

“We’re Black, We’re Proud, We’re Commandos”: Respectability Politics, Armed Self-defense, and Gender Dynamics in the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council, 1958-1968

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By the 1940s, Milwaukee was one of the most segregated cities in the country. Most black Milwaukeeans were forced to live in a ghetto known as the Inner Core. Black Milwaukeeans faced racial discrimination and segregation in housing, schools, and employment opportunities. Within the racial cultural landscape of the inner core, activists developed ideas, ideologies, and tactics in their quest for social justice. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Milwaukee branch Youth Council was the vanguard of several civil rights insurgences in Milwaukee during the 1960s. The Youth Council conducted a series of direct-action campaigns against racial discrimination in Milwaukee. However, the Youth Council’s direct-action tactics and the espousal of militant Black Power ideology put them in direct conflict with Milwaukee’s adult branch of the NAACP. The adherence to or rejection of respectability politics was at the core of this conflict. Within the black community, the issue of respectability politics created

tensions between the two organizations along the lines of class, gender, education, skin complexion, and migratory status. The Youth Council's direct-action protests also drew the ire of white Milwaukeeans, some of which engaged in white supremacist violence in an attempt to stop Youth Council campaigns. In 1966, in a response to white supremacist violence, the Commandos, an all-male proto Black Power self-defense organization, were organized to protect demonstrators from violent white counter protestors. The Commandos symbolized a working-class rejection of nonviolence.

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“This is war. We will not sign a new peace pact until the Negro is as free in Milwaukee as the Polish people. This is only the beginning. We should have been at this crossroad years ago.”

-Reverend William B. Hoard, *Waukesha Daily Freedom*, September 5, 1967.

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## Introduction

In early March 2019, Malcolm Brogdon, a prominent professional basketball player for the Milwaukee Bucks, generated controversy when he discussed issues of race and segregation he experienced in the city. Brogdon stated, “Before I came to Milwaukee, I’d heard the city was the most segregated in the country... I’d heard it was racist. When I got here it was extremely segregated. I’ve never lived in a city this segregated.”<sup>1</sup> Brogdon’s comments are not the first time the Milwaukee Bucks organization has address the continued segregation and racism in Milwaukee. At a Rotary Club of Madison event, Bucks Team President Peter Feigin said, “Very bluntly, Milwaukee is the most segregated, racist place I’ve ever experienced in my life... It is in desperate need of repair and has been for a long, long time.”<sup>2</sup> Joe McClain, former president of the Milwaukee chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) also claims that Milwaukee is “very racist.”<sup>3</sup> Descriptions of the differences between racism between the north and the south is that southern racists are “more outspoken” whereas the “northern racists claims, ‘I’m not racists.’”<sup>4</sup>

Brogdon, Feigin, and McClain’s assessments of Milwaukee being one of the most segregated cities in the United States are not inaccurate. Greater Together, a nonprofit organization that promotes diversity, compiled data of the largest 102 cities in the United

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<sup>1</sup> Donald McRae “People think if you’re black you can’t be both educated and a sportsman,” *The Guardian* March 1, 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/mar/01/malcolm-brogdon-interview-milwaukee-bucks-nba>.

<sup>2</sup> “Milwaukee Bucks President calls City a ‘Segregated, Racist Place,’” *Chicago Tribune*, September 27, 2016, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/ct-milwaukee-bucks-peter-feigin-racist-city-20160927-story.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Andrew Witt, “Picking Up the Hammer: The Milwaukee Branch of the Black Panther Party,” in *Comrades: A Local History of the Black Panther Party*, ed. Judson Jeffries (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 181.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Witt, “Picking up the Hammer,” 182.

States. Greater Together’s study concludes that not only is Milwaukee the most segregated city in the country, but it also has the highest rate of “residential segregation based on poverty.”<sup>5</sup> Using data from the 2017 U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, 24/7 Wall St., a finance company that conducts socioeconomic research issued a report focused on racial disparities in urban areas based on education, annual income, homeownership, unemployment, incarceration rates, and health. In its report, 24/7 Wall St. determined that Milwaukee is the “worst city for black people to live.”<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the contemporary racial disparities black Milwaukeeans experience are not a new phenomenon. Milwaukee has a long history of struggling with issues of racism and white supremacy dating back to the first half of the twentieth century. In response to these issues, Milwaukeeans from all walks of life have challenged racial inequality and pursued a path of social justice.

### **Analytical Framework**

This thesis framework will incorporate elements of racial cultural landscapes as described by Richard H. Schein in *Landscape and Race in the United States*. Cultural landscapes incorporate and analyze the interconnectivity of environment, spatial ordering, material culture, and the development of ideals. Specifically, this thesis will analyze the racial landscape of Milwaukee’s inner core, an urban ghetto primarily inhabited by working-class blacks. While the inner core may not be as iconic to the American cultural imagination as other civil rights sites like Birmingham’s Kelly Ingram Park, it still illustrates a powerful reminder of racial tension and segregation in American

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<sup>5</sup> Alex Groth “Open Housing Marcher says ‘State of the City has Gotten Worse,’” *Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service*, July 17, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Evan Comen, “The Worst Cities for Black Americans,” *24/7 Wall St.*, November 5, 2019, <https://247wallst.com/special-report/2019/11/05/the-worst-cities-for-black-americans-5/>.

society. The racial segregation of Milwaukee's inner core is an ideal location to analyze using a racial cultural landscape. The 1960 census found that the majority of African American Milwaukeeans, numbering roughly 90,000, lived in the Inner Core, which covered about 5.3 square miles. African Americans made up 12 percent of the city's total population, but they lived in an area that was only 5.5 percent of the total land area of Milwaukee.

The primary physical material culture I will be using for my analysis is housing. However, I will be taking an analytic step farther with Schein's view of cultural landscapes by including access to material culture. Regarding access to material culture, I will focus on livable employment opportunities and access to adequate to quality education. In doing so, I will incorporate arguments from Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How our Government Segregated America*. One of Rothstein's central arguments is that racial housing discrimination, particularly against African American veterans in the post-war era, denied African Americans and their children the ability to accumulate wealth as easily as white Americans during the post-war boom. Rothstein's argument is applicable to Milwaukee because around 1,000 African Americans in Milwaukee served in the armed forces during World War II. African Americans who had the means to purchase housing outside the inner core were denied housing due to racial discrimination. One of the catalysts of the 1967 direct action campaign of 200 nights of open housing marches conducted by the youth council occurred when Robert Britton, an African American Vietnam veteran, requested help from Father James Groppi after he and his family were rejected from renting an apartment because of his race.

Within this segregated cultural landscape, ideas and ideals were able to flourish and evolve within the African American community. One ideal which dominated the MNAACP was the adherence and promotion of respectability politics. This thesis will use respectability politics as an analytical lens to explore how its adherence and promotion in some instances stopped or stalled civil rights movements and how the youth council and Commandos worked in tension and tandem with it. Within this cultural landscape, respectability politics created tensions between the youth council, MNAACP, and the black Milwaukeean community along the lines of class, education, gender, and tactics to achieve social justice. This cultural landscape also helped create the development of Black Power ideology and armed self-defense ideas espoused by the Commandos and youth council.

### **Segregated Housing**

From the foundation of Milwaukee in 1846, the black population of the city remained small relative to other northern cities. By 1930, 7501 blacks lived in the city (1.3% of the population) and there became an increasingly discernible black neighborhood comprising of a four block by three block area. Previously, this neighborhood of Milwaukee was home to the city's small Jewish population, but during the 1920s, most were able to move to other parts of the city. Even by 1930, Milwaukee's segregation was evident due to the fact the area's population density was twice the city average.<sup>7</sup> Because of the population density and lack of adequate medical care, Milwaukee had the highest tuberculosis rate in the country. The Wisconsin

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<sup>7</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, November 8, 1967.

Antituberculosis Association condemned the living conditions as a “shameful” area where black Milwaukeeans were “herded.”<sup>8</sup>

Segregated housing is the first variable which helped create Milwaukee’s racial landscape. Following the United States entry into World War II, black Americans migrated to Milwaukee in unprecedented numbers. From 1940-1950, the black population grew from 8,821 to 21,772 (142.82 % increase).<sup>9</sup> With the dramatic increase of Milwaukee’s black population, racial segregation became more acute. A 1940 report conducted by the Citizen’s Governmental Research Bureau determined that Milwaukee’s racial segregation was comparable to southern cities such as Birmingham and Atlanta. The report also identified that less than six percent of black Milwaukeeans owned their homes and half of black residences were deemed “unfit for human occupation.”<sup>10</sup> Between 1950 and 1960, another 40,686 black Americans moved to Milwaukee and by 1967, the black population reached 90,000, making up twelve percent of the city’s population.<sup>11</sup> In the 1960 census, the inner core was broken into 26 tracks. Charles O’Reilly deemed nine tracks as “highly [segregated],” twelve tracks as “segregated,” two tracks as “transitional,” three tracks as “integrated,” and determined 92.6% of black Milwaukeeans living in the inner core lived in highly segregated or segregated tracks.<sup>12</sup> In 1967, a report by the Federal Housing Authority determined that only 320 black

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<sup>8</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, November 12, 1967.

<sup>9</sup> For more demographical information about Milwaukee’s black population in the 1950s and 1960s see O’Reilly, Charles, *The Inner Core North: A study of Milwaukee’s Negro Community* (Milwaukee: UW-Milwaukee, 1965) and “Mayor’s Study Committee of Social Problems in the Inner Core Area of the City”, *Final Report to the Honorable Frank P. Zeidler, Mayor* (Milwaukee: Mayor’s Study Committee, 1960).

<sup>10</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, November 10, 1967.

<sup>11</sup> O’Reilly, *The Inner Core North*, 5; Richard Smuckler, “Black Power and the NAACP: Milwaukee, 1969, A Case Study,” Master’s Thesis, UW-Milwaukee 1970, 27.

<sup>12</sup> O’Reilly defines highly segregated tracks as having a black population 75% or more, segregated tracks as between 50-74%, transitional tracks as between 24-49%, and integrated tracks as between 1-24%. O’Reilly, *Inner Core North*, 8.

families lived outside the inner core. Also, by this time, the inner core consisted of a 5.3 square mile area (5.5% of the total land area of Milwaukee) which housed the vast majority of Milwaukee's black population. Therefore, by 1967, Milwaukee was one of the most segregated cities in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Compounding the housing crisis for residents of the inner core was urban renewal programs and freeway construction projects. By 1969, over 8,000 habitable residences were destroyed for city projects while the city only built 320 residential dwellings to replace them.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1960s, the inner core contained most of Milwaukee's oldest buildings and the upkeep of the structures was neglected by the city. Frank Aukofer, a civil rights reporter for the *Milwaukee Journal*, describes the living conditions in the inner core:

To anyone who was simply passing through, the area did not look as slummy as those in some other cities. But a closer look revealed the litter, broken glass, and abandoned automobiles... People lived in rundown homes with rats and roaches, plumbing that did not work, heating systems that conked out on cold days, broken windows that went unrepaired—all typical of slum housing anywhere.<sup>15</sup>

O'Reilly compares and contrasts the housing condition of residents inside and outside the inner core. O'Reilly defines three types of dwellings: "sound," "deteriorating," and "dilapidated." O'Reilly determines that 87.8% of dwellings outside the inner core were "sound," compared to 67.9% of the inner core, 10.5% of the dwellings outside the core were "deteriorating," compared to 25.3% of the inner core, and 1.7% of dwellings outside the inner core were "dilapidated," compared to 6.8% of the inner core.<sup>16</sup> In some census tracks of the inner core, O'Reilly also found that the most segregated tracks contained the largest percentage of "substandard" homes. His survey deems that 11.3% of homes were

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<sup>13</sup> Frank Aukofer, *City with a Chance* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1968), 36.

<sup>14</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, November 27, 1969.

<sup>15</sup> Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 36.

<sup>16</sup> O'Reilly, *The Inner Core North*, 48.

considered substandard in integrated tracks while in segregated tracks, 47.6% of dwellings were substandard.<sup>17</sup>

### **Segregated Public School System**

Segregation of Milwaukee's black population can also be witnessed in an examination of Milwaukee schools. School segregation is a second variable in creating the racial landscape of Milwaukee in the 1960s. Lauri Wynn moved from Chicago to Milwaukee in 1965 to teach at the inner core school on 20<sup>th</sup> Street. Wynn previously taught at a school on the west side of Chicago, a highly segregated area, so she was familiar with “*de jure* segregation” and “segregated schools.”<sup>18</sup> Wynn argues that although the Milwaukee school on 20<sup>th</sup> Street was a dramatic improvement from the school she taught at in Chicago, she recognized that the school district was highly segregated and schools with higher percentages of nonwhite students were at an economic disadvantage compared to white-dominated suburban schools.<sup>19</sup>

In his research, Charles O'Reilly finds that black Milwaukeeans are at a severe educational disadvantage compared to their white counterparts. Surveying the population age 25 and older, O'Reilly reports that the median number of years spent in school among black Milwaukeeans in 1950 and 1960 was 8.1 and 9.1, respectively. However, during the same time period, the median number of years for the entire city was 9.1 and 10.4 years, respectively. Therefore, black Milwaukeeans' median years of education were

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<sup>17</sup> O'Reilly, *The Inner Core North*, 49-51.

<sup>18</sup> Lauri Wynn. Interviewed by Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmTz\\_LfhqCk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmTz_LfhqCk). Regarding *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, I align myself with Richard Rothstein's argument. Rothstein argues that *de facto* segregation is a myth and governmental policies have created (and are still creating) *de jure* segregation in the United States. Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of how our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017), xii, xiv.

<sup>19</sup>Lauri Wynn. Interviewed by Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

a decade behind of the rest of the city. O'Reilly also identifies a disparity of high school graduation rates between white and black Milwaukeeans: 40.7 compared to 25.6, respectively. A 1966 report by the Governor's Commission on Human Rights finds that in 1960, black Milwaukeeans made up 25% percent of the total student body population. However, in the 1964-1965 school year, the majority of black students attended schools that were 95% nonwhite.<sup>20</sup> By 1968, the state of Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau recognized the segregation of Milwaukee schools, saw the problem it created for the city of Milwaukee as a whole, and urged the government to act:

In recent years... the [educational] needs of children from slum areas, particularly Negroes in large cities, were not being met. For example, an outside study group in 1967 recommended sweeping changes in the Milwaukee school system, in part related to racial issues but also oriented to certain other key matters of curriculum, organization, community and neighborhood relationships, and finance, including the problem of disparities in resources.<sup>21</sup>

Despite this recommendation in 1968, the end of segregated schools in Milwaukee would not be achieved until 1979 after the Supreme Court upheld the 1976 ruling of Federal Judge John Reynolds decision in *Amos et al. v. Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee*.<sup>22</sup>

### **Economic Disparities**

Economic and employment opportunities and are a third aspect that created Milwaukee's racial landscape in the 1960s. In 1960, the unemployment rate of black Milwaukeeans was 18%, over three times higher than their white counterparts who had a

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<sup>20</sup> Report of the Governor's Commission on Human Rights (Wisconsin), *Racial imbalance in the Milwaukee Public Schools* (Madison: Governor's Commission on Human Rights, 1966), 6.

<sup>21</sup> *State of Wisconsin 1968 Blue Book*. Compiled by the Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau (Madison, 1968), 158.

<sup>22</sup> *Amos et al. v. Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee*, 408 F. Supp. 765 (1976). In his ruling, Judge Reynolds concluded that "segregation exists in the Milwaukee public schools and that this segregation was intentionally created and maintained by the defendants."

4.7% unemployment rate. Even more troubling is that census tracts that O'Reilly considered highly segregated or segregated could have up to four times the unemployment rate compared to the city average. Black men and women primarily worked as blue collar or service industry workers; only one fifth of the black males in Milwaukee worked white collar jobs. Two thirds of black men held positions in the service industry or as semiskilled or unskilled laborers and one third of black women worked as drycleaners or laundromat operators. The economic racial disparity in Milwaukee can be acutely recognized by the breakdown of black Milwaukeeans hired as city employees. In total, 8114 people worked for the City of Milwaukee in 1968, but only 546 of them were black (0.067% while black Milwaukeeans represented roughly 12% of the total population). Only one black Milwaukeean served in the positions of Aldermen, on the mayor's staff, city service commission, and on the treasurer's staff. Black Milwaukeeans also made up a miniscule portion of the city's fire and police department, 0.0068% and 0.02% respectively. Clayborn Benson argues that "system" in the city of Milwaukee had selected specific city jobs that black Milwaukeeans "were not qualified to do."<sup>23</sup> Garbage collector was the only city position that the black population equaled or exceeded their representative demographic percentage at 33%. Income inequality was also an issue in Milwaukee. City officials made racist comments discouraging the economic development of black Milwaukeeans. In a 1963 interview, Fred Lins, a member of Milwaukee's Social Development Commission argued that the city should find ways to keep poor blacks out of Milwaukee stating, that "most blacks have an I.Q. of

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<sup>23</sup> Clayborn Benson III. Interviewed by Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXv6cGyHqIk&t=481s>.

nothing” and that “negroes look so much alike that you can’t identify the ones that committed the crime.”<sup>24</sup>

Based on the median income in 1960, black families where only the male worked earned \$2,200 less per year than their white counterparts. In families where the husband and wife both worked, black families earned \$1,800 less per year. In 1960, based on the per capita income, black Milwaukeeans were three times more likely to earn under \$1,000 per year than their white counterparts. However, individuals earning over \$6,000 a year were three times more likely to be white.<sup>25</sup> Peter Eisinger, a professor of Urban Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, examines the economic racial disparity between black and white Milwaukeeans. Eisinger finds that that in 1960, the average household income for black Milwaukeeans was \$4,000 compared to \$7,000 for white Milwaukeeans Eisinger identifies that in 1960, an annual income of less than \$4,000 was considered living in poverty. Eisinger finds that by 1970, black Milwaukeeans were twice as likely to earn less than \$3,000 annually compared to white Milwaukeeans.<sup>26</sup>

### **Police Brutality**

Under the leadership of Police Chief Harold Breier, accusations of police brutality were commonplace. In 1965, the Milwaukee-based organization the Citizens Anti-Police Brutality Committee states that, “some law officers in this city constantly insult, harass and brutalize Milwaukee Negroes... every Negro is a second class citizen.”<sup>27</sup> Accusations of police brutality were the primary catalyst for the July 1967 civil disturbance in the

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Aukofer *City with a Chance*, 39-40.

<sup>25</sup> O’Reilly, *The Inner Core North*, 43, 69, 71, 76-77; *Milwaukee Courier*, March 2, 1968.

<sup>26</sup> Peter K. Eisinger, *Patterns of Interracial Politics: Conflict and Cooperation in the City* (New York: Academic Press, 1976), 34.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Braun, “Social Change and the Empowerment of the Poor: Poverty Representation” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 1999), 63.

inner core. However, it is unclear what sparked the incident. Squire Austin, a member of the Commandos, recalled hearing a rumor circulating in the inner core “that police had beaten up a kid pretty bad over on Third and Walnut... [when those rumors began circulating,] that’s when the looting and firebombing started.”<sup>28</sup> The following year, the Survey Research Lab conducted a survey of 119 of the people arrested in the July 1967 civil disturbance. The survey identifies that 84% of the black Milwaukeeans arrested asserted that police brutality was the primary factor causing the disturbance.<sup>29</sup> In response to accusations of police brutality, Chief Breier adamantly opposed the notion that police brutality was an issue within the department. Responding to these accusations, Chief Breier argued that police brutality was nonexistent within the department.<sup>30</sup>

Another aspect of police brutality in Milwaukee was several incidents of officers shooting black Milwaukeeans who had committed fabricated or nonviolent misdemeanor offences that were deemed “justifiable homicides.” Some of the more public incidents while the department was under the stewardship of Chief Breier include Daniel Bell in 1958, Clifford McKissick in 1967, Tommie Chesser in 1969, and Jacqueline Ford in 1972. During the civil disturbance on August 2, 1967, Clifford McKissick, an 18-year-old college student, was shot and killed by the Milwaukee police. According to police statements, McKissick and three other men were attempting to burn down a paint store with Molotov cocktails near his home. Whether this account is accurate or not, the shooting was determined justifiable. After McKissick’s death, two prevalent thoughts occurred among black Milwaukeeans regarding police-community relations. First, his

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Patrick Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 144.

<sup>29</sup> Karl Flaming, *Who ‘Riots’ and Why?* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Urban League, 1968), vii, xi, 2, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Witt, “Picking Up the Hammer,” 184.

death was “another case of a white man killing a nigger and getting away with it.”<sup>31</sup>

Second, the police department had two different objectives in the inner core compared to the white suburbs. While in the suburbs, the police’s objective was perceived as being to protect people, and in the inner core, the police were seen as an occupying army that surveilled, harassed, intimidated, and murdered black residents.<sup>32</sup>

All in all, based on O’Reilly’s research, black Milwaukeeans were more likely to be unemployed, live in substandard and crowded housing, work lower paying and less desirable jobs, and receive a lower quality education. Additionally, black Milwaukeeans had a higher infant mortality rate, higher rate of teen pregnancy, and a shorter life expectancy.

### **Personal and Familial Experiences**

Beyond the racial landscape of Milwaukee in the 1960s, personal and familial experiences influenced the attitudes and actions of individuals who became involved in the civil rights movements in Milwaukee. A history of previous family members’ quests for social justice is one major factor that propels individuals to act. Betty Martin’s great-grandfather was a victim of white supremacist violence for speaking to a white woman, challenging a major social/racial norm in the segregated south. Because of this transgression, white members of the community repeatedly ran over Martin’s great-grandfather with a tractor “until he was flattened to the ground,” while Martin’s father and grandmother were made to watch.<sup>33</sup> Due to this incident, Martin’s father and

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<sup>31</sup> Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Prentice McKinney. Interviewed by Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgn3Z6K\\_zao](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgn3Z6K_zao); Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Betty Martin. Interviewed by Joanne Williams Spring, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jb4rxLkC2fQ>.

grandmother were actively involved in challenging segregation in the south. When Martin was 10 years old, she participated in marches with her father and made him the promise that she would continue to fight for social justice “as long as I could continue to walk.”<sup>34</sup> Mary Arm’s family members were also active in civil rights movements in Mississippi. Arm’s grandfather provided housing and protection to white civil rights activists who were organizing in Mississippi.

Another motivating factor inspiring people to become active in Milwaukee civil rights movements was their experiences in the United States military. Squire Austin, a native Milwaukeean, describes how his experience in the military altered his perceptions of racism and discrimination. Austin recalled that he personally did not deal with much discrimination until he joined the army. After he was discharged, Austin returned to Milwaukee and states that he “could see it more clearly” and became actively involved with the youth council.<sup>35</sup> John Givens, another member of the US army, was stationed in France in the late 1950s and early 1960s. While stationed in France, Givens recalls that he was “defined” by French citizens as “an American citizen.”<sup>36</sup> Returning home after his discharge in 1961, Givens describes how he felt like an American citizen, but “there were a lot of people who didn’t agree with that” because he was a black American.<sup>37</sup> Givens describes how this overt racism was “an eye opener” for him of the “depths of racial prejudice” in the United States, and in 1962, he became an advisor for the youth council.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Martin, Betty. Interviewed by Joanne Williams Spring, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Squire Austin. Interviewed by Everett Marshburn Spring, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjPK8Jmli2A>.

<sup>36</sup> John Givens. Interviewed by Joanne Williams, Spring 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNExEstCOGQ>.

<sup>37</sup> John Givens. Interviewed by Joanne Williams, Spring 2011.

<sup>38</sup> John Givens. Interviewed by Joanne Williams, Spring 2011.

Familial military experience and the lack of fair housing in Milwaukee were motivational factors for others to become involved in civil rights organizations in Milwaukee. Prentice McKinney and his family moved to Milwaukee from the south as part of the Great Migration. McKinney recalls that he and other children growing up in Milwaukee did not “experience the [racial] suppression of the south.”<sup>39</sup> One experience in particular stood out to McKinney as pushing him towards becoming an activist. McKinney’s older brother was serving in the United States Air Force. While on leave from England, McKinney’s brother wanted to buy his mother a house outside of the inner core. McKinney recalls that his brother saw a house for sale and approached the house, in uniform, to inquire about it. The homeowner bluntly told McKinney’s brother, “We don’t sell to niggers, our neighbors would be upset.”<sup>40</sup> After hearing about his brother’s experience, McKinney thought to himself, “here is a man who is fighting for a country during a war, yet he can’t come back here and buy his mother a house?” After this experience with overt racism and housing discrimination, McKinney made two decisions. McKinney vowed that he would not serve in the armed forces like his two older brothers for a country that treated black Americans as second-class citizens. Instead, McKinney said that he was “going into service... for black people.”<sup>41</sup>

Other members of the youth council and the Commandos became involved in marches and demonstrations out of basic necessity. Most members of the youth council were children of working-class parents. For some people like Adolph Arms, the struggle to acquire food and housing was a daily occurrence. For most of his childhood, Arms and

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<sup>39</sup> McKinney, Prentice. Interviewed by Everett Marshburn Spring, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> McKinney, Prentice. Interviewed by Everett Marshburn Spring, 2011.

<sup>41</sup> McKinney, Prentice. Interviewed by Everett Marshburn Spring, 2011.

his eleven siblings were raised by his mother who struggled to provide for her family as a single parent. He recalls that he got involved with the youth council and demonstrations because of the “basic necessities” the Freedom house had to offer.<sup>42</sup> Although Arms became more socially and politically aware of the need for social justice in Milwaukee, initially he participated in the marches because he knew that he would get fed and have a place to sleep. George Sanders, an activist who spoke to members of the youth council about educational and economic opportunities, recalls that the Freedom House was important because “many of those kids had no place else to go.”<sup>43</sup> Combining their personal experiences within the racial landscape of Milwaukee’s inner core, ordinary people would organize and fight against racial oppression in Milwaukee.

### **Thesis Overview**

The first chapter analyzes the Milwaukee Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (MNAACP) and Youth Council through the lens of respectability politics, beginning with the murder of Daniel Bell in 1958. The power and pervasiveness of respectability politics among traditional black leaders in Milwaukee either stopped or slowed activism against racial injustice in the city. While respectability politics is a viable tactic, especially for those who face disenfranchisement, oppression, and racism, its promotion created tension within the black community. These tensions were based on class, education, gender, skin complexion, native Milwaukeeans vs southern migrants, and tactics to combat racial inequality. Beginning in 1963, the Youth Council conducted several direct-action campaigns to the dismay of the MNAACP.

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<sup>42</sup> Adolph Arms. Interviewed by Michael Gordon, August 17, 2007, <https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/march/id/1594>.

<sup>43</sup> George Sanders. Interviewed by Joanne Williams, Spring 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJQwu\\_uxHYc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJQwu_uxHYc).

Frustrated by the Youth Council's unwillingness to cease direct-action campaigns, the MNAACP would dismiss Youth Council Advisors, quit the MNAACP, or use the NAACP annual convention to demand the Youth Council coordinate their tactics with the adult branch (in effect becoming subordinate).

Chapter two examines the backlash against direct-action campaigns conducted by the Youth Council. Beginning with the Eagles Club Campaign in 1966, white supremacist violence against the Youth Council and its allies increased dramatically. In response to this increased violence, a subgroup of the Youth Council was formed, the Commandos. The Commandos served as a police force to protect demonstrators from white supremacist violence. The Commandos would also police the actions and behaviors of other demonstrators. The argument in chapter two is threefold. First, the Commandos are a symbolic working-class rejection of nonviolence in Milwaukee. Second, due to the lack of police protection and condemnation of white supremacist violence perpetrated against members of the Youth Council, the Commandos were a necessary organization to protect the Youth Council. Third, while on the surface it would appear that the Commandos rejected respectability politics, based on their code of conduct, beliefs, and actions, the Commandos in fact worked in tension and tandem with respectability politics.

Chapter three analyzes the gender dynamics within the Youth Council and the MNAACP. Gendered gatekeeping is one negative aspect of respectability politics, and respectability politics demands that women (and men) conform to middle-class values and appearances. Women who fail to conform to the values of respectability are deemed "unladylike" and therefore do not deserve the same level of respect, protection, and rights

as those who adhere to respectability's gendered public performances. Female activists in Milwaukee internally wrestled with the issue of presenting themselves as respectable women while publicly protesting inequality. This internal struggle illustrates how respectability and gendered gatekeeping can slow or stall women's participation in civil rights activism. Chapter three will also explore the gender tensions between the Commandos and female members of the Youth Council, which sparked the creation of the Commandoettes. Finally, this chapter will also explore the manifestation of Steve Estes's concept of masculinist uplift and Farah Jasmine Griffin's politics of protection within the Youth Council and the Commandos.

## Historiographical Essay

In recent years, the Civil Rights and Black Power historiography has undergone a significant reshaping. Civil Rights historians have been reorienting their scholarship away from the “classic” civil rights movement that focuses on southern movements, organizations at the national level, and a top-down approach. They have moved away from this narrative and begun to emphasize scholarship that utilizes a bottom-up approach, focusing on localized movements beyond the south and emphasizing the agency of ordinary people. Black Power scholars have also reoriented their focus away from more “radical/revolutionary” organizations such as the Black Panthers and instead have focused on organizations that preceded the Panthers, but whose ideas were deemed equally radical and dangerous to the continuation of white supremacy. Additionally, the Black Power historiography has begun to focus on the role of armed self-defense and its connections to the classic and long civil rights movements. Civil Rights and Black Power historians have also begun to analyze and understand the symbiotic nature and interconnectedness of civil rights and Black Power movements. By doing so, historians recognize that both movements have a longer and less contradictory past than previously thought. Both movements have a long history of drawing upon similar ideas and intellectuals, but more importantly, both movements have the same fundamental goal: bringing about the end of white supremacy. A scholarly analysis of the Youth Council helps bridge the gap between Black Power and traditional civil rights organizations. The Youth Council embraced aspects of Black Power ideology while simultaneously maintaining a multiracial organization that for the most part adhered to code of conduct outlined by the NAACP.

Over the past twenty years, there has been an increase in scholarship focusing on the civil rights movement at the local level, moving away from a top-down analysis of national organizations and leaders. A top-down analysis overlooks the crucial and diverse roles and tactics local people engaged in during their quest for racial equality. However, in 2003, Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard published their edited volume *Freedom North* calling for scholars to focus their attention on the civil rights movement outside the south. Theoharis and Woodward argue that an emphasis on northern civil rights movements will help challenge the perceived monolithic nature of the civil rights movement. They called scholars to revisionism the civil rights movement having their analysis not be bound by specific eras of time or geographic locations. Finally, Theoharis and Woodard call for more scholarly attention to local African American women civil rights activists.<sup>44</sup>

This thesis focuses primarily on one of these organizations, the Milwaukee National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (MNAACP) Youth Council. The Youth Council was founded in 1948 and for the first fifteen years of its existence operated as a subordinate entity to the MNAACP. However, in 1963, the Youth Council adopted a more “militant” approach and conducted several direct-action campaigns challenging racial segregation and discrimination in Milwaukee. This thesis will also focus on two sub organizations that grew out of the Youth Council, the Commandos and the Commandoettes. The Commandos were an all-male, proto-Black Power organization that served as a security and police force for the Youth Council. The primary function of the Commandos was to protect members of the Youth Council and

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<sup>44</sup> Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), xi-xiii.

their allies during demonstrations against white supremacist violence perpetrated by counter demonstrators and police officers. The Commandoettes were an all-female auxiliary group who provided support to the Youth Council and Commandos.

Several scholars answered Theoharis and Woodard's call for an expanded analysis of the civil rights movement outside of the south at the local level. In doing so, scholars have understood a more nuanced relationship between northern and southern movements. While northern movements shared a consciousness with their southern counterparts, their justifications and tactics were anything but monolithic. Among crucial factors that make northern experiences at the local level different from the south are its urban geography, a more industrialized economy, higher concentrations of white European immigrants, the semi-secure African American right to vote, the lack of formal Jim Crow laws, greater access for African Americans to adequate employment and education, and a weaker concentration of violent white supremacist organizations. Based on these conditions, Milwaukee's civil rights activism in the 1960s is a location well suited for a northern, bottom-up scholarly analysis. Furthermore, civil rights activism in Milwaukee has not received the proper attention or credit as being a bastion of civil rights insurgencies in the latter half of the twentieth century. Since the 1940s, Milwaukee has (and still is) one of the most segregated cities in the United States, and there have been several indigenous organizations that have challenged white supremacy and demanded social justice.

One of the first pieces of scholarship examining the Milwaukee NAACP in the 1960s is Richard Smuckler's thesis "Black Power and the NAACP: Milwaukee, 1969, a Case Study." Smuckler's argument is twofold. First, he argues that by the end of the

1960s, there was an ideological conflict between black activists in Milwaukee and the MNAACP. Second, he asserts that due to the unwillingness of the MNAACP to shift their ideological focus, the MNAACP failed to adequately fight for the demands of black Milwaukeeans. Due to these two factors, Smuckler argues that by the end of the 1960s, the MNAACP lost most of its power and influence in civil rights activism in Milwaukee. One shortcoming of Smuckler's scholarship is his analytical lens focuses too much on ideology and fails to adequately incorporate a class analysis. A scholarly focus on class illuminates that class tensions were at the core of the ideological conflict between the MNAACP and the Youth Council. Members of the MNAACP predominantly came from a middle-class background, while members of the Youth Council predominantly came from working class families who lived in the inner core.<sup>45</sup>

Joe Trotter Jr.'s *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945* is one of the few pieces of scholarship that uses class as its primary analytical lens. Trotter explores the occupational transition of Milwaukee's black working class from unskilled and service-based jobs towards industrial employment. Additionally, he focuses on the development and activism of organizations who fought for better conditions for the black working class in Milwaukee. While Trotter is correct that more black Milwaukeeans did gain more employment in industrial based jobs from 1915-1945, the numbers of blacks employed remained marginal based on population demographics. One of Trotter's strongest contributions is his focus on the intersection between class and race and tensions within the black community. Additionally, Trotter explores the segregation and oppression black Milwaukeeans faced. Trotter analyzes the uneasy relationship

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<sup>45</sup> Smuckler, "Black Power and the NAACP," 1970, 3-5.

between Milwaukee's small, black middle-class population and its growing working-class population. While at times the middle-class attempted to woo members of the working-class to support efforts of the MNAACP and other middle-class organizations, the relationships were marred by the negative aspects of respectability politics. Because Trotter's scholarship ends in 1945, a class-based focus of Milwaukee's black community will add greater continuity to the scholarship

Only a handful of scholars have conducted research on civil rights activism in Milwaukee, beginning with Jack Dougherty's scholarship on African American school reform titled *More than One Struggle*. Dougherty's deft analysis challenges African American education reform beyond the lens of *Brown v. The Board of Education*. Equally important, Dougherty highlights the role African American women played in education reform movements in Milwaukee. One of the most important aspects of Dougherty's scholarship is his challenge of the "abandonment narrative." The abandonment narrative suggests that after the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, black Americans, especially in the north, abandoned interracial nonviolent movements and joined Black Power and or black nationalist organizations. In Milwaukee, Dougherty finds that the civil rights movements were a diverse coalition of organizations, each with different motivations but fighting towards a common goal. Dougherty argues that struggles to desegregate Milwaukee's schools and Black Power "share more commonalities that most historical accounts have previously assumed."<sup>46</sup> Paul Geenen's book *Civil Rights Activism in Milwaukee* explores the diverse coalition of civil rights activists for education and open housing in Milwaukee, including the NAACP,

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<sup>46</sup> Jack Dougherty, *More than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 107.

Catholic clergy, college students, and Latino families. However, three pivotal organizations in Milwaukee during the 1960s have been the subject of greater attention by recent scholarship. These organizations are the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council, the Commandos, and Commandoettes.<sup>47</sup>

The first in-depth study of the Commandos was undertaken by Julius Modlinski in 1978. In his dissertation, titled “Commandos: A Study of a Black Organization’s Transformation from Militant Protest to Social Service,” Modlinski explores the development of the Commandos as a militant direct-action group and examines the subgroup of the Commandos who focused on community service programs. In his research, Modlinski takes a bottom-up approach, which includes dozens of interviews with former Commandos.<sup>48</sup> However, Modlinski does have one major analytical flaw in his interview practices; that none of the interviewees are women fails to acknowledge the gendered component of the Commandos. Since 1976, there have been several oral history projects on the Civil Rights insurgency in Milwaukee. Incorporating the voices of women in the movement fills in the gendered gap of Modlinski’s scholarship.

Although the term respectability politics was not coined until 1994 by Evelyn Higginbotham, Modlinski’s research indirectly identifies how the Commando’s *modus operandi* works in tension and tandem with respectability politics. Modlinski identifies an unwritten code of conduct that outlines Commandos’ behavior. Four out of the organization’s five articles adhere to respectability politics for African American men. The first emphasizes “toughness” and the willingness to defend one’s community,

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<sup>47</sup> Dougherty, *More than One Struggle*, 1-3, 106-107; Paul H. Geenen, *Civil Rights Activism in Milwaukee: South Side Struggles in the '60s and '70s* (Stroud, UK: The History Press, 2014), 2-3.

<sup>48</sup> Julius J. Modlinski, “Commandos: A Study of a Black Organization Transformation from Militant Protest to Social Service,” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1978), 34-35, 285-286.

particularly women and children. The second article urges “discipline” and a willingness to obey orders from superiors. The third focuses on “appearance,” including clean clothing and grooming practices. The fifth outlines “respectful behavior”: drunkenness was prohibited, and disrespect towards allies of the Commandos in the Milwaukee community was not tolerated. Appearance, the fourth article, also challenged respectability politics in two respects. First, Commandos were supposed to promote “natural” African American hair, with no “process” or “kinks.” Second, there was no specific type of clothing the Commandos were supposed to wear. However, in the initial stages, they chose a militant style, wearing fatigues, combat boots, patches, badges, and berets. As Commando membership expanded, not all of the members could afford this style of dress. Therefore, the Commandos created “NAACP Youth Council Commando” shirts that could be worn with jeans.<sup>49</sup> An examination of how the Commandos and the Youth Council worked in tension and tandem with the politics of respectability will help illustrate the power and influence entrenched respectability politics has within local black communities.

With his attention focused on the Commandos’ involvement in community service programs, Modlinski fails to properly address two crucial issues, the first of which being the Commandos’ relationship with nonviolence. In the Commandos’ unwritten behavioral code of conduct, article four states that all Commandos must adhere to nonviolence. Modlinski argues, “The Commandos practiced a non-violent philosophy.”<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, Modlinski does not clearly identify how he views “non-violent philosophy.” The philosophy of nonviolence has a wide range of meanings along

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<sup>49</sup> Modlinski, “Commandos,” 79-80.

<sup>50</sup> Modlinski, “Commandos,” 80.

an ideological spectrum, both in philosophical and tactical applications. However, one core tenet of the philosophy of nonviolence understood and promoted by Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, Reinhold Niebuhr, James Lawson, and Martin Luther King Jr. is that retaliatory violence against one's aggressor is morally and tactically unproductive and therefore should be avoided. Modlinski contradicts his assertion of the Commandos' nonviolent philosophy in describing an incident where the Commandos planned in advance a physical confrontation with Milwaukee police officers, which resulted in twenty-seven hospitalizations and eleven arrests. In his final chapter, Modlinski backtracks on his assertions that the Commandos adhered to the philosophical principles of nonviolence. Instead, he argues that the Commandos' relationship with nonviolence was not "in its purist sense."<sup>51</sup> Modlinski's assertion that the Commandos practiced a nonviolent philosophy has subsequently been contradicted by several Commandos and members of the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, a more nuanced examination of the Youth Council's and Commandos' views of and relationship with nonviolence is required to give a more complete understanding to the scholarship.

Modlinski's scholarship also fails to address the fact that the Commandos were a male-only organization, and he does not mention the Commandoettes or any issues of gender tension.<sup>53</sup> Because he did not interview any women in his research, Modlinski has left out the perspectives of female Youth Council members that could have added to his analysis and scholarship, particularly at the point when the Commandos broke away from

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<sup>51</sup> Modlinski, "Commandos," 189.

<sup>52</sup> Modlinski, 188-189; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 1988), 85-87, 204-205, 250-252, 292; James H. Cone, "Martin and Malcolm on Nonviolence and Violence," *Phylon* 49 (Autumn-Winter 2001), 175-177.

<sup>53</sup> Modlinski, "Commandos," 91-94, 110.

the Youth Council in late September 1967 and created their own independent organization known as Commandos Inc. Female members of the Youth Council such as Shirley Butler express negative feelings towards the Youth Council and Commando split. Modlinski also fails to acknowledge that the Commandos voted to deny female membership and does not mention that in a frustrated response to women's prohibition in the Commandos, Shirley Butler and Mary Arms formed the Commandoettes. A gendered analysis of the Youth Council and Commandos adds to the historiography because it gives a more complete and nuanced account, as well as providing a more complex understanding of the development of ideas and ideals within the cultural landscape of the Inner Core.<sup>54</sup>

Patrick Jones directly acknowledges that he heeded Theoharis and Woodard's call for more localized scholarship of the civil rights movement in the north. His book, *The Selma of the North* takes a more nuanced approach to the Youth Council and Commandos compared to Modlinski. Describing the armed self-defense tactics of the Commandos and their relationship with nonviolence., Jones draws upon Timothy Tyson's assertion that armed self-defense "worked in tension and in tandem"<sup>55</sup> throughout the civil rights movement. Jones describes several instances where the Commandos refused to collaborate with other armed self-defense organizations such as the Black Panthers, Pride Inc., and an unaffiliated branch of the Deacons for Defense and Justice unless they were willing to be non-violent during the demonstrations. However, like Modlinski, Jones

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<sup>54</sup> Modlinski, "Commandos," 98-99; Shirley Butler, "March on Milwaukee Oral History Project, 2007-2008," transcript of an oral history conducted July 29, 2007, by Amanda Wynne, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; Mary Arms, "March on Milwaukee Oral History Project, 2007-2008," an oral history conducted July 17, 2007, by Amanda Wynne, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

<sup>55</sup> Jones, *Selma of the North*, 123; Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 308.

describes the Commandos' planned confrontation against Milwaukee police officers and other instances of violence that the Commandos engaged in. Still, Jones does not classify these actions as a rejection of nonviolence.<sup>56</sup>

One point that Jones illustrates with his scholarship is the relationship between northerners participating in southern civil rights activism and bringing their experiences home with them. Jones focuses his scholarship primarily on one historical actor in the Milwaukee civil rights movement in the 1960s, Father James Groppi. Groppi was white Catholic priest whose congregation was in the Inner Core and who would become the advisor for the Youth Council in 1965. Jones conducts dozens of interviews with members from the Youth Council and the Commandos, which illustrates a bottom-up approach. Yet, his emphasis on Groppi moves his analysis towards a top-down approach. While Groppi is an important figure in the Milwaukee civil rights movement, there is still a need for scholarly additions that explore the Youth Council and the Commandos through the perspective of ordinary members. Incorporating oral histories and interviews from members of the Youth Council will reorient the scholarship towards a more bottom-up approach.

Jones's analysis on gender dynamics is more in depth than Modlinski's scholarship and yet is equally as problematic in similar respects. In his introduction, he asserts that until recently, the civil rights historiography had the tendency to overlook the roles of women. Yet, like Modlinski, Jones fails to acknowledge the existence of the Commandoettes. Additionally, Jones's analysis of gender seems to be more of an afterthought. He addresses the issue of a "gendered movement" over a series of a mere

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<sup>56</sup> Jones, *Selma of the North*, 133-135, 222-224, 215-216.

five pages near the end of his book. Jones only quotes one Youth Council member's issue with the gendering of the Commandos. He does acknowledge that Youth Council and the Commandos were "gendered and contradictory."<sup>57</sup> However, he emphasizes that the primary goal of the Youth Council and Commandos was to challenge racial inequality and gendered strategies were employed to attain this goal. The most compelling statements about a harmonious relationship between the men and women in the Youth Council and Commandos were made by Margert Rozga. Rozga was a white, middle-class member of the Youth Council. Based on her ethnicity and socioeconomic status, Rozga may not have fully understood or acknowledged the experiences of African American women and their view of gender tensions.<sup>58</sup>

One positive area of Jones's discussion of gender is the fact that he identifies a group of older African American women as "the mothers of the civil rights movement" who served as informal advisors and chaperones to women of the Youth Council. These "mothers" promoted and policed the standards of respectability politics to African American women of the Youth Council. They made sure female members of the Youth Council were accounted for at all times, that they knew how women should act around men in public, and spurred any advances by members of the Commandos.<sup>59</sup> Jones's brief discussion illustrates the role respectability politics played in the Youth Council. Further analysis can shed more light on how respectability politics were embedded within the Youth Council.

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<sup>57</sup> Jones, *Selma of the North*, 227.

<sup>58</sup> Jones, *Selma of the North*, 5, 223-226.

<sup>59</sup> Jones, *Selma of the North*, 226-227.

Currently, Erica Metcalfe is the only scholar of the Commandos and Youth Council who has begun to adequately address gender tensions within the two organizations. In her thesis, “‘Coming into our own’: a history of the Milwaukee NAACP youth council, 1948-1968” Metcalfe identifies several female members of the Youth Council who were resentful of the Commandos’ gendered role as male protectors. Metcalfe argues that gender tensions revolved around the idea of the group having an “egalitarian philosophy when it came to race but didn’t have that same philosophy when it came to gender.”<sup>60</sup> Metcalfe’s scholarship has begun to address gender tensions between the Commandos and the Youth Council. However, there are still more areas to expand the scholarship relating to gender norms, masculinity, and the politics of protection within the Commandos and the Youth Council. Regarding the relationship with nonviolence, Metcalfe’s analysis of the Commandos’ planned confrontation with Milwaukee police officers is similar to Modlinski’s. She argues that this confrontation does not suggest a rejection of nonviolence or a change in strategy. Instead, Metcalfe claims it was a symbolic act of resistance and summarizes the event by asserting that with this incident, the Commandos showed that they were not afraid of the police, and that they were willing to fight to gain respect from the community.<sup>61</sup>

Over the past fifteen years, there has been a surge of scholarly interest in African American armed self-defense organizations and their roles within the civil rights movement. A consensus among these historians is that armed self-defense organizations were formed in response to white supremacist violence and the lack of adequate

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<sup>60</sup> Naomi Waxman, “‘We Fought just as Hard’: Women in the March on Milwaukee. *Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service*, July 10, 2017.

<sup>61</sup> Erica Metcalfe, “Commanding a Movement: The Youth Council Commandos’ Quest for Quality Housing.” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 98, (2014), 12.

governmental protection, especially from local law enforcement. These are the exact parameters under which the Commandos were formed on October 4, 1966. In the month prior, two members of the Milwaukee Ku Klux Klan detonated a bomb at the headquarters of the adult branch of the Milwaukee NAACP. Another justification for the Commandos' formation was the violent reaction of white counter protesters and subsequent lack of police protection while the Youth Council was demonstrating at the Eagles Club, a fraternal organization that denied African Americans membership. Within the growing field of scholarship of armed self-defense organizations, the majority of research has been conducted in the south. Within the historiography, there is still ample room to explore armed self-defense in the north, the Commandos being a prime opportunity.<sup>62</sup>

Within the armed self-defense historiography, there is a heated debate among historians about the compatibility of armed self-defense with nonviolence. In his examination of one of the most prominent armed self-defense organizations, the Deacons for Justice and Defense, Lance Hill argues that the organization transformed into a symbolic rejection of nonviolence or a “revolt against nonviolence.”<sup>63</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, Charles E. Cobb Jr. argues that armed self-defense was neither incompatible nor contradictory with nonviolence. Cobb asserts that there is a historical misunderstanding with the use of guns in relation to nonviolence. He argues that the use of guns is not the opposite of nonviolence. Other scholars, such as Nicholas Johnson, take a more liberal approach to Hill's assertions. Johnson's scholarship does not completely

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<sup>62</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, October 5, 1966, p. 1; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 5, 1966, p. 1; *Waukesha Daily Freedom*, September 26, 1966, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 147.

concur with Hill's assessment but argues that the actions and rhetoric of the Deacons for Defense crossed over into political violence, which is contradictory to nonviolence. I am aligning myself with Hill's conclusions and argue that the Commandos became a symbolic working-class rejection of nonviolence. Furthermore, I will challenge Johnson's assertion that armed self-defense can spill over to political violence. During the civil disturbance in Milwaukee in late July and early August 1967, there is no evidence to suggest that the Commandos (or other members of the Youth Council) participated in political violence.<sup>64</sup> There is a lack of scholarship focusing on suborganizations working within organizations such as the NAACP who promote political nonviolence and personal self-defense. Unlike the Deacons, the Commandos were working within the organization of NAACP. Therefore, the Commandos had to abide by the branches bylaws and faced greater internal resistance to their tactical application of self-defense.<sup>65</sup>

Other scholars in the armed self-defense historiography such as Emily Crosby and Christopher Strain argue that scholars need to move beyond the dichotomy of whether armed self-defense was compatible or incompatible with nonviolence because it narrows the range of historical analysis. In her article "It wasn't the Wild West: Keeping Local Studies in Self-Defense Historiography," Crosby makes suggestions to scholars within the armed self-defense historiography. Crosby argues that scholars should move

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<sup>64</sup> Sam Denis of the US Justice Department presented his findings and analysis of the civil disturbance. In a letter to the Milwaukee Commission on Community Relations dated August 4, 1967, Denis concludes that no members of the Youth Council participated in the civil disturbance and argues that Father James Groppi had a "stabilizing influence" on the Youth Council. Records of Mayor Henry W. Maier Administration, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 1957-1989, Box 43, Folder 7, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

<sup>65</sup> Charles E. Cobb Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), xvii, 10-11; Nicholas Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2014), 273-276; Frank Aukofer, "March on Milwaukee Oral History Project, 2007-2008," transcript of an oral history conducted on November 16, 2007 by William Kapchinski, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

beyond the debate on whether armed self-defense is compatible or incompatible with nonviolence. She promotes a definition of “*unviolent*” which she claims is a more suitable middle ground between the dichotomy of compatibility. Crosby’s suggestion allows for more nuanced approaches and analysis within the armed self-defense historiography. I will suggest that future scholarship in the field should begin the process of firmly moving armed self-defense organizations into their own category beyond the standard analysis of their relationship with nonviolent activists and organizations.<sup>66</sup>

Within the current armed self-defense scholarship, Hasan Jefferies’s analysis of the Lowndes County Freedom Party (LCFP), the original Black Panther party, closely aligns with my analysis of the Commandos. Jefferies argues that the LCFP was a proto-Black Power organization that was created prior to Stokely Carmichael’s Black Power speech on October 29, 1966. Furthermore, Jefferies explores the origins of Black Power politics and the party’s relationship with armed self-defense. Like the LCFP, the Commandos were formed prior to Carmichael’s speech. Therefore, I will classify the Commandos as a proto-Black Power organization.<sup>67</sup>

Respectability politics is an important lens to use in examining civil rights organizations, particularly those associated with the NAACP. Incorporating an analytical lens of respectability politics allows scholars to understand how the code of conduct influenced civil rights organizations’ policies. Furthermore, respectability politics can be a site of tension based on class, gender, age, and skin complexion within the African

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<sup>66</sup> Christopher Strain, *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 8; Emilye Crosby. “It wasn’t the Wild West: Keeping Local Studies in Self-Defense Historiography.” In *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement*, edited by Emilye Crosby (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), 203

<sup>67</sup> Hasan Jefferies, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 19.

American community. The NAACP was one of the most ardent promoters of respectability politics dating back to W. E. B. Du Bois and his concept of the “Talented Tenth.” The term “politics of respectability” was first coined by Evelyn Higginbotham in her groundbreaking book *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Higginbotham argues that respectability politics was an uncodified set of beliefs regarding etiquette and behavior of marginalized communities to align with mainstream standards in order to combat systemic injustices. In adhering to white America’s social norms, African Americans could reject stereotypes placed on them. In theory, this would allow African Americans to safely and successfully enter the public sphere in white America.<sup>68</sup>

The early scholarship of respectability politics focuses on African American women’s behavior. Higginbotham argues that African American women were particularly likely to use respectability and to be judged by it. Moreover, African American women symbolized, even embodied, this concept. Respectability became an issue at the juncture of the public and private spheres. Paisley Jane Harris expands on Higginbotham’s scholarship by asserting that for African American women, respectability politics links worthiness of respect to sexual propriety, behavioral decorum, and neatness. In Harris’s view, respectability served as a gatekeeping function that established a behavioral code or “entrance fee” to the right to respect and full citizenship.<sup>69</sup> Michele Coffey asserts that for African American women, respectability politics also dictated that they should defend vulnerable African American women and

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<sup>68</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187-188, 195-196.

<sup>69</sup> Paisley Jane Harris, “Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women’s History and Black Feminism,” *Journal of Women’s History* (Spring 2003): 213.

children. She also asserts that African American women promoted concepts of sexual chastity and served as role models for other African American women to combat stereotypes that they were highly sexualized and unladylike. I will incorporate the scholarly analysis of respectability politics in the context of African American women, conducting an analysis of female behaviors and values of the Youth Council.

Additionally, I will explore how older African American women advisors to the Youth Council served as gatekeepers for “proper” women’s behaviors.<sup>70</sup>

After Higginbotham’s initial scholarship, historians began exploring how respectability politics applied to African American men. Victoria Wolcott was one of the first scholars to address respectability politics and its shift towards African American men in her book *Remaking Respectability*. Wolcott asserts that during the interwar period, “bourgeois respectability” reshaped the gendered discourse of respectability politics, shifting it towards a masculine ideology that surrounded manhood, nationalism, and economic self-help. Along with Wolcott, Farah Griffin argues that by the interwar period, African American women were no longer the central symbol of racial progress. Due to this transition, male African American intellectuals, ministers, and leaders promoted masculine norms for African American men, such as being the “defenders” of women, family, and community. In doing so, these African American men hoped they could challenge stereotypes of being lazy, immoral, unintelligent, and overly sexual. Equally important, Coffey asserts that in challenging these stereotypes, African American men could display their manliness and adherence to normative white masculine gender

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<sup>70</sup> Harris, “Gatekeeping and Remaking,” 204; Michele Coffey, “The State of Louisiana v. Charles Guerand: Interracial Sexual Mores, Rape Rhetoric, and Respectability in 1930s New Orleans.” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 54, no. 1 (2013): 48-50.

roles in the hope of combating racial discrimination and oppression. Martin Summers explores the transformation of masculinity and that relationship with respectability politics from 1900-1930. Summers argues that as the United States went from a producer to consumer society, ideas of masculinity also transitioned from producer to consumer. Summers asserts that the public performance of Victorian traits and values of masculinity became less important to younger African American men who in turn rejected aspects of bourgeois respectability.<sup>71</sup>

Historians have argued that the promotion and adherence to respectability politics can be highly problematic for African American communities in a number of ways. Although they do not use the term respectability politics, Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) and Charles Hamilton identify one of the core issues of respectability politics in relation with white America. They discuss how African Americans must constantly prove themselves to white people in a never-ending cycle; once African Americans have achieved one aspect of normative white society, another qualification is placed on them. Respectability politics are also imbued with class distinctions. Modupe Labode argues that generally, middle class African Americans adhere to respectability politics, but in some instances, working-class African Americans do as well. Harris outlines class tensions and the process of middle-class gatekeeping, which excludes some working-class African Americans and leaves them out of the “circle of worthy, respectable citizens.”<sup>72</sup> Kevin Gaines asserts that these class distinctions create

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<sup>71</sup> Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 6-10; Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Black Feminists and Du Bois: Respectability, Protection, and Beyond.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (2000): 34; Coffey, “The State of Louisiana v. Charles Guerand,” 50; Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 6-9.

<sup>72</sup> Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 204.

a paternalistic environment where some middle-class African Americans believe it is their responsibility to uplift African Americans of a lower socioeconomic status whether they like it or not. The flux of social identity within the African American community also makes respectability politics problematic. Brittney Cooper argues that African American identity, especially as it relates to class and gender, is a complicated and contested mode of black identity.<sup>73</sup> Most succinctly, Ibram Kendi argues that black Americans are not responsible for the racist thoughts and ideas of white Americans. Additionally, black Americans are not responsible for “changing racist policy by imagining they are uplifting the race by uplifting themselves.”<sup>74</sup> Kendi argues that the fundamental problem with respectability politics is that white society has told black Americans they must uplift themselves, “only to be cut down again by racists terror and policy.”<sup>75</sup>

All of these problematic aspects can be explored through an analysis of the Commandos and the Youth Council to see how these groups challenged respectability politics with their ideas and actions. Additionally, these scholars on respectability politics explore how respectability politics itself is a tactic utilized by black Americans to achieve racial equality and social justice. However, none of these scholars have explored how the adherence and promotion of respectability politics has the ability to stop and or stall activism. An analysis of the tensions created by respectability politics between the

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<sup>73</sup> Modupe Labode., “Defend Your Manhood and Womanhood Rights”: The Birth of a Nation, Race, and the Politics of Respectability in Early Twentieth-Century Denver, Colorado.” *Pacific Historical Review* 84, no. 2 (2015): 180; Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1–5. Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 22; Griffin, “Black Feminists and Du Bois,” 34, 36; Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 22.

<sup>74</sup> Kendi, Ibram, *How to be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 204.

<sup>75</sup> Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist*, 205.

MNAACP and the Youth Council in Milwaukee adds a new layer of analysis to previous scholarship on respectability politics.

Gender roles and tensions are an important analytical lens in the scholarship of civil rights and Black Power activism and organizations. In his ground breaking book on manhood and the civil rights movements, Steve Estes argues that within civil rights movements, the quest for racial equality is the top priority, but there are underlying questions of gender that are “deeply embedded within this overtly racial conflict.”<sup>76</sup> There is a plethora of scholarship examining gender in the Black Panther party. Robyn Spencer argues that on the one hand, Black Panther literature promoted internal revolution and provided men and women tools to critique gender discrimination, yet on the other, sexist attitudes persisted and sometimes even thrived in the organization. Joseph Peniel analyzes the influence of Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* on gender in Black Power organizations. Peniel argues that the book basks in “triumphant machismo,” promoting the ideal image of an African American man as strong, resilient, and violent. Regarding women, Peniel argues *Soul on Ice* depicts African American women’s actions towards African American men as condescending and cruel, but most importantly, as a liability because they viewed African American men as worthless. Cleaver’s depiction of African American gender stripped African American women of their femininity while promoting an oppressive type of black masculinity. In their seminal book *Black Against Empire*, Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin Jr. align with Spencer’s analysis. However, they argue that the analysis of African American machoism of the Black Panther Party has been distorted. They claim that on the one hand, the Black Panthers did promote the

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<sup>76</sup> Steve Estes, *I Am a Man: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 2.

image of “aggressive black masculinity,” but on the other, this image was not the totality of the Black Panthers’ politics.<sup>77</sup>

The diversity of Black Power organizations raises the issues of applicability between different groups. While the Commandos and the Black Panthers were both Black Power organizations, they are anything but monolithic in their ideology. Therefore, the scholarship of gender analysis of Black Power organizations needs to be expanded. There has been little gendered analysis of the Commandos and the Youth Council, which leaves ample room in the scholarship for more exploration. Patrick Jones does acknowledge that the Commandos did employ gendered strategies to achieve their goals, but his analysis has only scratched the surface of gendered strategies within the organizations. More importantly, Erica Metcalfe has identified gender tensions between the Commandos and female members of the Youth Council because of the promotion of racial equality over gender equality. Employing respectability politics as an analytical lens to explore gender in the Commandos and the Youth Council will greatly benefit the scholarship to add a deeper layer of understanding of gender roles and how the organizations worked within and against the framework of respectability politics.<sup>78</sup>

Female activists in civil rights organizations not only struggled for racial equality and social justice, but against sexism internally and externally of their movements. Women were always present and at the forefront of civil rights movements. Despite his

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<sup>77</sup> Robyn Spencer, *The Revolution has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party Oakland* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 4-5, 46-47. Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 212-213. Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 7-8.

<sup>78</sup> Jones, *Selma of the North*, 227; Erica L. Metcalfe, “Coming into Our Own’: A History of the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council, 1948-1968.” Master’s thesis, UW-Milwaukee, 2010 110-111.

highly problematic statements about women's role in SNCC, Stokely Carmichael said, "the ones who came out first for the movement were the women... women out there were giving all the direction... we used to say, 'once you got the women, the men would come.'"<sup>79</sup> Despite serving as the vanguard of several movements, female activists have been marginalized within civil rights organizations and by scholars. In her groundbreaking book *When and Where I Enter*, Paula Giddings challenges scholars to reorient the male-dominant activist narrative. Giddings asserts that black female activists face "double discrimination" which intersects both racism and sexism.<sup>80</sup> Due to their secondary status as women, combined with socioeconomic factors, Giddings argues that black women recognized, challenged, and transcended obstacles in powerful and meaningful ways. One reoccurring theme Giddings finds is the price female activists paid for challenging double discrimination that often put black women in direct conflict and competition with black men to achieve social justice.<sup>81</sup>

Echoing Giddings statements, Lynne Olson argues that even within the historiography of the civil rights movement, female activists do not receive the scholarly attention they deserve. In her book *Freedom's Daughters*, Olson argues that women's agency and contribution were dismissed in the past by members of their own organizations and governmental officials and in the present by scholars writing about or memorializing female activists. One of the most common and telling stories of female activists' marginalization is of Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her bus seat on December

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<sup>79</sup> Lynne Olson *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movements from 1830 to 1970* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 15.

<sup>80</sup> Paula Giddings *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on race and Sex in America* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1984), 5.

<sup>81</sup> Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 5-8.

1, 1955. Park's defiant and deliberate act has been memorialized by incorporating the stereotype of female passivity. The dominant narrative describes Parks as a seamstress who was too tired to move or as Olson describes Parks as, "less [of] a free agent than a vessel of the forces of history."<sup>82</sup> What the dominant narrative fails to acknowledge is the fact that Parks actively choose to perform her symbolic act of defiance. Furthermore, by 1955, Parks was an active member of the activist community for over two decades, playing an important role in the NAACP and investigating sexual assault cases against black women.<sup>83</sup>

Female members of Black Power organizations experienced the same struggles as women in civil rights organizations. In their anthology *Sisters in Struggle*, Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin acknowledge the previous contributions of scholars focused on female activists within civil rights organizations. However, Collier and Franklin argue that the scholarship lacks a detailed examination of female activists in the civil rights and Black Power movements. Collier-Thomas and Franklin would like to move the analysis away from individual activists and focus on movements more broadly. They selected authors who would incorporate an analysis of collective movements based on the social and political contexts of the movements. In doing so, Collier-Thomas and Franklin argue that can analyze the connection between social changes and their influences on the evolution of political consciousness among female activists.<sup>84</sup>

Beginning in 1963, the youth council served as the vanguard in a series of struggles against racial oppression and white supremacy in Milwaukee. Clayborn Benson

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<sup>82</sup> Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 13.

<sup>83</sup> Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 13-16.

<sup>84</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin eds., *Sister in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 4-5.

III describes the Youth Council as ordinary kids of the street who had “no more education [or] understanding of fair housing,” but they recognized the oppression and unfair conditions that black Milwaukeeans faced on a daily basis.<sup>85</sup> Benson argues that the Youth Council “galvanized” activism in Milwaukee by providing “the energy, strength, [and] the life blood of the movement.”<sup>86</sup> The Youth Council was a unique organization that embodied a variety of ideas and tactics from both the nonviolent civil rights and Black Power movements. Members of the Youth Council simultaneously incorporated and rejected aspects of nonviolent direct action and respectability politics in their quest for social justice.

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<sup>85</sup>Clayborn Benson III. Interviewed by Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

<sup>86</sup>Clayborn Benson III. Interviewed by Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

## Chapter 1

### **The Limits of Respectability**

On the evening of February 2, 1958, Milwaukee police officers Thomas Grady and Louis Krause attempted to pull over a car with a broken taillight. The driver was Daniel Bell, a twenty-one-year-old African American who had moved to Milwaukee from rural Louisiana. Bell pulled his car over and attempted to evade the officers on foot. Grady and Krause ordered Bell to stop, fired several warning shots, and proceeded to pursue Bell.<sup>87</sup> Catching up to him, Grady fired one shot, striking Bell in the back and killing him instantly. After both officers checked Bell's lifeless body for a pulse, Grady callously brushed off the shooting stating, "He's just a damn nigger kid anyhow."<sup>88</sup> The shooting of Daniel Bell galvanized his family and other black Milwaukeeans to demand justice for Bell's death. However, there were serious disagreements within the black community on what tactics should be deployed. At the core of the disagreements was tension created by the adherence and promotion of respectability politics. In 1958, calls for direct-action demonstrations fizzled out in a matter of weeks. The entrenchment of respectability politics in Milwaukee was so pervasive it had the power to stop or stall movements demanding social justice.

Broadly speaking, the politics of respectability is a moralistic discourse deployed by marginalized groups to achieve social equality. By adhering to and promoting dominant societal values, members of a marginalized social group display they are compatible with mainstream society. By adhering to dominant norms and values,

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<sup>87</sup> *Milwaukee Journal* February 3, 1958.

<sup>88</sup> *Patrick Bell, Sr. v. City of Milwaukee*. Based off Krause's testimony in 1978, Grady denies making this statement.

marginalized individuals may in theory be granted the ability to politically and economically participate within the society as full citizens. By extension, as more marginalized individuals gain the benefits of full citizenship, mainstream society would become more willing to accept and grant additional rights to more marginalized individuals. Therefore, at times, proponents of respectability politics will police the behaviors of fellow members of their community, which can create tensions within the community.

The NAACP combined three main tactics that intersect with respectability politics: increasing education among African Americans, increasing voter turnout, and challenging segregation and discrimination through legal means. In the Milwaukee NAACP (MNAACP) Unity for Justice Newsletter, branch president Christine L. Belnavis states the chapter has six areas of primary focus: “Fair share, quality/integrated education, monitoring discrimination complaints in all areas, fund raising, membership solicitation, educational excellence for all students.”<sup>89</sup> The NAACP opposed most of the direct action tactics because their actions being labeled as “militant” defied respectability politics and put pressure on their attempts to maintain a multicultural alliance. Exploring multiple direct-action civil rights campaigns in Milwaukee from 1958-1968, it is evident that the Milwaukee Chapter of the NAACP opposed these campaigns because their tactics defied the politics of respectability. The tension over the MNAACP’s view of direct action becomes more acute when examining its response to advisors and members of the chapter’s Youth Council. The MNAACP’s responses to direct action campaigns illustrate clear examples of the negative aspects of respectability politics including tensions

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<sup>89</sup> Vel Philips Papers, 1951-2009, UWM Archives, Box 39, Folder 26.

relating to class, education, age, and migratory status. Furthermore, the prevalence of respectability politics among middle-class members of the MNAACP can be witnessed through its members attempting to police and define “respectable” public performances of the Youth Council and working-class black community.

### **History of the Milwaukee NAACP Chapter**

The MNAACP was officially recognized on January 23, 1919. The chapter was established by Robert Bagnall and Wilbur Halyard. From its inception, the membership of the MNAACP was dominated by middle-class black Milwaukeeans. Early membership of the MNAACP comprised of 100 people who were priests, ministers, professors from Beloit college, and other white-collar professionals. In an interview conducted by Richard Smuckler, Reverend David Rohlfing suggests that the middle-class nature of the MNAACP was because Milwaukee had a small black population and therefore, more black Milwaukeeans were able to attain middle-class status. Under the stewardship of branch president attorney George DeReef (elected in 1920-1921), the organization’s primary functions were to protect and expand the interests of local businesses owners and black middle-class residents. However, in 1923, DeReef’s leadership was challenged by R. B. Montgomery due to DeReef’s focus on middle-class issues. Montgomery wanted the branch to focus on political and economic disenfranchisement of black Milwaukeeans and address the national issue of lynching. As a result of this conflict, the branch temporarily split into two opposing factions. The faction that supported DeReef elected Rev. E.W. Thomas, a Garveyite, and the other faction supported Montgomery.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Smuckler, “Black Power and the NAACP,” 23-26; Metcalfe, “Coming into Our Own,” 3-4; Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 125-126.

The factional split in the MNAACP in the early 1920 was short lived. However, the split illustrates class tensions within the branch and the influence of respectability politics and racial uplift. In a letter to Robert Bagnall, Director of NAACP Branches, Montgomery criticized Rev. Thomas as a “storefront preacher” who “does not amount to very much” and is “doing all he possibly can to break up your Association here in Milwaukee.”<sup>91</sup> Bagnall and James Weldon Johnson, the National NAACP Secretary, intervened and offered a solution to resolve the split within the Milwaukee branch. Bagnall and Johnson suggested that Dr. Edgar Thomas (no relation to Rev. Thomas), who recently moved to Milwaukee, should be designated branch president and both Montgomery and Rev. Thomas would step down. The election offered a temporary fix to the factionalism within the branch. However, Dr. Thomas exhibited a strong bias towards the working-class, Garveyites, and southern migrants to Milwaukee. After becoming branch president, Dr. Thomas wrote to Bagnall criticizing the city’s Garveyites saying that “they are against the N.A.A.C.P.” and “they as usual consist of that ignorant class.”<sup>92</sup> On another occasion, Dr. Thomas argued that the local branch would grow based on the activity of middle-class members and the “better class” would be able to organize and uplift the “ignorant” working-class migrants from the south.<sup>93</sup>

During the early years of the Great Migration, Milwaukee’s black population remained low (2,229 in 1920) in comparison to other northern cities. Most black southern migrants in the latter half of the 1910s came to Milwaukee for economic opportunities as Milwaukee’s wartime industries were relegated to unskilled laborer positions. By 1930,

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<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 126.

<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 126.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 126-127.

the black population in Milwaukee had more than tripled to roughly 7500, comprising 1.3 percent of the city's population. In the early 1930s, adequate housing became an acute problem for Milwaukee's growing population of working-class black citizens.

Milwaukee's black neighborhood comprised of an area four blocks by three blocks with a population density twice the average of the rest of the city. In 1940, a study conducted by the Citizen's Governmental Research Bureau reported that racial segregation in Milwaukee was comparable to Birmingham and Atlanta.<sup>94</sup>

From the early years of the Great Migration, class tensions were prevalent in the MNAACP based on the challenges the chapter attempted to tackle in Milwaukee. In the 1930s, the MNAACP attempted to challenge racial discrimination in Milwaukee's hotels, taverns, and dance halls. In August 1935, Edward Woodley was offered an invitation to attend a party thrown by The Milwaukee County Progressive party at the Plankinton House. Upon his arrival, the hotel manager denied Woodley and his wife's entrance to the hotel solely based on the fact that he was black. After hearing about the incident, the MNAACP filed a series of letters to the hotel challenging its discriminatory policies. However, the MNAACP's actions failed to achieve any meaningful success. This emphasis on Milwaukee following the law that guarantees equality of treatment for black Milwaukeeans is in stark contrast to housing, employment, and education issues which were prevalent among the working-class black population.<sup>95</sup> The native middle-class black population of Milwaukee did not identify with the plight of working-class migrants.

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<sup>94</sup> Smuckler, "Black Power and the NAACP," 23-26; Metcalfe "'Coming into Our Own,'" 3-4; Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 34; *Milwaukee Journal*, November 10, 1967.

<sup>95</sup> Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 202. *Milwaukee Journal*, November 9, 1967.

This division is clearly evident when examining a statement by the Wisconsin State Historical Society in its monthly publication titled “Wisconsin Then and Now”:

At first, the Beloit and Milwaukee [NAACP] chapters were more concerned with supporting the efforts of the national office than with working on a local level to change conditions, conditions of segregation and discrimination as bad as those existing in the South.<sup>96</sup>

The emphasis of maintaining support of the national branches can be seen through the MNAACP’s focused efforts on voting registration drives and education.

The emphasis on black Milwaukeeans’ voting in the 1960 and 1964 national elections can be seen through the MNAACP’s objectives and tactics in their voter registration drives. One MNAACP voter registration document states the objective is to “make every Negro adult a registered voter [and] teach them to vote intelligently.”<sup>97</sup> The MNAACP believed that black clergymen were the best avenue for getting their message of the importance out to the black community in Milwaukee. A letter from Frankie Jones, the MNAACP Chairman of Voter Registration Committee urges local clergymen to read this message to their congregations regarding the importance of voting. Jones’s statement reads:

Dear Pastor: Please emphasize to your congregation, the importance of this message: ‘be it resolved: that Freedom, though sought vigorously, is not obtained without positive action. The most effective weapon is THE BALLOT.’<sup>98</sup>

The phrase “positive action” illustrates the tactics the MNAACP deems appropriate for pursuing racial equality through voting. Although this letter does not define what is considered negative action, it lays the groundwork of what is considered respectable tactics to achieve equality. Another voter education program fact sheet clearly identifies

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<sup>96</sup> “Wisconsin NAACP Marches 50 Years,” *Wisconsin Then and Now*, XV, No. 4 (November, 1968), 2.

<sup>97</sup> NAACP, Milwaukee Branch Records, 1915-1989 Box 5, Folder 14.

<sup>98</sup> NAACP, Milwaukee Branch Records, 1915-1989 Box 5, Folder 14.

that the NAACP's tactics of voting and education are the most effective. This fact sheet states, "There hasn't been a single gain in Human Rights in America in which the NAACP did not participate."<sup>99</sup> These documents combined illustrate two important beliefs of the MNAACP. First, they show the belief that the most effective way to challenge racial inequality is to emphasize the importance of voting and education. Second, and most importantly, they demonstrate the belief that without the NAACP and their adherence to these tactics, changes in racial equality would not be possible.

In an interview with Everett Marshburn, Clayborn Benson III articulates the MNAACP's views of emphasis on education in achieving racial justice in Milwaukee. Benson argues that many people in Milwaukee "paid a tremendous price"<sup>100</sup> to change the local educational system and emphasize the right to vote. Benson asserts that education and voting were "key foundations to approaching racism and desegregation"<sup>101</sup> in Milwaukee. Furthermore, Benson sees direct links among black education, empowerment, and challenging discrimination. In Benson's view, education is the most important element in achieving racial equality. Benson states, "education is key because if you are not educated, people are going to 'act a certain way' which gives reasons for... discrimination to occur."<sup>102</sup> Others were skeptical of the MNAACP and its conservative tactics. Prentice McKinney, a member of the MNAACP youth council and Commandos states:

It was the old plantation mentality... The older community—the NAACP, respectable leadership—had an investment in the system. They understood that there was discrimination, but had learned to get along and live with it and not rock the boat... We were having no part of it. We were standing up against it. We were

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<sup>99</sup> NAACP, Milwaukee Branch Records, 1915-1989 Box 5, Folder 9.

<sup>100</sup> Clayborn Benson III. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

<sup>101</sup> Clayborn Benson III. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

<sup>102</sup> Clayborn Benson III. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

defying it, which put their position in jeopardy because they system would look at them and say, ‘Why can’t you control them?’ And they tried.<sup>103</sup>

Members of the Youth Council and their advisors saw the MNAACP tactics as ineffective, slow moving, and promoting the needs of the middle class over the working class. As a result, the Youth Council would conduct a series of direct-action campaigns that put them in direct conflict with the MNAACP and the core tenets of respectability politics.

In the 1950s, Cecil Brown Jr., a member of the Milwaukee NAACP raised his concerns at chapter meetings regarding the issues of class and skin complexion. Brown argues that the Milwaukee Branch of the NAACP had some “serious problems” regarding the organization’s leadership, which was made up of light-skinned, middle-class African Americans.<sup>104</sup> At one meeting, Brown articulated his concerns about these issues stating, “where were the average African Americans?” Brown argued that the branch had an emphasis on middle-class, light-skinned African Americans and raised this issue because if the organization was going to:

speak for so-called color people and you don’t have very many dark-complected [sic] colored people in your organization... I said, you don’t have any laborers, any mechanics, you don’t have any factory workers, you don’t have any barbers or beauticians, you know, run-of-the-mill average person.<sup>105</sup>

For raising these concerns at the chapter meeting, Brown was “branded as a maverick,” and in his words became a “persona non-grata” for expressing views and opinions that challenged the traditional tactics, beliefs, and leadership of the NAACP.<sup>106</sup> Brown’s

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<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 141.

<sup>104</sup> Brown, Cecil Jr and Loretta Brown. Interview with Jack Dougherty, August, 9, 1995, [https://liblamp.uwm.edu/ohms/viewer/render.php?cachefile=uwmms0217\\_a10-a11.xml](https://liblamp.uwm.edu/ohms/viewer/render.php?cachefile=uwmms0217_a10-a11.xml)

<sup>105</sup> Cecil Brown Jr. and Loretta Brown. Interview with Jack Dougherty. August 9, 1995.

<sup>106</sup> Cecil Jr. and Loretta Brown. Interview with Jack Dougherty. August 9, 1995.

critique of the chapter's leadership positions being dominated by middle-class Black Milwaukeeans is corroborated by election results of the executive board. In 1958, an engineer was elected as branch president, both vice presidents were attorneys, and the treasurer was both a banker and a real estate broker.<sup>107</sup> In interviews conducted by Richard Smuckler, several members of the MNAACP described how the middle-class makeup of leadership positions was considered normal and critics of the MNAACP used the issue of class to show the divide between middle-class leaders and the rest of the black community in Milwaukee.<sup>108</sup>

### **The Murder of Daniel Bell**

After Officer Grady shot Daniel Bell on February 2, 1958, he immediately began covering up his actions. Officer Krause left the scene to report the incident from a nearby house. When Krause returned, he saw that officer Grady had produced a small knife and placed it in Bell's lifeless right hand. Krause told Grady that the knife was too small, so Grady produced a larger knife and placed it Bell's right hand. When detectives and other officers arrived to document the scene, Grady stated that Bell matched the description of a black male suspected for several armed robberies and the shooting was justified because Bell was a "fleeing felon."<sup>109</sup> Subsequently, Grady revised what he stated in his official police report and claimed that Bell lunged at him with the knife and therefore the shooting was justified due to self-defense.<sup>110</sup>

The local Milwaukee media and the police department propagated Grady and Krause's fictitious story and most Milwaukeeans regarded the story as true and did not

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<sup>107</sup> *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 10, 1958.

<sup>108</sup> Smuckler, "Black Power and the NAACP," 37.

<sup>109</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, February 3, 1958.

<sup>110</sup> *Patrick Bell, Sr. V. City of Milwaukee; Milwaukee Journal*, February 5, 1958.

give the incident a second thought. However, Daniel Bell's siblings began challenging the department's official report by providing evidence that contradicted Grady and Krause's accounts. Most importantly, Bell's family members told local reporters that he was left handed, but the knife was found in Daniel's right hand, which possibly indicated the knife was planted by the officers. Additionally, Bell had left his personal pocketknife at home on the night of the incident. Bell's family indicated that he did not have a driver's license and had been given tickets for this infraction. They claimed that Bell fled from the police officers because he did not want to receive another ticket for driving without a license and his actions did not justify the use of lethal force. Two witnesses also came forward who contradicted portions of Grady and Krause's account. Despite this contradictory evidence, the district attorney and an all-white inquest panel found the officers' actions were just and did not warrant any disciplinary action.<sup>111</sup>

The varied responses from local black leaders of Daniel Bell's murder and subsequent coverup illustrate the entrenchment of respectability politics and the tension its adherence creates between middle-class and working-class black Milwaukeeans. James Dorsey, a former president of the Milwaukee NAACP, told the local black community that "Negroes [should] be a little more respectful of law and authority... before we start yelling 'police brutality' we must teach our children to respect the law and quit fighting the police."<sup>112</sup> Reverend T. T. Lovelace, the pastor of Mount Zion Church argued that something should be done regarding Bell's murder "not just as a

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<sup>111</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, February 3-6; Patrick Jones "'Get Up Off of Your Knees!': Competing Visions of Black Empowerment in Milwaukee during the Early Civil Rights Era" in *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 47.

<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Dougherty, *More than one Struggle*, 61-62.

matter of vengeance, but justice.”<sup>113</sup> However, instead of placing the blame for the incident on the police officers and department, Lovelace argued the culprit of the deterioration

between the black community and police officers was a result of the improper behavior of the black community. Lovelace urged black Milwaukeeans to “improve the general behavior of the Negro community”<sup>114</sup> and have a healthy respect for law and order. Even more troubling, Lovelace targeted black migrants for the deterioration of the community’s values, claiming migrants “created in the general populous disgust, shame, and fear.”<sup>115</sup> Instead of challenging racial problems in the Milwaukee Police Department, Lovelace founded the Institute for Social Adjustment which would help teach and rehabilitate local black migrants to the “standards and customs” of living in an urban environment.<sup>116</sup>

The conservative response of Lovelace and the failure of the MNAACP to mobilize the community to respond to Bell’s murder propelled other activists to take a more public approach. On March 17, 1958, Reverend R.L. Lathan, pastor at New Hope Baptist Church called for a “prayer protest” near the Milwaukee courthouse. With the support of Assemblyman Isaac Coggs and Calvin Sherard who founded the Citizen Committee to Protest the Case of Daniel Bell, Lathan’s supporters hoped the march would attract between 2,000 and 3,000 people who would join in prayer with Lathan for “justice and the good of all mankind.”<sup>117</sup> Lathan’s public and direct-action approach to

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<sup>113</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, February 16, 1958.

<sup>114</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, February 21, 1958.

<sup>115</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, February 21, 1958.

<sup>116</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, February 26, 1958.

<sup>117</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, March 17, 1958.

Bell's murder received a hostile reaction from Milwaukee's traditional black leaders. Three well-respected black ministers, Reverend Melvin Battle, Reverend E.B. Phillips, and Reverend Cecil Fisher privately approached Lathan to call off the prayer protest. First, they argued that prayer should remain in its "proper place," which is inside the walls of the church. Second, they argued that Lathan might not be able to control the crowd of working class and poor southern migrants, which in turn would lead to negative repercussions from white Milwaukeans. Alderman Vel Phillips echoed the concerns of Battle, Phillips, and Fisher, claiming that "lawless elements" may participate in the march. Due to the pressure from the traditional black leadership, Lathan ultimately called off the prayer protest because he did not want himself or other demonstrators to be "smeared" as subversive.<sup>118</sup>

The cancellation of Lathan's prayer protest created tensions between working-class and middle-class black Milwaukeans. Tom Jacobson, a lawyer who represented Calvin Shepard's organization, recalls working-class activists' feelings towards the traditional black leadership in Milwaukee. Jacobson states, "[After the Bell incident] they were totally upset by the way blacks were deserting and selling out to whites and undercutting them." Jacobson recalls that much of the frustration was directed at conservative black ministers who promoted "cleaning ourselves up instead of going out and demonstrating." Jacobson argues that during the Bell incident, it was clear that "there was no [African American] leadership. When an issue came up where there should've been a response from the African American community, there was no response." Ali Anwar reiterates Jacobson's beliefs stating, "in a crisis you can't find [traditional black

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<sup>118</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, March 21, 1958

leaders] anywhere.”<sup>119</sup> Calvin Shepard described black civic groups in Milwaukee as “nothing but social clubs” where middle-class African Americans used their “intellect to keep the lower Negro classes in hand.”<sup>120</sup> Even former MNAACP presidents grew disillusioned by the lack of action and unwillingness to help working-class black Milwaukeeans. At the end of his term, Eddie Walker wrote a letter to Gloster Current, the national NAACP branch director. In this letter, Walker states that the majority of black Milwaukeeans saw the MNAACP as an organization run by a “few complacent professional persons who are ‘not militant enough’ in their pursuit of social change for ‘the average man.’”<sup>121</sup>

The murder of Daniel Bell and the subsequent responses from the African American community illustrate two foundational factors in future activism in Milwaukee. First, respectability politics created tensions in Milwaukee based on class, tactics to challenge systemic racism, and relationships between southern black migrants and native black Milwaukeeans. Second, it reveals the limits of direct-action protests in a social environment entrenched with respectability politics. Bell’s murder and the subsequent community response foreshadows the tensions that the Youth Council would face in defying the entrenchment of respectability politics in Milwaukee. Five years later, the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council began its own campaign of direct-action protests which created further tensions between the old guard and the Youth Council over the best way to achieve racial equality in Milwaukee.

### **The Development of the Youth Council**

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<sup>119</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, March 24, 1958.

<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Jones, “Get Up Off Your Knees,” 53.

<sup>121</sup> Quoted in Dougherty, *More than One Struggle*, 79.

Since the founding of the MNAACP Youth Council in 1948 by Ardie Clark Halyard, the adult branch viewed the Youth Council as an organization that would train the next generation of the adult branch's leadership.<sup>122</sup> Halyard states the Youth Council was originally "to train the young people to take over the program of the NAACP as the older ones retired."<sup>123</sup> Gwen Jackson, another Youth Council Advisor, believes her role as advisor was to teach Youth Council members proper etiquette, conduct, behavior and ethics. Jackson also instilled respect for authority and for women. Jackson argues that all these factors combined was part of the process for grooming good leadership.<sup>124</sup> In essence, the relationship between the MNAACP and the Youth Council was to instill "proper" behavior and beliefs that directly correlate with the politics of respectability.

Of equal importance, the MNAACP viewed the Youth Council as a subordinate body. The Youth Council constitution has a passage which states that they were a "subordinate unit of the Association."<sup>125</sup> The MNAACP believed they had complete control over Youth Council programs and required final approval of any initiatives conducted by the Youth Council. Former Youth Council member Gloster Current discusses the control the adult branch had over the Youth Council: "Some senior branches take the attitude that they have the power to dominate youth, to tell them what to do, and to disagree completely with their programs and activities."<sup>126</sup> However, in 1963, at the NAACP annual convention, the constitution of the Youth Councils was revised. The major revision of the constitution was that the word "subordinate" was

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<sup>122</sup> Metcalfe, "Coming into Our Own," 20.

<sup>123</sup> Beth McKenty. *Faces of Milwaukee: Ardie Haylard*, Community Relations-Social Commission in Milwaukee County, 1978, 14.

<sup>124</sup> Gwen Jackson. Interview with Jack Dougherty, June, 31 1995.  
<https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/march/id/1648/rec/6>

<sup>125</sup> NAACP, Milwaukee Branch Records, 1915-1989, Box 1, Folder 1.

<sup>126</sup> Quoted in Metcalfe, "Coming into Our Own," 28.

replaced with the word “coordinate.”<sup>127</sup> This seemingly small linguistic change emboldened Youth Council members to pursue initiatives using tactics that would have been previously rejected by the adult branch.

### **Marc’s Big Boy Restaurant Protest**

In mid-March 1963, the Youth Council conducted its first direct action campaign over discriminatory hiring practices by Marc’s Big Boy restaurant in Milwaukee. On March 5, 1963, an African American member of the Youth Council attempted to apply for a bus boy position at the restaurant. The manager told the applicant that he would call him the following day to inform him if he would be hired. After the applicant did not hear back from the manager, on March 7, 1963, he called the restaurant to inquire about the status of the application. The applicant reported that the manager told him “Marc’s Big Boy policy prohibited hiring Negroes at [this location].”<sup>128</sup> The manager also claimed that they had employed an African American bus boy in the past but was terminated “because business fell off due to his employment.”<sup>129</sup> John Givens told the student to attempt to apply a third time for the position and if he was rejected again, Givens would send in a white test subject to see if he would be hired. The African American student was denied a third time and when the white test subject applied, he was told by the manager at Marc’s Big Boy that he could start that afternoon.<sup>130</sup>

On March 11, 1963, members of the Youth Council’s Special Employment sub-committee spoke with the manager at Marc’s Big Boy. Members of the sub-committee were informed that although the franchise did employ several African Americans in their

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<sup>127</sup> Metcalfe, “Coming into Our Own,” 36.

<sup>128</sup> “Why We Demonstrate” NAACP, Milwaukee Branch Records, 1915-1989 Box 5 Folder 9.

<sup>129</sup> “Why We Demonstrate” NAACP, Milwaukee Branch Records, 1915-1989 Box 5 Folder 9.

<sup>130</sup> John Givens. Interview with Joanne Williams. Spring 2011.

Milwaukee locations, all but one worked in the back of the house and none were in managerial positions. On March 13, the Youth Council sent a letter to the owner of Marc's Big Boy restaurants, Ben Marcus. In this letter, the Youth Council emphasized the restaurant's hiring practices were discriminatory and that qualified African American candidates were ready to fill managerial and front-of-house positions. After Marcus failed to reply to the Youth Council's letter, they began a picketing campaign under the advisement of John Givens, Tom Jacobson, and Gwen Jackson. After the third day of picketing, Ben Marcus invited Givens, Jacobson, Jackson, and Youth Council President Edward Smyth to a meeting at the Pfister Hotel to discuss how he could resolve the current situation. As a result of this meeting, Marcus agreed to hire the previously discriminated Youth Council member, and the picketing campaign ended.<sup>131</sup>

After the picketing campaign at Marc Big Boy's restaurant, Youth Council advisors Gwen Jackson and John Givens articulated how direct action could be successfully used to challenge discriminatory hiring practices in Milwaukee. In a report given to the MNAACP, Jackson stated:

After this experience, the advisors appraised the happenings and felt that the incident might further serve the purpose to make other firms aware that even though they say there is a "Non discriminatory policy in hiring" re-emphasizing said factors with all employees in a hiring position would be wise. Also, that it might make some firms re-evaluate their hiring practices.<sup>132</sup>

John Givens describes how important the picketing campaign was in sparking activism in Milwaukee. Givens states:

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<sup>131</sup> "Why We Demonstrate" NAACP, Milwaukee Branch Records, 1915-1989 Box 5 Folder 9; NAACP, Milwaukee Branch Records, 1917-1989 Box 5 Folder 15. Letter from Gwen T. Jackson to the NAACP Board May 9, 1963 "Youth Council report for March, April, May, 1963.

<sup>132</sup> NAACP, Milwaukee Branch Records, 1917-1989 Box 5 Folder 15. Letter from Gwen T. Jackson to the NAACP Board May 9, 1963 "Youth Council report for March, April, May, 1963.

What that young man started was an introduction to the racial discrimination in employment in the entire city of Milwaukee... we started to then look into companies in this community and you had no minorities in management anyplace.<sup>133</sup>

Shortly after the Marc's Big Boy picketing campaign, the Youth Council began picketing other businesses that had discriminatory hiring practices. The successful picketing of Marc's Big Boy is contrasted by the Daniel Bell incident and subsequent direct action that was ultimately postponed. The emphasis on respectability politics by the MNAACP in its response to the Marc's Big Boy campaign was initially unable to slow and end the direct-action campaign. However, the MNAACP did ultimately punish Youth Council advisors for defying what the branch saw as "respectable" tactics to achieve racial equality in Milwaukee.

The Youth Council's continued publicity of the direct-action campaigns against local businesses in Milwaukee began to frustrate members of the MNAACP and created tensions between Youth Council advisors and the adult branch. Tom Jacobson and John Given's relationship with President of the MNAACP Edward Smyth and the executive board became strained during and after the Marc's Big Boy demonstrations. Givens recalls that Smyth's support of the campaign was "tentative" and Givens was frustrated with the lack of support offered by the adult branch.<sup>134</sup> He recalls the reaction to and consequences of the Marc's Big Boy campaign:

Much to our dismay, [the picketing campaigns] really disgruntled a lot of the older NAACPers and so we had a lot of internal hassles going on. They wanted to write letters and talk to people and file lawsuits and all that all that stuff and we said no, the direct action will get it... We were right.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> John Givens. Interview with Joanne Williams, Spring 2011.

<sup>134</sup> Quoted in Metcalfe, "Coming into Our Own," 38

<sup>135</sup> John Givens. Interview with Joanne Williams, Spring 2011.

Shortly after the end of the direct-action campaign, the tension between the adult branch, Givens, and Jacobson became irreconcilable and Givens states that he and Jacobson were asked to leave the organization. After Givens and Jacobson left the NAACP, they continued their activism through founding the Milwaukee Chapter of Congress for Racial Equality.<sup>136</sup> The success of the Youth Council's direct-action campaign against Marc's Big Boy had two major consequences. First, it showed the power of direct action as a means of pursuing racial equality. Despite the adult members' distain for direct action, the success emboldened the Youth Council to prioritize direct action in future campaigns. Second, it illustrated the growing tension between the MNAACP and the Youth Council and the Youth Council's defiance of respectability politics.

#### **Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC)**

In 1964, the Youth Council participated in direct action campaigns organized by the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC). On March 1, 1964, MUSIC was formed by Lloyd Barbee, a former president of the Madison NAACP branch. MUSIC's primary tactics were direct action protests and sit-ins to challenge *de facto* segregation in Milwaukee schools. Members of the Youth Council as well as other children participated in the protests. MUSIC's campaigns challenged the MNAACP's prioritization of legalistic pursuits and respectability politics to achieve equality. Some members of the MNAACP were so outraged by MUSIC's tactics that they resigned from the organization. In a highly publicized case, James Dorsey left the MNAACP because he was infuriated by "the use of little children... as guinea pigs, for the accomplishment of personal amination of individuals."<sup>137</sup> Dorsey argued the actions by students showed a

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<sup>136</sup> John Givens. Interview with Joanne Williams, Spring 2011.

<sup>137</sup> "Dorsey Protests, Quits NAACP," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 20, 1964.

lack of respect to school authorities.<sup>138</sup> Dorsey also criticized the branch for “allow[ing] itself to be dictated to by other so-called civil rights groups” and stated that he “hated to see the NAACP falling in line with other civil rights groups that use techniques other than legal redresses.”<sup>139</sup> John Givens argues that Dorsey’s view of direct action was prevalent in the MNACCP and older members had the attitude of “I’m above that [type of protest].”<sup>140</sup>

### **Introduction of Father James Groppi**

In the spring of 1965, the Youth Council obtained a new advisor, a white Catholic priest named James E. Groppi. Groppi was a native Milwaukeean whose parents were Italian immigrants. Groppi’s father, Giocondo Groppi, owned a grocery store in the Bay View neighborhood of Milwaukee that was dominated by working-class immigrants. As a child, Groppi remembers the adversity that Italian immigrants faced in Milwaukee. Groppi even claims there was discrimination against Italian-Americans at his local Irish Catholic Church. From an early age, Groppi recalls being instilled with a liberal racial attitude for the time by his parents. In his unpublished autobiography, Groppi recalls:

I attribute to my mother and father the best course that I have ever taken in inter-group relations... My father had a deep sense of the dignity of man. He knew what prejudice was... My father never allowed racial remarks or ethnic jokes and slurs either in the house or in the grocery store.<sup>141</sup>

Due to these factors, Groppi saw his role as a Catholic priest as being a catalyst to bring forth a message of racial tolerance and social justice to his parishioners. In a 1969

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<sup>138</sup> Nelsen, James K. “From No Choice to Forced Choice to School Choice: A History of Educational Options in Milwaukee Public Schools. Dissertation, UW-Milwaukee, 2012, 86.

<sup>139</sup> “Dorsey Protests, Quits NAACP” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 20, 1964.

<sup>140</sup> Quoted in Metcalfe, “Coming into Our Own,” 46.

<sup>141</sup> James Groppi Manuscript Collection, UWM Archives, Box 14, Folder 7, 6-7 (hereafter, “Groppi Autobiography”).

interview, Groppi describes how he viewed his role as a priest: “a priest has a prophetic role to play... the prophetic role today is in the area of social justice and the eradication of racism.”<sup>142</sup> After Groppi graduated from St. Francis Seminary, he was assigned to the predominantly white St. Veronica’s church where he began to preach his liberal theology. However, by 1963, the white parishioners of St. Veronica grew tired of Groppi’s sermons on racial equality and social justice, and he was transferred to St. Boniface. St. Boniface was located in Milwaukee’s inner core where the parishioners were mostly working-class black Milwaukeeans. As Groppi developed close relationships with his parishioners at St. Boniface, he became influential in transforming discussions of racial justice in Milwaukee and providing guidance to the Youth Council in future direct-action campaigns.<sup>143</sup>

Beginning in the early 1960s, Groppi with fellow Milwaukee clergy members participated in civil rights demonstrations such as the March on Washington in August 1963 and the Selma to Montgomery March in February 1965. Groppi described his participation at Selma as a “conversion experience” that galvanized him to bring a form of militant, nonviolent, direct-action protests back to Milwaukee.<sup>144</sup> While preaching social justice at St. Boniface’s and participating in the MUSIC campaign, Groppi attracted the attention of several Youth Council members. Alberta Harris, a member of the Youth Council, asked Groppi if he would be their advisor. Initially, Groppi was reluctant to accept the position because he may not be able to properly fulfill his duties at the church. Once Harris asked if he would serve as a temporary advisor, Groppi agreed.

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<sup>142</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 98.

<sup>143</sup> Groppi Autobiography 7-8, 14, 20; Metcalfe, “Coming into Our Own,” 44-45; Jones, *Selma of the North* 93, 95.

<sup>144</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 98.

Groppi's future wife Margaret Rozga described his appeal to members of the Youth Council:

He was doing something. He had been in the school boycott. He was the second vice president of MUSIC... he gained an amount of visibility as someone who was going to take risks, be active, and do things.<sup>145</sup>

Under the stewardship of Groppi, the Youth Council would again begin several campaigns of nonviolent direct actions against racial inequality in Milwaukee.

### **Eagles Club Campaign**

The first direct action campaign conducted by the Youth Council under the stewardship of Groppi was protesting membership discrimination of the Fraternal Order of the Eagles Club in February 1966. The Eagles Club had a "Caucasians only" clause which denied non-white membership. The Eagles Club chapter in Milwaukee had 5,400 members, making it the second largest chapter in the nation. Even more important, many prominent local elected officials of Milwaukee were members including judges, aldermen, and the district attorney. The Youth Council protested the Eagles Club because they saw it as a local power broker whose all-white membership prevented black Milwaukeeans access to an avenue to promote the black community's issues. However, due to the lack of media coverage and an unclear message to the local population, the Youth Council's initial Eagles Club protest failed to gain any ground.<sup>146</sup>

In early August 1966, the Youth council changed their tactics in the Eagles Club campaign. Instead of picketing the organization itself, the Youth Council decided to picket Eagles Club member Circuit Judge Robert C. Cannon, who lived in Wauwatosa, a

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<sup>145</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 114.

<sup>146</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, March 17, 1966; Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 97-97; Jones, *Selma of the North*, 119.

suburb of Milwaukee. Judge Cannon had a liberal record of ruling favorably for civil rights issues, and the Youth Council hoped that the public pressure would persuade Cannon to withdraw from the Eagles Club. However, the picketing of Judge Cannon and other judges and representatives was temporarily postponed after two members of the Ku Klux Klan bombed the MNAACP headquarters.<sup>147</sup> The Youth Council began picketing Judge Cannon's home on August 18, 1966. However, the Youth Council was not making any successful gains and the white counter protests grew larger, more hostile, and more violent.<sup>148</sup> Frank Aukofer, a reporter for the *Milwaukee Journal* recalls that white counter protesters yelled racial epithets and threw objects such as eggs, bottles, bricks, and cherry bombs at the peaceful demonstrators. On August 26, 1966, an on-air editorial was broadcast by WTMJ-TV of Milwaukee describing its view of the Youth Council and the reaction of white counter protestors:

The demonstrations in front of Judge Robert Cannon's house may have had solid objectives, but they were reached long before this... The results since then are negative, dangerous and ugly... What we now have is a situation inviting physical danger—even if it does not come from any violent thoughts of the demonstrators... Can the NAACP's demonstrations really believe the Caucasian clause of the Eagles Club is worth the risk of violence and tragedy. Are there not greater racial injustices worth demonstrating against?<sup>149</sup>

By August 29, 1966, Ervin Meier, Mayor of Wauwatosa, did not believe he could provide enough protection for the demonstrators and called in the National Guard.<sup>150</sup>

On August 30, 1966, the Youth Council again suspended their demonstrations of Judge Cannon's home with the hopes finding a solution through mediation by local

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<sup>147</sup> The bombing of the MNAACP by the KKK will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

<sup>148</sup> Patrick Jones identifies that up to 4,000 white counter protestors would demonstrate against the Youth Council and Judge Cannon's home, including members of the KKK. Jones, *Selma of the North*, 110.

<sup>149</sup> Records of Mayor Henry W. Maier Administration, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 1957-1989, UWM Archives, Box 44, Folder 13, Print version of WTMJ-TV editorial, August 26, 1966.

<sup>150</sup> Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 100-101.

religious leaders. In late August and early September 1966, the members of the Youth Council and Groppi met with 50 Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish religious leaders from Wauwatosa to mediate an end of the Youth Council's demonstrations. Although these religious leaders claimed that they disliked the Eagles Club Caucasian-only clause, they did little to persuade Judge Cannon and other club members to resign. The Youth Council were frustrated with the Wauwatosa clergymen's inaction and felt betrayed by them. Members of the Youth Council believed that these clergymen wanted to help their cause, but in reality, most of them just wanted to stop the demonstrations in Wauwatosa. Throughout the whole Eagles Club campaign, only one judge resigned from his position. Judge Michael T. Sullivan resigned because he believed that his membership in a segregated club was "inconsistent with his oath of office."<sup>151</sup> The Youth Council would continue to periodically demonstrate against the Eagles Club and mediation efforts would be attempted but always fail. By 1968, the youth council demonstrations against the Eagles Club were indefinitely postponed.<sup>152</sup>

### **Backlash Against Youth Council**

The Milwaukee Youth Council received support and approval from the national branch as other chapters began demonstrating against the Eagles Club in 1966. The president of the Eagles Club, D.D. Billings sent a telegram to Roy Wilkins, the executive director of the NAACP national branch. In this telegram, Billings stated that he would not be willing to meet with NAACP officials to discuss membership policies until Wilkins disavowed the Youth Council. In response to Billings's telegram, Wilkins offered his support to the Youth Council:

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<sup>151</sup> Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 102.

<sup>152</sup> Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 102-103.

You call upon me as national executive director of the NAACP to “disown” our Milwaukee youth unit... I cannot do this. Our Milwaukee youth unit is not violating any of the general programs set forth by the NAACP. Although its methods may strike some persons as being unorthodox, the situation to which it addresses itself in 1966, namely, a racial expulsion clause in the membership of, of all groups, a fraternal society, is also extraordinary for this day in this nation.<sup>153</sup>

Despite Wilkins’s distain for direct action demonstrations, he was willing to support the Youth Council as long as they did not violate NAACP policies. However, the MNAACP frustration with the Youth Council’s defiance of respectability politics would boil over at the Wisconsin NAACP annual state convention.<sup>154</sup>

In December 1966, MNAACP President Reverend Walter Hoard invited John Morsell, Assistant Executive Director of the national branch to attend the Wisconsin NAACP conference. Hoard invited Morsell to “clarify our Youth Council and adult board membership.”<sup>155</sup> Walter represented the conservative wing of the MNAACP who opposed the militant approach of the Youth Council. At the state convention, Walter and other members of the MNAACP drafted a resolution which called for the MNAACP and the Youth Council to “coordinate their efforts and consult with each other before embarking on future programs.”<sup>156</sup> Walter argued that the resolution would help “eliminate differences in strategy and to present a united front to the community.”<sup>157</sup> The state conference rejected Walter’s proposal and instead adopted a resolution that supported the tactics of the Youth Council.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 142.

<sup>154</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, October 9, 1966; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 9, 1966; Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 104.

<sup>155</sup> *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 9, 1966.

<sup>156</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, November 13, 1966.

<sup>157</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, November 13, 1966.

<sup>158</sup> Smuckler, “Black Power and the NAACP,” 46.

In the view of MNAACP members, the Youth Council's direct-action tactics and challenge of respectability politics caused a decline in support of the branch from Milwaukeeans affiliated and unaffiliated with the MNAACP. Two main issues that were raised as a result of the Youth Council's actions in 1966 were that they discouraged Milwaukeeans from joining the MNAACP and they alienated white community members. In an interview with Charles Smuckler, Ardie Halyard, founder of the Youth Council and branch treasurer, describes her view of the negative impact the Youth Council had on the MNAACP. Halyard states:

The NAACP local branch has been having difficulties since the Eagles club demonstrations and the involvement of Father Groppi. We have lost a lot of support with life members and influential members of the white community.<sup>159</sup>

Another executive board member, Exie Jackson, also believed that the Youth Council's tactics under the leadership of Groppi caused a decline in the MNAACP because "professional people quit coming to meetings and both whites and blacks quit."<sup>160</sup>

Bernice Buresh, a reporter for the *Milwaukee Sentinel* accurately summarizes the growing tension between the Youth Council and the MNAACP. Buresh makes two different arguments in the tension between the MNAACP and the Youth Council. First, Buresh asserts that the Youth Council's militant tactics challenged the status quo of the MNAACP's pursuit of racial equality in Milwaukee. Second, Buresh accurately argues that there was a socio-economic element to the conflict because the majority of the members of the MNAACP were middle class, while the majority of the Youth Council members came from working-class families.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Quoted in Smuckler, "Black Power and the NAACP," 46-47.

<sup>160</sup> Quoted in Smuckler, "Black Power and the NAACP," 47.

<sup>161</sup> Smuckler, "Black Power and the NAACP," 47.

As the Youth Council Advisor, James Groppi wanted to foster strong and independent black leadership in the members of the Youth Council. Groppi also did not want to “overshadow” or “stifle” the leadership of the Youth Council. Groppi’s goal was to create strong leadership in the Youth Council to the point where he could play “a more self-liquidating role.”<sup>162</sup> However, to the frustration of members of the MNAACP, Groppi did not instill characteristics of respectability politics into members of the Youth Council. Groppi’s reluctance to adhere to the norms and promote the values of previous Youth Council advisors put him at odds with the middle-class African American community. Former Youth Council Advisor Gwen Jackson expresses her concern about teaching the Youth Council respectability under Groppi’s stewardship. Jackson argues that she was concerned about the behavior, morals and ethics of members of the Youth Council and the male members’ lack of respect for women. Jackson recalls:

I was very concerned with the behavior and ethics of our young people and I felt that even though there was some strength in some of the things that he was doing, that we fell away from things like moral stability, good ethics... I remember him saying “Well, you know, kids gotta [sic] do their own thing.” I think that is some of the worst things [that happened to the Youth Council because] things they did weren’t too healthy... We [MNAACP] were not happy about that, and so there began to be a drifting of Groppi and how we saw the Youth Council and so many of the people who had been on the advisory committee chose not to be involved... The conduct and the behavior [of the Youth Council under Groppi] was not what I could agree to.<sup>163</sup>

Groppi’s militancy and tactics of direct action also put him at odds with members of the MNAACP. Founder of the Milwaukee Youth Council Ardie Halyard describes her dissatisfaction with Groppi’s tactics and its impact on the Youth Council. Halyard states,

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<sup>162</sup> Groppi Papers Box 15, Folder 5.

<sup>163</sup> Jackson, Gwen Jackson. Interview with Jack Dougherty June, 31 1995.

“Some may disagree, but it is my feeling that Father Groppi took something out of the council when he helped to turn it into a picketing organization.”<sup>164</sup>

Members of the local community were also frustrated with Groppi and the lack of respectability he injected into the Youth Council and the tactics used to pursue racial justice in Milwaukee. An anonymous letter to the MNAACP from October 4, 1967 argues that Groppi should be replaced by a more respectable leader who embodies personal characteristics of John Davis Jr. or Archie Moor. The writer argues that “Groppi’s leadership is your downfall” and the tactics Groppi was using were not helping changing people’s minds on the issue of racial equality in Milwaukee. The writer asserts that Groppi should be replaced with “Somebody who is for the betterment of the negroes, but knows it can only be accomplished by following in the footsteps of respectable people.”<sup>165</sup> In another anonymous letter from October 6, 1967, the author advises the black Milwaukeeans that they should not emulate the tactics and promote the values of Groppi. Instead, the author argues that to improve the quality of life of black Milwaukeeans is to “follow the advice of leaders like Archie Moor.”<sup>166</sup> The author argues that there are more suitable black Milwaukeeans who could replace Groppi, “We have many, many respectable negroes which are respected by all, why? Because they respect the law, as other people and their property.”<sup>167</sup>

As the intensity of the Youth Council’s direct-action campaigns grew, Milwaukeeans’ reactions to their tactics went beyond detesting their lack of respectability and grew more violent. In late August 1967, the Youth Council and its allies initiated a

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<sup>164</sup> Beth McKenty, *Faces of Milwaukee*, 14.

<sup>165</sup> Groppi Papers, Box 11, Folder 5.

<sup>166</sup> Groppi Papers, Box 11, Folder 5.

<sup>167</sup> Groppi Papers, Box 11, Folder 5.

campaign of 200 days of protesting and marching for fair housing laws in the city of Milwaukee. As white backlash and white supremacist violence intensified, the Youth Council concluded that they needed an internal organization to protect nonviolent demonstrators. In early October 1967, the self-defense organization known as the Commandos was formed. The Commandos' militancy, promotion of Black Power, and defiance of respectability politics drew the ire of many Milwaukeeans. Although the Commandos defied elements of respectability politics, they also indirectly promoted elements of its values.

## Chapter 2

### **The Limits of Nonviolence**

In the spring of 2011, Everett Marshburn sat down with Prentice McKinney to discuss his experiences as a Commando for his documentary *Freedom Walkers for Milwaukee*. During the interview, Marshburn asked McKinney if he was “prepared for the hatred” the marchers received from white Milwaukeeans.<sup>168</sup> McKinney described how at the time that was not his concern. Instead, McKinney inverted the question and asked, “were those racist white people ready for the anger that we felt?”<sup>169</sup> McKinney described that at the time, many black Milwaukeeans were fed up being treated like second-class citizens and used organizations such as the Youth Council not only to challenge systemic oppression in Milwaukee, but to gain a sense of camaraderie with likeminded people. McKinney gave credit to Father James Groppi and the Youth Council because they served as a safety valve to siphon off anger into a “legitimate confrontation over what our disagreements are,” which relieved some of the frustration that black Milwaukeeans felt because they felt that their voices were being heard.<sup>170</sup> In 1966, white supremacist violence was on the rise in Milwaukee, forcing the Youth Council to find alternative ways to protect themselves and keep their quest for social justice alive.

In early October, due to the rising white supremacist violence that was being inflicted on members of the youth council and other civil rights demonstrators, the Youth Council created a police/self-defense force known as the Commandos. Father James Groppi served as the advisor of the organization and due to his background as a white

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<sup>168</sup> Prentice McKinney. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

<sup>169</sup> Prentice McKinney. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

<sup>170</sup> Prentice McKinney. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

Catholic priest, the Milwaukee media focused their news coverage on Groppi. Even contemporary scholars have placed too much of an emphasis on Groppi's role within the youth council and the Commandos. Shakespeare Lewis joined the Commandos near the end of 1967 and described the Commandos as "a body of our own" and argued that many people were under the impression that Groppi was the leader.<sup>171</sup> However, Lewis stated that Groppi "couldn't do a thing...unless he got the OK..." and he did "exactly what he was told" from the Commandos.<sup>172</sup>

The Commandos were formed prior to Stokely Carmichael's "Black Power Speech," although they were subsequently highly influenced by Black Power intellectuals.<sup>173</sup> Initially, there were ten founding members of the Commandos who were originally led by Dwight Benning, but over the next several years, their membership increased to roughly 30 members.<sup>174</sup> The Commandos were a multiracial organization and were comprised of men whose ages ranged from late teens to forties. Predominantly, members of the organization came from working-class backgrounds. Many of the Commandos were "street kids" who were attracted to the organization for a variety of reasons, ranging from a desire to fight racial inequality in Milwaukee to needing basic necessities such as food and housing provided by the Freedom House.<sup>175</sup> The Commandos' ideology infused aspects of Black Power ideology while maintaining a multiracial alliance that was promoted by the NAACP. However, the Commandos rejected philosophical nonviolence and were willing to defend themselves and other civil

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<sup>171</sup> Modlinski, "Commandos", 81.

<sup>172</sup> Modlinski, "Commandos", 81.

<sup>173</sup> Because the Commandos were formed prior to Carmichael's speech, I classify them as a proto-Black Power organization.

<sup>174</sup> Modlinski, "Commandos," 75; Jones, *Selma of the North*, 142.

<sup>175</sup> Benson, Clayborn III, Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011; Adolph Arms. Interview with Michael Gordon, August 17, 2007, <https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/march/id/1594>.

rights demonstrators against white supremacist violence. The Commandos became a symbolic working-class rejection of nonviolence who simultaneously worked in tension and tandem with tenets of respectability politics. Furthermore, the violence perpetrated by white counter demonstrators against the Youth Council and the lack of adequate response of public officials illustrates the necessity of the Commandos to protect members of the Youth Council from white supremacist violence.

### **MNAACP Office Firebombing and the Formation of the Commandos**

On August 9, 1966, after the MNAACP was bombed by Robert Schmidt and Roger Long, two members of the Wisconsin Ku Klux Klan, Father Groppi stated that he was receiving phone calls where an individual made further threats of violence. In response to these threats, members of the Youth Council armed themselves with guns and guarded the Freedom House. On August 10, 1966, the *Milwaukee Journal* published a picture of Dennis McDowell, armed with a carbine, standing guard outside the Freedom House on its front page, despite the objections of the leadership of the MNAACP.<sup>176</sup> Like other Civil Rights activists such as Martin Luther King Jr., Fannie Lou Harris, and Hartman Turnbow, Groppi simultaneously preached political nonviolence and armed self-defense. In this issue of the *Journal*, Groppi discusses his view on nonviolence and armed self-defense:

I will not remain non-violent in the face of some bigot coming at night and placing a bomb beneath the window... That is where my non-violence ends. I've always believed in self-defense... You know how cowardly the Klan is. They always strike at night. And this is Klan type of activity... This sort of thing is so sneaky and so dirty that I believe in self-defense in a case like this.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Jones, *Selma of the North*, 153.

<sup>177</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, August 10, 1966.

The bombing of the MNAACP and subsequent threats against the youth council's Freedom

House was one of the primary catalysts for the formation of Commandos.

At a news conference on October 4, 1966, Groppi discussed the formation of a self-defense organization known as the Commandos. Groppi explained, "This is a direct action force that goes into very tense situations, that's very militant... They will be a police force. They will not be armed."<sup>178</sup> The Commandos objectives were as follows: protect civil rights demonstrators from violent attacks initiated by white counter protesters and police brutality, police the behavior of demonstrators to ensure their actions were orderly and nonviolent, and to watch for undercover Milwaukee police officers and their attempts to plant weapons on peaceful demonstrators in order to make arrests and disrupt the organization.<sup>179</sup>

### **Objectives of the Commandos**

The Commandos' primary objective was to serve as a police force to protect demonstrators against hostile counter protesters and ensure the marchers behaved in an orderly fashion. Dwight Benning, the first captain of the Commandos, said the Commandos "took it upon [themselves] to defend these people" because they were asked to march and risk bodily harm.<sup>180</sup> Therefore, it was the Commandos' responsibility to protect demonstrators against the threats of violence. Ed Thekan, the only Caucasian member of the Commandos, describes the organization's role as a "protective shield" for the demonstrators against hostile counter protesters' "verbal abuses...physical punches,

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<sup>178</sup> *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 5, 1966.

<sup>179</sup> Modlinski, "Commandos," 75-76; Prentice McKinney. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011; Squire Austin. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

<sup>180</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 132.

and their rocks and bottles.”<sup>181</sup> The Commandos’ role also included policing the behavior of the marchers. Robert Granderson recalled that some demonstrators who were marching were just doing so to “raise hell” and the Commandos would watch out for individuals who were becoming overly violent.<sup>182</sup> Additionally, the Commandos would make sure that demonstrators marched in an orderly fashion, prevent marchers from littering, and would attempt to diffuse tense interactions between the marchers and Milwaukee police officers.<sup>183</sup>

The threat of white supremacist violence and bodily harm against members of the Youth Council and other nonviolent protestors was a daily occurrence the Commandos had to deal with. While members of the Commandos and Youth Council had an air of youthful invincibility, parents who grew up in the south knew all too well the dangers black Americans faced in challenging white supremacy. Prentice McKinney’s mother grew up in the Deep South and cautioned her son from openly protesting for civil rights. McKinney recalled his mother telling him on one occasion that protesting is “white folks’ business” and urged him not to get involved because “they will kill you.”<sup>184</sup> Undeterred by his mother’s warnings, McKinney continued participating in demonstrations and protecting Youth Council marchers. McKinney’s working-class mother with very limited means was so fearful of harm coming to her son that she purchased a life insurance policy for him.<sup>185</sup> Dennis McDowell, a member of the youth council, argues that the Commandos’ willingness to defend the marchers prevented more serious injuries from

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<sup>181</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 133

<sup>182</sup> Quoted in Modlinski, “Commandos,” 76.

<sup>183</sup> Modlinski, “Commandos,” 76; Metcalfe, “Coming into Our Own,” 57.

<sup>184</sup> Prentice McKinney. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

<sup>185</sup> Prentice McKinney. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011; Margaret Cannon, “The Education of Prentice McKinney,” *Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service*, July 7, 2017.

occurring. Before he was a Commando, McDowell joined the Youth Council to protect his sister and other family members who were working in the Freedom House. McDowell credits the Commandos with potentially saving the movement. He argues that without the Commandos, “somebody might have got killed” and believed that if a death occurred, “I think the movement would have died.”<sup>186</sup> Although there were no fatalities during the demonstrations conducted by the youth council, white supremacist violence against black Milwaukeeans occurred frequently.<sup>187</sup>

The largest outburst of white supremacist violence took place during the Youth Council’s 200-day open housing marches which began on August 28, 1967. On the evening of the August 28, 1967, 100 members of the Youth Council and their supporters marched from St. Boniface Catholic Church to Kosciuszko Park in the center of the south side of Milwaukee, a predominately white, working-class neighborhood. At 6:25 pm, demonstrators set out from the Sixteenth Street Bridge, crossing the Menomonee River. In Father Groppi’s words, the Sixteenth Street Bridge served as the “Mason-Dixon line” in Milwaukee, separating white and black neighborhoods.<sup>188</sup> The *Milwaukee Sentinel* describes the Menomonee River Valley as “a natural boundary that has unnaturally kept most minority groups out of South Side neighborhoods.”<sup>189</sup> Eight Milwaukee police officers were assigned to protect the marchers, but they were greatly outnumbered by white counter protestors and spectators. The Milwaukee police department estimated that about 5,000 white Milwaukeeans were observing, harassing, and assaulting the marchers along the route and the park. While the marchers were holding signs stating, “Fair

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<sup>186</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 134.

<sup>187</sup> Cannon, “The Education of Prentice McKinney”; Jones, *Selma of the North*, 135.

<sup>188</sup> Quoted in Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 112.

<sup>189</sup> *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 29, 1967.

Housing” and “Black Power” and singing freedom songs, white counter protestors responded by waving Confederate flags and shouting “We want slaves,” “Get yourself a nigger,” and “Eee-yi-eee-yi-eee-yi-oh, Father Groppi’s got to go.”<sup>190</sup> White counter protestors threw projectiles such as rocks, bottles, cherry bombs, and pieces of wood, injuring twenty-one demonstrators. On the way back from Kosciuszko Park, a group of counter protestors surged against the police officers and marchers. However, by this time, over 100 additional police officers dressed in riot gear had arrived to gain control of the white counter protestors.<sup>191</sup>

Undeterred by the violence they faced the previous day, the Youth Council conducted a march to Kosciuszko Park on August 29, 1967. On this march, 200 members of the Youth Council flanked by thirty Milwaukee police officers encountered an estimated 13,000 angry white counter protestors. At Crazy Jim’s Auto, several hundred whites gathered around a lynched effigy of Father Groppi with swastikas painted on it, shouting racist slogans. The marchers could hear, “kill... kill... kill” echoing in the distance.<sup>192</sup> One block away from Kosciuszko Park, a mob of 1,000 white counter protestors rushed the police and marchers, overwhelming them. The Commandos, though few in number, stepped into the breach to face the attack and fought with counter protestors to defend the marchers. Firing shotguns and tear gas into the crowd, the police were able to temporarily disperse the white mob. At the park, Father Groppi briefly spoke to the demonstrators telling them, “You’ve shown you’re willing to die for freedom” and

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<sup>190</sup> Quoted in Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 111.

<sup>191</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, August 29, 1967; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 29, 1967; Aukofer, *City with a Chance* 111-113; Jones, *Selma of the North*, 170; “Second Fair Housing March,” August 29, 1967, WTMJ-TV, Wisconsin Historical Society, UWM-Library Achieve.

<sup>192</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 2.

asking them not to hate the white counter protestors but to “feel sorry for them.”<sup>193</sup> Transitioning into his next sentence Groppi said, “Jesus Christ died for brotherhood...” then a cherry bomb exploded in the crowd injuring three marchers.<sup>194</sup> It was at this moment that Mary Arms, a member of the Youth Council, recalled her terror at Kosciuszko Park, thinking to herself, “are we going to make it out of here alive?”<sup>195</sup> Police officers immediately surrounded the marchers as they began a hasty retreat to the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge. During the retreat, the marchers were assaulted by white counter protestors who rained projectiles upon them. At the second march, sixty-one people were arrested and twenty-four demonstrators were injured, including a five-year-old boy who was hit with a piece of concrete.<sup>196</sup>

The violence and rage of the white counter protestors terrified members of the Youth Council and the Commandos. Squire Austin, a member of the Commandos, recalls a security meeting they had prior to the march on August 29, 1967. In this meeting, the Commandos discussed the “dos and don’ts” of how they should conduct themselves.<sup>197</sup> Additionally, Austin recalls how he tried to “mentally prepare” himself for the violence the marchers were going to encounter once they crossed the 16<sup>th</sup> street Bridge.<sup>198</sup> Austin states that the Commandos knew the counter protestors were going to “throw everything but the kitchen sink at us” and the police were going to be unwilling to protect the marchers.<sup>199</sup> Prior to crossing the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge on August 29, 1967, Austin stated:

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<sup>193</sup> Quoted in Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 115-116.

<sup>194</sup> Quoted in Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 116.

<sup>195</sup> Mary Arms. Interview with Amanda Wynne, July 29, 2007.

<sup>196</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, August 30, 1967; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 30, 1967; *Waukesha Daily Freedom*, August 31, 1967.

<sup>197</sup> Austin, Squire. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

<sup>198</sup> Austin, Squire. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

<sup>199</sup> Austin, Squire. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

First thing, I was scared. Really scared... As we got closer and closer to National [Street], you could hear them. You could hear the echo. You could hear the chants of White Power and it was really frightening and we knew that the police weren't going to protect us.<sup>200</sup>

After the marchers reached the safety of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge, Frank Aukofer, a journalist for the *Milwaukee Journal* described the marchers:

[They] looked like refugees from a battle... Some could not walk and had to be carried by other marchers. Blood streamed down the face of a young white seminarian who had been hit by a bottle. Others had assorted cuts, bumps, and bruises.<sup>201</sup>

The marches on these two days alone illustrate the need for the Commandos to protect Youth Council marchers and their allies against white supremacist violence.

Another role of the Commandos was keeping a watchful eye on Milwaukee Police officers who were assigned to protect demonstrators and keep order. Some Milwaukee police officers were at best unsympathetic to the demonstrators and at worst outright hostile towards them. Prentice McKinney argues that demonstrators experienced more hostility and aggression from police officers than white counter protestors. Additionally, he argues that some officers had the tendency of “slipping with the tear gas” intended to disperse violent counter protestors, engulfing the demonstrators.<sup>202</sup> The most infamous instance of the Milwaukee PD’s aggressive use of tear gas occurred on August 29, 1967 after the Youth Council returned to the Freedom House following their march to Kosciuszko Park. Back at the Freedom House, several demonstrators articulated their opinions about the lack of protection to several police officers. Claiming to hear gunshots during the argument, police officers shot tear gas into the crowd. One canister was shot

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<sup>200</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 184.

<sup>201</sup> Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 116.

<sup>202</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 132.

into the Freedom House itself which set the house on fire. When the Milwaukee fire department came to put out the fire, again claiming they heard gunshots from a sniper, police officers refused to allow firefighters to put out the fire.<sup>203</sup>

Accusations of police brutality were made by members of the Youth Council. The day after the fire at the Freedom House, Father Groppi and the Youth Council held a rally and press conference in front of the Freedom House. As evidence, Father Groppi held up the tear gas canister found in the Freedom House and several Youth Council members who were eye witnesses articulated that police officers were responsible for the fire.<sup>204</sup> Mary Arms recalls that she and several other members of the youth council were upstairs watching TV and suddenly the house was filled with tear gas and smoke. During the rally, Arms claims that the police began firing tear gas into the crowd of demonstrators outside the Freedom House and indiscriminately assaulting people, stating she was “hit across the head,” cracking her tooth.<sup>205</sup> Mary Arms argues that one of the primary objectives of the Commandos was to protect marchers from the police. Arms recalls how the marchers were not only unprotected by the police, but “somebody needed to protect us from the police.”<sup>206</sup> Squire Austin, a Commando, describes the instances where he experienced police brutality after being arrested. Austin said once police officers

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<sup>203</sup> “Father Groppi and the Commandos Speaking at the Burned out Freedom House,” August 30, 1967, WTMJ-TV, Wisconsin Historical Society, UWM-Library Achieve; Arms, Mary. Interview with Amanda Wynne, July 29, 2007; Cannon, “The Education of Prentice McKinney,” *Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service*, 7 July 2017; Jones, *Selma of the North*, 4.

<sup>204</sup> “Father Groppi and the Commandos Speaking,” 30, 1967. The city of Milwaukee never acknowledged that the tear gas canister caused the fire. An official of the Milwaukee Fire Department stated that the fire was not caused by a “tear gas bomb” because the house would have had to be on fire for “forty to fifty minutes” to reach that intensity. Instead he argues that the fire was started by a “hydrocarbon possibly a solvent or liquid, a flammable liquid of some sorts. Due to the rapid propagation of the fire... a substance of this nature must have been used.” “Milwaukee Fire Department Official Discussing the Freedom House Fire,” August 30, 1967, WTMJ-TV, Wisconsin Historical Society, UWM-Library Achieve.

<sup>205</sup> Mary Arms. Interview with Amanda Wynne, July 29, 2007.

<sup>206</sup> Mary Arms. Interview with Amanda Wynne, July 29, 2007.

handcuffed him, “he was going to get hit... we knew that was coming.” Austin also describes how there were no repercussions against officers who engaged in police brutality.<sup>207</sup> Austin says that members of the Youth Council and Commandos could “complain all you want, but you have no proof” and “a lot of the time, you would get in areas where you wouldn’t be bruised.”<sup>208</sup>

Members of the Youth Council also accused the police of planting weapons on demonstrators to make false arrests to disrupt the movement. Prentice McKinney, Mary Arms, and Robert Granderson described a final objective of the Commandos and the Commandoettes as being to watch for police officers planting weapons on demonstrators to make false arrests.<sup>209</sup> Granderson stated that on several occasions Milwaukee Police officers would “infiltrate the [marching] line,” plant evidence on demonstrators, then “jump out of their [squad] cars and snatch people out of the line.”<sup>210</sup> Arms describes incidents of Milwaukee police officers planting weapons on demonstrators in order to disrupt the marches, make false arrest, or a justification to “come in and beat us up.”<sup>211</sup>

### **Backlash Against Open Housing Marches**

The Youth Council not only faced white supremacist violence from counter demonstrators, but city officials condemned the marches as well. Furthermore, city officials took a position that placed the blame of violent outbursts squarely on Father Groppi and the Youth Council’s tactics, not the perpetrators of violent outbursts against the peaceful marchers. On August 30, 1967, Milwaukee County Supervisor Richard

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<sup>207</sup> Squire Austin. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

<sup>208</sup> Squire Austin. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

<sup>209</sup> Mary Arms. Interview with Amanda Wynne, July 29, 2007; Prentice McKinney. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

<sup>210</sup> Quoted in Modlinski, “Commandos,” 76.

<sup>211</sup> Mary Arms. Interview with Amanda Wynne, July 29, 2007.

Nowakowski argued that Father Groppi, the Commandos, and the Youth Council “goaded and intimidated” south side residents with an “I dare you to” attitude that was just “begging for trouble.”<sup>212</sup> Nowakowski describes Groppi’s tactics as a “three ringed circus” with an attitude that “ensured mob action.”<sup>213</sup> Nowakowski falsely argues that black Milwaukeeans have never faced violence or racism on the south side and that Father Groppi and the Commandos are the ones who have “an extremely bigoted outlook.” Later in the news conference, Nowakowski finally says that the violence is “totally unjustifiable, *but* it’s not unexplainable because Father Groppi has dared these people to take this action.” Not only did Nowakowski provide white Milwaukeeans the justification for their violent outbursts, but more importantly his overtly apologetic tone ensured future violent acts would be tolerated by city officials.

Mayor Henry Maier made a statement to the press on August 30, 1967. Maier denounced the white supremacist violence against demonstrators, arguing it was his job to protect the lives and property of all Milwaukeeans. In his statement, Maier reiterated his objections to a city-wide housing ordinance and discussed how he was working with members of the religious community to find solutions. Maier stated that three unconfirmed sources told him that members of the civil rights leadership were urging Father Groppi to cease the marches but were unwilling to do so publicly. Although these statements from leaders of the civil rights community in Milwaukee could not be confirmed, it is highly probable that the traditional black leaders in Milwaukee attempted

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<sup>212</sup> “Milwaukee County Supervisor Richard Nowakowski Press Conference,” August 30, 1967, WTMJ-TV, Wisconsin Historical Society, UWM-Library Achieve.

<sup>213</sup> “Nowakowski Press Conference,” August 30, 1967.

to stop the direct-action protests of Father Groppi similarly to how they were able to stop Rev. R. L. Lathan's prayer protest in response to the murder of Daniel Bell in 1958.<sup>214</sup>

As the racial and civil unrest in Milwaukee grew, Mayor Maier made another public statement at a press conference on September 12, 1967. As a response to the growing intensification of violence, Maier announced the recommission of the Commission of Community Relations. Maier stated that he selected the nine members of the commission with the guidance of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance of Negro Clergy (Father Groppi was not selected). Maier argues that these "prestigious men" of the commission were the only ones who had the chance to successfully end "racial tensions in Milwaukee."<sup>215</sup> Unfortunately, Maier argued that this commission would "transcend" the issue of open housing and focus on prejudice in the community, not recognizing that they were interlinked.<sup>216</sup> Maier also stated that he appealed to Father Groppi on several occasions to stop the demonstrations and stop "waking up our working people."<sup>217</sup> In a more subtle tone than Nowakowski, Maier also blames Father Groppi for the unrest that the demonstrations had caused. Maier said that he thinks that Father Groppi's tactics are "imprudent but he has the right to do so," however, "it is always questionable if a man has the right to cry fire in a crowded theatre."<sup>218</sup>

As the white supremacist violence against open housing demonstrators continued to rise, Richard Nowakowski made another statement to the press on September 14, 1967. After personally witnessing the "mob insanity" on September 13, he "strongly

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<sup>214</sup> "Mayor Maier Press Conference Concerning Local Religious Leaders and Civil Disturbances," August 30, 1967, WTMJ-TV, Wisconsin Historical Society, UWM-Library Achieve.

<sup>215</sup> "Mayor Henry Maier Press Conference on the Commission on Community Relations," September 12, 1967, WTMJ-TV, Wisconsin Historical Society, UWM-Library Achieve.

<sup>216</sup> "Maier Press Conference," September 12, 1967.

<sup>217</sup> "Maier Press Conference," September 12, 1967.

<sup>218</sup> "Maier Press Conference," September 12, 1967.

condemn[ed]” the actions taken by counter protestors.<sup>219</sup> Nowakowski condemned individuals who were attacking Milwaukee Police officers by throwing objects such as bottles and bricks at them, those who cheered the Nazi swastika, and those who engaged in racist chants calling for the murder of black demonstrators. Although Nowakowski’s tone grew harsher towards counter protestors, he still placed the responsibility to end the violence on the shoulders of Father Groppi. Nowakowski argued that the purpose of the marches to raise awareness of a housing ordinance have “long been accomplished and have proved their point” by garnering national attention, that they are “no longer a useful too,” and will only result in more violence.<sup>220</sup> Nowakowski claimed that Father Groppi is the person who ignited the violence because of his actions and argued that he was the only one who could stop the violence by ending the marches. Nowakowski urged Father Groppi to end the demonstrations because “only then will the rioting stop.”<sup>221</sup> Again, Nowakowski is condemning the white supremacist violence, but he is putting the responsibility squarely upon Father Groppi and the Youth Council to stop the demonstrations to stop further violence instead of holding the perpetrators of the violent acts primarily responsible for the unrest.

In response to the Youth Council’s open housing marches, white power organizations conducted their own marches to denounce the Youth Council and condemn greater integration of Milwaukee. On September 12 and 23, 1967, hundreds of white demonstrators could be seen waving confederate flags and holding signs with “white power” written on them. At the September 12 counter demonstration, protestors carried a

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<sup>219</sup> “County Supervisor Richard Nowakowski Press Conference,” September 13, 1967, WTMJ-TV, Wisconsin Historical Society, UWM-Library Archive.

<sup>220</sup> “Nowakowski Press Conference,” September 13, 1967.

<sup>221</sup> “Nowakowski Press Conference,” September 13, 1967.

coffin with them with slogans such as “Groppi rest in hell” and “God is white.”<sup>222</sup>

Members of the American Nazi Party attended and spoke at these rallies. In the summer of 1967 and in early 1968, members of the Ku Klux Klan were also present at counter demonstrations to the Youth Council’s open housing marches.<sup>223</sup>

Mayor Maier’s response to white supremacist violence against members of the Youth Council was not only inadequate but illustrates the hypocritical double standard between civil unrest perpetrated by black vs white Milwaukeeans. At a press conference on September 12, 1967, a journalist asked Maier if he was contemplating calling in the National Guard or enforcing a curfew to ease the unrest the city was facing. Responding to this question, Maier said, “this city... is the freest city in the whole world. We intend to keep it that way.”<sup>224</sup> Maier also indicated that in the future, he would consider that some “curtailment” of the demonstrations may have to be made “because they are waking up our working people.”<sup>225</sup> Analyzing Maier’s comments, two major hypocrisies come to light. First, Maier would have been willing to curtail the demonstrations not to reduce the white supremacist violence committed against members of the Youth Council, but to ensure that the residents of the predominately white south side neighborhoods would not be inconvenienced with the noise of the demonstrators and counter demonstrators. Second, when Maier was faced with the civil disturbance in the inner core, he called in the National Guard and enforced a twenty-four-hour curfew on the first day of the civil disturbance on July 31, 1967. The responses from Maier and Nowakowski illustrate the

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<sup>222</sup> *Waukesha Daily Freedom*, September 13, 1967.

<sup>223</sup> “White Power Rally and March in Milwaukee,” September 12, 1967, WTMJ-TV, Wisconsin Historical Society, UWM-Library Achieve; “White Power March in Milwaukee, September 23, 1967, WTMJ-TV, Wisconsin Historical Society, UWM-Library Achieve; Jones, *Selma of the North*, 122.

<sup>224</sup> “Maier Press Conference,” September 12, 1967.

<sup>225</sup> “Maier Press Conference,” September 12, 1967.

necessity of the formation of the Commandos. These two city officials along with the Milwaukee Police Department failed to adequately protect peaceful demonstrators. Even more troubling, they failed to unequivocally denounce the acts of white supremacist violence and instead placed blame on Groppi and the Youth Council, causing more violence to ensue.<sup>226</sup>

### **Objectives of the Commandos: Tension and Tandem with Respectability**

The Commandos had an unwritten code of conduct for its members which mirrored aspects of respectability politics. From his interviews with members of the Commandos, Julius Modlinski argues that the organization's behavior was governed by five characteristics: respectful behavior, discipline, appearance, toughness, and non-violence.<sup>227</sup> Regarding respectful behavior, the Commandos' code of conduct prohibits drunkenness, violent behavior, and demands respect to members of the Youth Council and Commandos as well as allies in the community of Milwaukee. All of these behaviors—respect, temperance, and unwillingness to engage in violence—are core tenets of respectability politics. The Commandos' guidelines regarding discipline also align with respectability politics. The Commando leadership demanded that its members follow instructions and comply with orders given by officers. These two characteristics align with respectability politics' tenets of respect for authority and presenting oneself as organized.

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<sup>226</sup> Jones, *Selma of the North*, 145.

<sup>227</sup> Modlinski, "Commandos," 80. Modlinski's assertion that the Commandos adhered to "non-violent philosophy" is entirely inaccurate based on statements made by the Commandos and an examination of philosophical nonviolence. For a detailed discussion of the philosophy of nonviolence, see Branch, Taylor, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963*, and for the relationship between philosophical nonviolence and armed self-defense, see Christopher Strain, *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era*.

Other parts of the unwritten code of conduct either work in tension or tandem with respectability politics or reject its core tenets outright. The Commandos' idea of toughness in defending demonstrators, particularly women and children, align with respectability politics. While respectability politics demands that black men protect their families, the divergences occur with those adhering to respectability being unwilling to publicly confront perpetrators' harassment or violence in a verbal or physical way. The modus operandi of the Commandos rejects nonviolence and respectability politics, which are often closely interconnected. Finally, the Commandos' appearance flips the idea that is prescribed by those who promote respectability politics. Respectability politics demands that people must be well dressed, clean, and groomed in a way that fits in with the physical appearance of middle-class white Americans. Although the Commandos demanded that members clothing must be clean, there was not a specific uniform. Initially, the Commandos dressed in combat fatigues and boots to project an outward representation of militancy. However, because many of the members came from working-class backgrounds, many members wore sweatshirts identifying them as Commandos. Additionally, the Commandos emphasized its members keep their hairstyles natural. The clothing and appearance of the Commandos illustrates the differences in ideology and socioeconomic background with conservative, middle-class members of the MNAACP. The Commandos came from working-class backgrounds and favored a militant, direct-action approach to achieving racial and social justice.<sup>228</sup>

### **The Commandos and the Defiance of Respectability**

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<sup>228</sup> Metcalfe, "Commanding a Movement," 3; Modlinski, "Commandos," 80.

Within days of Groppi's announcement of the formation of the Commandos, editorials in the *Milwaukee Journal* and the *Milwaukee Sentinel* denounced the Commandos as a hate group and reported that the formation would deteriorate race relations in Milwaukee. Editors at the *Milwaukee Journal* stated that the formation of the Commandos was "disturbing news" and compared the Commandos to the "Hitler Youth" and "the Red Guard of Communist China."<sup>229</sup> The article concluded that race relations in Milwaukee would become "more bitter and more frustrating by the formation of this or any other commando force" and argued the Commandos should be disbanded.<sup>230</sup> The *Milwaukee Sentinel* made similar statements, describing the Commandos as "vigilantes" who would create further tensions between black Milwaukeeans and the local police:

A band of vigilantes—and this is what the NAACP Commandos really are—might have a place in a community where the processes of law enforcement have broken down, where citizens must band together to protect themselves. Milwaukee is not such a place. Making the NAACP youth into a military cadre can only exacerbate the unfortunately and unnecessarily strained relations between the Negro community and our police department.<sup>231</sup>

In an editorial in the *Milwaukee Courier*, a local black newspaper, was critical of the formation of the Commandos stating:

The COURIER and many members of the community have very deep and grave concerns about the wisdom of a Commando unit. We are concerned first, about the welfare of these young men. We [are] also concerned about the image of the Youth Council, and by reflection, the prestige and tradition of the NAACP. Uniforms have traditionally been associated with war and fighting, not peace and love. We would like Fr. Groppi and the council members to take a long hard look at their goals and the methods which are being used to reach them.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, October 12, 1966.

<sup>230</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, October 12, 1966.

<sup>231</sup> *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 7, 1966.

<sup>232</sup> "The Commandos," *Milwaukee Courier*, October 15, 1966.

In response to the denunciations of the Commandos, Groppi attempted to make a distinction between extremism and militancy in relation to the organization stating, “We are not extremists. We are militant. We are a vigorous direct-action group. I don’t think that is extremism.”<sup>233</sup> Despite the initial criticisms, the Commandos would play an integral role in future direct-action campaigns conducted by the Youth Council.

At the national level, the NAACP articulated their opposition to the Commandos formation for several reasons. At both the local and national levels, the conservative elites opposed the Commandos’ militant tactics that were increasingly influenced by Black Power. In Roy Wilkins’s opinion, Black Power, despite lacking a clear definition, ultimately was a slogan of “anti-white power” and denounced Black Power as “a reverse Mississippi, a reverse Hitler, a reverse Ku Klux Klan”<sup>234</sup> In Wilkins’s view, Black Power challenged the pluralistic and integrationist position of the NAACP and would be used as a justification for white backlash against the struggle for racial equality. What Wilkins feared most about Black Power was that it could alienate northern white liberals and fragment the fragile multiracial coalition which supported and more importantly funded the NAACP. Black Power and armed self-defense scholars Lance Hill and Hasan Jeffries identify that Black Power and armed self-defense became a litmus test for white liberals who would support civil rights organizations.<sup>235</sup> Henry Lee Moon, the NAACP Director of Public Relations sent a memorandum to Milwaukee news outlets on October 13, 1966 describing the NAACP’s position regarding violence and the organization’s

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<sup>233</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 132.

<sup>234</sup> “Roy Wilkins to NAACP supporters concerning the NAACP’s position on ‘Black Power,’” October 17, 1966, typed letter, NAACP Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (127.00.00). <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naacp/the-civil-rights-era.html>; Quoted in Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 189.

<sup>235</sup> Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 189; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 6.

approach to achieving racial justice. Moon stated that the NAACP's goal to achieve racial justice was through the "democratic process" and the organization was committed to integration which grants black Americans their "human and constitutional rights."<sup>236</sup> Additionally, Moon argues that the NAACP repudiated "any strategies of violence, reprisal or vigilantism."<sup>237</sup>

In regard to multiracial coalitions, Black Power ideology is not monolithic in nature and the Youth Council's view of Black Power challenges Wilkin's assessment that it is "anti-white power." On October 13, 1967, journalist Frank Aukofer attended a mass at St. Boniface where members of the Youth Council sang freedom songs. After communion, the following call and response took place between Father Groppi (G) and members of the Youth Council (YC):

G: You like all black people?

YC: Unh-uh

G: You like all white people?

YC: Unh-uh

G: What do we mean when we sing that song, "here me I'm calling, my brothers?"

YC: It means we want to be heard all over...

G: What do we mean by black power? Does it mean black people over white people?

YC: No, equal! It means opportunity...<sup>238</sup>

After the call and response was over, members of the Youth Council sang "We love everybody in our hearts." While some Black Power organizations promoted black only membership and or leadership, the Youth Council's view of Black Power correlates with the Lowndes County Freedom Party (original Black Panther Party) slogan, "All Power to the People."<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Groppi Papers, Box 11, Folder 5.

<sup>237</sup> Groppi Papers, Box 11, Folder 5.

<sup>238</sup> Quoted in Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 83.

<sup>239</sup> Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 83-84.

While Wilkins accepted the formation of the Commandos (other local NAACP chapters had similar organizations), the MNAACP opposed the Commandos. Prentice McKinney describes the tensions between the MNAACP and the Commandos and his view of the adult branch:

It was the old plantation mentality... They older community—the NAACP, respectable leadership—had an investment in the system. They understood that there was discrimination, but they had learned to get along and live with it and not rock the boat. We were the young turks. We were having no part of it. We were standing up against it. We were defying it, which put their position in jeopardy because the system would look at them and say, “Why can’t you control them?” And they tried.<sup>240</sup>

The Commandos’ willingness to defend themselves against white supremacist violence in Milwaukee challenges respectability politics in two fundamental ways. First, the public use of violence, even in self-defense, defied characteristics of non-violence and self-control which respectability politics prescribed. Second, the Commandos were unwilling to respect and follow orders, especially those of community leaders. Though the MNAACP did try to control the Commandos, the adults were powerless to stop them.

Previous scholars have described the Commandos and the Youth Council as adhering to tactical nonviolence or as “not-violent.” These interpretations of the Commandos are highly problematic because in the Commandos’ own words, they reject the tactic of nonviolence. While the Commandos and the female auxiliary unit the Commandoettes admired Martin Luther King Jr. and other non-violent activists, ideologically they aligned with Black Power activists such as Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and H. Rap Brown. Prentice McKinney describes the philosophy of the

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<sup>240</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 141.

Commandos as rejecting non-violence and as having the willingness to use violence to defend Youth Council protestors:

You had two different schools of thought you had Martin Luther King [Jr.] with nonviolent... you can do whatever you want to us and we're just going to ball and take it. On the other hand, you had people like H. Rap Brown who said, "burn baby burn." Then you had the black Muslims... [who said] "you don't mess with me, I won't mess with you. But if you mess with me, we have a problem." That was the philosophy of the Commandoes. We're not going to mess with you. We are going to protect the people behind us. But no, we are "not non-violent" if you attack us, we will not ball up in a little knot and let you do whatever you want to do. We have dignity we pride, and we demand that you respect that.<sup>241</sup>

Mary Arms, the founder of the Commandoettes, articulates her view of nonviolence and the organization's approach. Arms describes how she admired Martin Luther King Jr. and associated King with her mother's generation stating, "he was their time."<sup>242</sup> When Arms was introduced to Malcolm X's writings in college, she identified with his statement "by any means necessary" to achieve racial equality arguing, "Now see, he made sense."<sup>243</sup>

Arms describes the philosophy of the Commandoettes and the youth council compared to the MNAACP:

Well, we were never nonviolent. That's where the conflict came between us and Martin Luther King [Jr.]. We were never nonviolent. Well, we didn't teach violence. We tried to approach it in a nonviolent way but if someone struck we were going to strike back. And that's what people didn't believe and then that's where the conflict came between us and the NAACP.<sup>244</sup>

Father Groppi argued that because of the background of most of the Commandos, for some, violence in the Inner Core was used as a means of survival. Groppi argued that based on the Commandos' backgrounds, "we had to adapt [King's] philosophy" of

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<sup>241</sup> Prentice McKinney. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

<sup>242</sup> Mary Arms. Interview with Amanda Wynne, July 29, 2007.

<sup>243</sup> Mary Arms. Interview with Amanda Wynne, July 29, 2007.

<sup>244</sup> Mary Arms. Interview with Amanda Wynne, July 29, 2007.

nonviolence to not-violence which represented the background and objectives of the Commandos.<sup>245</sup>

### **Not Violent?**

At times, the Commandos wrestled with their position of not-violence. For the Commandos, physical altercations with white counter protestors and Milwaukee police officers were commonplace. Prentice McKinney describes the 200 days of open housing marches as “200 nights of getting arrested, fighting with the police, trying to protect the marchers, and on occasion, going to jail.”<sup>246</sup> Squire Austin also discusses the Commandos’ willingness to physically engage with counter protestors and the police. As a tactic, Austin describes that the Commandos had to protect the marchers because the police were not going to protect them. However, Austin says that the Commandos tried not to get “too violent” because they knew the media was watching.<sup>247</sup> The Commandos knew they were under the microscope of public perception, which was primarily portrayed to the public via the media. Attempting to control the public narrative of the Commandos by the media was a tactic they engaged in.

On one particular occasion, the Commandos planned a violent confrontation with Milwaukee Police officers. During the open housing marches, the Commandos decided that they had had enough harassment and violent outbursts from Milwaukee police officers. Over several confrontations between police officers and the Commandos, officers expressed their desire to “do battle”<sup>248</sup> with them to derail the open housing marches. Julius Modlinski argues that the Commandos believed to maintain their

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<sup>245</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 134.

<sup>246</sup> Cannon, “The Education of Prentice McKinney.”

<sup>247</sup> Squire Austin. Interview with Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011.

<sup>248</sup> Modlinski, “Commandos,” 91.

“credibility” with the black community and to deter police violence, they would need to gain legitimacy “through a violent confrontation.”<sup>249</sup> In October 1967, the Commandos conceived of a plan to confront the Milwaukee police. The Commandos devised a plan to trap police officers by sealing off four corners of the intersection of 20<sup>th</sup> and North Avenue. Once the police charged into the intersection to break up the marchers, the Commandos ordered the marchers to let the police pass into the center of the intersection. Then, hidden members of a Commando “Task Force” charged into the intersection and began battling with police. Shakespeare Lewis, who designed the altercation, described the strategy:

The strategy was that when we tie up the traffic at the intersection we knew that the police was going to rush in. And when they rush in, we opened up the marching line and let them into the square where we had blocked off traffic. The police started swinging fists and clubs when they saw they were trapped. The Commandos responded and the fighting was hard and bad. While the police had helmets, we didn’t and many [of our] heads were knocked. Both sides had casualties who had to go to the hospitals.<sup>250</sup>

As a result of the altercation between the Commandos and Milwaukee Police on October 9, 1967, eleven Commandos were arrested and six police officers were taken to the hospital. Several Commandos were seriously injured, but the exact figure has not been documented.<sup>251</sup>

After the violent confrontation with the Milwaukee police, the Commandos quickly recognized a new balance of power between themselves and the police. Jesse Wade describes the following march after the confrontation, saying there was “a little more cooperation” between the Commandos and the Police.<sup>252</sup> Shakespeare Lewis echoes

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<sup>249</sup> Modlinski, “Commandos,” 91.

<sup>250</sup> Quoted in Modlinski, “Commandos,” 91.

<sup>251</sup> “Police and Marchers Clash at Intersection,” *Milwaukee Journal*, October 10, 1967.

<sup>252</sup> Modlinski, “Commandos,” 94.

Wade's assertion of increased cooperation because the police saw the Youth Council wasn't "bullshitting" in what they were marching for and was "going to march no matter what" consequences they faced until their goals were achieved.<sup>253</sup> Other scholars such as Erica Metcalfe argue that this confrontation did not "represent a rejection of nonviolence" but instead it was a "symbolic" act of defiance.<sup>254</sup> Metcalfe's assertion that the confrontation was symbolic is accurate. However, the symbolic nature of the event is that after the confrontation the police recognized the Commandos' willingness to confront them physically and some black Milwaukeeans began to respect and admire the Commandos. The result of this confrontation illustrates the limitations of non-violence in the fight for social justice. If this confrontation did not occur, an increase in cooperation between the police and the Commandos may have never taken place.

Another grey area of the Commandos was that Father Groppi publicly stated that they would be unarmed, but in reality, some of the Commandos did carry weapons to protect demonstrators and themselves from white supremacist violence.<sup>255</sup> One instance that illustrates the Commandos' willingness to arm themselves occurred on the second day of the Wauwatosa protests. Father Groppi invited Tom Jacobson to join the protest and help legally defend any member of the Youth Council who was arrested. Groppi, Jacobson, and members of the Youth Council boarded Groppi's bus. Prior to leaving for Wauwatosa, Jacobson reminded the members of the Youth Council that he could only legally represent them if they adhered to nonviolence. Jacobson told the demonstrators on the bus, "if you have any weapons, you need to get rid of them now before we leave."<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Modlinski, "Commandos," 94

<sup>254</sup> Metcalfe, "Commanding a Movement," 12.

<sup>255</sup> *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 5, 1966.

<sup>256</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 135.

After none of the demonstrators reacted, Jacobson said “I’m going to get off the bus and come back on.”<sup>257</sup> After Jacobson returned on the bus there was a stash of weapons such as brass knuckles, knives, and chains that Groppi had collected.<sup>258</sup>

The Commandos’ unwillingness to publicly advocate the use of weapons to defend themselves during the open housing marches drew them into conflict with other, more radical Black Power organizations. In mid-September 1967, a group of young black men wearing shirts that read “Deacons for Defense” confronted the Commandos and their leadership at a rally held at St. Boniface Church.<sup>259</sup> These men were not officially affiliated with the Deacons for Defense and Justice and they advocated separatist Black Nationalism and armed self-defense. During a private meeting, the Commandos told the Deacons that they did not want to be a part of their organization, but they could join the Commandos if they adhered to their policy of not carrying weapons. The Deacons rejected the Commandos’ offer and instead opposed open housing legislation with the white supremacist organization the Milwaukee Citizens’ Civil Voice.<sup>260</sup>

The Commandos also came into conflict with other Black Power organizations over ideological orientation. In September 1967, Father Groppi and members of the Youth Council and the Commandos went to Washington D.C. to attend the “Conference on the Churches and Urban Tension” to promote open housing legislation in Milwaukee. At the conference, the Commandos came into conflict with Pride, Inc., a black national

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<sup>257</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 135.

<sup>258</sup> Jones, *Selma of the North*, 134-135.

<sup>259</sup> The Deacons for Defense and Justice was an armed self-defense organization that was formed on July 10, 1964 in Bogalusa Louisiana to protect nonviolent civil rights activists against white supremacist violence. For more information on the Deacons for Defense and Justice, see Hill, *The Deacons for Defense* and Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

<sup>260</sup> Jones, *Selma of the North*, 215.

organization founded by Marion Barry. The tension between the Commandos and Pride centered around Groppi's involvement in the organization. Rufus Mayfield, a spokesman for Pride, believed that blacks should lead their own organizations stating, "Father Groppi has one thing wrong with him--his color. It's the same old case of whites using Negroes. After they're through they throw you back."<sup>261</sup> Members of the Youth Council and the Commandos defended Groppi's involvement and argued that he was only their advisor. Lawrence Friend, President of the Youth Council, responded by saying, "I'm not following and he's not leading... Father Groppi's heart is as black as mine."<sup>262</sup> The conflict with Pride helped Groppi reflect about his role as advisor to the Commandos stating, "It raises problems in the sense that I am white, and that we are trying to develop indigenous black leadership."<sup>263</sup> The confrontation with Pride outlines the Commandos' willingness to incorporate ideas of Black Power within a multiracial organization. Additionally, it illustrates the multifaceted nature of Black Power organizations and their relationships with different organizations.<sup>264</sup>

Another Black Power organization the Commandos came into conflict with was the Chicago Blackstone Rangers. On several occasions the Rangers went to St. Boniface and harassed members of the Commandos and attempted to undermine their leadership in the community. In front of a small crowd at St. Boniface, one Ranger stated, "From what we see, you Commandos are doing nothing. You don't even act black. The white man in

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<sup>261</sup> Ethel Payne, "Milwaukee March Leader Called 'Just a Whitey,'" *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 3, 1967.

<sup>262</sup> "Groppi Turns Cheek to Black Critic," *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 2, 1967.

<sup>263</sup> Groppi Papers, Box 15, Folder 5.

<sup>264</sup> Patrick Jones, "'Not a Color, But an Attitude': Black Power Politics in Milwaukee," in *Common Ground: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodward, eds., (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 259.

Milwaukee has called your bluff. And what do you do? You keep on marching.”<sup>265</sup> A more serious altercation occurred between the Commandos and Rangers while the two groups were staying in the same hotel while attending an NAACP convention in Philadelphia. Members of the Rangers forcibly held a member of the Commandos nicknamed “Curly” at gunpoint in a Rangers hotel room. The Rangers told Curly that the Commandos needed to dismiss Groppi as their advisor and become an all-black organization. Eventually, the members of the Rangers released Curly and he was able to rejoin the Commandos alerting them what had happened. Dwight Benning responded to the incident:

To all those persons that have been trying to tell us to get violent we say that this is our movement, and we’re going to continue to make the decisions. If outsiders want to join us, they’re welcome to do so on our terms. But there will be no violence on our part unless our women and children are attacked.<sup>266</sup>

The tensions between the Commandos and other Black Power organizations illustrate the wide ideological spectrum of Black Power. Furthermore, the Commandos’ reactions to the Blackstone Rangers and Pride Inc. show that the Commandos simultaneously incorporated ideas and tactics from both Black Power and nonviolent civil rights organizations.

The Commandos were an incredibly complex organization. Their formulation was sparked by the rise of white supremacist violence in the city of Milwaukee. Furthermore, the Commandos proved they were necessary to protect peaceful demonstrators because the officials of the city of Milwaukee and the police department demonstrated they were unwilling to take the necessary actions to defend members of the Youth Council.

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<sup>265</sup> Betty Washington, “Milwaukee Commandos in 2-Front Battle: Faced by White bigotry, Black Militants’ Violence,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 20, 1967.

<sup>266</sup> Betty Washington, “Youths in Housing Thrust,” *Chicago Defender*, September 30, 1967.

Ultimately, through the Commandos' willingness to protect themselves and protestors, they grew into a symbolic working-class rejection of nonviolence in Milwaukee. The formation of the Commandos injected another level of militancy into the Youth Council and their demonstrations, which drew the ire of members of the MNAACP, city officials, journalists, and ordinary Milwaukeeans. The Commandos simultaneously defied and incorporated aspects of respectability politics within their organization. Additionally, they infused ideas and tactics from both mainstream civil rights and Black Power organizations. However, the fact that they were an all-male organization that voted unanimously to exclude women was bound to cause gender conflicts that gave rise to the formation of the Commandoettes.

## Chapter 3

### Respectability and Gendered Gatekeeping

On May 31, 1995, Jack Dougherty sat down with Gwen Jackson, a former Youth Council advisor, to conduct an oral history about her activism in Milwaukee during the 1960s. Dougherty raised the issue of a transition of leadership in the Youth Council being dominated by females but shifting towards leadership being dominated by men in the latter half of the 1960s. Jackson stated she was unaware of the shift in leadership being dominated by women to men. However, Jackson does discuss the leadership of the Youth Council under President Reynolds Moore. Jackson argues that Moore was “ill equipped” to be president because of his “wild” nature and that there was a lack of leadership development under Father Groppi.<sup>267</sup> Although Jackson was not aware of the transition, Erica Metcalfe’s scholarship on the history of the Youth Council finds that after 1966, the Youth Council’s leadership became comprised of mostly men. The Youth Council’s transition of leadership from women to men is a common phenomenon among civil rights organizations. Women tended to be the backbone in the formative stages of civil rights organizations. However, as these organizations grew, men tended to dominate the leadership, pushing aside the voices and contributions of its female members. To some extent, the Youth Council followed this pattern.<sup>268</sup>

### Tensions over the Formation of the Commandos

Although the Commandos served as an internal police due to the lack of adequate protection by the Milwaukee Police department, some members of the Youth Council

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<sup>267</sup> Gwen Jackson. Interviewed by Jack Dougherty May 31, 1995.

<sup>268</sup> Gwen Jackson. Interviewed by Jack Dougherty May 31, 1995; Metcalfe, “Coming into Our Own,” 110-111.

were not enthusiastic about its formation. Alberta Harris, president of the Youth Council during the formation of the Commandos, expressed her objections. Harris's objections to the Commandos were twofold. First, she was "concerned about the paramilitary" aspect of the Commandos and did not want them to "turn into the Black Panthers."<sup>269</sup> Second, Harris was concerned that the overt paramilitary nature of the Commandos could hurt community relations and the perception of the Youth Council as a whole. Harris argues that the Commandos "scared the bejesus out of a lot of people... especially the establishment."<sup>270</sup> The fact that the Commandos unanimously voted to prohibit women's entry into the organization caused some tension among female members of the Youth Council such as Mary Arms and Shirley Butler. Butler recalls several heated exchanges between female member of the Youth Council and the Commandos over female membership in the organization. Ultimately, Butler argues that the Commandos prohibited female membership because they did not see protection as a female role, instead "that was the men's job."<sup>271</sup> The objections of Arms and Butler over the prohibition of female membership in the Commandos served as a catalyst in the creation of the Commandoettes.

### **Commandoettes**

The decision of the Commandos to exclude women illustrates that their belief was that only men could serve as protectors within the organization. Shirley Butler argues that gender roles in the movement were at the core of why the Commandos rejected female membership. Mary Arms was also upset about the male-only policy of the Commandos,

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<sup>269</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 132.

<sup>270</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 135.

<sup>271</sup> Sherly Butler. Interviewed by Amanda Wynee, July 17, 2007.

arguing that female members of the Youth Council “fought just as hard. We were right there by their side.”<sup>272</sup> Butler argues that in the end, the Commandos believed “that the girls shouldn’t be out protecting the guys”<sup>273</sup> Shortly after this decision, Shirly Butler and Mary Arms suggested forming an auxiliary female group known as the Commandoettes. Arms describes two primary functions of the Commandoettes. First, they served as an energizer to the marchers: learning songs, chants, and different marching steps because “it’s hard marching,” and these tactics would “perk up [the marchers] a little bit.” Second, Arms said that their main function was to watch out for marchers carrying weapons, being violent, police officers planting weapons on marchers, or individuals planted by the police to disrupt the march. Arms recalls, “We heard of the police actually putting somebody in just to cause a disruption so they can come in and beat us up.”<sup>274</sup> The Commandoettes did not gain the same momentum as the Commandos and the organization was quickly couched. At the time, female members of the Youth Council were willing to set gender issues aside and primarily focus on the issue of race relations in Milwaukee. Even though the Youth Council was a multiracial organization that was egalitarian in nature, the same philosophy did not apply to gender roles within the movement.<sup>275</sup>

### **Commandos and Masculinist Uplift**

Issues of gender were embedded within the Youth Council and their quest for racial equality in Milwaukee. In his scholarship on gender in the civil rights and Black

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<sup>272</sup> Mary Arms. Interviewed by Amanda Wynee, July 29, 2007.

<sup>273</sup> Sherly Butler. Interviewed by Amanda Wynee, July 17, 2007.

<sup>274</sup> Mary Arms. Interviewed by Amanda Wynee, July 29, 2007.

<sup>275</sup> Sherly Butler. Interviewed by Amanda Wynee, July 17, 2007; <sup>275</sup> Mary Arms. Interviewed by Amanda Wynee, July 29, 2007; Naomi Waxman, “‘We Fought just as Hard’: Women in the March on Milwaukee,” *Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service*, July 10, 2017.

Power movements, Steve Estes coins the term “masculinist uplift,” which emphasizes the development of black male leadership. Estes argues that masculinist uplift uses masculine rhetoric to “inspire a sense of dignity and pride” among black men but can have the unintended consequence of reinforcing a sense of male dominance over women.<sup>276</sup>

Female members of the Youth Council have mixed opinions about whether the Commandos and their masculine persona caused tensions within the Youth Council. Betty Martin describes a gendered understanding from members of the Youth Council and their roles in the demonstrations. Martin states, “I knew that the men’s job was to get out there and protect that line... everyone had a defined role... there was no conflict.”<sup>277</sup> But other female members of the Youth Council such as Alberta Harris remember that there were internal struggles in relation to gender roles. Harris recalls, “We had some power struggles within the organization itself over the fact that we had males that had too much power.”<sup>278</sup>

The Commandos embody aspects of masculinist uplift in several ways. A sense of emasculation was a common feeling among members of the Commandos prior to their involvement with the organization. Masculine performances of strength, militancy, and protection of the community were seen as a way to regain a sense of masculinity. The Commandos’ name and appearance represent hyper-masculine concepts. Mary Arms coined the name Commandos for its members because of their hypermasculine appearance stating, “they looked like Marines or... Green Berets... So I called them

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<sup>276</sup> Estes, Steve, *I Am a Man: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 187.

<sup>277</sup> Quoted in Jones, Selma of the North, 225.

<sup>278</sup> Quoted in Jones, Selma of the North, 225.

Commandos and it stuck.”<sup>279</sup> Dennis McDowell reiterates this idea of regaining a sense of masculinity after joining the Commandos stating that until then, “we didn’t know we had the right to stand tall as men.”<sup>280</sup> Masculinist uplift can also be witnessed through Father Groppi’s goals of fostering strong black male leadership in the Youth Council and Commandos. One of Father Groppi’s primary goals in serving as the advisor to the Commandos was to “develop indigenous black [male] leadership.”<sup>281</sup>

About fifteen years after Father Groppi resigned as advisor to the Youth Council, he discussed hypermasculine characteristics within the Commandos. In his quest to develop strong black male leadership, Groppi used the rhetoric of masculinity. Reflecting on the Commandos, Groppi stated, “The Commandos... were a very chauvinistic group. There were no women that were in the Commando group. It was looked at as a very macho thing.”<sup>282</sup> Aspects of Black Power such as the creation of a positive self-image through self-expression and the necessity of black people to define the world for themselves without control or oppression clearly intersect with the same language of masculinist uplift.

It is clear that the Commandos exhibit aspects of masculinist uplift, but it remains unclear to what degree its negative consequences can be witnessed. Based on the shift towards male-dominated leadership after 1966 and Harris’s view that men began to have too much control illustrates a growing sense of male dominance within the Youth Council. However, the notion of a growing sense of female victimization is less apparent. The fact that Arms and Butler created the Commandoettes in response to female

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<sup>279</sup> Mary Arms. Interviewed by Amanda Wynee, July 29, 2007.

<sup>280</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 223.

<sup>281</sup> Groppi Papers, Box 15, Folder 5.

<sup>282</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 223.

prohibition from the Commandos shows that several female members of the Youth Council did not feel a sense of victimization. More voices and stories of female members of the Youth Council need to be recorded to accurately analyze a sense of female victimization.

### **The Politics of Protection**

Linking respectability politics and masculinist uplift, Farah Jasmine Griffin has developed the term “politics of protection,” which is a strategy devised by black intellectuals and activists to protect black women from physical and sexual violence and economic poverty. At the root of the politics of protection is a sense of traditional patriarchal protection of womanhood. Griffin argues that although the men who implemented the politics of protection truly cared about the women they were attempting to protect, there are several incredibly problematic aspects of its implementation. First, it creates a sense of victimization and reduction of agency among women through a sexist discourse. Second, the language of protection and purity mirrors the same rhetoric that white men used to repress white women and brutalize black men. Denis McDowell, one of the first captains of the Commandos, describe that the organization’s unwritten code of conduct had specifics for how they were to interact with women. McDowell explains that the Commandos were not to be “disrespectful, rude, crude, or lewd around the girls.”<sup>283</sup> McDowell also states that the Commandos placed an emphasis on their role to “protect the womenfolk” and “to protect the old folks.”<sup>284</sup> Ed Thekan, a member of the Commandos, reiterates this idea of regaining a sense of masculinity through protection stating, “Here [was] a case to exemplify the black man as being the leader in the sense of

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<sup>283</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 136.

<sup>284</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 136.

protector.”<sup>285</sup> Both McDowell and Thekan’s statements illustrate both aspects of the politics of protection: the physical protection of women and the protection of their purity.

It is clear that the Commandos exhibit aspects of masculinist uplift and the politics of protection but it remains unclear to what degree its negative consequences can be witnessed. Masculinist uplift can be witnessed through the shift towards male-dominated leadership after 1966 and Harris’s view that men began to have too much control clearly within the Youth Council. Additionally, the politics of protection can be seen through the Commandos’ view of protection and behavior around female members of the Youth Council. However, the notion of a growing sense of female victimization and reduction in female agency is less clear. The fact that Arms and Butler created the Commandoettes in response to female prohibition from the Commandos shows that several female members of the Youth Council did not feel a sense of victimization. The Youth Council and female participation in the open housing marches served as a primary vehicle for female leadership and activism in Milwaukee. Betty Martin argues, “there were a lot of devoted women behind the scenes... a lot of people don’t know that... women were out there and put their lives on the line every day along with the men.”<sup>286</sup> More voices and stories of female members of the Youth Council need to be recorded to accurately analyze a sense of female agency or sense of victimization.

### **Respectability Politics and Gendered Gatekeeping**

One of the negative aspects of respectability politics in relation to gender is that it serves as a form of gendered gatekeeping. At the foundation of this gendered gatekeeping is the holding all African American women to standards of respectable, middle-class

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<sup>285</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 223.

<sup>286</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 226.

feminine gender norms such as meekness, chastity, and moral virtuousness. These values of middle-class respectability also intersect with the ideology of separate spheres, which dictates the public sphere as political and inherently masculine, while women are relegated to the “feminine” domestic sphere and are inherently non-political actors. Female members of the Youth Council and their allies were inherently political actors challenging the ideology of separate spheres. Women participated in direct-action campaigns, served in positions of leadership, and were an integral part of developing ideas, tactics, and strategies to fight against racial inequality in Milwaukee.

In addition to challenging the ideology of separate spheres, female members of the Youth Council also challenged tenets of respectability politics. Respectability politics dictates appropriate and inappropriate forms of feminine activism. Appropriate forms of protest include writing letters, petition campaigns, fundraising efforts, and challenging the system through legal means. Inappropriate forms of feminine activism include direct action protests or public confrontations. Women who challenge respectability by entering the public/political sphere, for example, participating in direct action campaigns, are exhibiting characteristics that are “unladylike.” There are two main consequences in the connection between respectability politics, gendered gate keeping, and female participation in direct action campaigns. First, women who are deemed unladylike are seen as community outsiders who do not deserve the same protection, rights, and respect as women who adhere to respectability gender norms. Second, it can create an internal struggle for women who simultaneously want to present themselves as respectable women and actively and publicly fight for reforms. This internal struggle can prevent

women's participation in the fight for social justice that can hinder the progress of social movements as a whole.

Alderman Vel Phillips is a prime example of how respectability created internal and external tensions when she decided to join the demonstrations for open housing in Milwaukee. Prior to the open housing marches, Phillips used her political power as an alderman to present open housing legislation to the city council. On four occasions from 1962 to 1967, Phillips presented open housing bills to the Milwaukee Common Council. However, each time her bill would be voted down 18-1 by the council which was primarily comprised of white men. Although Phillips received hostile backlash against her open housing initiatives from white Milwaukeeans, she did not receive attacks from black Milwaukeeans in terms of defying middle-class respectability. In fact, the only pressure Phillips faced from black Milwaukeeans came from the working-class who argued that Phillip's ordinances favored housing for middle-class black Milwaukeeans over the working class.<sup>287</sup>

Phillips was a staunch ally to the Youth Council, however she never participated in one of their demonstrations until she saw news footage of the open housing marches. Phillips recalls seeing several people saying that the march "is for Vel Phillips's housing, fair housing bill" and remembers thinking to herself, "I have to be there."<sup>288</sup> After deciding to participate in the open housing marches, Phillips informed her family of her decision. The reaction from her family reflected the gendered tenets of respectability

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<sup>287</sup> Through One City's Eyes: Race Relations in America's Heartland, Milwaukee WI, Duncan Group 1999, Milwaukee Manuscript Collection, UW-Milwaukee Archives, interview with Vel Phillips, Box 1, Folder 16; "Fair Housing Defeat Nears," *Milwaukee Star*, May 27, 1967; Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 105.

<sup>288</sup> Through One City's Eyes: Race Relations in America's Heartland: Interview with Vel Phillips, Box 1, Folder 16.

politics. Phillips recalls her mother saying that demonstrating was “not very ladylike” and her husband pleaded with her not to demonstrate saying “this is not you, you don’t want to do that.”<sup>289</sup> Internally, Phillips wrestled with between maintaining a respectable status—which would appease her family—and joining the open housing demonstrations. Phillips recalls that her mother had a lot of “rules about what ladies did and didn’t do,” one of which was not marching up and down the street with protest signs.<sup>290</sup> Although Phillips made the choice to join the march, she still abided by her mother’s rules. Phillips participated on the second day of the open housing march but found a middle ground of appeasing her mother by not carrying a sign during the demonstration.<sup>291</sup> Phillip’s internal struggle shows how powerful respectability politics are for black women who want to maintain an image of respectability while simultaneously fighting for social justice. Furthermore, it illustrates that the entrenchment of respectability in Milwaukee can slow female activism.

Gwen Jackson’s experiences and upbringing with respectability mirror Phillip’s experiences. Jackson’s oral history reveals how she too wrestled with how respectability politics factored into her upbringing and her decisions to participate in direct action campaigns while she was an advisor to the Youth Council. Although Jackson describes her mother as instilling a sense of gender equality in her children, she also defined what actions were appropriate for middle-class African American women:

I was raised to be a lady, and there were certain things that ladies did and certain things that ladies didn’t, and I wasn’t too much a lady that I didn’t participate in marches, but I did not like being confrontational.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Through One City’s Eyes, interview with Vel Phillips, Box 1, Folder 16.

<sup>290</sup> Through One City’s Eyes, interview with Vel Phillips, Box 1, Folder 16.

<sup>291</sup> Through One City’s Eyes, interview with Vel Phillips, Box 1, Folder 16; “Fair Housing Defeat Nears,” *Milwaukee Star*, May 27, 1967; Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 105.

<sup>292</sup> Jackson, Gwen. Interview with Jack Dougherty. June 31, 1995.

Jackson's statement illustrates that at the individual level, respectability politics impact the individual's view of appropriate gendered behavior and how that behavior intersects with tactics used to pursue racial equality. Additionally, it also indicates one of the defining characteristics of respectability politics, which is policing the behavior of the black community by enforcing middle-class African American standards. In turn, this form of policing also served as a method of gendered gatekeeping by outlining who is considered a "lady" and who is not.

Male members of the Youth Council in some respects faced similar challenges in their defiance of respectability politics through direct-action protests. However, a core tenet of respectability politics for men is that they defend their family and community from racial oppression. However, unlike female members, they did not simultaneously challenge the ideology of separate spheres. Therefore, male activists in Milwaukee did not experience the double marginalization of defying both respectability politics and the ideology of separate spheres. Oral histories and interviews conducted with men of the Youth Council have not illustrated the same level of internal tensions in maintaining their public image of a respectable man while fighting racial oppression.

Another aspect of gendered gatekeeping and policing of respectable behavior was from an older group of women who served as informal advisors and chaperones. Betty Martin, a member of the Youth Council, called these women "the mothers of the civil rights movement."<sup>293</sup> Martin recalled that during this time period in Milwaukee, adults were more willing to chastise youths' inappropriate behavior and report it to the child's parents. Martin suggests that these "mothers" taught her and the other girls of the Youth

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<sup>293</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 226.

Council respectable behavior. One of the most important roles of the civil rights mothers was to deny romantic advances by members of the Commandos towards the young women in the Youth Council. Additionally, Martin argues that because of the constant media presence covering the Youth Council, the mothers did not want these young girls to portray that they were unladylike or out of control. Many of these mothers filled a specific role during Youth Council demonstrations. Martin explains that Mother Butler was responsible for knowing where everyone was supposed to be and if a member of the Youth Council was not in the correct place, she would find him or her. Martin describes Mother Miller as the “overseer,” and if any member of the Youth Council “got out of line,” she would call a “hen party” where all the mothers would meet with the Youth Council to correct any inappropriate behavior.<sup>294</sup> These mothers exemplify two fundamental aspects of respectability politics’ relationship with gender. First, they taught and groomed female members of the Youth Council how to be respectable women and report any inappropriate behavior to the children’s parents. Second, they policed the behavior of the female members of the Youth Council with an extreme focus on chaste behavior.<sup>295</sup>

The mothers’ roles and behavior indicate how the entrenchment of respectability politics passes from one generation to the next based on ideas they promoted and their policing the behavior of young women to maintain a respectable public image. Furthermore, oral histories and scholarship on the Youth Council have shown that male members of the Youth Council did not experience the same level of surveillance in regards of their behaviors. When male members of the Youth Council’s behaviors were

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<sup>294</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 226-227.

<sup>295</sup> Betty Martin. Interview with Joanne Williams, Spring 2011; Jones, *Selma of the North*, 226-227.

policed it regarding their interactions with female members. Gwen Jackson illustrates this point when she challenged Father Groppi on his failure to instill proper etiquette and behavior in male members of the Youth Council towards female members. The policing of respectability of male members revolves around maintaining the purity and respectability of female members which further indicate the emphasis of respectability politics' gendered gatekeeping of black women.

It is difficult to quantify the role respectability's gendered tenets had on women in Milwaukee and the internal conflict to fight for social justice while simultaneously presenting themselves as respectable women. Vel Phillips and Gwen Jackson illustrate this internal struggle. The entrenchment of respectability politics and gendered gatekeeping show how these powerful ideas can slow or stop activism of women in the quest for social justice and the success of movements. These are just two women's voices and future scholarship and research needs to incorporate a stronger gendered analysis to make a broader account of women's experiences in the Youth Council as a whole.

Despite the gendered challenges female members of the Youth Council experienced due to respectability politics and gendered gatekeeping, they served as a backbone of the formation of the early years of the organization. Although they faced a degree of marginalization in roles of leadership after 1966, they still played an integral part in the fight against racial oppression in Milwaukee. It is imperative that future scholars document and record the experiences of these women to incorporate a more gender inclusive narrative of civil rights activism in Milwaukee before they no longer have the opportunity to make their voices heard.

## Conclusion

### “Fifty Steps Forward, Five Hundred Back”

Beginning in 1963, the Youth Council served as the vanguard in a series of struggles against racial oppression and white supremacy in Milwaukee. The Youth Council was a unique organization that embodied a variety of ideas and tactics from both the nonviolent civil rights and Black Power movements. Members of the Youth Council simultaneously incorporated and rejected aspects of nonviolent direct action and respectability politics in their quest for social justice. Despite the triumphs the Youth Council achieved by the end of the open housing marches, the organization’s ability to influence and organize activists in Milwaukee would soon come to an end.

One major factor in the Youth Council’s downfall was that in March 1968, the Commandos split away from the Youth Council and became an autonomous organization known as Commandos Inc. Three primary factors lead to this split. First, several Commandos wanted to create social welfare programs, funded by governmental agencies. Father Groppi was adamantly opposed to creating programs that were funded by government grants because he did not trust the government’s commitment to fund these programs. Second, members of the Commandos grew frustrated with being a subordinate group to the Youth Council, especially concerning the Youth Council’s power to allocate funds. Third, some members of the Commandos grew resentful of the media’s focus on Groppi and the belief that he, not the members of the Youth Council and Commandos, was leading the movement. Shirly Butler argues that as a result of the Commandos

breaking away from the Youth Council, much of the energy was sucked out of the movement.<sup>296</sup>

Commandos Inc. would go on to create community programs that would focus on expanding black employment opportunities, home repair projects, inner city summer youth projects, juvenile justice and rehabilitation, and educational and counseling programs. By 1980, Commandos Inc. was the most prominent inner-city social service agency in Milwaukee. However, with the election of Ronald Reagan, Father Groppi's warnings about the reliance of governmental funding came to fruition. The Reagan administration ushered in a conservative approach towards funding inner-city programs, and the funding for Commando projects was cut drastically. The Commandos could not draw upon the same level of resources through donations from people, businesses, and organizations in Milwaukee, which left the organization unable to maintain the community service programs they had been developing for over a decade. By the early 1990s, once the Commando's projects diminished, rates of inner-city unemployment, poverty, and mass incarceration of black Milwaukeeans rose dramatically. Less than thirty years after the successes of the Youth Council in creating social change in Milwaukee, a new generation of Milwaukeeans would have to fight similar battles as their predecessors.<sup>297</sup>

Another factor behind why the Youth Council lost some of its energy was the resignation of Father Groppi as Youth Council advisor on March 11, 1968. It remains unclear if Father Groppi willingly resigned or if he faced pressure from members of the MNAACP to submit his resignation. Groppi stated that he resigned because he wanted to

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<sup>296</sup> Butler, Shirley. Interviewed by Amanda Wynne, July 17, 2007; Modlinski, "Commandos," 190.

<sup>297</sup> Modlinski, "Commandos," 111, 115, 121, 124, 131; Metcalfe, "Coming into Our Own," 102, 106.

organize his parish “along the lines of militant social action involvement.”<sup>298</sup> Although Groppi resigned as the advisor to the Youth Council, he still maintained a level of activism in Milwaukee, leading protests against employment discrimination at the Allen-Baradley company and leading the “Welfare Mothers March.” On September 21, 1969, Groppi led a 90-mile march from Milwaukee to Madison to protest budget cuts to the state’s welfare programs. On September 22, 1969, Groppi and 3,000 other activists gathered outside the capitol building in Madison. Groppi and the activists stormed the capital building and broke down the locked doors leading into the legislative chamber. Pandemonium ensued as protestors entered the legislative chambers and occupied the chamber for eleven hours before they were forced to leave by the police. According to reports in the *Milwaukee Journal*:

Where the clerks normally sit and record the day’s events, angry welfare marchers strode on the desk top, leading songs, chanting slogans and making speeches amidst loaves of bread, jars of peanut butter and mayonnaise and packages of baloney. The thronelike chair where the assembly speaker should sit was occupied at various times, by mothers, squirming children and orators who were using it and the speaker’s podium for something to stand on. The last occupant was a bushy haired young man leaning back with his feet folded comfortably on the rostrum, making a call on the speaker’s telephone.<sup>299</sup>

The following day, Groppi and the protestors returned to the capital and were met by hundreds of members of the Wisconsin National Guard. Using a law from 1848, the legislators voted 72-24 to hold Groppi in contempt, which sentenced him to a jail for six months or until the legislative session was over. Groppi challenged the charges, ultimately leading to a 1972 Supreme Court hearing which unanimously ruled that the assembly violated Groppi’s rights. Groppi spent roughly a month in jail due to the

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<sup>298</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 242.

<sup>299</sup> *Milwaukee Journal*, September 23, 1969.

contempt charges and according to Father Dismas Becker, the incident “killed his spirit.”<sup>300</sup> The Welfare Mothers March was the last major direct-action campaign conducted in Milwaukee for years to come. Activism in Milwaukee continued but instead was led by other organizations such as Commandos Inc. and the Milwaukee Black Panther Party.<sup>301</sup>

Members of the Youth Council went on to form other social justice organizations and remained active in the Milwaukee activist community. Betty Martin is the executive director of the Just Us for Justice organization which Martin describes as a “spin off” of the Youth Council.<sup>302</sup> Margaret “Peggy” Rozga went on to become an English Professor at UW-Milwaukee. Rozga has written a book of poetry discussing the open housing marches, *200 Nights and One Day*, a play, *March On Milwaukee: A Memoir of the Open Housing Protests*, and most recently served as the editor of an anthology, *Where I Want to Live: Poems for Fair and Affordable Housing*. Shirley Butler became a teacher in the Milwaukee Public School system and wrote a book in 2013 titled *Asante Sana ‘Thank You’ Father James E. Groppi* describing her experiences in the Youth Council. Butler continues to break down racial barriers in the Milwaukee. Although the Youth Council lost its power to pursue social change in Milwaukee, the spirit of activism lives on in these former members who still actively fight for social justice today.<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Quoted in Jones, *Selma of the North*, 239.

<sup>301</sup> Groppi Papers, Box 11, Folder 5; *Milwaukee Journal*, September 23-24, 1969; Jones, *Selma of the North*, 238-239, 248.

<sup>302</sup> Betty Martin. Interviewed by Joanne Williams, Spring 2011.

<sup>303</sup> Margaret (Peggy) Rozga. Interviewed by Michael Gordon, June 19, 2007, <https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/march/id/1724/rec/10>; Margaret (Peggy) Rozga. Interviewed by Michael Gordon, August 19, 2008 <https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/march/id/1666/rec/9>; Jim Higgins, “Milwaukee’s Margaret Rozga named Wisconsin Poet Laureate,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 14, 2019; Carly Wolf, “Former St. Boniface Student says Father Groppi ‘Taught me how to Love,’” *Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service*, June 22, 2017;

## Milwaukee Today

Shortly after Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1968 (more commonly known as the Fair Housing Act), on April 30, 1968, the Milwaukee Common Council passed its own open housing law which prohibited housing discrimination based on race, religion, national origin, or sex. After the law was passed, black Milwaukeeans began moving into South Side neighborhoods. However, discrimination still occurred because the fair housing ordinances “were difficult to enforce.”<sup>304</sup> New forms of housing segregation such as redlining, the lack of affordable housing in the suburbs, discriminatory lending practices, and freeway construction projects, such as the construction of I-34, facilitated “white flight” and the isolation of predominantly black inner city neighborhoods. A 2011-2015 United States Census Bureau survey found that 25,179 residents with the 53206 ZIP code were black compared to 632 white residents. Greater Together, a nonprofit organization that promotes diversity, has compiled data of the largest 102 cities in the United States. Greater Together’s analysis shows that not only is Milwaukee the most segregated city in the country, but it also has the highest rate of “residential segregation based on poverty.”<sup>305</sup> Reggie Jackson, head griot at America’s Black Holocaust Museum also studies demographic and housing data in Milwaukee. While black populations in some of Milwaukee’s suburbs such as Brown Deer and Glendale have increased to twenty-nine and fourteen percent, respectively, the number of black Milwaukeeans living in the suburbs remains low. Using data from the 2010 US

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<sup>304</sup> Mendez, Edgar, “Fifty Years after Open Housing Marches, Residential Segregation still Norm in Milwaukee,” *Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service*, June 27, 2017.

<sup>305</sup> Groth, Alex, “Open Housing Marcher says ‘State of the City has Gotten Worse,’” *Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service*, July 17, 2017.

census, Jackson finds that only one percent of the total population in Greendale and Hales Corners are black. As a result of racial segregation, black Milwaukeeans encounter similar problems that Richard O'Reilly found in his 1965 report, such as higher rates of poverty, unemployment, teenage pregnancy, incarceration, and exposure to violent crime and lower educational achievement rates and access to healthcare.<sup>306</sup>

Milwaukee's local power structure is more diverse than it was in the 1960s, but numbers of black Milwaukeeans and other minorities in positions of power are still not representative of their population. Since 1967, there have been 219 city council elections. Black Milwaukeeans have won twenty-three percent of these elections, but black Milwaukeeans make up forty percent of the city's population. Latinx Milwaukeeans have only won 2.7% of city council elections but represent seventeen percent of the city's population. Women have only won 15.5% of city council elections.<sup>307</sup> Black Milwaukeeans still make up a smaller percentage of Milwaukee population's professionals. Using demographic data from 2008-2015, Ashley Luthern and Kevin Crowe calculate that the Milwaukee police force is sixty-six percent white, eighteen percent of the Milwaukee police force is black, and thirteen percent is Latinx. Additionally, Arthur Jones was the only black Milwaukeean to serve as chief of police and Milwaukee has yet to elect a mayor who is not male and white. As witnessed in these contemporary studies, racial disparities in housing, education, economics, and

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<sup>306</sup>Mendez, "Fifty Years after Open Housing Marches, Residential Segregation still Norm in Milwaukee."; Groth, "Open Housing Marcher says 'State of the City has Gotten Worse.'"

<sup>307</sup> These figures are from 2017 and may have been changed in the last three years. Grace, Julie, "Council is more Diverse than in 1967, but City Faces Similar Problems," *Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service*, July 27, 2017.

incarceration rates illustrate that black Milwaukeeans still face many of the same problems today as they did in the 1960s.<sup>308</sup>

Betty Martin, recalling what she thinks of when she crosses the 16<sup>th</sup> street bridge, now known as the James Groppi Unity Bridge, is torn about her feelings regarding the successes the Youth Council achieved. On the one hand, she thinks of the “sacrifices” and the “differences” that activists made going across the bridge.<sup>309</sup> Martin firmly believes that the outcome of open housing was “worth the walk” because technically Milwaukeeans can live where they choose.<sup>310</sup> But on the other, even though she “made it across the bridge, we are facing some of the same problems today as we did just to get across that bridge. It’s like we took fifty steps forward and five hundred back.”<sup>311</sup> Martin’s statements are a reoccurring theme among former members of the Youth Council. Martin, Prentice McKinney, and Earl Bracy want younger generations of black Milwaukeeans to remember the trials and tribulations they experienced in their quest for social justice to provide all people the opportunities they might take for granted today. Additionally, these members of the Youth Council urge young black people to continue the fight for social justice and the end of white supremacy in Milwaukee and beyond.<sup>312</sup>

### **Respectability Politics Lives On**

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<sup>308</sup> Grace, “Council is more Diverse than in 1967, but City Faces Similar Problems”; Luthern, Ashley and Kevin Crowe, “MPD Struggles to Increase Diversity in Ranks,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, March 31, 2017.

<sup>309</sup> Martin, Betty. Interviewed by Joanne Williams, Spring 2011.

<sup>310</sup> Martin, Betty. Interviewed by Joanne Williams, Spring 2011.

<sup>311</sup> Martin, Betty. Interviewed by Joanne Williams, Spring 2011.

<sup>312</sup> Martin, Betty. Interviewed by Joanne Williams, Spring 2011; McKinney, Prentice. Interviewed by Everett Marshburn, Spring 2011; Earl Bracy. Interviewed by Alex Groth, July 17, 2017, <https://www.milwaukeeens.org/open-housing/open-housing-marcher-says-state-of-the-city-has-gotten-worse.php>.

The espousal of respectability politics is still as prevalent and powerful in the twenty-first century as it was in the 1960s. The Milwaukee NAACP still champions issues couched in respectability politics. As of 2020, the NAACP states its top five core issues as education, open housing, employment, health, and criminal justice and police reform. Two recent initiatives undertaken by the current President of the MNAACP Fred Royal are to improve the educational system in Milwaukee to decrease the “school to prison pipeline” and to support a bill that would restore felons’ right to vote after they have completed their sentence. The issues of education and increased black Milwaukeean voting mirror the same issues the MNAACP were championing in the 1960s. Furthermore, the MNAACP is failing to attract youth to the organization and have lost appeal to younger organizations such as Black Lives Matter. As of March 2018, Royal says that of the branch’s 800 members, only seven members under the age of twenty-five are actively involved in the organization. Royal says the organization is committed to attracting more millennials and the organization will remain a pillar in the Milwaukee community.<sup>313</sup>

The presence of respectability politics in Milwaukee can also be witnessed through Lena Taylor’s 2020 Milwaukee mayoral campaign. Taylor is a democratic state senator who has represented Wisconsin’s 4<sup>th</sup> district since 2003. In her mayoral campaign, Taylor is running a platform based on creating and promoting more equity, inclusion, and diversity. In her speech announcing her mayoral bid, Taylor prioritized the

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<sup>313</sup> Fred Royal, “NAACP Milwaukee’s Collective Core Issues 2020,” January 17, 2020, <https://naacpmke.org/?p=1410>; James Causey, “Name of the NAACP is not on the Building on N. King Drive, but People Know it’s There,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, March 23, 2018; Talis Shelbourne, “Unlock the Vote Campaign Seeks to Restore Ex-offenders’ Voting Rights,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, September 5, 2019.

role of increased funding for education in the city. Taylor argues that when the city invests in schools, “you sow in your children and you sow in youth. When you sow in youth, you get me.” Taylor’s emphasis on education as a path forward is imbued with the tenets of respectability politics. Additionally, Taylor’s dress and appearance (white business jacket and skirt, pearl necklace) is indicative of respectability politics based on social expectations of what a middle-class female politician would dress like. Her comments of promoting education that will produce people like herself illustrate several aspects of respectability politics. Taylor’s image promotes the ideal look and dress that connects to mainstream middle-class standards. Additionally, her image unintentionally creates a divide between middle-class and working-class. Furthermore, her image illustrates a sense of gendered gatekeeping by projecting what black women should strive to look like. Both Taylor and Fred Royal are champions of social justice for all Milwaukeeans. However, they embody aspects of respectability politics which need to be examined to create a successful and inclusive activists’ community in Milwaukee.<sup>314</sup>

Respectability politics has gained new traction within the scholarly community in the post-Obama era and due to the rise of Black Lives Matter protests. Milwaukee’s limited success in using tenets of respectability to make social justice gains suggest that it is important for activists to have a conversation about the tensions respectability politics can create within black communities. As illustrated in Milwaukee during the 1960s, respectability politics can create tensions along the lines of class, gender, education, native versus nonnative Milwaukeeans, and serve as a form of gendered gatekeeping. Furthermore, Tehama Bunyasi and Cadis Smith have explored the connections between

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<sup>314</sup> Marti Mikkelson, “State Sen. Lena Taylor Announces Bid For Milwaukee Mayor,” *Wisconsin Public Radio News*, September 4, 2019.

respectability politics and the hindrance of support for black Americans who face an intersecting system of oppression. They argue that respectability politics in contemporary society causes a series of negative consequences. Most importantly, they argue that the adherence to respectability politics reveals that black Americans will limit or not support marginalized black groups, leading to a form of “secondary marginalization.”<sup>315</sup> The question among black activists pursuing social justice remains: is respectability politics a viable tactic? Ibram Kendi and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argue that in our current society, white Americans have the tendency to see minority populations as a monolith or that an individual black American is representative of the entire black population.<sup>316</sup> Due to this fact, is respectability politics a tactic black Americans should use? Kendi would say no. He argues that although in the past he has believed that respectable black behavior could make white Americans “less racist,” his experiences have told him otherwise.<sup>317</sup> Kendi argues that if people believe that poor behavior from black Americans is responsible for white Americans’ racism, it validates white racism against black Americans’ conduct. Kendi ends his discussion of respectability politics (or what he calls uplift suasion) with this powerful statement, “I represent only myself. If the judge draws conclusions about millions of Black people based on how I act, then they not I, not Black people, have a problem.”<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Bunyasi and Smith, “Do All Black Lives Matter Equally to Black People?” 184.

<sup>316</sup> Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist*, 204; Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 179.

<sup>317</sup> Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist*, 204.

<sup>318</sup> Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist*, 205.

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