It Happened Here Too: The Black Liberation Movement of St.Louis, Missouri (c) 2002 Kenneth Stuart Jolly

The title, "It Happened Here Too:The Black Liberation Movement of St.Louis, Missouri," is a response to the inadequate examination of the Midwest in Civil Rights movement scholarship in general but more specifically, scholarship that continues to ignore the city of St. Louis and the civil rights struggle that took place there. At the turn of the century we have entered into a new phase in the study of the Civil Rights movement. Historians have begun to investigate local movements, uncovering the nuances and various forms of the struggle on local levels and in different parts of the country. While historians have begun to investigate local movements, they have also begun to erase the sharp division between the Civil Rights movement and the so called Black Power movement, no longer seeing a strict demarcation between two separate movements.

However, while historians have begun looking at the "classical period" of the Civil Rights movement of the '50s and '60s, on a local level, few historians have examined the latter years of the movement, the so called Black Power years, from a similar local perspective. Failure to consider the movement outside of the Deep South has caused historians to focus primarily on the transition to Black Power by organization such

as SNCC, a group that did not exist in St. Louis. On the other hand, when historians do

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examine Black Power in the North, the primary subject of focus is most often the Black Panthers. This work fills in this gap by examining these latter years of the Civil Rights

movement, the so called Black Power years, from the local perspective of St. Louis, Missouri.In particular, the following examines the Black Liberators, an organization that emerged in St. Louis in the summer of 1968 advocating the concept of Black Power. [2]

In St. Louis, the concept of Black Power became increasingly appealing among a new generation of African Americans after 1964, who came to question the success and utility of the tactics and goals of nonviolence, interracial cooperation and integration that had served as the movement's foundation. Nonviolence and interracial cooperation had accomplished much with regard to public accommodations and hiring practices in St. Louis yet additional "bread and butter" issues still needed to be addressed. [3] These victories in public accommodations and hiring, coupled with the passage of federal civil rights legislation, also gave rise to expectations among African Americas, expectations

that ultimately brought disillusionment, frustration and anger when these human rights issues went largely unaffected by previous reforms. Ultimately, this disillusionment brought scrutiny and even rejection to the philosophies of nonviolence, interracial cooperation and integration and an embrace of the concept of Black Power.

The Black Liberators emerged in St. Louis late in the summer of 1968 with the opening of its headquarters at 2810 Easton in downtown St. Louis. The Liberators

introduced themselves to the city outfitted in military styled black uniforms and referring tothemselves in military titles, a style that mirrored the Black Panthers. The Liberators also demonstrated their presence in the community by holding "drills" every Thursday night outside of their headquarters. Yet beyond their image the Liberators adopted a five point program for change in the St. Louis community. Specifically, the Black Liberators

stated its goals as follows:

1.that we be given a chance to prove ourselves as other men have done. 2. that we gain enough living space to find ourselves and prove ourselves as full fledged citizens. 3. that we plan to do for ourselves in all areas of human living. 4. that we move out and up into human dignity. 5. that we have sufficient funds to carry our creativity to fruition. [4]

With the promotion of these five points and the adoption of a revolutionary agenda the Liberators established themselves as a unique organization that differed greatly from other established civil rights groups in St. Louis. Nonetheless, as sociologist and former

"liaison officer" of the Black Liberators, William B. Helmreich, explains, the specific conditions responsible for the creation of the Liberators were also responsible for the creation of other organizations that embraced the concept of Black Power. [5] For example,

the Liberators noted that conditions responsible for the organization's creation included,

"poverty, discrimination, and lack of opportunity that existed and are still present in the Black ghetto." In addition, the Liberators asserted that their formation resulted from "a desire to work toward improving the economic status of Black ghetto residents, a desire to protect Black persons from being mistreated by the police, and an interest in developing and enhancing Black identity, awareness, and self respect." Thus, while the Liberator's existence was relatively unique in St. Louis, the Liberators arose from conditions that gave rise to similar organizations throughout the country and world with programs promoting self determination and political and economic empowerment.

Similar to the Black Panthers, part of the Liberator program included protection of the community from crime, violence and police brutality. Soon after their emergence, the Liberators offered to patrol the

Liberators held a meeting with the Franklin Avenue Businessmen's Association, the majority of whom were white, at which the Liberators offered to "guard" their stores in return for funding. Specifically, according to the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, the Black Liberator's Prime Minister, Charles Koen, told the Association that the Liberators would

"keep things 'cool' in the area if the businessmen" were cooperative. [8] Koen's proposal that the Liberators serve as night-watchmen was part of his larger plan for total African American control of the community. [9]

The Black Liberators took their role in the community seriously and they expected

to be taken serious. Likening themselves to other oppressed and colonized peoples throughout the world, the Liberators, sought to protect themselves and their African American neighborhoods from the law enforcement officials and others who had proven themselves antagonists and opponents to the movement. Placed in this larger context of protection from reactionary, oppositional, and occupational forces, the role of the Liberators as providers and protectors of their community was central to their existence.

It is clear that the Black Liberators, defined themselves as part of a much larger national and international struggle for Black liberation by associating with national and international freedom fighters. For example, at their headquarters, the Liberators educated their members in various revolutionary ideologies by offering reading materials by Franz Fanon, Karl Marx, Mao Tse-Tung, Malcolm X, and Che Guevara. In addition,

individuals such as Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and James Foreman were invited by the Liberators to speak at rallies and meetings in St. Louis. [10] In doing so, the Liberators linked their local efforts in St. Louis to a larger national and international movement. Yet it should be emphasized that this connection is very much a part of the larger concept of Black Power that promotes the relationship between the liberation struggles of all oppressed people.

In addition, a more formal association between the Liberators and the Student

Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was established on November 8, 1968 when H. Rap Brown's successor Philip L. Hutchings came to St. Louis. At a rally at the Riviera Night

Club in St. Louis, Hutchings introduced Charles Koen, Prime Minister of the Liberators, as the new Midwest Deputy Chairman of SNCC and introduced himself as the General Field Marshal of the Black Liberators, H. Rap Brown, former head of SNCC, was named General of Human Justice of the Liberators, and James Foreman, another former SNCC leader, was named the Liberator's General for Foreign Affairs. [11]

Along with forming working alliances with national organizations such as SNCC,

the Liberators also cooperated with the Zulu 1200s, an African American organization in St. Louis that promoted cultural nationalism and linked with the neighborhood improvement group, the Mid-City Congress. Together, the Liberators and Zulus created the Wall of Respect, located at Franklin and Leffingwell. The Wall of Respect was painted by seven St. Louis African American artists and displayed portraits of Malcolm X, H. Rap Brown, Muhammad Ali, Stokely Carmichael, Marcus Garvey, Jomo Kenyatta, Elijah Muhammad, Dick Gregory, Phyllis Wheatley, Ray Charles, James Baldwin, LeRoi Jones, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., Jean Baptiste Pointe deSable, and W.E.B. DuBois,

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all under the Garvey slogan, "Up You Mighty Black Race." The Wall of Respect's portrayal of contemporary and historic African American and African leaders demonstrated the local movement's connection to a larger liberation struggle that existed beyond St. Louis and U.S. boundaries, and even beyond the 1960s.

Furthermore, the Wall of Respect in St. Louis also linked the local movement to other movements throughout the country that similarly created Walls of Respect in their communities. Historian Erika Doss explains that Walls of Respect were inspired by Emory Douglas, artist for the Black Panther's newspaper, *The Black Panther*. Doss explains that through his work with *The Black Panther*, "Douglas crafted a protest aesthetic aimed at convincing audiences of Black Power." [13]

Moreover, defining the local Black liberation struggle within a larger international context had a dramatic impact on gender relations and the gendered representation of the struggle. Specifically, this collective struggle of oppressed people throughout the world helped solidify the association between liberation and masculinity. As the local movement defined itself as part of a broader international liberation struggle, by 1964, liberation increasingly came to be defined as a "man thing," a revolution for Black liberation and self determination but equally a revolution for the recovery of manhood.

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This connection between Black liberation and the recovery of African American manhood suggests a conservative element found in the concept of Black Power. For Black Panther co-founder Huey Newton, the successful liberation of African Americans would not only bring political, economic and cultural self determination but would also re-establish the African American man as the head of the African American family. As the liberation struggle was portrayed as a masculine endeavor to begin with, once the revolution was won, men would assume the position as both head of the newly freed African American community as well as the newly freed African American family. For example, in her article, "Africa on My Mind: Gender, counter Discourse and African American Nationalism," historian E. Frances White argues that Black Power "can be radical and progressive in relation to white racism" yet

with regards to gender relations

within the larger African American community, Black Power can be "conservative and repressive", [14] From this perspective, Black Power was a concept by which African American men could reassert their masculinity and their control over the larger community as well as their individual families.

The St. Louis media's representation of the Black Liberators further speaks to

these gender dynamics. While women played key roles in the organization and leadership of many Black Power organizations, including the Black Liberators, the white media focused solely on images of young African American men wearing black leather coats, berets, and stern faces thus contributing to the masculine image of the movement.

In particular, the *St.Louis Post Dispatch* presented an "in depth" report on the Black Liberators in early 1970. This report further illustrates the larger public's fixation on the rhetoric and imagery of Black Power rather than the actual message and programs promoted by groups such as the Black Liberators. For example, this glimpse "inside the Black Militants' headquarters" focused predominantly on the group's young male members with pictures of young African American men posing next to posters of other African American male representatives of the African American freedom struggle such as

Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. [15] Interestingly enough the host or tour guide throughout the headquarters was a young woman member. Yet while the article includes pictures of

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the young male revolutionaries in various poses next to posters of Malcolm X and Mohammad Ali, the only picture of a woman member shows her in the group's kitchen wearing what looks to be a dress, sandals, and head wrap, engaged in some sort of work. [16] The caption to the picture reads, "Saturday

morning cleanup in the kitchen."It should be noted that two men are present in the picture, both attired in all black clothing, one with a sheet of paper in his hand and the other with his empty hands at his sides. Of course it is impossible to know exactly what these individuals are all doing in this kitchen and it is important not to speculate or infer too much from this grainy image. Nonetheless, this image contributes to the gender construction of this organization by presenting these men as revolutionaries along side other strong male revolutionaries such as Malcolm X and Mohammad Ali. While two men are presented in the picture of kitchen cleanup along side a woman, women are not similarly pictured in any other format, serving any other role outside of the kitchen, as the men are.

While the *Post Dispatch* depicts these conservative gender relations in this local organization, because of the lack of internally produced material from the Liberators themselves, it is impossible to determine specifically how assigned and determined these gender roles actually were in the organization. In other words, the question remains, how much of this depiction of gender relations within the Black Liberators is a construction of

the white media and how much is a construction of the organization itself. While the white media presented Black Power and its advocates in a biased and irresponsible manner

contributing to the fear and reaction to organizations such as the Liberators, Black Power groups similarly cultivated specific images in order to speak in the same language as those they were trying to reach and because they were an outgrowth of the conditions that motivated African Americans to embrace Black Power. Yet it is important to point out that these efforts were met with harsh government reprisals aimed to limit their success and silence their message.

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It is essential that one examine reaction to the Black Power movement in the larger context of the Cold War's fight against an international and domestic communist threat. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on fears and suspicions of communist infiltration of civil rights and "radical"

movements, a few specific remarks concerning Cold War influenced reaction to the Black Liberators in St. Louis deserves attention.

One tactic employed by the FBI to undermine the Black Power movement was through the creation of false documents to be circulated within these organizations and between members in order to facilitate and often aggravate inter-group and intra-group conflict. For example, the FBI attempted to undermine the Black Liberators by attacking its leader, Charles Koen's, personal life. The *Post Dispatch* reported, "a memo was dated

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February 14, 1969 from the St. Louis FBI office to Hoover indicated that the target was separated from his wife.Permission was granted by Hoover on February 28, 1969 to send the man's wife a letter hinting that her husband had been unfaithful." This letter and others like it that attempted to undermine the local movement by targeting the private lives of its leaders were not designed to single handedly bring the collapse of the local liberation movement. Yet included within larger systematic and coordinated suppression efforts that included a variety of tactics and strategies to attack individuals and groups on multiple levels, letters such as this one were largely successful in aggravating relationships that were often already tense as a result of these additional tactics.

In sum, in the context of the Cold War, repression of the Black Power movement, in part, stemmed from concern that domestic social unrest was and could be manipulated and encouraged by America's enemies. Moving beyond the debate regarding the actual threat communists presented to the movement, that domestic social unrest would be used by America's enemies as important Cold War propaganda for the hearts and minds of people throughout the world, this concern was substantiated time again as school desegregation, and incidents of police brutality and racial violence became front page news in foreign countries throughout the 1960s.

Direct conflict between the local police and Black Liberators began in mid- August 1968 when two Black Liberators were arrested following a speech in St. Louis by Adam

Clayton Powell.Direct conflict between the police and Liberators continued through

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September. [19] Specifically, the incident during Powell's visit touched off a larger battle between the police and Black Liberators that included drive by shootings and fire bombings against the 9<sup>th</sup> precinct police station, the home of a police lieutenant, the alleged destruction of the Liberator headquarters by the police, and the beating of Prime Minister Charles Koen and General Leon Dent while in police custody. [20] The Powell incident began this larger pattern of harassment and violence which was largely successful in limiting the success of the Liberator's community program.

While this conflict initially began between the Liberators and police it ultimately become a larger issue involving other local human rights groups and organized labor. These other groups expressed solidarity with the Liberators during their struggle against the police for fear that police reaction could quickly turn on them as well. As conflict

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between the Liberators and police continued through September 1968, support for the Liberators was demonstrated through marches, rallies, protests, and public statements in the press. [21] These efforts to develop a united front against police harassment and

repression culminated in a law suit, filed October 10, 1968 by the ACLU, seeking an injunction against police harassment of local human rights groups. [22] After three days, U.S. District Court Judge Roy W. Harper denied the injunction against alleged police harassment.

In early 1969 in a small article in its back pages, the St. Louis Post Dispatch reported that Charles Koen,

Prime Minister of the Black Liberators, had been arrested and

booked on possession of marijuana on January 28, 1969. Two days later, Koen resigned as Prime Minister of the Black Liberators. According to reports, two Liberator generals "assumed leadership of the organization; but the subsequent attempt to keep the group going was unsuccessful and, for all practical purposes" the Liberators "ceased to exist" in St. Louis. Housing By 1979 Koen had returned to Cairo, Illinois Where he took over the Cairo United Front to promote housing development through the Egyptian Housing

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# Development Corporation. [25]

Black Power was an ambiguous, often perplexing, and contradictory concept that meant different things to different people at different times and in different places. As a result, the meaning of Black Power was often at the mercy of any capricious agenda. Failure to look beyond the sights and sounds of its surface too often resulted in, at best, a simple dismissal, and at worst, violent reaction. Years after the so called sights and

sounds of Black Power no longer draw the same intense reaction from law enforcement as they did in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the meaning of Black Power, its utility, and its

impact are still debated and contested today. As these debates proceed with regard to the Black Liberators' legacy in St. Louis, William Helmreich concludes "although we do not know how many young Blacks in [St. Louis] they reached, if nothing else, they gave hope to many of their members that the conditions of life in the ghetto could be improved. Moreover, they instilled pride and self respect in those who joined the organization... That the [Liberators] were able to involve such individuals in the activities of the their organization, even for a relatively short period of time, was perhaps their greatest

overall accomplishment." [26]

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the conditions that gave rise to the Black Liberators in St. Louis gave rise to similar organizations throughout the country and world. The Liberator's program for Black liberation in St. Louis, Missouri differed little

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from programs for liberation put forth by similar movements by oppressed people throughout the world. Yet it is because the story is similar to those of others that the Black Liberators and the St. Louis Black liberation struggle should be included in discussions of the Black Power movement.

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For example, on May 19, 1961, after eight previous attempts in 1948, 1953, 1955, 1956, 1958, 1959, 1960, the St. Louis Board of Aldermen passed the Public Accommodations Ordinance that prohibited discrimination in public places by race or religion. In addition, the Jefferson Bank protests from August 1963 to March 1964, were responsible for establishing fair hiring practices in the city's banking industry and other local firms.

[4] Eda Houwink Papers. Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

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[6] Helmreich.pp. 162.

Helmreich.pp. 162.

- [8] St. Louis Post Dispatch. "Negro Militants Make Proposal to Businessmen." August 23, 1968, pp. 3A.
- [9] St. Louis Post Dispatch. "Negro Militants Make Proposal to Businessmen." August 23, 1968, pp. 3A.
- Carmichael spoke in St. Louis on September 6, 1968, H. Rap Brown spoke on September 10, 1967 at a Liberator rally in East St. Louis and James Foreman spoke on Saturday, January 4, 1969 at a rally aimed to raise funds for "political prisoners" including Black Liberators Leon Dent, Clifford Valentine, and Eddie Price.(source: *St. Louis Argus*. "Stokely Carmichael Visits and Speaks in St. Louis Rally." September 6, 1968; *St. Louis Argus*. "James Foreman to Speak at Black Liberator's Seminar." January 3, 1969.)
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- [15] Meyer, Gerald J.St. Louis Post Dispatch. "Inside Black Militants' GHQ." March 22, 1970.
- [16] Meyer, Gerald J.St. Louis Post Dispatch. "Inside Black Militants' GHQ." March 22, 1970.
- One example of intra-group conflict promoted by the police occurred on September 5, 1968 when it was alleged that St. Louis police officers destroyed the headquarters of the Black Liberators. Police immediately blamed the destruction on another local Black Power group, the Zulu 1200s. However these efforts to promote conflict between the Liberators and Zulus produced no conflict between the two organizations.
- [18] St. Louis Post Dispatch. "St. Louisan Wants FBI Curbed." November 19, 1975.pp. 1.
- [19] Two Liberators were arrested following the speech on weapons charges.

On the evening of September 5, 1968 shots were fired through the window of the 9th Precinct, through the window of Lt. Grimes' home, and a fire bomb tossed through the broken window of the real estate office of' an African American member of the police board, Clifton W. Gates to protest the arrest and intimidation of Charles Koen the previous day.Immediately following these incidents, on September 5, the Black Liberator's headquarters was destroyed.According to the United Methodist Church, local residents "observed plain-clothes policemen" destroy the offices. (source: Missouri East Conference, United Methodist Church Papers, 1800-1972.University of Missouri, Columbia Western Historical Manuscripts Collect.Collection number 3308.Box 2, f. 36.) On September 13, 1968, Koen and Dent were stopped by police for a defective brake light. They were taken to the 9th Precinct where they were beaten by police. Both suffered cuts to the head that required stitches, bruises and broken hands and fingers.

Support for the Liberators came from CORE, ACTION, the Mid City Congress, NAACP, *St. Louis Argus*, Locals 688 and 562, the United Methodist Church, St. Louis Archdiocese, the ACLU, SDS, and the Committee for War Resistance.

- Defendants in the suit included Charles Koen, Percy Green of ACTION, Richard Koch and Joel Allen of Washington University SDS.
- [23] St. Louis Post Dispatch. "Liberator Arrested on Drug Charge." January 30, 1969.pp. 8D.
- [24] Helmreich pp. 140
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- [26] Helmreich.pp. 165.