



“We're tired of being treated like dogs”: Poor Women and Power Politics in Black Baltimore

Rhonda Y. Williams

To cite this article: Rhonda Y. Williams (2001) “We're tired of being treated like dogs”: Poor Women and Power Politics in Black Baltimore, *The Black Scholar*, 31:3-4, 31-41, DOI: [10.1080/00064246.2001.11431154](https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2001.11431154)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2001.11431154>



Published online: 14 Apr 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 19



View related articles [↗](#)

“We’re tired of being treated like dogs”: Poor Women and Power Politics in Black Baltimore

by Rhonda Y. Williams

“People think because we’re low-income, we’re damned flunkies . . . People are going to stand up. . . .”

— *Annie Chambers Rogers*
Baltimore Welfare Rights, August 1978.

POOR BLACK WOMEN’S URBAN ACTIVISM stood at the crossroads of civil rights, Black Power, and economic struggles during the 1960s and 1970s. Occupying decaying inner cities increasingly devoid of work and shaped by white flight, urban renewal, substandard housing and Great Society programs, black women in public housing and on welfare developed bases of power to fight for political representation, economic justice, and human rights. Spurred by practicality and the experience of racism and economic exclusion, poor women demanded that local government address their needs. In their quest for subsistence, decent housing, jobs, and dignity, poor women responded to social dislocations in urban America by pushing for the redistribution of resources and empowerment vis-à-vis state institutions.

This essay explores the housing battles waged in Baltimore by black women tenant and welfare rights activists in a de-industrialized and increasingly racially and economically segregated city. Finding themselves in government-designed residences and communities, poor black women contested their oppression and sought to alter the state’s treatment and societal views of them as objects.¹ More specifically, they engaged in battles with the state, protesting the actions of public housing and welfare administrators and elected officials on the local and state levels.

While Southern protestors’ demands for voting rights and equal treatment in the public arena resulted in the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act, these legal remedies did not address the constellation of problems, such as the dearth of jobs and inadequate housing, plaguing urban America.² Poor black women, who collectively contested an array of political impediments, engaged in a power politics that legitimized poor people’s claims as citizens and sought to redistribute wealth, thereby to bring concrete improvements to their daily lives. Poor black women’s activism, then, unveils a localized parlance of power politics that complicates historical narratives that focus on civil rights as black southerners’ search for integration and on Black Power as a response to the limits of non-violent direct action, or as a rhetorical phenomenon void of concrete results.³

THE ORGANIZING EFFORTS and location of civil rights and Black Power groups in urban communities, the threat of urban rebellions, and the Great Society programs helped to shape the political landscape in which poor people made demands for rights and empowerment. Moreover, social protest groups supported the efforts of poor and working-class people who sought to alter the power dynamics between their communities and local bureaucracies. Movement activists increasingly focused on race and class discrimination specific to urban space, waged battles with city officials, and called for social, political, and economic control in black communities.⁴

The ushering in of the Black Power era did not end poor people's daily struggles or discontent. On the contrary, Richard Nixon's presidency and federal divestment in cities during the decade after the prime freedom fighting years, ensured that poor people still had to contend with urban decay. The Office of Economic Opportunity, which administered the programs associated with the War on Poverty, was under siege. Overall, "the new national rhetoric diminished [the government's] responsiveness to the poor."⁵

In 1978, female public housing tenants employed the rent strike and picketing as tactics to force local government officials to address their demands—even long after the hey-day of such campaigns in Baltimore and elsewhere. Their organizing campaign in Baltimore, therefore, also begins to complicate historical narratives that describe a sharp break with the peak of black activism. In the late 1970s, poor women's struggles to gain power and push for change were built around organizations, actions, and strategies drawn from the sixties and early seventies. Considered tactically anachronistic and outmoded in the late 1970s, poor black women's reliance on collective actions such as the rent strike provides a conceptual bridge between civil rights and Black Power politics.⁶

"Sunlight at early dawn"

IN THE mid-1960s, inner cities in the North became a primary target of civil rights and Black Power organizations and the federal government. In east central Baltimore within a half-mile radius of six public housing complexes, the Congress of Racial Equality's Baltimore chapter, which was founded by pacifists in 1951, opened another office on the 800 block of North Gay Street after the group's 1964 national convention. At the convention, members agreed to move into the ghetto, which they dubbed "the awakening giant." Two years later in 1966, CORE chose Baltimore as its first "Target City" and spoke of "'igniting' East Baltimore's vast, gritty Negro ghetto in 'one big push against a segregationist, racist backwater, the worst in the nation.'"⁷ That same year in Baltimore, CORE endorsed "Black Power" at its national

convention, which had the theme, "To Organize for Economic and Political Power."⁸ Just two blocks away on 1061 North Gay Street, the poverty fighting organization, Union for Jobs or Income Now (U-JOIN), which on occasion worked with CORE, had an office, and the Office of Economic Opportunity's Community Action Program established centers in public housing complexes. Across town in west central Baltimore, the "Soul School," a grassroots black educational institute, rented a row-house apartment directly across the street from the high-rise public housing complex, Murphy Homes. Stokely Carmichael's utterance of Black Power in Greenwood, Mississippi, on June 17, 1966, a slogan he defined as "black people coming together to form a political (and economic) force," already had begun to characterize the dynamics in Baltimore.

THESE BLACK FREEDOM ORGANIZATIONS, alongside federal programs which made their homes in communities where poor people negotiated the urban terrain daily, helped to shape and ignite poor people's activism. In East Baltimore, which became a center of power politics and activism, U-JOIN took the lead in mobilizing poor and working-class people. Led by the radical 23-year-old poverty fighter, Walter Lively, U-JOIN offered a broad critique of the system by simultaneously addressing race, class, and state power. The organization protested the exclusion of poor people from policy-making arenas, forthrightly attacked racism, and publicly critiqued local government officials.¹⁰ In 1966 U-JOIN helped to establish the city's first welfare rights coalition, Mother Rescuers from Poverty, and organized rent strikes against private landlords, which led to the creation of Tenants for Justice in Housing to push for rent escrow legislation.¹¹ Mother Rescuers preceded the Baltimore Welfare Rights Organization, which served as the primary activist group in the O'Donnell Heights' public housing rent strike in the late 1970s.

ACTIVIST ORGANIZATIONS that heralded the needs of poor people often provided the ideological, financial, and administrative

support to catalyze poor black women's activism. The first leader of Mother Rescuers, Margaret McCarty, a black woman and mother of seven whose family relied on a \$237 monthly welfare check after she separated from her husband, credited U-JOIN with her emerging political consciousness. After seeing a U-JOIN flier which advertised cheap coal on a Community Action Agency (CAA) bulletin board, McCarty who did not have enough money to buy fuel for her furnace went to U-JOIN's office for help. The organization's members treated McCarty so well that eventually she started attending city council meetings with them. McCarty began to question a welfare system and a government in general that did very little to help poor people escape poverty. U-JOIN politicized McCarty not only as a welfare recipient, but also as a woman who felt that "every woman should know more about politics, more about welfare, more about what their rights are." McCarty, who emerged as a forceful advocate for poor women's rights, told a *Baltimore Afro* reporter: "I'm a citizen who has a job to do, instead of a poor forgotten colored woman, like some of our people feel."¹² The *Baltimore Afro* described McCarty's statement as "symbolic of the new mood creeping slowly through the black ghetto of Baltimore like sunlight at early dawn—a mood that demands rights and respect and a chance for a decent life as the natural birthright of all."¹³

U-JOIN-SUPPORTED PROTESTS resulted in the formation of Mother Rescuers from Poverty, "a civil rights organization," whose battles for economic justice and human rights sought poor women's empowerment vis-à-vis a racially exclusive and stingy state. In June 1966 three mothers receiving public assistance and U-JOIN organizer, Joan Berezin, began their organizing efforts by passing out fliers in front of the Department of Public Welfare Office. The leaflet encouraged recipients to fight for what they deserved: "It is time that mothers on welfare stop being treated like dogs. We must stand up together and fight for bigger welfare checks and the respect that every human being deserves."¹⁴ In just the first three months, Mother Rescuers had seventy-five active members and a mailing list of two hundred.¹⁵

FOLLOWING THE STRATEGY of U-JOIN, which had the "reputation of getting in the Establishment's hair and pulling hard," Mother Rescuers confronted bureaucrats and commanded the public eye by frequently marching and vocally demanding their rights. They garnered the ear of the press, especially the *Baltimore Afro-American*. In just the first six months of their existence, Mother Rescuers held at least six protests, some of which resulted in meetings with state Department of Public Welfare officials and Maryland legislators. With McCarty as chairwoman, Mother Rescuers sought women's economic independence by demanding that the welfare system support recipients' basic needs as well as facilitate the movement of mothers off of public assistance and toward self-sufficiency.¹⁶

In 1967 the battles heated up around welfare rights. Beginning in January 1967, the state began targeting welfare recipients for fraud, prosecuting 20 cases a week. In February, the Mother Rescuers geared up for a battle to reinstate increased grants for rent, food, and clothing, which had been cut from Governor Spiro T. Agnew's budget. Forty members marched to Annapolis to demand re-incorporation of the items in the governor's supplemental budget and to avoid a "slap in the face" wholesale cutting of the State welfare budget."¹⁷ The capitol was hot that Friday as the Tenants for Justice in Housing organization, another U-JOIN group, led by Mrs. Irene Lee, one of the first tenants to move into Lafayette Courts public housing complex in 1955, also took a caravan to Annapolis. The delegation pushed for rent escrow legislation in the private rental market, the existence of which would play a significant role in the city's first public housing rent strike in O'Donnell Heights in 1978. Up until state Representative Walter Orlinsky (Democrat-2nd) introduced the rent escrow bill into the state legislature, violations such as holes in walls, rats or fire hazards did not represent enough cause to hold rent in escrow. The rent escrow bill also included rent control measures to prevent landlords from retaliating against complaining tenants by increasing their rent.¹⁸ Tenants for Justice issued a scathing critique; the group accused

the Rent Court of being in cahoots with slum landlords, calling the court their “partner extorting hard-earned dollars.”¹⁹

GRASSROOTS ACTIVISTS also capitalized on the fear of black discontent and mass eruptions, which thrust urban centers into disarray. In fact, the President’s Crime Commission pinpointed Baltimore and eleven other major industrial cities as potential targets for violence during the summer of 1967.²⁰ While Baltimore would escape the urban rebellions of 1967, welfare rights activists threatened to wield the mass uprising as a weapon if local officials continued to ignore their demands. Deploying the threatening image of a “long, hot, angry summer” months before the president’s commission report was even released, McCarty and Mother Rescuers led a march. On March 22, dubbed Poor People’s Independence Day by the organization, 300 adults and children rallied in Annapolis to protest cuts in an already inadequate welfare budget. For a family of four in Maryland the average grant was \$1,958.16 — one-third below the federal poverty line of \$3,150.²¹

The assault on poverty, launched by more radical organizations in urban communities, received support from a “mainstream” civil rights voice in the form of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. King spotlighted the travesty of American poverty in a democratic nation in his book *Where Do We Go From Here?* He suggested the replacement of the slogan “Black Power” with “power for poor people.” According to King, “The time has come for an all out world war against poverty.”²² In March 1968, St. Augustine Lutheran Church in Baltimore sponsored a talk by King, who was touring the country to raise support for the Poor People’s Campaign in the District of Columbia.²³ Event organizers posted a flier calling for cross-racial class alliances to combat economic oppression: “Poverty Hurts Not Just Blacks! Not Just Whites! But All Poor People!”²⁴

MORE THAN A YEAR AFTER King’s assassination and the inauspicious Poor People’s Campaign, poverty continued to define the urban landscape, especially with the federal government supporting black capitalism over economic redistribution. Poor people,

particularly black women, who still confronted dire living situations, continued to demand power and confront the government bureaucracy. Using a proven civil rights tactic, black and white public housing tenants and welfare recipients slept-in at the city’s Department of Social Services headquarters. Their demands included transportation for volunteer advisors, free use of telephones at DSS for their in-house advisory service, and access to legal manuals.²⁵ Supporters from a local church and other civil rights groups brought protesters food, drinks, and blankets and kept in touch with them through walkie-talkies. Television news teams reported the “sleep-in,” and an advisor to the Cherry Hill Homes’ participants called the group’s protest: “an example of people power, black and white people getting together for a common goal. This is something Malcolm X and the late Martin Luther King were working towards.”²⁶ Malcolm X and King finally met on the northern urban terrain where working-class black people sought economic rights and empowerment.

Shortly after the successful sleep-in campaign, tenants who were already welfare rights activists from six public housing complexes including O’Donnell Heights met to discuss the formation of a Public Housing Coalition similar to the Welfare Rights Coalition, but one that could concentrate on organizing tenants. Around the same time, welfare rights activists established the Welfare Rights Organization (WRO) in Baltimore with a grant from the Catholic Archdiocese’s Campaign for Human Development,²⁷ an offspring of Mother Rescuers, which as of May 1, 1969 had an office on Gough Street and Broadway that operated on small fundraisers, the WRO opened its office on 31 North Fulton Street in St. Martin’s Rectory. Rudell Martin, a public housing tenant, became its first paid executive director.²⁸

“...the blue-eyed devils”²⁹

POOOR BLACK WOMEN’S STRUGGLES incorporated a continuum of Black Power concepts alongside urban civil rights aims such as economic independence, political inde-

pendence, and self-respect. Welfare rights activists tired of political promises by elected officials, especially Agnew. They spoke of March 22nd and subsequent protests as the beginning of an organizational drive for independent political power. Poor and working-class people would “run, vote, and elect our own people from our own neighborhood,” McCarty stated prior to the March protest.³⁰ Eight months later, in November 1967, Walter Lively, whom CORE’s New York headquarters envisioned as a viable candidate for Baltimore mayor in the next decade, ran for city council, but he lost. Nevertheless, CORE officials labeled Lively, who was having success organizing poor people in East Baltimore, “the harbinger of political hopes.”³¹ In January 1968 Lively was appointed the executive director of the Urban Coalition, a partnership of business, labor, and religious organizations and local government to address “poor housing, poor education, joblessness, poverty, and frustration” in Baltimore.³²

The quest for political independence and representation framed the demands of public housing tenants who wanted to have a stake in decisions affecting their lives. In public housing, women tenants sought representative voice and led the battle to establish resident councils in an attempt to afford residents greater control over the decisions affecting their families and communities. Residents took advantage of community action programs, which opened offices in public housing complexes, and CAP workers provided tenants with training and helped them form resident organizations such as those in Lafayette Courts and Douglass Homes, which pushed for tenants’ right to have policy-making power.

LOCAL URBAN UPRISINGS PROVIDED the backdrop for tenants’ claims to power, shaping the political culture, marking the physical landscape, and exposing black discontent. In 1967 and 1968, cities exploded nationwide. Baltimore may have escaped the 1967 rebellions, but the city blew up after King’s assassination, joining 171 cities nationwide.³³ Gay Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, the main thoroughfares in east and

west Baltimore’s inner city communities, became sites of protests, looting, and fires. Walter Lively, who walked the streets trying to bring calm, interpreted the rebellions as a proletariat response to racial and class oppression in internal U.S. colonies: “the black community of this city do not want the white man to continue his economic colonization of our people.” Responding to the unrest, Governor Agnew upbraided mainstream civil rights leaders and blamed “black militants” and poverty fighters such as Walter Lively and organizations such as CORE and SNCC for fomenting violence.³⁴

As in the case of welfare rights activists, black urban rebellions aided tenants in their fight to secure rights and power. In 1968 in an attempt to address “tenant dissatisfaction and alienation,” the Department of Housing and Urban Development created its modernization program, which mandated resident participation in public housing budget decisions. Alongside black activists’ calls for economic justice and political power and the CAA’s call for maximum feasible participation, the modernization program, which emerged in riot-torn cities, further legitimated tenants demands for power-sharing and provided them with an organizing tool in cities across the nation.³⁵ Led by cohorts of black female tenants in east Baltimore public housing complexes, the fight for tenant power resulted in the creation of a citywide Resident Advisory Board to advise executive officials on public housing modernization.

IN ORDER TO GARNER OFFICIAL RECOGNITION from local housing officials and develop a base of collective power, residents formed tenant councils and formalized already existing councils by holding elections and writing constitutions and by-laws. In September 1968, in the west central Baltimore high-rise public housing complex, Murphy Homes, the tenants’ group met to discuss setting up such a “viable tenant organization.”³⁶ Gladys Spell, who became the president of the renamed Murphy Homes Improvement Council, said: “Instead of the manager making the decision for you, you make your own decision and you decide what you want, you know. He still managed, but yet and still some of that power that

he had was given to you.”³⁷

While the search for collective voice and power fueled the formalization of the Murphy Homes organization, black residents realized—with help—that they had neither real nor symbolic control. Murphy Homes’ manager, who was white, controlled the complex, its day-to-day management, and made decisions affecting tenants’ lives. Tenants wanted a greater stake in their lives. It was this desire for respect and self-determination, in fact, that spurred east Baltimore public housing residents, who represented the vanguard of the city’s public housing tenant movement, to push for greater voice, representation, and policy-making power in their communities. In an attempt to remedy the lack of power, Murphy Homes tenant leaders called for the replacement of their white manager with a black manager, believing a black manager would look out for their best interests.

THE CAMPAIGN in Murphy reflected cultural nationalist politics and emerged during a period when black power campaigns began to envelop the city and nation.³⁸ In fact, direct encounters with the grassroots black nationalist group, the Soul School, unveiled the linkage among race, representation, and power. On June 11, 1969, Gladys Spell and the improvement council’s Youth Committee invited Soul School members to a tenant council meeting as part of their two-day Black Seminar series. The tenant council wanted Soul School members to display and talk about their African carvings and paintings. Spell recounted the following experience:

But instead of bringing it and talking about that, first they said when they went up, the manager was white then, Mr. Walden Gorsuch, he was a Jew but he was a nice man, and Mrs. Keen ... our office was integrated then. Honey, [Benjamin] McMillan and them, they insulted everybody with a white face that was there that night. And told me, “I wouldn’t even be here if I had known you were going to have the blue-eyed devils sitting in here.... I thought it was just going to be the tenant council members. I thought it was just going to be a black audience. I had no idea.” (Spell laughs). Oh, they carried on. That you ought to kill them. You ought to, oh, they ain’t got no business in here. You should put them out...

I was almost speechless because I had no idea they would do that. But they did that because Mrs. Keen and Mr. Gorsuch were there and they had asked someone else to come with them, you know. Our office was integrated and the black people in the management were there. But he begged their pardon, said he wasn’t after insulting nobody black, but he was after getting rid of them blue-eyed devils. “They don’t mean you no good. You should kill them right now. ...” We didn’t have to kill them. They got up and walked.

Gladys Spell presented this episode as a turning point for the Murphy Homes Improvement Council. Shortly after Soul School members critiqued white management, calling them “blue-eyed devils,” a common 1960s phrase popularized by Malcolm X and Black Muslims, council members started circulating a petition requesting a black manager.

IN 1968, the black nationalist critique of white supremacy, particularly white participation in black affairs, not only shaped Murphy Homes tenants’ responses, but broader political activities throughout Baltimore. In January, U-JOIN sponsored a talk by Stokely Carmichael, the Black Power firebrand, at Morgan State College. Two months later, black activists “covering all shades of beliefs,” including Dr. Homer Favor, the director of the Institute of Urban Affairs at Morgan State College, Walter Lively of U-JOIN, and Benjamin McMillan of the Soul School, participated in a conference to consider forming a black united front.⁴⁰

The expression of Black Power in Murphy Homes, which resulted in the racial exclusion of white public housing staff members from future meetings and the campaign for a black manager, did not go uncontested. In her recollections, one tenant, who helped to form the improvement association, critiqued insular racial politics, stating that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. “wanted equal rights for everybody. He didn’t say kick the whites over that side and we jump on this side.”⁴¹ Black tenants behind the campaign, however, took cues from McMillan and the Soul School’s cultural and political nationalism. According to Spell, the tenant campaign was successful; Murphy Homes received its first black manager in the early 1970s. Ironically, east Balti-

more public housing tenants, who were part of the public housing activist vanguard, had called for the dismissal of the black manager who had found his new home in Murphy Homes.⁴²

“We’re tired of being treated like dogs”

ALMOST A DECADE AFTER public housing tenants had fought to gain representation, poor women in urban America still faced awful physical and financial conditions in urban spaces. From 1969 through 1977, O’Donnell Heights’ tenants, for instance, had complained about loose floorboards, sinking toilets, falling plaster, live electrical wires, and roach and mice infestation in the 900-unit public housing complex managed by the Baltimore Housing Authority.⁴³ Facing a slum landlord in the State, which sought to blame them for the appalling state of housing, black and white women tenant activists in a May 1969 resident council letter contested what they deemed absurd and unsustainable accusations:

The Housing Authority Says It Is The Tenant’s Fault. We Don’t Think So!

Sure, some tenants do not take care of their homes and tear up the neighborhood. But, are they the ones who made the electric wiring and the plumbing bad? Are they the ones who kept out buildings from being painted and let our porches fall apart?

The Housing Authority wants us to live in shacks, and they want O’Donnell to be a slum. We want homes in a community we can proud of!!

We will pay \$600,000 rent this year, and we want it spent to improve O’Donnell.⁴⁴

Fed up almost ten years of what they perceived as neglect and official unresponsiveness, residents made a bold move to contest the travesties through collective action. They decided to organize a rent strike. While mass protests across the country increasingly disappeared by 1978 during the post-movement era, O’Donnell Heights activists, primarily black women veterans of welfare rights and tenant activism in the 1960s and early 1970s, relied on proven tactics.⁴⁵

BALTIMORE WELFARE RIGHTS ORGANIZATION activists became the bane of local government agencies. Three months before the rent strike in August, the Baltimore Welfare Rights Organization, which had just recently secured office space in O’Donnell Heights’ neighborhood center, was threatened with an unsuccessful ouster by the center’s white director, W. Edward Dorsett, who had just returned from a two-year leave. He “ordered welfare rights to vacate the 2nd floor space” and fired the temporary director, Steve Wilkie “during the confrontation with W.R.O.”⁴⁶ O’Donnell Heights tenant welfare rights’ members claimed that before the Baltimore Welfare Rights Organization opened its office, very few people frequented the center.

O’Donnell Heights tenants contested the agency’s dictatorial stance. Hemphill argued at a meeting with Dorsett to protest the ouster: “You’re telling us what we’re going to have, when we’re the ones who ought to be telling you what we want.” The chairwoman of the Baltimore Welfare Rights Organization’s board of directors, Annie Chambers Rogers, who also attended the meeting, added: “People think because we’re low-income, we’re damned flunkies, but we’re tired of getting kicked. People are going to stand up.”⁴⁷ The O’Donnell Heights welfare rights group kept its office. Some two months later it was organizing the complex’s rent strike with advice from the Legal Aid Bureau.

A WEEK AFTER a *Baltimore Sun* newspaper series publicized O’Donnell Height’s physical disrepair, Mayor Donald Schaefer visited the complex and pledged his help. During his visit, however, Schaefer, who initiated downtown growth and redevelopment projects, focused primarily on tenants’ lack of recreation to the exclusion of their other stated concerns. Moreover, Schaefer talked to few residents. Disappointed, tenants yelled at him, echoing 1960s organizing slogans: “We’re tired of being treated like dogs”; “We need somebody to help us”; and “God damned social workers, they don’t do nothing for nobody.”⁴⁸

The Baltimore Welfare Rights Organization (WRO), under veteran activists Cheeks and Annie Chambers, educated and orga-

nized tenants for the rent strike. Cheeks had traveled across the country working numerous social action jobs with young gangs, training the unemployed, supervising in a health center, and evaluating poverty programs was volunteering on Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign in Maryland.⁴⁹ While Cheeks was WRO director and government officials focused on his leadership, women ran and fueled the organization's campaigns. Moreover, in Annie Chambers' recollection of organizing the rent strike, Cheeks was initially against the strike even though in public he fought vociferously for it:

He did not want to do that rent strike! He wanted to talk. And I said we have talked enough. Because we did at that date. ...

He was the director. I was the president of the Board. We fought. We took six votes before, because people would split up. Some people wouldn't vote at all. Some people, he would lobby people to vote not to do the rent strike. But I never lobbied anybody, but I would get on that floor, and I would, you know, I had to chair the meeting. I was the president so everybody was going to hear what I had to say. And I won that battle [by one vote]. That's how we did the rent strike.

THE RENT STRIKE AND PROTESTS, which became a centerpiece of poor black women's activism in the late 1970s, were considered outdated. Then city director of social services, Kalman Hettleman, characterized the Baltimore Welfare Rights Organization's protest tactics as "a throwback to the advocacy and activism of the '60s." Lenwood Ivey, director of the city's Urban Services Bureau and former chief of neighborhood operations for the East Baltimore Area Community Action Agency, felt Cheeks, who was "damn sincere," also was an "anachronism in an increasingly conservative era."⁵¹

After the advent of the strike, public housing tenants and welfare rights' organizers formed the Poor People's Housing Coalition. The coalition, which picketed downtown offices, pulled together public housing tenants from around the city including O'Donnell, Fairfield, Gilmore, Westport, and Murphy homes. All except O'Donnell were 99 percent to 100 percent black-occupied, as were most public housing complexes by the

late 1970s. According to Cheeks, the WRO through the initiation of the rent strike and creation of the housing coalition was trying to spread "the idea that no matter what system a person is influenced by, they have certain rights and they can affect the way they are treated."⁵²

WHILE SOME 200 TENANTS MAILED an initial list of complaints to the housing authority, by the start of the rent strike only 75 public housing tenants had withheld their rent as of December 8, 1978, according to John A. McCauley, a city housing official.⁵³ Rush repairs conducted by the housing authority and fear on the part of tenants prevented their participation. Chambers, who went door to door with other activists trying to organize people for the rent strike, recalled in an interview: "We would go and knock on doors and talk to people. And you know, some people were afraid ... They didn't have nowhere else to go and they didn't know what would happen."⁵⁴ By the time the rent strike cases were filed in Peoples Court, the number of unresolved cases had dwindled even further. Forty-nine cases were filed in court with two-third successful.⁵⁵ Organizers won 30 of its 49 cases (most from O'Donnell Heights) in February 1979 after the presiding district court judge and a participant in Baltimore's sit-in movement in 1960, Robert Mack Bell saw the conditions for himself.⁵⁶

WHILE THE RENT STRIKE did not involve a majority of O'Donnell Heights tenants, the action still represented victory.⁵⁷ Engineered and organized primarily by poor black women, who confronted the power structure, the rent strike forced the housing authority to correct maintenance and management problems in O'Donnell Heights and other complexes. The rent strike also provided evidence that poor people, despite the conservative national mood, could wage a battle that resulted in concessions from a seemingly all-powerful city bureaucracy. In 1981, O'Donnell Heights was targeted for a major facelift with an \$18.1 million federal grant, part of a \$30.1 million grant from HUD to improve city public housing facilities. According to Cheeks:

This proves that you can fight City Hall and win. This gives hope and pride to the tenants. They can take pride in where they live, they are somebody. And it is this pride and hope that can also benefit the authorities.

What poor people lack in money and influence, they can make up in organized numbers and determination.⁵⁸

Conclusion

POOR AND WORKING-CLASS BLACK WOMEN did not operate in a vacuum; they engaged in struggle—in “customized wars”—within their communities. Welfare recipients sought economic power and the redistribution of wealth. Tenant activists began to demand a form of “tenant power” to address quality of life issues such as poor maintenance and increasing vandalism. Their battle for subsistence exposed the inseparability of citizenship rights, economic activism, and claims to power, and unveils the specific working-class parlance of broader freedom discourses. Poor women, who focused on public housing and welfare rights, prioritized their fight based on their racial and class position and their urban residency. These women engaged in protest for dignity, income, and democracy. Their activism resulted in concrete changes in public housing and the welfare system. As activists, they gained relief for their families and constituent communities and abated (even if only temporarily) desolate living conditions.

The struggles of poor black women also expose the myriad and disparate spaces of Black Power and rights politics beyond the traditional organizations. Black Power politics, more specifically, did not just merely happen at the national or international level around anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, and anti-racist agendas, but also occurred in local communities where black people, who were just fed up, responded to unsympathetic and oppressive state policies. While working-class black women probably would not characterize themselves as Black Power advocates or even civil rights activists, their activism was influenced by the larger political milieu that shaped militant black freedom fighting organizations. They demanded representation, rights, and self-determination.

MOREOVER, the battles waged represented more than rhetorical flourish or abstract conceptualization and resulted in more than legal remedies. The evocation of civil rights and Black Power in urban communities and the attendant activism resulted in changes that addressed working-class black people’s marginal position in urban spaces. Tenant activists established resident councils and the citywide Resident Advisory Board in the late 1960s. In 1978 the rent strike carried out by poor and working black women brought publicity and millions of dollars in modernization funds.

Finally, poor and working black women’s activism exposes a venue of Black Power and civil rights militancy that is not masculine. Male bravado did not always rule the happenings in the street. Men may have been toting guns and law books to protect their communities against police brutality and contest the state, but women engaged in the battle for respect and social justice on a familial and community-wide level. In fact, they used their positions as women, heads of families, and community mothers to argue for change and implement programs to address people’s everyday needs.

Endnotes

1. Lipsitz, George, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), p. 145. For studies that focus on black working-class and poor women’s community activism, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, see, for example, Bailis, Lawrence Neil, *Bread or Justice: Grassroots Organizing in the Welfare Rights Movement* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1974); *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing Across Race, Class and Gender*, edited by Nancy A. Naples (New York: Routledge, 1998); Curry, Constance, *Silver Rights* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995); Grant, Joanne, *Ella Baker: Freedombound* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998); Lee, Chana Kai, *For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Naples, Nancy A., *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work, and the War on Poverty* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Orleck, Annelise, “If It Wasn’t For You I’d Have Shoes for My Children”: The Political Education of Las Vegas Welfare Mothers,” *Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right*, eds., Jetter, Orleck, and Taylor (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), pp. 102-118; Payne, Charles M., *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley:

- University of California Press, 1995); West, Guida, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger Press, 1981); *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers*, edited by Vicki Crawford, Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).
2. Ibid.
 3. Robert Self argues that: "In this sense, black power as a political phenomenon was not primarily a response to the civil rights movement but a parallel development that sought to redistribute economic and political power within the increasingly divided metropolis without emphasizing integration." See Self, Robert, "'To Plan Our Liberation': Black Power and the Politics of Place in Oakland, California, 1965-1977," *Journal of Urban History* Vol. 26, September 2000, p. 761.
 4. See, for instance, *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]*, edited by Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998); Self, "'To Plan Our Liberation'"; Woodard, Komzoi, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) & Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 102.
 5. Piven, Frances Fox and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 334.
 6. Most of the 1,000 delegates at the National Tenants Organization convention were black, but there were a sizeable number of Chicanos, Indians, and whites. "Tenants Prepare a National Drive," *New York Times*, November 7, 1971.
 7. Franklin, Ben A. "CORE's 'Target City' Program in Baltimore Now Hailed for its Moderation," *New York Times*, April 16, 1967.
 8. Diltz, James D., "The Warning Trumpet: CORE is the Only Voice Black People Ever Had," *Baltimore Sun Magazine*, December 1, 1968, Envelope: Congress of Racial Equality, Maryland Vertical Files, Maryland Room, Enoch Pratt Free Library.
 9. Ibid.
 10. See, for instance, "Williamson, Mach Reply to Charges Made by U-JOIN," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 20, 1966; "U-JOIN Wants Williamson Out," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 6, 1966; "G. Williamson to Answer U-JOIN on Wednesday," *Baltimore Afro*, August 9, 1966; "Carmichael to Appear Here January 16," *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 7, 1967; "What SNCC's Stokely Carmichael Said at Morgan," *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 21, 1967; "Poor Demanding Role in 'Demonstration' Project," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 18, 1967.
 11. See, for instance, "U-JOIN Pickets Stun Landlord's Home Area," *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 28, 1966; "More 'Rent strike' Cases Taken to People's Court," *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 20, 1966; "Rent Strike Cases Forces Court Test," *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 27, 1966; "U-JOIN to Form Tenant Organization," *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 4, 1966; Nissly, Roger J., "Money Withheld in Rent Strike Repair Dispute," *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 11, 1966; Nissly, Roger J., "Eight Families on Rent Strike," *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 18, 1966.
 12. "Mother Rescuers Fight for More Welfare Help," *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 2, 1966.
 13. Ibid.
 14. "Relief Mothers Start Fighting for Checks, Respect," *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 14, 1966.
 15. "Welfare Clients to Get Hearing," *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 20, 1966.
 16. Meeting Minutes, State Board of Public Welfare, November 18, 1968, Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, Maryland.
 17. "Rescuers from Poverty Take Fight to Agnew," *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 21, 1967.
 18. "Loopholes in Rent Proposal," *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 21, 1967.
 19. "U-JOIN Ready with Another Rent Protest," *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 14, 1967.
 20. "Policemen and Riots," *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 6, 1967.
 21. "Protest Set on Welfare Cuts," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 21, 1967.
 22. "Power for Poor People: Should Be Our Slogan," *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 20, 1967. Also see, King, Martin Luther, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).
 23. Woodard discusses King's visit, also in March 1968, to a Newark church located among three of the city's largest high-rise public housing complexes in Central Ward. While there King called for a black mayor and exhorted people to "Stand up with dignity and respect." See Woodard, *Nation Within a Nation*, pp. 93-94.
 24. Flier in Folder: Perkins Homes—CASC, 1971-79, Box 41, S14, RG48, Baltimore City Archives, Baltimore, Maryland.
 25. Lassiter, Lee, "Welfare: Reform or Revolt," *Baltimore News American*, April 1969, Folder 16: Welfare—DSS, Box 22, Series 24, BCP, University of Baltimore, Baltimore, Maryland; "Welfare Mothers Sleep-in at DPW," *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 13, 1969. In Detroit, demonstrating welfare mothers closed offices for four days. See Piven and Cloward, p. 265.
 26. "Welfare mothers sleep-in at DPW," *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 13, 1969.
 27. It is unclear whether the first meeting of tenants led to Rudell Martin's writing of the grant.
 28. Lassiter, Lee, "Welfare: Reform or Revolt—Part V; 'Income, Dignity, Democracy,'" *Baltimore News American*, May 1, 1969, Folder 16: Welfare—DSS, Box 22, Series 24, BCP, UBA.
 29. For more expansive discussion, see Williams, Rhonda Y., "Living Just Enough in the City: Change and Activism in Baltimore's Public Housing, 1940-1980," Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 1998), Chapter 7.
 30. "Rescuers from Poverty Take fight to Agnew," *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 21, 1967.
 31. "C.O.R.E. Watches Lively's Career," *Baltimore Sun*, November 26, 1967, Envelope: Congress of Racial Equality, MD, VF, EPFL.
 32. "Lively, Mitchell, Favor Get Urban Coalition Posts," *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 20, 1968; "Ghetto Leaders Think Non-whites Setting Policy," *Baltimore Afro-American* February 10, 1968.
 33. See Woodard, p. 71.
 34. See Folder 38: Civil Disorders (1) (2) (3), Box 453, S26, RG9, D'Alesandro III Administrative Files, BCA.
 35. On Newark's urban rebellion, which took place near

- Hayes Homes, one of the largest public housing complexes, see *The Politics of Riot Commissions, 1917-1970: A Collection of Official Reports and Critical Essays*, edited by Anthony Platt (New York: MacMillan Company, 1971), p. 349; "Riots: What Happened in Public Housing in Newark—in Detroit—in San Francisco," *Journal of Housing*, No. 7, 1967, pp. 371-378; Woodard, pp. 78-79. On using HUD regulations as an organizing tool, see Bryan, Jack, "Public Housing Modernization" *Journal of Housing*, No. 4, 1971, 167; Venkatesh, Sudhir Alladi, *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 57-62; Williams, Rhonda Y., "Living Just Enough in the City"; Woodard, p. 224.
36. BURHA Memo, February 11, 1969, Box 35, S14, RG48, BCA.
 37. Author's interview with Gladys Spell, 4 November 1993, Session I.
 38. See, for example, essays in *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]*; Joseph, Peniel E., "Black Liberation Without Apology" in this issue; Self, "To Plan Our Liberation"; Tyson, Timothy B., *Radio-Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Woodard.
 39. Author's interview with Gladys Spell, 4 November 1993.
 40. See Brown, Scot, "The US Organization, Black Power Vanguard Politics, and the United Front Ideal: Los Angeles and Beyond," in this issue.
 41. Author's interview with Maxine Stephenson, 5 November 1993.
 42. Joel Newton was still involved with public housing in 1997 as a housing commissioner, an appointed position in the Department of Housing and Community Development, and some tenant activists still complain that he is insensitive and has a degrading attitude.
 43. See Letter to Charlotte Minton from R.C. Embry Jr., May 2, 1969; Letter to Delores Westerfield from R.C. Embry Jr., May 2, 1969; Letter to Helen Ford from John Meehan, May 2, 1969, all in Folder: O'Donnell Heights Monthly Reports, 1965-70, Box 39, S14, RG48; Memos to Van Story Branch from Margaret Keen, October 10, 1977, December 6, 1977, Folder: O'Donnell Heights Monthly Reports, 1976-79, Box 39, S14, RG48.
 44. Letter to Charlotte Minton from Robert C. Embry Jr., August 26, 1969; Protest letter to Robert C. Embry Jr. from O'Donnell Heights Community Council, May 27, 1969, Folder: O'Donnell Heights—General, 1968-69, Box 37, S14, RG48.
 45. When the welfare rights group, IMPACT, first organized in 1969, white women helped to lead the effort. Charlotte Minton, who was also secretary of the residents' O'Donnell Heights Community Council, and Barbara Jean Linkenhoker had become well-known for the advocacy of welfare rights throughout the city in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Fannie Hemphill, a black woman, took over IMPACT in 1970. By the late 1970s, when the O'Donnell rent strike took place, black women such as Hemphill and Shirley Rivers led the interracial advocacy battle. See Letter to Charlotte Minton from R.C. Embry Jr., August 26, 1969, Folder: O'Donnell Heights—General, 1968-69, Box 37, S14, RG48; Memos to Van Story Branch from Jacob Fisher, March 3, 1969, April 3, 1969, Folder: O'Donnell Heights—Monthly Reports, 1965-70, Box 39, S14, RG48.
 46. Memos to Van Story Branch from Margaret Keen, March 8, 1978, March 22, 1978, April 10, 1978, May 8, 1978, August 7, 1978, all in Folder: O'Donnell Heights—Monthly Reports, 1976-79, Box 39, S14, RG48.
 47. Annie Rogers has dropped usage of her married name, Rogers, and uses her maiden name, Chambers. "Ouster of City Welfare-Rights Agency Opposed," *Baltimore Sun*, August 1, 1978, Envelop: Housing—Baltimore—O'Donnell Heights, MD, VE, EPFL.
 48. The series was written by Tracie Rozhon between October 1-3, 1978. Also see Memo to Van Story Branch, November 9, 1978, Folder: O'Donnell Heights—Monthly Reports, 1976-79, Box 39, S14, RG48; "City Faces Rent Strike by Public Housing Tenants," *Baltimore Sun*, November 26, 1978.
 49. Author's interview with Rudell Martin, 25 February 1997; "Cheeks to Poor: You Can Fight City Hall," *Baltimore Sun Magazine*, September 13, 1981; Milton Kent, "Bobby Cheeks, Welfare Rights Advocate, Voice of the Poor," *Baltimore Evening Sun*, September 16, 1988, African-American Vertical Files, EPFL.
 50. Author's interview with Annie Chambers, 10 January 1997, Session I.
 51. "Poor People's Advocate Takes Fight to the Streets," *Baltimore News American*, December 17, 1978.
 52. *Ibid.*
 53. *Ibid.*
 54. Author's interview with Annie Chambers, 10 January 1997, Session I.
 55. Shirley Wise said the remaining cases were unsuccessful because the rent escrow accounts were not kept up to date. Author's telephone conversation with Shirley Wise, 1 November 1997.
 56. Thirty-eight of the forty-nine cases were from O'Donnell Heights. See, "O'Donnell tenant leads rent strike testimony," *Baltimore Sun*, January 19, 1979. For history of the Baltimore sit-in movement and Bell's role, see Irons, Peter, *The Courage of Their Conviction* (New York: Free Press, 1988), pp. 130-152.
 57. In the early 1990s, residents of Lexington-Poe under the leadership of Lorraine Ledbetter threatened a rent strike, but did not actually have to go through with it.
 58. "Bobby Cheeks' Welfare Righters Win Important Court Decision," *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 10, 1979.
 59. I borrow the term "customized wars" from David Farber in his discussion of the War on Poverty, CAP and neighborhood political mobilization. See Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1994), p. 107.

CORRECTION: The biographical and professional information of author Peniel E. Joseph was omitted from the Contributing Authors page of the last issue of **The Black Scholar**, Volume 31, No. 2, "Black Election: 2000." See the Contributing Authors page of this issue for Professor Joseph's information.