

## CONCLUSION

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### Motown Is Burning, Jesus Is Black, and the Struggle Continues

Motown, if you don't come around, we're gonna burn you down.

—Stokely Carmichael, Detroit, 1966

Neither the work of community organizations such as the WCO nor that of established civil rights organizations, from the NAACP and the Detroit Urban League to the Group on Advanced Leadership, nor the resources channeled into Detroit's War (some called it a skirmish) on Poverty was enough to prevent the outbreak of urban rebellion in the city. Several years after the uprisings in Watts and Harlem, and just weeks after one in Newark, Detroit was rocked by four days of fires, shooting (much of it done by the police and the National Guard), and looting. The rebellion left 43 dead and another 347 were injured. Over 7,000 people, the majority of them Black, had been arrested, and nearly 1,300 buildings lay in ruins. Detroit would never be the same.<sup>1</sup> Before the rebellion, city officials and some civil rights spokespersons were still clinging to the image of Detroit as a "model city." But image and reality were in obvious conflict.

Years later Mel Ravitz, who by 1967 had served six years on the Common Council and would go on to serve many more, opined that the city administration's problems began after the 1965 elections at the beginning of Cavanagh's second term. The incumbent faced raging debates

over education, housing, and police-community relations, as well as heated disagreements with the council on budgetary issues. In the wake of the rebellion, Ravitz recalled, Cavanagh seemed “unable to comprehend what had happened. . . . I think he had begun to believe that some of the things that were being said about Detroit being a model city in regard to race relation were true. I think the riot stunned him and I don’t think that he ever recovered thereafter.”<sup>2</sup> Cavanagh’s perplexity and paralysis can be seen as a metonym for the reaction of some segments of the liberal-labor coalition in general, and they were certainly characteristic of the reactions of many city leaders, who had never looked behind the thin veneer of progress.

The late 1960s found Detroit’s economy in the midst of one of its longest boom cycles to date. Opportunities for Black industrial employment had been increasing steadily since 1963. Yet the unemployment rate for inner-city Black adults was stuck at 11 percent, more than triple the average for workers in the Detroit metropolitan region. Almost half of all Black public school students were dropping out before graduation, and unemployment among those twenty-five and under ranged from 30 to 40 percent. Even those who completed their high school education could expect to earn an average of sixteen hundred dollars less than their white counterparts. The economic inequality had a severe impact, with one of every three Black families living below the federal poverty line of three thousand dollars annual income. Detroit’s War on Poverty was one of the largest local efforts in the nation, but of the 360,000 residents living in poverty only 70,000 were receiving direct aid.<sup>3</sup> The rebellion brought the connections between race and poverty into stark clarity. On the one hand, it spurred a mad scramble for more funding from public, private, and especially religious sources and for more community organizing around the concept of self-determination. On the other hand, it fueled efforts to combat racial and economic exploitation at the point of production in the Detroit area plants.

Attendance at Central Congregational/Shrine of the Black Madonna skyrocketed after the rebellion, and Reverend Cleage soon became “the titular head of the 700,000-member Detroit Black community.”<sup>4</sup> Reverend Cleage had already launched an early version of his Black Christian nationalism movement by unveiling a large painting of the Black Madonna and child on Easter Sunday 1967. In this striking painting, which is eighteen feet high by nine feet wide, an imposing and very dark woman in a white headdress or veil and a white robe with a blue shawl cradles an equally dark infant swaddled in saffron cloth. The pair is posed before a blue sky standing defiantly on gray and rocky ground

with a town barely visible along the horizon. The portrait hangs in the church's chancel, above the altar, covering an original stained-glass window (from the old days of Brewster-Pilgrim Congregational) depicting Governor Bradford landing at Plymouth Rock.<sup>5</sup>

According to the artist, Glanton Dowdell, the portrait was meant to symbolize the connections between the Madonna and "any Negro mother, an ADC mother whose child goes wrong, anyone."<sup>6</sup> The model for the Madonna is said to have been a young woman, Rose Walden, who lived in the neighborhood around the shrine. Because the infant is nestled against his mother, his face is not visible, but given Dowdell's troubled history, it is possible that he saw himself in the image of the Black Christ-child.<sup>7</sup> A native of Detroit, in 1949 Dowdell had been sentenced to a thirty- to forty-year sentence in the Jackson (Michigan) State Prison for second-degree murder. While in prison he honed his artistic ability and even assembled a one-man show of his "prison scenes" in Detroit before being paroled in 1962. He later became active in the Revolutionary Action Movement—a group that advocated armed self-defense and sponsored "gun clubs"—and worked in and around the developing radical Black Left. He also operated a small art gallery, which was destroyed during the rebellion, and helped to organize the 1966 Detroit Black Arts Conference. Dowdell was particularly close to General Baker, who helped him with the painting of the Black Madonna and Child.

Shortly after it was finished, Dowdell and Baker were convicted on concealed weapons charges.<sup>8</sup> Before Reverend Cleage began his sermon marking the occasion of the unveiling, he offered a prayer for Baker and Dowdell, "the artists of the Black Madonna," who were to be sentenced the next day in Recorder's Court. "No justice could be served by sending these men to jail," Cleage intoned; their predicament was merely "part of being Black in a white man's world." Cleage then wondered whether, instead of a sermon, the congregation would not be better served by simply sitting and admiring the new chancel painting, "marveling that we have come so far that we can conceive of the Son of God being born of a black woman."

"Now we have come to the place," he continued,

where we not only can conceive of the possibility, but we are convinced, upon the basis of our knowledge and historic study of all the facts that Jesus was born to a black Mary, that Jesus, the Messiah, was a black man who came to save a black nation. It would have little significance if we unveiled a black Madonna and it had no more



**Photograph of the Black Madonna and Child, Shrine (number 1) of the Black Madonna of the African Orthodox Christian Church, Detroit, Michigan. (Photograph by the author.)**

meaning than just another picture in a church. Our unveiling of the Black Madonna is a statement of faith.<sup>9</sup>

Hoping to produce a cultural, political, and religious “awakening” of Black peoples, the painting harmonized with Cleage’s theology of a Black revolutionary Christ dedicated to the salvation of a Black nation.

Cleage’s view on the subject of the Blackness of Christ and the Holy Family was intensely controversial, primarily because his interpretation was so literal and genealogical. “When I say Jesus was black, that Jesus was the black Messiah,” he explained, “I’m not saying ‘Wouldn’t it be nice if Jesus was black?’ or ‘Let’s pretend that Jesus was black’ or ‘It’s necessary

psychologically for us to believe that Jesus was black.' I'm saying that Jesus WAS black."<sup>10</sup> Adopting a position not unlike that advanced by the white Christian Marxist Claude C. Williams, Cleage claimed that the Apostle Paul had confused the revolutionary message of Christianity with obscure supernaturalism in his efforts to "integrate" Christianity into the world beyond. The belief that Jesus was white, along with the idea that a highly spiritualized Christ was resurrected from the dead, was for Cleage at best a mystification and at worst a lie.<sup>11</sup>

Like Williams, in 1964 Cleage was put on ecclesiastical "trial" for his theological innovations. Undeterred by the Metropolitan Detroit Association of Congregational Churches or any other "church hierarchy," Cleage continued to trace the implications of his views, insisting that the original disciples were not primarily concerned with the bodily resurrection of Jesus but with the collective resurrection and salvation of the Black nation. Hence, he argued that Blacks—whether Christian, Muslim, or atheist—needed to get back to the original, and more authentic, message.<sup>12</sup>

In elaborating a Black Christian nationalism on the existence of an actual, flesh and blood, Black Messiah, Cleage was not working with a blank canvas. He drew, for example, on the legacy of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA's African Orthodox Church, which had also promoted the idea of a Black Christ. After 1924, Garveyites and members of the church had declared Jesus "the Black Man of Sorrow" and his mother "the Black Madonna." "Let us start our Negro painters getting busy," had proclaimed Archbishop George Alexander McGuire, "and supply a black Madonna and a black Christ for the training of our children." The vision of a Black Christ as one of the Prophets of Allah also featured in the theology of the Nation of Islam. While the NOI certainly taught that Christianity was a white man's religion, and while it denied that Jesus was the divine son of God and part of the Holy Trinity, Christ was nonetheless claimed as a prophet and a Black man. "Christ wasn't white," Malcolm X said in a 1963 interview in *Playboy*. "Christ was a black man." This view was also adopted by Cassius Clay when he converted to the NOI and took the name Muhammad Ali. Ali accepted as an article of his faith the idea that Christ was not white and that if Jesus had lived in Kentucky he "would be cooped up in the 'Jim Crow' cars."<sup>13</sup>

Cleage may also have drawn on a number of artistic sources for his belief in the Blackness of Jesus. Visual depictions of Jesus and Mary (and less often Joseph) as Black were not uncommon during and after the Harlem Renaissance. In Lawrence Jacobs's *Catholic New Orleans* (1941), an image of a Black Christ is included among the other icons in the reli-

gious store where a Black woman is shopping; while in William Johnson's *Jesus and Three Marys* (1939), a Black Jesus hangs on a large white cross, surrounded by three Black, horror-stricken Marys. These same four figures, accompanied by the two thieves who were crucified with Jesus on Calvary, also appear in Johnson's 1939 work, *Lamentations*.<sup>14</sup>

The poets Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes also contributed to the tradition. In poems such as "Christ Recrucified" (1922), and especially the dense and plodding epic "The Black Christ" (1929), Cullen explores the thorny question of theodicy and Black suffering, depicting a world in which "Christ's awful wrong is that he's dark of hue." Similarly, in Hughes's "Christ in Alabama," written as part of his *Scottsboro Limited* (1932) collection, the poet creates a Black and southern Jesus crucified/lynched.

*Christ is a nigger,  
Beaten and black:  
On, bare your back.*

*Mary is His mother:  
Mammy of the South,  
Silence your Mouth.*

*God's His Father—  
White Master above,  
Grant us your love.*

*Most holy bastard  
Of the bleeding mouth:  
Nigger Christ  
On the cross of the South.*

"Christ in Alabama" was composed at around the same time that Hughes said, in another poetic work, "Goodbye, Christ" to the "white man's" Jesus of hypocrisy, racism, and materialism.<sup>15</sup>

The effort to "blacken" Christ as a way of representing Black suffering and the search for justice was not limited to African Americans. In 1961, Black South African artist Ronald Harrison painted a Black Christ, who resembled anti-apartheid activist and African National Congress leader Albert Luthuli, being crucified by officials of the white South African government. The painting hung briefly in St. Luke's Anglican Church in Salt River before it was banned by the government and subsequently smuggled out of the country. (In 2004, the recently

discovered painting was returned to the country and prominently displayed on the walls of St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town.)<sup>16</sup> And in 1964 the people of Cardiff, Wales (perhaps inspired by Paul Robeson's participation in a demonstration of striking Welsh miners in London in the late 1920s and by his subsequent visits to Wales),<sup>17</sup> donated the "Wales Window for Alabama" to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church one year after the bombing that murdered four Black girls and damaged the church's original stained glass. The Cardiff window, designed by stained-glass artist John Petts, features a Black Christ with head bowed, one hand outstretched in protest, the other extended in a sacrificial posture. Etched around the feet of Jesus are the words "You do it to me" in reference to Matthew 25:40: "And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'"<sup>18</sup>

Given all of these prior depictions of a Black Christ, one wonders why Cleage's theology and the painting at his shrine caused such a stir. The shrine's Black Madonna was not the only Black religious icon created in Detroit during those postriot days. Immediately after the rebellion subsided, a minor war broke out over the coloring of the statue of Jesus outside the Sacred Heart Seminary on West Chicago Boulevard and Linwood. It was painted black and then repainted white within a span of a few days, after which a group of seminary students painted it black again. Across town at St. Cecilia's Roman Catholic Church, in 1969, a dome painting, "Black Christ," by local artist DeVon Cunningham, was unveiled. The work depicts an obviously Black Jesus surrounded by a multicultural cadre of angels. It was subsequently featured on the cover of *Ebony* magazine, accompanying an article entitled "The Quest for a Black Christ." The parish's Lebanese American priest, Fr. Raymond Ellis, explained that he and his congregants wanted to "affirm that Christ today *is also black*" as opposed to Cleage's insistence on the actual, literal, and historical Blackness of Jesus.<sup>19</sup>

The distinction is an important one. Cleage believed that "Black people cannot build dignity on their knees worshipping a white Christ."<sup>20</sup> A Black theology imagined as the religious arm of Black power demanded something more. For Cleage and BCN, the Black Christian nation had both religious and secular manifestations to the extent that the two could be separated. Synthesizing theology and Black power politics, in 1966, Cleage, along with Rennie Freeman, Ken Cockrel, Grace Lee and James Boggs, and others, organized the Inner-City Organizing Committee (ICOC), a local organization dedicated to improving the living conditions of inner-city residents, protecting their rights and inter-

ests, and increasing the Black population's consciousness of its history through cultural activities. The group also sought to develop a program for the complete and humane reorganization of urban life, including housing, education, transportation, industry, welfare, health, recreation, justice, and government, in accordance with modern social and technological developments.<sup>21</sup> In short, it was yet another attempt by the Boggesses to bring the revolution to Detroit.

In that same year, Cleage and Freeman also joined the Board of Directors of the Interfaith Foundation for Community Organizing. The IFCO described itself as "a unique coalition of Roman Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, Black and Methodist organizations" dedicated to "helping disadvantaged people to help themselves." Both the ICOC and IFCO were designed to take advantage of the millions of dollars being distributed to grassroots activists while maintaining community control of the programs those dollars supported.<sup>22</sup>

"We'll accept white money," Cleage remarked, "but not white leadership and dictation."<sup>23</sup> Insisting on self-determination for the poor, Reverend Cleage and others argued that past attempts to achieve residents' "maximum feasible participation" in antipoverty efforts had failed, chiefly because they failed to appreciate the distinction between Black participation and Black control or Black direction. With funding from organizations that were willing to abide by this position, such as the IFCO, Cleage transformed his church into a base of political, economic, religious, and cultural ferment. Of course, these ideas were not peculiar to Cleage or the political landscape of Detroit: the demands for community control and a political role for the Black church were part of larger national and historical trends.

In the late 1960s, Black religious scholars from different denominations and parts of the country began codifying a systematic Black theology. The writings of scholars such as James H. Cone, Gayraud Wilmore, Nathan Wright Jr., and Vincent Harding represented a concerted effort to separate African American Christianity from the theology of mainline white churches and seminaries.<sup>24</sup> Although Cleage was not a practicing theologian in the academic sense, he was a charter member of the National Committee of Black Churchmen—an interdenominational organization whose membership rolls included many of the new Black theologians. Cleage participated in the committee's first public theological discussions, which in essence launched Black theology as a religious and political movement.<sup>25</sup> The new movement shared a number of key features with liberation theology, which was growing out of the Latin American political and social struggles going on at the time. Like libera-



tion theology, Black theology placed theology, religious practice, and the institutional resources of the church at the disposal of the oppressed.<sup>26</sup>

Cleage saw this as a very serious and practical enterprise that was aligned with other, more secular articulations of Black power—especially Charles V. Hamilton and Stokely Carmichael’s 1967 volume *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. Cleage’s quest for a revolutionary transformation of institutions and practices eventually motivated his defection from the National Committee of Black Churchmen, which he later denounced as a Black version of scholasticism “written for a white audience.”<sup>27</sup>

Cleage’s devotion to working with Black communities and organizations, along with his post-1965 aversion to electoral politics, explains the dizzying array of local and national organizations with which he collaborated after the 1967 rebellion. In addition to IFCO and the ICOC, he was a founder and cochairman with Glanton Dowdell of the City-Wide Citizens Action Committee. The committee was founded in August 1967 and immediately proclaimed itself the “New Black Establishment,” committed to uniting the city’s nationalists in an effort to “control everything.” The funding it received from the Interfaith Emergency Council (nineteen thousand dollars) and IFCO (eighty-five thousand dollars) was used to establish the Black Star Coop and other community-based ventures. Horrified by the committee’s nationalist bent, a group of Black liberals and moderates founded a rival group, the Detroit Council of Organizations, headed by the Rev. Roy Allen, which included the NAACP, the Cotillion Club, and the TULC among its members.<sup>28</sup>

In an effort to unify the two contingents, Cleage founded yet another organization, the Federation for Self-Determination, as a broad “popular front” uniting radicals and nationalists with moderates and liberals. He used his new column in the *Michigan Chronicle*—itself a sign of his newfound prominence—to issue repeated calls for unity.<sup>29</sup> Although Cleage’s efforts produced some overlap in the two groups’ membership, the Detroit Council of Organizations refused to be “united” out of existence. Toward the end of 1967 both the federation and the council sought comprehensive funding from the New Detroit Committee. This committee, whose purpose was to oversee efforts to repair the damage done by the rebellion, included Henry Ford II, Max Fisher, J. L. Hudson, and other powerful citizens, along with three Black militants—Rennie Freeman, Alvin Harrison, and Norvell Harrington of the ICOC—and six other, more moderate African Americans.<sup>30</sup>

Confronted with competing proposals from mutually hostile organi-

zations, both of which claimed the exclusive right to speak for Black Detroiters, the New Detroit Committee granted each group one hundred thousand dollars for a one-year period. There were a number of conditions and strings attached. But Cleage was unwilling to compromise. In January 1968, the Federation for Self-Determination returned its share of the money and severed relations with New Detroit. Black members Rennie Freeman and Norvell Harrington resigned from the New Detroit Committee in protest. "As the news of the Federation's action spread," Cleage wrote in his column, "congratulations began to pour in from Chicago, New York, California and across the country. Everywhere black brothers and sisters were glad that a black organization had finally expressed in concrete terms of the meaning of the black revolution without the confusion of a hot summer night."<sup>31</sup> Looking past the author's exaggerations, the New Detroit affair led activists in Detroit and Black communities across the country to raise important questions about self-determination and community control.

While admirable in principle, the federation's decision left local nationalists with practical questions about how the revolution would be funded. Their search for practical solutions led to the publication of *The Black Manifesto*, a document delivered from the pulpit of the Riverside Church by James Forman, the international affairs director of SNCC, on May 1, 1969, demanding 500 million dollars ("\$15 per nigger") from white Christian churches and Jewish synagogues. Since these religious bodies were "part and parcel of the system of capitalism," the payments were to be penance for their complicity in oppression, racism, and colonialism.<sup>32</sup> The *Manifesto* laid out ten major areas into which the money would be funneled, including a southern land bank; four major publishing and printing centers in Detroit, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and New York; a National Black Labor Strike and Defense Fund; and an educational and fund-raising body, the International Black Appeal.

Although Forman and his coauthors targeted white churches and synagogues, they were cognizant of walking a fine line religiously. Complicity with the *Manifesto's* demands was characterized as the "true test of their faith and belief in the Cross and the words of the prophets." But the authors were far more forgiving when it came to Black Christians, insisting that "we do not intend to abuse our black brothers and sisters in black churches who have uncritically accepted Christianity."

We want them to understand how the racist white Christian church with its hypocritical declarations and doctrines of brotherhood has abused our trust and faith. An attack on the religious beliefs of black

people is not our major objective, even though we know that we were not Christians when we were brought to this country, but that Christianity was used to help enslave us.

For Black Christians such as the Rev. Charles A. Hill, who had devoted a lifetime to Christian principles, striving to realize the brotherhood of all mankind, the *Manifesto* was an assault on their most fundamental beliefs. But the *Black Manifesto*, perhaps more than any other artifact of those troubled and heady times, demonstrates how far local activists had moved from the ethic of interracial unity, King's "beloved community," and the political theology of the social gospel. The generational chasm—symbolized to some degree by the political and theological differences between Hill and Cleage—would never really be closed, and the Black church's role in local and national politics would never be quite the same.

For all of its faults, the *Manifesto* was a remarkable document. Uniting a critique of organized religion with a call for economic self-determination, it was drafted in Detroit during the 1968 National Black Economic Development Conference. The conference, organized in part with IFCO funds, was held at Wayne State University on April 25–27 of that year and was attended by over six hundred delegates from organizations across the country. The conference situated local activists within a larger national trend, but the fact that it took place in Detroit was not without significance. The body heard from James Boggs and Milton Henry, who, along with his brother Richard, had just organized the separatist Republic of New Africa. In several resolutions, many proposed by local activists, conference participants rejected the definition of Black power as Black capitalism and minority entrepreneurship and emphasized the importance of landownership and control of ghetto institutions, especially schools.

Many of the resolutions reflected the Marxist position on Black nationalism being developed by James and Grace Lee Boggs, Ken Cockrel, General Baker, John Watson, James Forman, and others. While there is some question about whether the *Manifesto* was directly influenced by Cleage, it is known that Watson, Cockrel, Luke Tripp, and Mike Hamlin—all of whom were nominated to the Steering Committee assigned to implement the *Manifesto's* programs—assisted Forman in drafting the document.<sup>33</sup> The reaction of most white churches and nearly all of the synagogues that weighed in was negative if not out-and-out hostile. But this, too, was indicative of changes in the local movement culture. White churches and clergymen were no longer seen as valuable allies. Instead,

they had become mere funding sources. Blacks and whites alike were growing deaf to calls for interracial brotherhood.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, younger activists, who were more inclined to think in Marxist terms, turned toward the factory as the prime site for organizing Black power. Organizers were welcome at the Shrine of the Black Madonna, but many of them felt that Cleage's approach did not go far enough. Many of these younger radicals came to understand religion (particularly Black theology) as just one of many cultural—and I would say ethical—dimensions in their evolving philosophy. Those who had belonged to groups such as UHURU and the WCO felt that what was now needed was a Marxist-Leninist movement linking the community, churches, and the shop floor.

In particular they seemed to feel that the strictures of the Alinsky model had led them to ignore the unions for too long. "I think that in order to have been effective in Detroit in the late '60s," observed Sheila Murphy Cockrel, "organizations like WCO would have had to take on organized labor, given the nature of racism in the unions."<sup>35</sup> There was also a sense that older Black unionists, from A. Philip Randolph down to Horace Sheffield and the TULC, had "sold out": no longer part of the solution, they were now viewed as part of the problem. Having gotten valuable training in groups such as the WCO, younger activists were moving in a different direction. "At that time SNCC was moving towards Black Power," recalled Mike Hamlin. "White radicals were moving toward mysticism and saying that the working class was too corrupt, could not be organized, wasn't a revolutionary force. Part of our effort was to prove that wasn't true."<sup>36</sup> But the fact that activists could no longer rely on the labor movement—and had in fact become antagonistic toward it—is surely one of the biggest changes from the 1930s to the 1960s.

Nearly a year before the rebellion, Mike Hamlin, General Baker, and John Watson started their own independent newspaper, the *Inner-City Voice*. This paper, and later Wayne State's student newspaper, *The South End* (which had been "liberated" by John Watson), served as forums for the new ideological debate; the first issue of the *Inner-City Voice* included writings by Ché Guevara, even though he was "white." The paper was also, like the *Illustrated News* had been years before, a vehicle for propaganda and organizing. Several members of the *Voice* group worked in the Dodge Main plant and decided to use the shop floor as their point of entry into the class struggle. "We took the paper, which called for revolution, out to the plants," explained Hamlin, "and distributed it and were prepared to fight to the end with any worker, Black or white, or anybody else who tried to stop us from distributing it." At the same time,

their offices became a gathering place, attracting nationalists with “nothing else to do,” students, and others “just off the streets,” what James Boggs called “the street force.”<sup>37</sup>

This loosely organized vanguard led a series of wildcat strikes in the spring of 1968 that spread throughout other city plants. The strike led to the formation of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, of similar Revolutionary Union Movements in other plants, and in 1969 to the emergence of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. For many, the wildcat strikes called to mind the sit-downs in the 1930s with the addition of bongo drums and other forms of Black cultural expression. Edward Lee, a worker at Dodge Main and the brother of Grace Lee Boggs, described the scene he observed from a factory window as someone on the street began to beat a bongo drum and was joined by another “until a line of perhaps twenty bongo players rent the air with the curious, alien and slightly frightening noise.”

On the streets a group of young blacks began to dance. Dressed in Afro robes, they complement the drums and draw the interest of the bystanders. Some of the workers at the windows mutter “Obscene savages” but there are also some who watch intently, apparently studying the action. Old photographs and antidotes of the sitdown strikes of 1937 come to my mind. The spontaneity and fellowship of those days seem related to what is taking place. . . . It seems to me that here, as in the sitdowns of a generation ago, there is a superb job of organization and leadership.<sup>38</sup>

There seems to have been a general feeling that the strikes, familiar as they may have seemed to some older activists, were at the same time something new and different. Still, with the establishment of DRUM and the league, the patterns of political radicalism in Detroit did in a sense come full circle—back to labor if not to the organized labor movement. Many of the trends seen in Detroit’s political radicalism from the early 1960s onward now coalesced in the league. League members attempted to create an almost entirely comprehensive revolutionary political and cultural center, and before the group broke apart in the early 1970s, wrenched by internal and external pressures, it was well on its way to establishing a multilevel strategy for revolution that, like the initiatives outlined in the *Black Manifesto*, connected labor, education, the media, and the political process.

The multifaceted network that the league managed to establish during its short life span included a publishing company, a bookstore, a film

production unit, and a well-funded nonprofit organization.<sup>39</sup> Afraid that the romantic appeal of the California-based Black Panther Party, which they considered to be politically uninformed, would challenge the league's preeminence, Luke Tripp and John Watson preemptively organized a Detroit chapter of the Panthers and attempted to induce its members to join their own "street force."<sup>40</sup> They also worked with young people, supporting school walkouts, protests, and efforts to create independent "freedom schools." Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, they maintained their relationship with Reverend Cleage's Black Christian nationalism and the various efforts stimulated by the publication of *The Black Manifesto*. League members also kept in personal and ideological contact with Grace Lee and James Boggs and the Socialist Workers Party (particularly in opposition to the Vietnam War), as well as with the Henry brothers.

The antiwar effort was led, in part, by the ICOC, which worked with the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based RESIST to assist young Black men in either avoiding or resisting the draft. Along with groups such as the Detroit chapter of the Northern Student Movement and People against Racism, the league also engaged in antiwar demonstrations and educational programs. Detroit once again found itself in the vanguard of political radicalism.

The league was eventually destroyed, to some extent, by its own success. The process was emblematic of the overall decline in the fortunes of the city's second civil rights community. Having spread itself thin, organizationally and ideologically, the league, like so many groups before it, dissolved into a loose army of factions whose differences proved irreconcilable.<sup>41</sup> Like the rest of the civil rights community, the league also attracted a formidable array of hostile adversaries. The old liberal-labor coalition was never very accepting of what it characterized as a group of young, communistic upstarts, and the UAW hierarchy more or less closed ranks against it.

Historian Heather Thompson recounts a story that exemplifies the terrible relationship between the league and the UAW. In August of 1973 a wildcat strike broke out at Chrysler's Mack Avenue stamping plant in Detroit. Although the action was not actually led by the league, the group was blamed for the strike by the enraged UAW hierarchy. When negotiations to end the walkout broke down, the UAW International decided to take matters into its own hands. Union officials from across the city were contacted to assist in ending the strike. "The next morning, at 4:30 a.m., one thousand union officials met at the Local 212 union hall and began to map out their strategy for ending the wildcat,"

Thompson writes, "With baseball bats, pipes, and an assortment of other weapons in hand . . . the assembled union officials marched in groups of 250 to each of the four Mack gates and began to attack picketing workers." By early morning the UAW had violently and successfully ended the action, which not coincidentally proved to be the last of its kind. The best that can be said of this shocking turn of events is that the attackers were an interracial group—an unforeseen spin on the old labor slogan "Black and White, Unite and Fight."<sup>42</sup>

Many white rank-and-file workers—particularly those who cast their lot with George Wallace's racist 1968 presidential campaign—greeted the upsurge in Black labor radicalism with fear, suspicion, and at times open hostility.<sup>43</sup> Adding insult to injury, the league, along with other Black radical groups in Detroit and across the nation, was subjected to investigations by COINTELPRO, the FBI's notorious counterintelligence program, which had already targeted organizations such as the Communist Party and the Socialist Workers Party.

COINTELPRO's policy with regard to Black nationalist groups, which the bureau labeled "Black Hate" organizations, was to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize . . . their leadership, spokesmen, membership, and supporters" in order to prevent the groups from developing coalitions and establishing a level of respectability.<sup>44</sup> Its efforts and the white backlash against Black radicalism were at least as instrumental in the destruction of the league and its fellow radical groups of the late 1960s and early 1970s as HUAC and anticommunist hysteria had been in the destruction of Detroit's earlier civil rights community. As one activist put it: "There were political forces opposed to us and they knew what they were for and against. They prevailed, and we didn't."<sup>45</sup> Still, the federal government's efforts to hinder individual and organizational action on behalf of civil rights, social justice, and African American liberation were matched blow for blow by the activists' own efforts to transform society.

Many of the groups active in the late 1960s did not weather these internal and external pressures. With a few exceptions—notably the Shrine of the Black Madonna—the vast majority of organizations from the later civil rights community have long since dissolved. The league carried all of its ancillary groups, including the International Black Appeal, with it to the grave; the ICOC ceased operations, as did the Boggsses' various groups, including the Organization of Black Power. And the Henry brothers' Republic of New Africa was killed in a rain of bullets through the windows and doors of C. L. Franklin's New Bethel Baptist Church. On March 29, 1968, shortly before midnight, police

raided the church, where a Republic of New Africa meeting of 250 adults and children was just breaking up. The reasons for the use of deadly force remain unclear, but the police's aggressive action resulted in major damage to the church, the death of 1 officer, and the wounding of 3 of the meeting's participants. Mass arrests immediately followed, with a total of 142 men, women, and children dragged to Detroit's downtown jail—an action that prompted George Crockett, by then a Recorder's Court judge, to hold an all-night marathon of bond hearings.

The speed with which Crockett moved to allow the defendants to post bond did not endear him to the police or the city's angry reactionaries. He nevertheless survived subsequent attempts to unseat him and indeed went on, in 1980 (at age seventy-one), to win the congressional seat vacated by Charles C. Diggs Jr.

The New Bethel incident was just one of a string of violent confrontations with overzealous police. The New Bethel defendants were tried in two separate trials, with Ken Cockrel serving as the lead defense counsel. His belligerent yet brilliant defense led to acquittals in both cases. The city's Black radicals declared a major victory, but the Republic of New Africa never really recovered.<sup>46</sup>

Detroit's civil rights community was always more than the sum of its component organizations and institutions, however. Many of its members entered the city's administration, especially after the 1973 election of Mayor Coleman A. Young, who remained in the office until 1992; others managed to achieve positions within the UAW hierarchy or continued to work in radical and grassroots associations. Grace Boggs, a loyal Detroitier and committed activist, still lives in the city and runs the Boggs Center, a progressive nonprofit organization dedicated to nurturing community leadership, especially among young people. The SWP's ranks have been greatly diminished over the years thanks to a series of internal purges, but Solidarity, an organization founded in part by ex-SWP members, still supports rank-and-file labor activism in the city. As both role models and contemporary activists, its members serve as a living legacy for future generations.

The churches are also still there, still struggling to meet the needs of their congregants and the city's residents. Hartford Avenue (now Memorial) Baptist has gone from humble beginnings in 1920, as a thirty-five-member congregation on the city's old west side, to a massive church in terms of both membership and its stately stone structure on the city's northwest side. The Rev. Charles G. Adams, who has pastored the congregation since Hill's retirement in April 1968 at age seventy-five, has managed in many ways to combine the legacies of Reverends Hill and



Cleage. Hartford currently runs the AGAPE House, which offers medical and legal referrals, clothing, a daily senior citizens program, a hunger task force, and the REACH program for AIDS awareness, among its other efforts. While maintaining an array of outreach programs for young people and families, the Hartford Economic Development Foundation has also worked with national chains such as Kmart and Home Depot to help spark the much-needed return of investment to the city. "The church needs to concentrate on the business of creating economic institutions," suggests Adams, who has just entered his fifty-first year in the ministry. Given the problem of corporate downsizing and plant closures, Reverend Adams continues, the Black church "finds itself in a situation where it is the best continuing, organized entity in the black community for the acquisition and redevelopment of land, the building of business enterprises and the employment of people."<sup>47</sup>

Plymouth Congregational (now UCC), too, remains true to the activist heritage of the Rev. Horace White and his successor, the Rev. Nicholas Hood Sr. The church has been pastored by the Rev. Nicholas Hood Jr. since his father's retirement in 1985. Like his father, Reverend Hood Jr. has also served on the Common Council and currently oversees the creation of the Medical Center Court Apartments, renamed in honor of Reverend Hood Sr., as well as the newer Medical Center Village Apartments and the Housing Ministry at Plymouth. The church also continues to deliver services to developmentally disabled and mentally retarded adults through the Cyprian Center (named in honor of Hood's daughter, Sarah Cyprian Hood) and a variety of assisted-living and independent-living residences. Reverend Hood Jr. also founded the Plymouth Education Center, the first charter school in Michigan to build a new building (at a cost of twelve million dollars) from the ground up. The school currently has an enrollment of more than eight hundred students.<sup>48</sup>

Fr. Canon Malcolm Dade remained active in the church and the community even after his 1972 retirement from St. Cyprian's, right up until his death in 1991. Much like Reverend Hill, Father Dade never lost faith in the possibilities of an enlightened liberalism. He helped to establish new churches in predominately African American communities in Inkster (St. Clement's) and Ecorse (Church of the Resurrection) and was also the founder and first president of the Michigan Chapter of the Union of Black Episcopalians. In 1961, Father Dade was appointed the first Black honorary canon of the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in Detroit. He served by appointment on various City Commissions under five different mayoral administrations from 1942 to 1976. Unlike many

old west-side churches, St. Cyprian's has remained firmly rooted in the neighborhood where it grew up.<sup>49</sup>

One wonders what Father Dade really thought of Albert Cleage's Black Christian nationalism and the Black power movement in general. "My father might have endorsed some of the values in Black nationalism," his son, Malcolm C. Dade Jr., conjectures, "but, let's put it this way, he was no disciple of Malcolm X." When asked what the Black church should be doing "in these troubled times," Father Dade's reply, published in a volume of essays on the Black gospel within white churches, was: "Do what we have been doing for the past thirty years! Identify with our people; be where they are; be willing to be hurt, to be misunderstood, to be denounced and falsely judged. . . . The Gospel can speak through us in Detroit!"<sup>50</sup>

In 1968 Reverend Cleage stunned Detroiters by giving back the hundred thousand dollars granted to the Federation for Self-Determination by the New Detroit Committee because the money "brought interference from whites and bickering among Blacks." He called a national press conference to announce his decision, which seems in hindsight to have signaled a turning point. In the years since, the shrine has continued to grow and evolve. In the early 1970s, Cleage, who took the name Jaramogi Abebe Ageyman, turned his back on the public world of predominately white funding agencies, organizational rivalries, and rhetorical grandstanding and turned inward toward the shrine and the Black Christian nationalism movement. In his book, *Black Christian Nationalism*, he writes, "I am not convinced that Black theologians cannot move beyond the basic theological statements outlined in *The Black Messiah*. Therefore I feel compelled to move on to the essential restructuring of the Black church implicit in that theology."<sup>51</sup>

Guided by the desire to create a separate nation within a nation—the long, hard dream of Black nationalists since the eighteenth century—Cleage/Ageyman strove to erect a series of counterinstitutions and methods of consciousness-raising to meet the political and spiritual needs of African Americans. In this way, the shrine would point the way toward a new promised land of Black power, dignity, and control. "I have been running around the country for some time now trying to *talk* Black people into power," Cleage/Ageyman said on another occasion. "I no longer believe this approach can work. . . . I'm going to have to function differently from now on."<sup>52</sup>

*Black Christian Nationalism* lays out the concrete program for nation building and begins to specify qualifications for membership (e.g., a

twelve-month training program before full initiation, followed by two additional years of advanced leadership training), an educational and training schema comprised of three levels (i.e., the act of beginning or Kunanza, the process of growing or Kua, and the initiation into full membership or Kuanzisha), and a more elaborate political theology. It was a turn not only toward building the institutions necessary to sustain the nation but also toward the cultivation of an inner divinity and a new, much more collective sense of self. As the BCN Creed, which is still recited in the various shrines in Detroit, Atlanta, and Houston, puts it:

I believe that both my survival and my salvation depend upon my willingness to reject INDIVIDUALISM and so I commit my life to the liberation struggle of Black people, and accept the values, ethics, morals and program of the Black Nation, defined by that struggle and taught by the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church.

In essence, *Black Christian Nationalism* codifies a set of beliefs that Cleage and his associates had loosely articulated for years. By 1969, the concept of a nation within a nation was adopted in the church's *Black Christian Manifesto*, the document that sparked a restructuring of the rituals, organizations, and programs of the church. Central Congregational was officially renamed the Shrine of the Black Madonna in 1970. This was followed soon after by the institution of African naming ceremonies and new holy days; the establishment of a food cooperative program; and the inauguration of a training center, bookstore, and cultural center on Livernois Avenue (where the store still stands today, doing a brisk business in the community).

Even as they began to establish new shrines (two in Detroit that were subsequently consolidated into Shrine #1 at the original Linwood location and others in Atlanta and Houston), Abebe Ageyman continued to search for ways to make critical interventions in local politics. One vehicle, the Black Slate, Inc., was inaugurated in 1973 in order to support the election of Mayor Coleman A. Young. Schooled early on by his association with Reverend Hill, Young always understood the power of religion and the church in political mobilization. "Mayor Young always felt the Shrine's early endorsement of his campaign was a critical piece of his success," recalled a former adviser, "and he never forgot that."<sup>53</sup> The Black Slate, which incorporated earlier tactics such as plunking and the lessons learned from the ill-fated Freedom Now Party, is also widely credited with the elections of Atlanta mayors Maynard Jackson and Shirley Franklin and a long roster of Black candidates in Detroit, including

Councilwoman JoAnn Watson, U.S. Representatives Barbara Rose-Collins and Carolyn Cheek Kilpatrick, and Representative Kilpatrick's son, Detroit's current mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick.

In 1978 the shrine also renamed the "Black Christian Nationalist Church" the "Pan African Orthodox Church," signaling the advent of yet another phase in its theological and institutional evolution. The change was followed three years later by the establishment of the Beulah Land Farm Project, the goal of which was to acquire and run a fully mechanized, self-sustaining farm on five thousand acres in Abbeville, South Carolina. The farm opened in 1999 and is still operating. The Beulah Land Farm Project may have been inspired by the Cleage family farm in Belleville, Michigan, which was purchased by Dr. Albert B. Cleage Sr. and used by his family for many years to nourish body and soul. The Beulah Land Farm at Abbeville and all that it represents—self-sufficiency and self-determination, the building of skills, a communal approach to life and work, the dream, perhaps, of a Promised Land here on earth—were Jaramogi Abebe Ageyman's last great achievements. He died there in February 2000. Today the church and movement that he built claim a combined membership of some fifty thousand, including approximately seven thousand active, core members. Abebe Ageyman's legacy is still alive, even as the city that he loved continues to struggle.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, one of the things that distinguishes churches and religious congregations such as the shrines or Hartford Memorial Baptist is precisely the kind of intergenerational, living legacy of pastoral care and prophetic commitment that its founders instilled and their progeny carry on.

Cultural theorist Jerry Herron begins his book *AfterCulture: Detroit and the Humiliation of History* by noting that "Detroit is the most representative city in America": where Detroit once stood for success, it now stands for failure. "This is the place," Herron continues, "where bad times get sent to make them belong to somebody else." But the city, which has surely suffered from the painful postwar transformation of America and the rise of a global economy, is sustained by the unrelenting activism of new generations. I have tried to tell their story in a way that reflects both changes and continuities over the course of three troubling, exhilarating, inspirational, and enraging decades. Like every historian wise and honest enough to admit it, I am humbled to contemplate the innumerable words, ideas, and actions that have been unsaid, unrecorded, or misunderstood. At best, this book offers one story about religion and political radicalism in Detroit; but it is far from the *only* story that could be written. Detroit is still, as Reverend Franklin once remarked, a "city of good preachers." It is also a city in which many continue to keep the faith.

