the community to visit families and introduce them to the church's evolving mission. He also began to attract a core of activists who would later become influential in the theory and practice of a Black nationalist politics.⁴²

CRITIQUING THE LIBERAL COALITION

The Origins of a New Protest Community

One of those who attended services at Central was attorney Milton Henry (later Brother Gaidi Obadele). Henry had come to Detroit from South Philadelphia by way of Pontiac, Michigan, where he had served six frustrating years on the City Commission. A World War II veteran and graduate of Yale Law School, Henry had moved to Detroit in the early 1950s and was soon followed by his brother, Richard (later Brother Imari Obadele), who worked for several years as a reporter at the *Michigan Chronicle* and as a technical writer at the U.S. Army Tank Automotive Center in Warren, Michigan. James and Grace Lee Boggs were also among the attendees at Central, as was Edward Vaughn, owner of Detroit's first Black bookstore (on Dexter Avenue) and later a political

ally of Cleage's.⁴³ Cleage political views and expanded activism were finding a wider audience.

Even as he preached change from the pulpit and worked through the church, Cleage also made good use of the independent press, another traditional avenue for social influence in African American communities. In the latter half of 1961 Cleage, his siblings, and a few friends launched their own bimonthly newspaper, the *Illustrated News*. "Friends and associates decided to put out a good black paper," explained Cleage's sister, Gladys Evans, "more of a general newspaper but born of the idea to give an objective, intelligent outlook."⁴⁴ The reverend's brother, attorney Henry Cleage, served as the chief editor, while another brother, Hugh, a farmer, apprenticed himself to a printer in order to handle production. Once denied a spot on his school newspaper because of racial discrimination, Cleage now controlled his own outlet.

Printed on bright pink newsprint, with a free circulation of over thirty-five thousand (estimates range as high as sixty-five thousand), the *Illustrated News* was published from 1961 to 1965. During these four short years, the paper served as an important public platform for Cleage and his associates. Reverend Cleage, as a contributing editor, penned the majority of the articles, with contributions from his brother Henry and attorney Milton Henry and his brother Richard. The *News* was an outlet for emerging Black nationalism and a platform for often-virulent criticism of the racial status quo, as well as a community-organizing tool. Cleage's articles in particular were critical of the Black middle class and the liberal coalition, from which he took great pains to distance himself. Indeed, among his earliest contributions was a series of articles entitled "The Negro in Detroit," which targeted the shortcomings of the Black middle class with special scorn reserved for the Black clergy.

In a less than complex analysis of class stratification in African American communities, Cleage suggested that the desire for integration and white acceptance had left the Black middle class with "no critical facility . . . no real ability to evaluate the white community and select the good and reject the bad."⁴⁵ In Cleage's assessment, "authenticity" and true self-knowledge lay in the lower middle class—"the solid foundation of all Negro organizations"—which had little desire to fashion itself into a mere "replica of the white community." Because the Black working class had a structurally defined critical distance from the white mainstream, Cleage suggested that it was more organically connected to the cultural traditions that could sustain African Americans in the face of oppression. Cleage thus pitted his affinity with the lower classes against his own middle-class background on cultural grounds. He wrote with the authorita-

tive tone of an insider who had repositioned himself on the outside, one who had achieved his much-valued critical distance not by circumstances of birth but by choice.

Christian themes of repentance and conversion played an important role in this discourse, which eventually led to the formulation of Black Christian nationalism. In order to fully embrace the Black church as the foundation of the Black nation, Cleage expected that the “guilty” would reorient their lives and, in effect, re-create themselves. They must declare, as he put it, that “I have been an Uncle Tom and I repent.”⁴⁶ Clearly, in critiquing his upbringing Reverend Cleage was also questioning the one institution—the Black church—to which he had dedicated much of his life.

In this conceptualization of racially polarized class dynamics, Cleage argued that “the Negro church has prospered poorly in the North because it has been unable to relate the gospel of Jesus Christ meaningfully to the everyday problems of an underprivileged people in urban industrial communities.” Because it had failed to tap into the authenticity of “the folk,” the African American church had failed to keep pace with the community it served, becoming “lost in a sea of triviality and aimlessness.” In what Cleage considered the worst-case scenario, some former congregants had turned their backs on the church while others had sought “integration” in small, ineffective, interracial churches.⁴⁷

In a particularly introspective moment, Cleage later recalled his assertion that interracial churches were a monstrosity. What bothered him the most about these churches (which were never very prevalent and certainly never constituted a real threat to the Black church) was not that what “seemed like integration from a white person’s point of view is not really integration.”⁴⁸ Rather, he said, his animus was primarily cultural.

Years before Cleage fully articulated the political theology of Black Christian nationalism, the church had already become for him the repository of cultural authenticity. Loyalty to the Black church could only be rejected at one’s peril. To put it another way, before he became a committed Black nationalist, politically, economically, and socially, Cleage was a cultural nationalist with a religious bent. In the late 1950s and early 1960s he could work toward integration but only as long as integration was tempered with a respect for cultural difference. Civil rights and social justice would be meaningless and empty, he suggested, unless they drew on the critical perspective and cultural authenticity typical of the lower classes, traits that had been abandoned by their middle-class peers. Culture was always central in Cleage’s political theology. His

early discussions of Black nationalism in the *Illustrated News* always came from a cultural perspective.

One particularly good example, again deeply related to his personal experience, is “Black Nationalism in Jazz,” about a forum featuring singer Abbey Lincoln and her husband, drummer Max Roach, which had been staged at Central Church. That Cleage, who once had dreams of a musical career himself, staged such a forum highlighted his early interest in cultural struggles and struggles over culture. With Lincoln and Roach’s release of their *We Insist: The Freedom Now Suite* in 1961, followed by Lincoln’s *Straight Ahead*, the couple were causing a stir in the jazz world with recordings now deemed to be classics. At the time, they were denounced, primarily by white jazz critics, in the pages of *Down Beat*, assailed for “politicizing” jazz by introducing an “inappropriate” Black nationalist perspective. Rumors circulated that the two had intimate connections to the Nation of Islam. But Roach and Lincoln, seconded by Cleage, defended what their critics called “Crow Jim” (Jim Crow in reverse) on the grounds that jazz was “essentially a Negro musical idiom.”⁴⁹ In his article on the forum, which had been attended by approximately one hundred people, Cleage called the event a “rather uncomplicated representation of the argument that the Negro must stop trying to look and act like the white man, and must begin to take pride in himself . . . in his color, in his hair, and his distinctive negroid features.” “Even those who were not ready to follow her example,” he said in reference to Lincoln’s “natural” afro, “were forced to admit that ‘Black Nationalism’ looked good on Abbey.”⁵⁰

Although early on Cleage retained a blind spot when it came to the relationships among women, gender, and Black nationalism, his understanding of how culture did, and must, influence political struggles became more sophisticated over time. Years later, and in an almost Maoist vein, he wrote:

Culture grows out of struggle. In China the Red Guards fought in the streets against those who were taking on Western ways, not because they thought Chinese people looked more beautiful in Chinese dress, but because they knew that Western ideas and dress were weakening the power of China. It was a power struggle. We have made an artificial separation between cultural revolution and the power struggle. They are more excited about culture than they are excited about the struggle for power, because it is easier to put on African clothes than it is to struggle and sacrifice.⁵¹

In 1966 and 1967, Cleage would again mobilize around these ideas by agreeing to become one of the sponsors (along with Vaughn's Bookstore and the Inner-City Organizing Committee) of Detroit's Black arts conventions, which held sessions at Central Congregational. Although older artists participated, including John O. Killens and Detroit's Dudley Randall (founder of the Broadside Press), the conventions were primarily oriented toward younger writers who had embraced various forms of Black cultural nationalism, including poets Larry Neal and Haki Madhubuti (formerly Don L. Lee) and activists such as Muhammad Ahmad (Max Stanford) of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM).⁵²

In the pages of the *Illustrated News*, Cleage's cultural project coexisted with his political agenda. At every turn, Reverend Cleage distanced himself from the established Black leadership strata and the liberal civil rights coalition. Although he had served on the Executive Board of the NAACP in the mid-1950s, he came close to calling his former fellow board members incompetent on a number of occasions. His condemnation, strong as it sounded, was never total however. When a group of Black ministers started a selective-buying campaign in 1962—yet another reincarnation of the “Don't Buy Where You Can't Work” idea—he gave the loosely organized mobilization his full support, remarking that “Negro ministers” were finally becoming a “New Force in the Detroit community.”⁵³ Similarly, although he was often critical of the TULC for its allegiance to the UAW, it was, in Cleage's opinion, “doing a tremendous job in the areas of trade unionism and policies.” He even praised the Cotillion Club, a highly exclusive, middle-class Black organization, for “making major steps forward” on the problem of police brutality—perhaps because the group's president at the time was George Crockett.⁵⁴

Still, Cleage tended to hold the infectious optimism of the early 1960s at arm's length. While he agreed, for instance, that “the Negro became the most potent political force in the city of Detroit” after playing a role in the election of Mayor Jerome Cavanagh (he even claimed part of the credit for Black voter turnout), Cleage still believed that “Our New Mayor Bears Watching.” Never one to trust whites, regardless of how liberal they seemed, Cleage insisted that Cavanagh had not been made fully “aware of the role the Negro must play in this community.”⁵⁵ The reverend had, at the same time, given considerable support to William T. Patrick in 1961 and, more controversially, to three (and only three) Black candidates for the state legislature in 1962: Russell S. Brown, Frederick Yates, and Charles Diggs Jr. He was widely denounced

for his supposedly racist strategy of concentrating votes, or “plunking,” by the Detroit Council for Political Education and the Fair Campaign Practices Commission among others.⁵⁶

More specifically, Cleage focused his dissatisfaction on the public school system and urban renewal. Both of these important community issues exerted a disproportionate effect on the Black urban poor. In Cleage’s view, the Detroit public school system was as segregated and inadequate as the one in Little Rock, Arkansas, and he used the *Illustrated News* to run a series of “exposés” illustrating this problem.⁵⁷ A number of the pieces were written by an anonymous teacher at Northwestern High, and it is interesting to speculate on whether Luke Tripp, one of the city’s young Black militants and a swimming instructor at the high school, could have been Cleage’s “mole.” Cleage also penned a number of the articles himself. Drawing on his own experiences, he wrote that he had been “aware of the discriminatory practices of our public school system since I was a student at Northwestern High back in the 1930s.” “Later,” he continued, “I saw evidence of these practices while a student at Wayne and as a worker in the Department of Welfare. I left Detroit to continue my education. When I returned home ten years ago . . . I found that few of the discriminatory practices have been changed.”⁵⁸

The practices had not changed, but the context had, and the difference was dramatic. Whereas many of Cleage’s troubles had resulted from being in a small minority of Black students within a primarily white school, in the 1960s Black students found themselves relegated to predominately Black and educationally inferior schools. The problems were the same, however—racially biased textbooks and teachers and administrators who ran the gamut from paternalistic to insensitive to outright racist. While Cleage tended to blame traditional race improvement agencies such as the NAACP and the Detroit Urban League for their failure to confront the situation, these groups were not really the problem. The true issue was the city’s changing demographics. Even as “white flight” drained off the city’s white middle-class residents from 1962 to 1966, the city’s schools added almost twelve thousand students, more than half of whom were Black. Because of residential segregation, whole school districts became overwhelmingly African American, and because the entire system depended on an increasingly shrinking tax base of home owners, predominately Black schools became increasingly impoverished schools.⁵⁹

Cleage’s critique was not directed at the need for Black children to be educated in predominately Black schools, as his own negative assessment of being educated in a primarily white setting might suggest.

Rather, his contention was that Black students were being mistreated by white teachers and administrators and done a disservice by biased textbooks and inadequate facilities. At this point in his career, the solution Cleage was putting forth was still based on equity as integration. Years later, he would reorient himself toward the quest for equity as community control in which Black parents controlled education for Black students taught by Black teachers. This reorientation was not peculiar to Cleage but was part of a growing trend in the late 1960s and 1970s.⁶⁰

Cleage was also quick to point out the Detroit School Board's inadequate response to these demographic changes and the financial crisis they produced. The board had adopted a bylaw in 1959 banning discrimination in all school operations and activities, but administrators played fast and loose with district boundaries, often transferring students to other districts in an effort to maintain segregation. Even the School Board itself had to admit to both "obvious laxity" and "insubordination" in enforcing its own policy.⁶¹

In Cleage's view, the board needed some prodding, and the opportunity presented itself in early 1962. Sherrill School, which was located on the southwest side of the city, had gone from majority white to majority Black in the 1950s; by 1962, it was 95 percent African American. More important, the quality of both its physical plant and its educational resources was clearly inferior to that of the city's white schools. Disputes over district boundaries and student transfers sent a clear signal to Sherrill parents that their school's administrators and the School Board were attempting to forestall desegregation. Frustrated over the inaction, a group calling itself the Sherrill School Parents Committee broke ranks with the Parent-Teacher Association and approached Cleage, who had been keeping up a constant harangue about school conditions. Cleage, along with Milton and Richard Henry, among others, had recently organized a new protest group, the Group on Advanced Leadership. An all-Black organization, GOAL was designed to be a "chemical catalyst" in the fight against bias. "A chemical catalyst speeds up the chemical reaction," Richard Henry wrote in the *Illustrated News*. "Similarly we will speed up the fight against bias."⁶²

Cleage and GOAL viewed the Sherrill school predicament as one that was likely to spark the sort of chemical reaction they felt was necessary for change. But their position also drove a wedge between GOAL and the NAACP. Cleage claimed that he had "tried to convince the NAACP that action should be taken in this situation. . . . [a]lthough we felt an alert NAACP would have acted without having to be convinced."⁶³ Opposing the NAACP's decision to study the Sherrill situation, Cleage and GOAL

GO WITH GOAL

THE GROUP ON ADVANCED
LEADERSHIP



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IN '63
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HERE'S
WHAT GOAL
MEMBERSHIP

GOAL HAS MEANT

started and led the fight to have
Negroes treated fairly in public
school history books.

GOAL Backed the Carver Progressive Club
court suit to get "Negro Removal"
case slum pressures on Negro neigh-
borhoods.

GOAL relentlessly picketed A&P stores un-
til demands for Negro hiring and
Negro products were met.

GOAL is fighting to end "legal extortion"
in the traffic court and to do away
with bias in the courts and Gestapo
tactics by the police.

GOAL has laid the basis for an investment
company to support and expand our
existing Negro businesses and give
the Negro can get off his economic
financial help to new ideas so that
knees.

A NON-PROFIT CORPORATION

Group on Advanced Leadership (GOAL) pamphlet, circa 1964 (George Breitman Papers. Courtesy of Robert F. Wagner Archives, Tamiment Library, New York University.)

took matters into their own hands. Cleage became chair of the Sherrill Parents Committee and launched a series of pickets and boycotts against the school. Parents kept their children home and walked the line, joined by a group of community activists and ministers, including the Rev. Charles A. Hill, who was now in his late sixties but remained active in the city's civil rights movement (in fact, when parents and students from Northwestern High staged a similar boycott in 1962 the advance "strike meeting" was held at Reverend Hill's Hartford Baptist).⁶⁴

Dissatisfied by the results of their picket, GOAL attorney Milton Henry initiated a lawsuit against the School Board on behalf of the aggrieved parents. The suit, which was underwritten by the TULC and guided through the legal process by George Crockett and his firm, Goodman, Crockett, Eden and Robb, charged the board with systematic mistreatment of Black students, a result of the "drawing, redrawing and gerrymandering" of districts. The plaintiffs demanded an increase in the number of Black teachers and administrators, as well as the removal of textbooks presenting negative images of African Americans. The textbook issue was particularly close to the heart of GOAL president Richard Henry, who in 1963 lodged a formal complaint with the School Board against his son's eighth-grade text for its failure to acknowledge the contributions of African nations to world civilization. GOAL threatened a citywide boycott on this issue as well, and the School Board relented, adding two supplementary chapters to the texts.⁶⁵

The NAACP initially maintained a polite distance from the Sherrill dispute, although it did eventually support the lawsuit.⁶⁶ It was already leery of Cleage and GOAL, but when Cleage launched a personal attack on Dr. Remus Robinson, the sole Black member of the School Board since 1959, the battle lines were drawn. Cleage held Robinson personally responsible for segregation and discrimination and for what he saw as Robinson's reluctance to act against them.⁶⁷ The NAACP rushed to Robinson's defense, condemning Cleage as shortsighted.

While the suit was working its way through the legal system (it was finally adjourned in 1965 due to "substantial" progress on desegregation), Cleage turned to what many saw as an outrageous mode of protest. In the spring and fall elections of 1963, Cleage proceeded to drum up opposition against a tax millage intended to increase school funding. Why, Cleage asked, should Black parents vote to increase their property taxes in order to fund and perpetuate a system that mistreated their children? "No Taxation for Discrimination" became the movement's slogan. Cleage's antimillage campaign brought down a storm of criticism from the liberal coalition. "We must decide whether we will follow in the paths

of destruction and chaos of Negro and white extremists,” read an editorial in the *Michigan Chronicle*, which summarized the opposition to Cleage’s crusade. “By voting against the millage, we are automatically casting our lot with the lunatic fringe. . . . We cannot afford to sacrifice the future of our young by following the foolish counsel of the radical elements in our midst.”⁶⁸

In the weeks leading up to the April 1 vote, Cleage debated his way through a good portion of the city’s liberal coalition. He faced off, in person and print, against Horace Sheffield and the TULC, attorney (and future judge) Damon Keith of the Detroit Council for Political Education, the NAACP, the School Board itself, and Ofield Dukes and the other editorial writers at the *Michigan Chronicle*. Cleage faced Remus Robinson in a debate held at Fr. (by this time Canon) Malcolm Dade’s St. Cyprian’s Church and a representative of the Detroit Federation of Teachers at another debate staged by Detroit CORE.⁶⁹ Cleage held his ground throughout. While members of the liberal coalition did their best to neutralize him, his campaign did have an effect. After dozens of articles and speeches delivered at more than 250 meetings throughout the city, approximately fifty thousand Black voters changed their votes from yes to no. Ninety-eight percent of all Black voters had favored the millage in 1959, but in 1963 more than 40 percent opposed it.⁷⁰ The millage was in fact defeated in the spring (mostly by angry *white* voters), but it passed in the fall.

Cleage and GOAL were simultaneously at work on the related issue of urban renewal. Asking Blacks to finance schools that discriminated against their children was, for Cleage and the Henry brothers, no different from asking them to finance (again, with tax dollars) the destruction of Black neighborhoods and the displacement of their former inhabitants. “Urban Renewal,” wrote Cleage and the Henrys time and time again in the *Illustrated News*, was “Negro Removal.” GOAL had hoped that urban renewal, like school reform, would become a unifying issue for the city’s civil rights community. It invited the NAACP, the TULC, the Cotillion Club, and others to join in the fight to keep Negro removal out of urban renewal. There was already widespread concern over the way the city’s urban renewal policies were being carried out, and many in the liberal coalition were more than a little annoyed at being “invited” to the struggle by the GOAL arrivistes.

By 1962, almost ten thousand acres of “blighted” area, or 15 percent of the city, had been cleared under the urban renewal program. Roughly 57 percent of those personally affected by the clearance were Black. Although renewal programs were in principle racially open, most of the

new housing projects were privately owned and rents were high, factors that worked against African American occupancy. What urban renewal really does, wrote the NAACP's Arthur Johnson, "is to relocate Negroes from one blighted area into one that is already overcrowded, thus eventually transforming it into a slum." "Increasingly," added councilman Mel Ravitz, "it has become an instrument primarily for the economic advantage of certain citizens and businesses who profit from investment, or who may benefit from residence in the city."⁷¹

Part of the problem came from the fact that it was unclear whether urban renewal was supposed to improve the quality of life for the city's present residents or whether its purpose was to attract suburbanized, white, middle-class families back to Detroit. "They're not going to return," said Black councilman William T. Patrick, insisting that the city focus more on low-income units. But it was not just access to new housing that was at issue; questions of equity also came into play when deciding which areas would be slated for clearance in the first place. Cleage and GOAL saw no reason why African Americans should be made to surrender their homes and neighborhoods disproportionately. Together with other organizations, GOAL launched a full frontal assault on the constitutionality of the Urban Renewal Redevelopment Program, filing a suit in federal court on the premise that the Urban Renewal Authority had no right to condemn and clear private properties for the benefit of private organizations.⁷²

Actually, GOAL filed two lawsuits. One involved the Detroit Eight Mile Road Conservation site, one of many sites in the city that were judged to be viable but in need of conservation and improvement. The problem was that plans for the Eight Mile site (on the northwest border of Detroit) called for the destruction of an entire strip of Black businesses fronting Eight Mile Road and their replacement with a shopping center in which the displaced businesses were unlikely to be granted space. The second suit focused on the Medical Center, which was slated for the cleared land that was once Black Bottom. While GOAL was well aware of ongoing efforts by the Fellowship of Urban Renewal Churches, headed by Reverends Louis Johnson and Nicholas Hood, to oppose these same programs, Cleage and his fellow activists were unimpressed. Cleage was particularly exercised over the idea that Black churches had been selected for demolition while a number of white churches were to be left untouched. From his point of view Black ministers and congregations were caught in the absurd situation of being privately assured that everything was going to be worked out while at the same time being "maneuvered into a position of begging for our legal rights." The fellow-

ship's negotiations, Cleage insisted in the pages of the *Illustrated News*, missed the real crux of the problem.⁷³

Instead of negotiations, Cleage and GOAL turned to lawsuits to stop what they saw as a violation of rights destructive of Black churches and businesses and a threat to concentrations of Black political and economic power. They hoped to obtain a binding legal decision to correct a string of injustices committed through conservation and redevelopment programs. They demanded that conservation be rigorously pursued, that the process include the affected residents, and that displaced people and businesses be granted the right to return to redeveloped areas with assistance for their relocation or return. They also insisted on a broadly conceived antidiscrimination provision: "The government must guarantee through operable law and administrative measures, that no business, institution, apartment, person or persons in a conserved or redeveloped area may practice racial discrimination in any form, including its economic guise."⁷⁴

The coalition that GOAL had joined was much more narrowly focused. The Medical Center urban renewal dispute centered not so much on the city's right to proceed with the project, although questions were certainly raised about the ethics of using public funds to subsidize private enterprise. Rather, in this case the major issues were the destruction of area Black (but not white) churches and racial discrimination in the hospitals that stood to benefit most from the project.⁷⁵ The Detroit Urban League provided well-documented evidence of systematic discrimination against African American health care professionals and patients. With prodding from Reverend Hood and his Fellowship of Urban Renewal Churches, area ministers banded together to protect as many Black churches as possible. It was a hard-fought battle, but it resulted, unlike the GOAL lawsuit, in significant concessions from the city.

Some of the Black churches that were threatened under the Medical Center plan, including Plymouth Congregational and Bethel AME, were granted a reprieve, allowing them to pool their funds in order to buy land and rebuild within the area. The coalition was unable to convince the city to build low-income public housing to allow for the return of displaced residents, but some churches, such as Friendship Baptist and Plymouth, sponsored their own low-income housing projects with assistance from city and federal agencies. Of equal significance, the coalition succeeded in gaining pledges of nondiscrimination from the hospitals. Monitored by the DUL, these pledges resulted in better treatment of

Black patients and an increase in employment opportunities for Black doctors, nurses, and orderlies.⁷⁶

Although the coalition led by Reverend Hood's fellowship group would seem to have been more effective in the long run, Cleage and his GOAL colleagues felt that the very existence of the urban renewal controversy confirmed the necessity of meeting power with power—of not asking politely but demanding. It was neither the first nor the last time that GOAL would be accused of working at cross-purposes with the liberal coalition. The urban renewal and conservation controversies also reinforced Cleage's arguments about the ability of churches to improve the day-to-day lives of their communities. More important, at least for our purposes, these contests over housing and public education were instrumental in the genesis of a new civil rights community distinct from the liberal coalition.

Reverend Hood captured some of the underlying difference between these two groups when comparing himself to Reverend Cleage. Whereas Hood worked within the liberal coalition to get elected to the Common Council in 1965, Cleage aligned himself with efforts to build an all-Black political party; while Hood worked within the corridors of power, Cleage worked from the outside, seeking to fundamentally alter established power relations. But both men played an important role. "In the city, we've got to have the thrust of an Al Cleage," Hood opined in the 1970s, "because he scares people half to death and then they open the door to me."⁷⁷ Scaring people half to death was becoming a full-time job for Cleage, a prophetic burden that he carried in addition to his priestly duties at Central Congregational.

IN THE NAME OF SAINT CYNTHIA

Cleage's critique of the liberal-labor coalition and his efforts to mobilize the community on school reform and urban renewal increased his cachet among the city's young activists. Cleage took seemingly daring and confrontational positions, always well to the left of the NAACP, which made him attractive to those who questioned the viability of the established Black leadership and its white liberal allies. Cleage and the Henry brothers welcomed young activists into the ranks of GOAL and, along with the local Socialist Workers Party (SWP), supported young people's own attempts at organizing. A Detroit Commission on Community Relations report on one group of young Black radicals notes that "they have a great deal of respect for Reverend Cleage and the leader-

ship of GOAL” and goes on to suggest that “only Cleage and the Henrys might be able to discipline them.”⁷⁸ This last observation is inaccurate. Like Cleage, these young activists were searching for alternatives to the liberal coalition and were arriving at conclusions ideologically similar to his. Cleage may have offered encouragement but not discipline.

Many of the new organizations founded by these young radicals were small, and their activities were generally sporadic. Historian Sidney Fine may be right in describing them as “flyspecks in terms of posing a threat to the black leadership position occupied in Detroit by the NAACP.”⁷⁹ But they were important as markers of slow but steady ideological shifts within the city’s civil rights movement. By the late 1960s, this new generation of activists would have a decisive impact on the course of political mobilization in Detroit—in the labor struggles of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the wildcat strikes of 1968 and in the spheres of welfare rights, antipoverty work, and Black community empowerment.

One of the most important of these “flyspecks” was UHURU, which was organized in March 1963 by Luke Tripp (who was a twenty-two-year-old college senior at the time, majoring in mathematics and physics) with John Watson, Ken Cockrel, and General Baker, all of whom would later be active in the founding of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and a variety of other Wayne State students. Taking their name from the Swahili word for freedom, UHURU’s stated purpose was to “seek the closest possible alliance of militant black groups from the broadest possible united black front to wage a tit-for-tat struggle against the anti-Negro machine that is America; to fight for ‘uhuru quita’ [freedom now] . . . and to affirm the principle of self-defense in the Negro freedom struggle.”⁸⁰ As a group UHURU tended to reject the ethic of nonviolence and embrace the logic of anticolonial and third-world revolution. Although there were many such philosophical and political differences between UHURU and the liberal coalition, it was the hostility of the group’s rhetoric that coalition members found most disturbing. “Their bitterness,” wrote a field investigator for the Detroit Commission on Community Relations, is “totally destructive”; worse, it is a “complaint against capitalism.”⁸¹

While UHURU was an exclusively Black organization—white people could help, but they could not join—it did maintain close ties to the SWP and the mostly white Young Socialist Alliance, which was based on the Wayne State campus. “We [UHURU] produced newsletters,” recalled Baker. “We went to SWP’s Militant Labor Forum and got introduced to people that was coming around the country on circuits.”⁸² The Detroit

Commission on Community Relations also noted this connection but did not see the ties between UHURU and the Young Socialist Alliance as indicative of a shared intellectual culture. Rather, the DCCR implied that (once again) well-meaning Blacks were being duped by a group of white subversives out to destroy the American way of life. The anxiety of the DCCR and others was completely out of proportion to UHURU's power. The organization functioned primarily as a discussion group for young, disaffected, Black university students, and none of its occasional forays into political activism was exactly revolutionary.

UHURU did some of its work in conjunction with GOAL, one of the "militant black groups" included in UHURU's vision of a "black united front." At other times its actions were entirely self-directed. That the group's activities tended toward symbolic forms of protest should not decrease their significance, and these actions often betrayed a lively sense of humor. The group first came to public attention in the fall of 1963, when it disrupted a ceremony and rally staged by the committee lobbying to make Detroit the host of the 1968 Olympic Games. It was UHURU's position that "Detroit wasn't deserving of the Olympics because it didn't have open occupancy." Since the rally, held in front of the City-County Building in downtown Detroit and featuring the Olympic torchbearer, was to be "broadcast all over the world," it was also an opportunity to exploit the media and make a big symbolic splash.⁸³ Whereas CORE and the NAACP's Housing Committee confined their protests on open housing to placards, UHURU took a more vocal approach. "We were singing and hissing," remembered Baker. When the police band began playing the national anthem, UHURU members increased the volume of their jeers and catcalls. They also "embarrassed" Hayes Jones, the Black runner bearing the Olympic torch, by taking great pains to "remind him of his second class citizenship."⁸⁴ The city administration and the civil rights establishment were outraged. CORE issued a statement denying any connection with UHURU and its protest; its members were already angry at UHURU members for showing up a week earlier at their picket outside of a local Kroger grocery store with signs that read "Cross at Your Own Risk."⁸⁵ The TULC was already cool toward the new organization. Shortly before the Olympic protest, UHURU had descended on the TULC's Freedom House to protest the appearance of Mayor Cavanagh, "the Man," and their "Uncle Tom elders." Reportedly, Sheffield, Battle, and other angry council members "took the little radicals out back and beat the shit out of them."⁸⁶

Michigan Chronicle columnist Ofield Dukes, who was also director of the Young Adult Division of the NAACP, bemoaned UHURU's disrupt-

tion of the “peaceful” demonstration planned by the NAACP’s Housing Committee. He was particularly upset that the NAACP’s actions had been upstaged by “the unruly mob,” which jeered at “the National Anthem, our Negro Councilman [William T. Patrick], and a Mayor who put his neck on the political chopping block [in defense of open occupancy].” In terms reminiscent of his rebuke of Cleage’s antimillage campaign, Dukes characterized UHURU members as “irresponsible and absurd in their approach to the race problem” and accused them of having a “subversive aim” to “wreck completely all Negroes relations with the white community.” Taking the assessment one step further, he drew a parallel between UHURU’s political orientation—“Mau Mau Maoist”—and the supposedly “subversive” influence of the Communist Party decades earlier.⁸⁷

Finally, interjecting the generational aspect, Dukes wrote them off as ungrateful youths: “Negroes in Detroit have too much at stake to sit by quietly while the blind young beneficiaries of years of efforts by the Negro-white coalition are methodically destroying the framework in which these gains were made.” It does not seem to have occurred to Dukes that, for the members of UHURU, this framework was part of the problem—that younger activists were in fact challenging the basic assumptions guiding the liberal coalition. Indeed, Detroit’s young radicals were probably gratified by the harsh reactions they received from “liberals,” as well as the support they received from Cleage, GOAL, and other “militants.” In any case, UHURU was unrepentant. When city administrators, backed by law enforcement officials, identified the protesters and demanded a public apology, the group refused.⁸⁸

Days later, warrants were issued for the arrest of UHURU president Luke Tripp, John Watson, General Baker, John Williams, and Gwendolyn Kemp, one of the group’s few female members. For most of them, it was, as Baker put it, their “first real antagonism with the law,” although Watson and Kemp had been arrested in Charleston, Mississippi, during a SNCC mobilization.⁸⁹ Incredibly, the case went to trial in November with GOAL’s Milton Henry serving as defense counsel. Henry created a minor sensation, arguing that a true jury of his defendants’ peers would have to be all Black—a suggestion dismissed by the trial’s African American judge as frivolous.⁹⁰ Years later Ken Cockrel and his white radical partner Justin Ravitz would use similar tactics in defense of Black defendants in the city’s courtrooms.⁹¹

The five members of UHURU were acquitted by mistrial in May 1964, but the entire experience did nothing to endear them to the city’s legal system and the police department, another favorite UHURU tar-

get. UHURU members protested in front of city police stations on a regular basis. The police force was amazingly restrained, probably thanks to the intercession of George Edwards, the liberal police commissioner and ex-UAW organizer; since Cavanagh's appointment of Edwards, police-community relations had shown signs of improvement. In one relatively minor scuffle, Luke Tripp and Gwendolyn Kemp were detained for making "inflammatory" statements, but both of them were soon released.⁹²

But the event that probably radicalized the young militants the most was the police slaying of Cynthia Scott. "Saint Cynthia" as Scott was known, was a middle-aged Black prostitute who worked the streets of the Twelfth Street district not far from Cleage's Central Church. Six feet tall and 198 pounds, Scott was a raucous local fixture who had tallied up a string of confrontations with the law for "soliciting and accosting."⁹³ With her record, it probably did not seem too far out of the ordinary when Officer Theodore Spicher and his partner began to harass Scott in the early morning of July 5, 1964. But the encounter turned nasty, and Scott, who in a drunken state supposedly pulled a knife on the officer, ended up with two bullets in her back and one in her stomach. Saint Cynthia was no Rosa Parks (by this time Parks and her family had moved to Detroit to escape retaliatory southern violence), but the incident did touch off a storm of protests. The outrage felt by some segments of the Black community reached a climax when the officers were cleared of wrongful death charges on self-defense grounds.⁹⁴ The dead prostitute swiftly became a martyr. Several hundred people picketed police headquarters on July 13 as a part of street rallies organized by Reverend Cleage, GOAL, and UHURU. Cleage, James Boggs, and the Henrys were featured speakers at a number of these rallies, demanding that Officer Spicher be retried. GOAL attorneys, including Milton Henry, assisted Scott's mother with a five-million-dollar lawsuit against the officer and the police department. UHURU members also staged a sit-in in Mayor Cavanagh's office, demanding that a Black chief of police be appointed to replace Edwards.⁹⁵

The Scott affair became an important point of reference for the city's activists and the Black community as a whole. When Cleage's brother Henry ran for Wayne County prosecutor on the all-Black Freedom Now Party ticket in 1964, he promised, "When I am elected, I will see to it that the case of Cynthia Scott is re-opened." The murder even made a literary appearance in Barbara Tinker's 1970 novel, *When the Fire Reaches Us*, as something "damned few black people" in the city had forgotten: "Self defense, he [the Man] said. Only how come she was shot in the back?" Finally, in his detailed study of the 1967 rebellion, Sidney Fine identifies

the Scott killing as one of African Americans' many lingering grievances against the police and the city's administration.⁹⁶

THE BLACK REVOLT OF 1963

Reverend Cleage was proud of his ability to cause trouble, once boasting of being the only "Negro leader in this labor-dominated city to defy labor leaders." In a later sermon, Cleage ridiculed Walter Reuther as "our great black leader," who had apparently forgotten that UAW organizers once fought, looted, and defied the law in order to establish their union. But that was before they got respectable, Cleage chided.⁹⁷ Increasingly, Cleage's brand of Black nationalism was presented as a viable alternative to "working within the system" of city administrators or labor union officials. Hence, Cleage and the growing group of Black nationalists arrayed around him at GOAL and Central Congregational were a constant source of tension during the civil rights mobilizations of the mid- to late 1960s. Indeed, one could argue that Black nationalism was as divisive in the 1960s activist community as anticommunism had been a decade earlier.

These tensions—over Black nationalism, the possibility of coalition politics, and, once again, the proper role of churches and clergymen—were becoming apparent in Black communities across the nation. In Detroit they came to a head immediately before, during, and after the Walk to Freedom march of Sunday, June 23, 1963. With a turnout of between 125,000 and 200,000 participants, the Detroit march, which preceded the March on Washington by two months, was until then "the largest civil rights march in the nation." It was dubbed a success by the media, both Black and white, but its planning and implementation created a rift within the local movement that would never be repaired and would later be amplified by the Cynthia Scott protests, UHURU's antics at the Olympic torch ceremony, and the creation of the Freedom Now Party. The initial idea for the Detroit march came from a segment of the city's activist community that considered itself well to the left of the NAACP. The need for an "unprecedented show of strength" to dramatize the frustrations of Black Detroiters was expressed by Cleage at the end of an otherwise "disappointing" NAACP-sponsored demonstration in sympathy with civil rights protesters in Birmingham ("Bombingham"), Alabama. James Boggs recalls that there were about 50 people present for the event, mostly trade union militants, and that toward the end of the demonstration he began to call for Cleage.⁹⁸

The idea of holding a massive march in Detroit caught on, and plans

began to take shape on May 17, when more than eight hundred Black Detroiters gathered to commemorate the ninth anniversary of the *Brown* decision at New Bethel Baptist Church, which was pastored by the Rev. C. L. Franklin. Born in 1915 in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, Franklin had grown up poor and nearly illiterate in a rural community sustained both by faith and by the Delta blues of fellow Mississippians such as B. B. King, Son House, and Charley Patton. To many, it seemed nothing short of miraculous that Franklin had managed to escape his early surroundings, obtain a decent education, and develop a captivating preaching style based on his rich and sonorous singing voice. Franklin had begun to develop this style even before he arrived in Detroit in 1943, interweaving the secular and the sacred, the blues and the Bible. It would eventually propel him to national prominence in the 1950s and 1960s as a preacher's preacher, a performer, and a recording artist.

In the pulpit and on the stage, Franklin lived a flashy and unconventional life studded with fine suits, ostentatious jewelry, and beautiful women. Perhaps to make himself look better by contrast, Franklin once used his very popular Sunday radio show to chastise the truly unconventional James "Prophet" Jones, of the Pentecostal Universal Triumph, the Dominion of God, Incorporated, who was known for his unorthodox interpretations of Christianity and for wearing full-length white minks coats, as a "threat" to "the very foundations of our religion."⁹⁹ Yet Franklin was often on the receiving end of similar charges. Deeply moved by the events that were rapidly transforming the social and political landscape of his childhood South, by the early 1960s Franklin had begun to play an active role in the city's civil rights movement.¹⁰⁰

Franklin was soon thereafter named head of the newly organized Detroit Council for Human Rights (DCHR). Because he had only recently become politically active, various members questioned whether he had the sort of experience necessary to lead the group, but Franklin insisted that he could handle the responsibility. Cleage was also named to the board of directors. Some within the DCHR hoped that the group would eventually eclipse the NAACP as the city's leading civil rights group, but its first, more limited order of business was to coordinate the march, a goal that proved more difficult to achieve than anyone could have anticipated. Since the march was to double as a fund-raiser for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, it was agreed that the Rev. Martin L. King Jr., a close friend of Franklin's, should be invited to lead the march and address a rally at Cobo Hall, the city's riverfront convention center. Consensus on which other dignitaries and speakers should be invited proved elusive, however. Cleage, for one, wanted to keep the

march as militant and Black led as possible. But it was a losing battle. Mayor Cavanagh and the UAW's Reuther were added to the list, leading Cleage to accuse the march's organizers of attempting to "legitimize" the event (thus limiting its effect) by involving the white establishment.

The DCHR also found itself placating other factions of the Black clergy. The Rev. Charles W. Butler of New Calvary Baptist had just been designated as Detroit's new SCLC representative in part as a conciliation to the powerful Baptist Ministerial Alliance, of which Butler was a member. Soon afterward alliance ministers voiced their opinion that Butler, not Franklin, should play the lead role in the march and rally. As Franklin's biographer, Nick Salvatore, notes, Reverend Franklin had long been dismissed by influential Detroiters such as the Rev. A. A. Banks of Second Baptist and Edward Turner of the NAACP as "a mere preacher." "They abhorred his public style and denigrated his political analysis," Salvatore continues. "Yet, in this moment of crisis"—with the SCLC barely solvent after the costly Birmingham campaign—"King had reached out not for Arthur Johnson, his Morehouse College classmate, nor other close acquaintances among the black social elite, but for the Mississippi-born migrant."¹⁰¹

If Reverend Franklin's rise was disturbing to the alliance, Reverend Cleage's was truly horrifying; many worried about what the ascension of these two accomplished, yet very different, preachers might portend. Their opponents were reportedly disquieted by the pair's insistence on maintaining the march's "Negro character" and insisted that "local white churches wanted to have a share in raising funds . . . and to support future actions towards desegregation."¹⁰² When he attempted to make peace with the alliance, Franklin, whose efforts to keep his distance from the group had already gotten him into trouble with its membership, was forced to purchase a membership before it would allow him to speak. Franklin went ahead and made his case but to no avail. The alliance not only declined to support the march, but it even organized an alternative program at King Solomon Baptist on the same day.¹⁰³

The local NAACP's resentment toward Cleage, Franklin, and others within the DCHR was at least as strong as its feelings toward the alliance. Having been repeatedly denounced by the DCHR as "a bunch of Uncle Toms," the NAACP was in no mood to cooperate in the march. Looking back on the matter, the NAACP's Arthur Johnson diplomatically recalled that the planning for the march was initiated by "three or four men whose credentials were not as clear as we would have liked them to be." The NAACP hierarchy went so far as to threaten a boycott;

Cavanagh and Reuther's inclusion in the event was the price that the NAACP exacted for its support.¹⁰⁴

In the end, the march was not all that Cleage and Franklin had hoped it would be. But it was nonetheless an impressive show of solidarity with the southern struggle. The turnout was larger than expected, perhaps in part because Cleage and others held "prerallies" at their churches, encouraging people to attend the march. And most of the city's other civil rights organizations eventually signed on, including CORE, GOAL, the UAW, and especially the TULC.

Even with all this support, no one—neither the organizers nor the participants nor the city's officials—was prepared for the thousands and thousands of marchers, mostly Black and dressed in their Sunday best, who formed a human sea washing down the streets of the city. During his address at Cobo Hall, King proclaimed the march "the largest and greatest demonstration for freedom ever held in the United States." It was, according to him, a "magnificent new militancy" that could be harnessed and magnified in an equally massive march on Washington in support of the civil rights legislation pending in Congress. At the close of his forty-eight-minute speech, King delivered a longer and richer version of the "Dream sequence" that famously highlighted his speech at the March on Washington.¹⁰⁵

Reverend Cleage also addressed the crowd. As James Boggs recalled, "After King finished talking about conditions in the South, Reverend Cleage got up and said that we'd better start looking at conditions in Detroit."¹⁰⁶ Cleage's speech actually preceded King's that day, but Boggs's memory is otherwise accurate: for one brief moment, the tensions within the local civil rights movement appeared to have been smoothed over and contained.

But the moment passed quickly. Members of the DCHR felt the march had proved that they, not the NAACP, were truly "in touch with the masses." For James Del Rio, a successful Black real estate agent and DCHR member, the march "was a direct repudiation of the NAACP" and a personal rejection of NAACP president Edward Turner and executive secretary Arthur Johnson. Similarly, Reverend Franklin expressed "deep respect" for the NAACP in general but accused its leadership of being "too close" to whites and consequently losing contact with "the Negro man-in-the-streets." The NAACP responded by reminding Detroiters that it was the oldest and still the most viable civil rights organization in town—which it was.¹⁰⁷ The organization's ability to survive internal and external challenges, both locally and nationally, is noteworthy to this day.

The Detroit Council on Human Rights was attempting to occupy a position somewhere between the NAACP, on the one hand, and Cleage, UHURU, and GOAL on the other. It wanted to become the center of the city's new civil rights coalition, but it would not hold that position for long. Even as it was launching salvos in its war of words with the NAACP, the DCHR was experiencing internal problems of its own. Ideological differences between Cleage and Franklin finally broke the surface during the DCHR's effort to create a Northern Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC), as a counterpart to the SCLC.¹⁰⁸ The resulting eruption destroyed whatever unity had ever existed within the council and, perhaps more significantly, exposed even deeper tensions in the city's civil rights movement, particularly regarding Black nationalism.

The proposed three-day founding convention of the NCLC (November 8–10, 1963) was to be open to delegates from all of the northern civil rights organizations. Cleage was appointed chairman of the Conference Committee, but his plans to invite Conrad Lynn and William Worthy, founding members of the newly organized Freedom Now Party, were rejected by Reverend Franklin, who continued to serve as the organization's head. Worthy, a reporter for the *Baltimore Afro-American* and a committed pacifist, had been a special CBS News correspondent in Moscow during the 1950s and had defied the U.S. travel ban to Cuba, for which he lost his passport in 1962. Lynn was a radical attorney based in New York City and a veteran activist who faced angry mobs during the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation to test the Supreme Court ruling against segregation on buses in cases of interstate travel. Both men had ties to the Socialist Workers Party and Robert Williams (Lynn was his lawyer), who was living in exile in Cuba.¹⁰⁹ The idea for the Freedom Now Party had grown out of conversations among a group of New York-based radicals, including Lynn, Worthy, and Black intellectual Harold Cruse; its founding was announced in a *New York Times* story on August 24, 1963, four days before the March on Washington. Interested parties in New York, Detroit, and elsewhere had planned for weeks to meet at the march in Washington in order to hash out the party's platform—an arrangement that made them highly unpopular with their liberal colleagues.¹¹⁰

Even as plans for the NCLC gathering developed, Cleage still did not join the Freedom Now Party. But he clearly expressed his hopes of building an all-Black independent political party and invited the participation of GOAL and UHURU, as well as representatives of the Nation of Islam, including Minister Wilfred X, head of Temple #1 in Detroit, and his brother, Minister Malcolm X. Reverend Franklin forbade the invitation

of “communists” (Lynn and Worthy) or “extremists” (Malcolm and Wilfred X), proclaiming that “mingling” with “communists, black nationalists and persons with criminal records” would only “destroy our image.” “Ours is the Christian view and approach,” added Del Rio. “Those who refuse to turn the other cheek are having their own conference.” Frustrated, Cleage resigned from the DCHR in early November and began to make plans for a rival meeting, the Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference, whose very name was meant to symbolize the groups’ differences.¹¹¹

Cleage and GOAL scheduled the rival Grass Roots conference for the same weekend as the DCHR’s event. There was no reason to do so other than spite, which was rewarded when the DCHR convention flopped. Even though Adam Clayton Powell addressed the DHCR’s public rally at Cobo Hall, only “a disappointing 3,000 souls attended” (Cobo Hall seats fifteen thousand). Only a select group of one hundred had been invited to the weekend workshops and meetings, but less than half that number showed. And of those who did several, including Gloria Richardson, an accomplished organizer from Maryland, left the DCHR’s convention for GOAL’s.¹¹² Reverend Franklin and the DCHR were, as Nick Salvatore notes, caught between opposing forces: the NAACP, the Baptist Ministerial Alliance, and the liberal leadership of the city’s civil rights movement on one side; and Cleage, GOAL, and the small but growing cadre of militants and nationalists on the other. In fact, it was not so much Cleage and GOAL’s alternative conference that crippled the plans for an NCLC but a virtual boycott of the event by the ministerial alliance under the leadership of the Rev. A. L. Merritt. Trapped between warring parties, the would-be centrist NCLC quickly succumbed. Franklin, who rejected gradualism but insisted on nonviolence and opposed Black nationalism, found himself similarly squeezed.¹¹³

The Grass Roots Leadership Conference, while slightly better attended, was really only a small blip on Detroit’s political radar. When it is remembered at all, it is generally for Malcolm X’s appearance and his “Message to the Grass Roots” speech. It was one of Malcolm X’s last public addresses before he broke with the Nation of Islam, and in it he struggled to articulate a position on “real” revolution in a national and international context. The speech was not terribly successful in this regard, although it did illuminate distinctions between the liberal and nationalist approaches to Black freedom. “Who ever heard of a revolution where they lock arms, as Rev. Cleage was pointing out beautifully, singing ‘We Shall Overcome’?” Malcolm X asked. The ultimate goal of the Black struggle, he argued before an audience of three thousand

gathered at the King Solomon Baptist Church, was not civil rights but rather land and a Black nation.

When you want a nation, that's called nationalism. When the white man became involved in a revolution in this country against England, what was it for? He wanted this land so he could set up another white nation. . . . The American revolution was white nationalism. The French Revolution was white nationalism. The Russian Revolution too—yes, it was—white nationalism. You don't think so? . . . All the revolutions that are going on in Asia and Africa today are based on what?—black nationalism. A revolutionary is a black nationalist. He wants a nation.¹¹⁴

Reverend Cleage regarded Malcolm X as a political ally despite their religious and ideological differences. Religiously, Cleage and GOAL members went out of their way to unite Christians and Muslims, a unity they symbolized in the image of “a Christian Negro minister marrying an Islamic invocation into a Christian prayer.”¹¹⁵ Cleage's and Malcolm X's speeches were dotted with references to each other; but their positions on the revolution, while similar, were not exactly the same. Reverend Cleage never believed in the Black nation as a separate geographical entity. The Black nation was political, economic, cultural, and spiritual, not physical. His revolution did not seek land but power and self-determination. In fact, Cleage broke with Richard and Milton Henry over this distinction when the Henrys founded their separatist Republic of New Africa in the late 1960s. “Revolution—real revolution—is for power,” Cleage told the crowd at King Solomon's. “Negroes must learn to refuse to accept anything less than complete freedom” here in the United States in their own communities. “And we must make it clear to white people that we will enjoy our freedom—all of it—or they won't enjoy theirs either.”¹¹⁶

But, despite their differences, Cleage incorporated both the flavor and substance of Malcolm X's philosophy into his own thinking. After Malcolm X's assassination in 1965, Cleage debated Marxist and SWP member George Breitman over the true meaning of Malcolm X and his legacy. Breitman suggested that in the last year of his life Malcolm X was well on his way to becoming an international socialist, adopting some of the same conclusions about revolution and anticapitalism as the SWP. Cleage rejected the notion. “I am not a Marxist—I don't pretend to be, I don't even pretend to know anything about it,” Cleage retorted, in what was at least his second speech to a SWP Friday Night Forum.¹¹⁷ Insisting

that Malcolm X “wasn’t fooled in Mecca, he wasn’t fooled in Africa,” Cleage argued that Malcolm X’s internationalism was of a different kind, one based on the fight against racial, rather than economic, oppression.

These differences over the relationship between land and power and about what role, if any, white radicals could play in the revolution continued to structure the evolution of a Black nationalist perspective in Detroit and elsewhere well after Malcolm X’s assassination. The Grass-Roots Conference had helped to launch the Michigan chapter of the Freedom Now Party; a year or so later James Boggs founded the closely aligned Organization for Black Power. The FNP was hampered from the beginning by disagreements over which school of Black nationalism it would adhere to. Shortly after the founding of the national party, the disagreement manifested itself in a dispute over whether the FNP should pursue a separatist or integrationist strategy. “A shaky compromise was reached,” explains Conrad Lynn, under which “all candidates for public office would be black, but individuals of whatever color were free to join. In this way we hoped to have a party primarily devoted to the interests of blacks.”¹¹⁸ The problem for many was with the insertion of that adverb, *primarily*, and the questions it posed about the political affinities of the party’s white members.

These debates were somewhat reminiscent of the arguments that swirled around A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington movement in 1940 after Randolph broke with the National Negro Congress over the involvement of the Communist Party. A faint echo of Randolph can be heard in James Boggs’s sharp missive to Conrad Lynn some twenty years later. “I wrote that I did not believe the party should be under any kind of umbrella,” Boggs warned Lynn.

If you want to know what I mean by an umbrella, I mean that it should not be under the auspices of any radical group. And if you want me to be more concrete I am under the impression that the people you have in Detroit and Cleveland are people whom you were given by the SWP. . . . If white radicals are saying that they must be in the party in order for it to be a party, then I am against the damn party. . . . For instance, Grace, my wife, hasn’t got a damn bit of business in the black political party unless they label her a Negro in this country.¹¹⁹

Boggs was absolutely right. For well over a month the FNP’s chief person in Detroit had been none other than George Breitman, William Worthy’s close friend and frequent correspondent. It was Worthy who in

many ways had been the Harlem-based party's progenitor; he used Breitman as a sounding board and a conduit for information on the situation in Detroit. In this capacity, Breitman was able, for instance, to supply information on James Boggs, whom Worthy had met only once, briefly; Breitman cautioned Worthy against involving Boggs too closely in his efforts. When Worthy asked about possible youth involvement, it was once again Breitman who was able to suggest Luke Tripp. But above all the two men discussed Reverend Cleage and whether he would actually join the FNP.¹²⁰ At one point an obviously frustrated Breitman complained about the extent to which it "has been and grows increasingly difficult for me to be your contact here," not only because of the "need to avoid leaks" but also because "I am not a Negro." While Breitman continued to support the Michigan FNP, he eventually found someone more suitable to head its forces in Detroit, a young, unemployed man by the name of LaMar Barrow. Barrow was neither experienced nor sophisticated, but he was, Breitman wrote, "responsible and reliable."¹²¹

The FNP generally stuck to its compromise on the question of race and membership. White radicals, particularly those associated with the SWP, did join or support the party, as Breitman's story makes clear. Grace Lee Boggs was the only non-Black member who ran for office on the FNP ticket. As a Chinese American, she apparently presented a problem for the party's efforts to enforce race-based membership categories. The Michigan FNP had a politically diverse constituency, however, attracting people who had been involved with GOAL and UHURU, as well as those who had worked with the TULC, CORE, and NAACP. At least one of the party's members, Christopher Alston, had been a Communist. The party ran a full slate in 1964, with Reverend Cleage as the gubernatorial candidate; Milton Henry running for Congress; and Ernest C. Smith, a teacher at Cody High School, running for Senate. The party also ran a full slate of eight candidates for the state Board of Education. One of the six women on the ticket, Helen Kelly, was a member of Teamsters Local 458 and had been active with both the TULC and the Sherrill School Parents Committee. Another candidate, Ella Mae Perryman, was a member of Cleage's church and the Harmony Neighborhood Civic Group, one of the city's numerous block club organizations. Attorney Henry Cleage ran for Wayne County prosecuting attorney in a campaign largely focused on the police slaying of Cynthia Scott. Grace Boggs stood for the Board of Trustees of Wayne State University.¹²²

Although Cleage was slow to join the FNP, once he did so he showed absolute commitment. He became the Michigan Freedom Now Party's state chairman and wrote and spoke frequently on behalf of the party.

ELECT NEGRO CANDIDATES

By Voting
FREEDOM NOW
PARTY

VOTE for
MILTON R. HENRY



U.S. CONGRESS
1st DISTRICT
BALLOT NO. 199

ELECT NEGRO CANDIDATES

By Voting
FREEDOM NOW
PARTY

VOTE for
CHRISTOPHER C. ALSTON
STATE REPRESENTATIVE 10th - DISTRICT



BALLOT NO. 204

ELECT NEGRO CANDIDATES

VOTE FOR

DR. LOUIS J. CLEAGE

BOARD OF EDUCATION

NON-PARTISAN

ELECTION, SEPT. 1

ENDORSED BY

GOAL - GROUP ON ADVANCED LEADERSHIP
FREEDOM NOW PARTY
LEAGUE OF NEGRO WOMEN VOTERS



On October 11, 1963, he gave a speech to an FNP rally that wove many of the year's political developments into an argument about why 1963 was the year of the Black revolt. Affirming that "we have come a long way in a short period of time," Cleage began by referencing the recent debate over an open occupancy ordinance proposed by Councilmen William T. Patrick and Mel Ravitz and about the role of "our white liberal friends" in helping to defeat the proposal. Cleage was especially hard on Philip Van Antwerp, who had defeated African American candidate Jackie Vaughn in a hard-fought election in 1962 for a seat on the Common Council. Cleage chided those who had felt that, since the two were both liberals and expressed practically no differences of political opinion, it was better to vote for the more experienced Van Antwerp than the newcomer Vaughn.¹²³

When the council finally voted, the open occupancy ordinance was defeated seven to two. Van Antwerp voted with the majority, maintaining that unsegregated housing was a moral issue and therefore impossible to legislate—a position the *Michigan Chronicle* branded as an "absurd parade of stupidity and ignorance." Years later, Ravitz vividly recalled the intensity of the controversy. It was, he reflected, "the first time I became really aware of the virulence of hatred in this city, when I had to have my house guarded, [and when I had my] tires slashed." At the raucous public hearings, held at Ford Auditorium in order to accommodate the crowds, the councilmen had to be escorted by armed guards.

To make matters worse, not only was the Patrick-Ravitz ordinance voted down but a rival measure affirming the "freedom" to discriminate was brought before the council by the Greater Detroit Homeowners' Association and then directly to voters through an initiative petition of the same sort once used by leftists to force action on an FEPC ordinance. The association needed only four days to collect the signatures necessary to get this so-called Poindexter Ordinance (named after attorney and councilman Thomas Poindexter, who lost his reelection bid to Nicholas Hood in 1965) on the ballot. The NAACP's legal challenge to the ordinance's inclusion on the ballot was to no avail. In September 1964, the measure passed by a vote of 136,671 to 111,994.¹²⁴

"The whole open occupancy situation," Cleage said to the audience gathered for the 1963 Freedom Now rally, "has done more for the Freedom Now Party in the city of Detroit than anything anybody could have said to anybody." Many, including Cleage, noted the "progressive" UAW's absence from the debate over open occupancy. He also referred to the Cynthia Scott slaying and its aftermath; the UHURU Olympic protest; that September's Birmingham church bombing, which had

killed four African American girls; and the Kennedy administration and Congress's inability to secure the rights of Black citizens. What additional proof did anyone need, Cleage asked rhetorically, to prove that "the white man does not intend to give the Negro equality?"¹²⁵

Instead of "accidentally" wasting votes by supporting fair-weather white liberals such as Kennedy and Cavanagh—"We took Cavanagh and we made a mayor out of a little lawyer who didn't have a chance. And we wasted our vote"—Cleage suggested that FNP voters might as well waste their votes on purpose. This was not just a protest vote or even a vote of conscience. Rather, it was part of what Cleage called "an organized and deliberate strategy of chaos." "I'm not talking about that natural ability that we have to tear up things," he explained. "I'm talking about a deliberately conceived plan to tear up those things from which we are excluded in these United States—it either accepts us in it, or we'll do everything possible to tear it up." The FNP was to become a thorn in the Democratic Party's side, an open rejection of the argument that Blacks ought to support Democrats as the lesser of two evils. It was a risky strategy, which reflected Cleage's campaign for a no vote on the 1963 school millage question seeking to hold Detroit's schools accountable for their failure to meet the needs of Black children and their communities.

When speaking publicly about the Freedom Now Party during late 1963 and 1964 Cleage never mentioned the SWP and tended not to speak in terms of full-scale nationalist or socialist revolution. Still, the bulk of the SWP membership continued to support the new political party. Not everyone in the Socialist camp was happy with this decision, but in internal party arguments George Breitman carried the day.¹²⁶ There were other ties as well. William Worthy was close to the SWP (he had been one of the featured speakers at the October 1963 rally in Detroit), and the SWP's 1964 national ticket included a number of FNP-friendly African Americans—particularly Clifton DeBerry, a New York state party organizer who ran for president with Edward Shaw, a former Detroit auto worker and party organizer. The SWP also ran a slate of candidates in Michigan's statewide races; not wanting to split the modest ranks of those willing to vote for candidates of either party, the SWP abstained from certain designated races.¹²⁷

The FNP's stance on Black nationalism and its tacit endorsement from the SWP did nothing to endear the new party to the city's liberal coalition. An older generation of Black ministers, including the Rev. Charles A. Hill, was especially vocal in its opposition. "I don't want anything to do with organizations which want all-black," Hill told a meeting of Baptist ministers. "There are white people suffering and dying for civil



Freedom Now Party campaign poster, 1964 (Ernest C. Smith Collection. Courtesy of Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.)

rights, too.” Believing in God power, not Black power, Hill urged, “We should close our churches to them [the FNP].”¹²⁸

Hill attempted to do just that. The FNP, recognizing that Black churches were important sites for community organizing, sought to meet in as many area churches as possible. The petition drive to get the FNP on the ballot had also centered in African American churches and was part of Cleage’s attempt to organize at the religious grass roots of Black Detroit. Hill believed that by shutting the FNP out of these community venues he and his colleagues could effectively shut the party down.

In one much-remarked instance, Hill was able to persuade a local minister, the Rev. W. R. Haney of Dexter Avenue Baptist, to reverse his decision to allow the Freedom Now Party to meet in his church by convincing him that the FNP stood for “Black nationalism and a separate state idea.” The rest of the ministerial alliance followed Hill’s lead. It was, to be sure, a complete reversal for a clergyman who had begun his political career by opening his church to dissidents. Milton Henry remarked on Hill’s turnabout, which Henry saw as inconsistent. “It is difficult to understand how Rev. Hill could have allowed a dinner party to be held at his church . . . for the Communist Party’s Benjamin Davis last May, and yet try to deny my church, Dexter Avenue Baptist, the right to hold a Freedom Now meeting.” Perhaps, Henry added, Hill “feels that the Communist Party is okay since it is interracial.”¹²⁹ In the course of over three decades of activism, Reverend Hill had gone from accusations that he was “commie” to suggestions that he was a “Tom.” His political philosophy had not changed at all, but Detroit’s political struggles had undergone a transformation around him.¹³⁰

Actually, Reverend Hill avoided calling the FNP “communistic” on the basis of its ties to the SWP, as others had. Yet it is interesting to wonder whether Hill’s affinity for the CP, with its long-standing hatred of the SWP, influenced his position in any way. The FNP’s ties to the socialists were also a problem for Cleage and his fellow Black nationalists, given Cleage’s (false) insistence that his party had no connection with the SWP or any other “white radicals.”¹³¹

Although the SWP and the other groups associated with the Freedom Now Party campaigned hard, the state election results were less than edifying. Cleage received only 4,767 votes for governor; the only candidate who made a decent showing was Henry Cleage, who garnered 6,603 votes in his congressional race.¹³² Disappointed, Cleage and Grace Lee Boggs both left the FNP shortly after the election.

The loss was, however, an important learning experience. Having

made a shaky peace with the Democratic Party, candidate Cleage rose again, this time to run for the Common Council in 1965—twenty years after Reverend Hill's first campaign. It was a phenomenal campaign season. An unprecedented thirteen African American candidates entered the primaries that year, including Cleage, George Crockett, Jackie Vaughn, the UAW's Marc Stepp, and the still cantankerous Snow Grigsby, who was described as "a surprising dynamo on the speaker's circuit." The despised councilman Thomas Poindexter also joined the race. Cleage did not survive the primaries, but Reverend Hood, backed by a "Unity Slate" comprising the TULC, the Cotillion Club, and the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance (of which Hill was a prominent member), went on to become the second African American ever elected to the council, edging out Poindexter for the ninth seat.¹³³

For Cleage, the defeat carried yet another important lesson about the potential and limitations of the political arena. Thus, while 1963 may not have been the year of the Black revolt, as he had prophesied, the Freedom Now Party's efforts, coupled with the growing popularity of Black nationalism, were having a noticeable effect on the younger ranks of the city's civil rights community.

IN SEARCH OF ALTERNATIVES

Although young, self-styled militants had been involved in the Grass-Roots Conference and the Freedom Now Party (Luke Tripp and Gwen Kemp were on the FNP's Executive Committee), they did not wholeheartedly share Cleage's political objectives. These young activists did not give the work of organizing political parties and running candidates for public office equal weight with efforts to go "back to the ghetto" in a more direct and sustained fashion. At the same time that Lyndon Johnson was initiating the national War on Poverty, of which Detroit's Total Action against Poverty (TAP) was a major component, a large segment of the Left in Detroit and elsewhere was reorienting its activism almost exclusively toward community organizing.¹³⁴

It was a national change that even the media felt compelled to comment on. Political power, noted an article in the *Detroit News*, was now defined in terms of creating "new pressure groups by organizing Detroit's slum dwellers into political units." As a spokesperson for Detroit CORE put it, "the whole civil rights movement shifted in a downward manner . . . [to] take into account the black nationalist movements and the separatists." While there were heated debates over Black nationalism within the ranks of Detroit CORE, the organization was not willing

to renounce its efforts to promote integration. Instead, the idea was “to show people that by organizing, they can still participate in our integrated society.”¹³⁵ Yet it was a Black nationalist perspective, variously defined, that was steadily becoming the basis for new coalition- and community-building efforts and the associated grassroots activism.

By the spring of 1964, Detroit CORE had begun organizing communities around issues important to their residents. The group opened a branch office in the Twelfth Street district and began organizing tenants’ rights groups. It was also one of the first groups to organize Detroit’s Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) mothers, although they were ultimately unable to sustain this campaign.¹³⁶

This “ghetto program” prefigured the creation of a whole series of new community groups. By far the most active and successful of these, the West Central Organization, is illustrative. Headed by the Rev. Richard Venus of the Fourteenth Avenue Methodist Church, the WCO was an interracial group active in the city’s Wayne State University district. Organized in 1965, the group was committed to organizing in the style of Saul Alinsky.¹³⁷ Because Alinsky’s method involved integrating oneself and one’s organization into neighborhood life without preconceived tactical or strategic notions, the WCO found it vastly superior to the “maximum feasible participation” approach of federally directed antipoverty programs. The WCO’s idea was not to change people to fit institutions and programs imposed from outside but to modify institutions in ways that would allow the poor to represent themselves.¹³⁸

Like Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation in Chicago, the WCO established ties to local religious organizations, including the Archdiocesan Solidarity Federation, the Detroit Catholic Worker, and individual parishes and churches. The WCO felt that church involvement, even if limited to financial support, was essential and that churches must begin “to relate to the people who make up the lower socio-economic levels in society.” Echoing Cleage’s attack on the Black middle-class clergy, the WCO insisted that the church must confront its own “class and cultural barriers” and establish a “meaningful relationship with people outside of the middle-class structure.”¹³⁹ Rising to this challenge, various churches and religious bodies funneled thousands of dollars into the community-organizing efforts of groups such as the WCO.

The WCO was based in the older, interracial, and interethnic neighborhoods around the Wayne State University campus. Among the young activists, Sheila Murphy and her future husband, Ken Cockrel, were both members, as was Marian Kramer, who was married to fellow activist and WCO member General Baker. At its height, the group was a federation

of over thirty organizations.¹⁴⁰ Like CORE, the WCO initially focused on such community problems as absentee landlords who exacted high rents for scant services and stores that inflated their prices. Like every rights-oriented group since the 1910s and 1920s, the WCO also worked in the area of police brutality, criticizing the police department's dismal record in responding to crime in poor and Black neighborhoods. In one instance, the group left Police Commissioner Ray Girardin a nightstick sheathed in foam rubber, with a bag of black and white jelly beans attached. "Only when the police force is as integrated as these jelly beans should the sheath come off the night stick," read the attached note.¹⁴¹

But, although the WCO claimed minor successes in these efforts, it was in the fight against discriminatory urban renewal policies that they had the greatest effect. The WCO, like GOAL and the liberal coalition working in the Medical Center area, was not opposed to urban renewal in principle. It simply argued that residents' right to self-determination had been repeatedly violated by city agencies and helped the aggrieved residents work out a confrontational action plan. It was not a revolutionary program, although some members of the group thought revolution might be necessary to achieve their goals. In 1966, for example, when the city moved to evict families in the Hobart Street area as part of the Wayne State redevelopment plan, some families, accompanied by WCO members, locked themselves in. The city turned off the water, then the electricity and gas, but the barricaded resisters managed to jerry-rig backup service. Police arrested two dozen protesters outside of the apartment building, and the city eventually negotiated a compromise.¹⁴²

Within two years, however, tensions over race and ideology had severely hampered the WCO's effectiveness. Perhaps the tensions were in part a natural consequence of diversity within the WCO and the neighborhoods where it operated. "Black elements over on, say, Butternut Street might have been concerned about a son or a nephew getting his ass kicked . . . by the police," Ken Cockrel explained, "and that might not play well over on Commonwealth Avenue, where the concern might be, you know, street lights, garbage pickup, things of that kind." Cockrel maintains that the organization was also hampered by the strictures of the Alinsky method. Alinsky tended to caution against antagonizing organized labor—it simply created more problems than it solved—and radicals such as Cockrel weren't "too happy about being counseled not to take on discriminatory industries because of this policy," as they would soon prove with the Revolutionary Union Movement.¹⁴³

Lorenzo ("Rennie") Freeman, a driving force in the WCO, resigned from the group in 1968 because he didn't believe that a racially inte-

grated organization could be effective in Black ghettos. “What was radical two years ago,” remarked Freeman, recalling the Hobart Street confrontation, “isn’t radical today . . . and it takes radicals to bring about social change.” Like other young Detroit militants, Freeman was enormously affected by the 1967 rebellion and the inability of established groups such as the WCO and CORE to prevent the uprising. Many came to wonder whether there might be a way to harness the power of Black Detroit’s frustration. Concluding, perhaps with a tinge of regret, that “We’re just going to have to take the gloves off,” Freeman—like Reverend Cleage, the Henry brothers, the Boggsses, and so many others alongside them—continued to search for alternatives.¹⁴⁴