

Storming Hillbilly Heaven:  
The Young Patriots Organization, Radical Culture,  
and the Long Battle for Uptown Chicago

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Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

English

August 7, 2020

Nashville, Tennessee

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To the Common Conspiracy

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In many respects, the process of writing a dissertation is truly isolating. So much depends on the hiving off and individuating knowledge, to say nothing of the long and lonely work of writing. But the opposite is true as well. The exercise of writing this dissertation has also been about sharing, being supported, learning to be supported and share. It has been about being led to new people, new discussions. It has been about being given a great deal: time, words, money, people's stories, and then being told to go do something useful with them. In other words, while it has been lonely it has also been hyper-social and generous, and the work has expanded my world.

I would like to mention a handful of people here, knowing that in naming names I will forget so many others, and I would like to thank them for their help in getting this project along and in doing so contributing to the common conspiracy, whether they knew it or not. I would like to thank my family, my mother and father and brother, for their unconditional support and curiosity. I would like to thank Emily for love and edits and daily inspiration to keep following the threads. To my aunts, uncles, and cousins for getting through it together, and especially to my uncle Kelly Ambrose who left us too soon but with so much.

To my first friends in Nashville, Andy Eaker (who later put me up for research in Baltimore), Rita Bullwinkel and Alex Spoto (who did the same in San Francisco), Lee Conell, and Garrett Warren, as well as the wide, wild Nashville Huis Clos nebula. The band at Santa's, the grown folks at Carol Ann's Home Cooking Café, and especially the denizens of Bobby's Idle Hour (most especially Josh Distad, who watched o'er the Idle Hour so well). All lightened my pockets and my feet and tutored me in community. To the men and women of Graduate Workers' United, more comrades in the common conspiracy, I'd like thank them for their fellowship and urge onwards!

I've had many wonderful teachers at Vanderbilt but I would especially like to thank Scott Juengel, Peter Guralnick, and Hortense Spillers for saving/inspiring me at different points. Jessie Hock and Alex Dubilet had a more or less open house policy, which I needed more than I knew, and talked me through most of the writing process (trust the process). To my committee members, Dana Nelson, Jen Fay, Ben Tran, and Jeff Cowie, I am deeply grateful. The degree to which this dissertation feels whole owes so much to their guidance and latitude. To Stefano Harney, who graciously stepped in as an outside reader and itinerant teacher, and who showed me things about the Young Patriots that were hiding in plain sight, or not hiding at all.

Harry Rice and Sharyn Mitchell at Berea College, Kathleen Campbell at the Country Music Hall of Fame, and the folks at the Chicago History Museum were invaluable in helping me navigate the various archives that contributed to this project.

Most of all, this would have been impossible without the time and generous reflections of those who sat for interviews and shared their stories. To Roger Gadway, Ethan Fesperman, and Hy Thurman, I extend my deepest thanks.

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## Introduction

We say all power to all people.  
*All power to all people.*  
We say white power to white people.  
*White power to white people.*  
Brown power to brown people.  
*Brown power to brown people.*  
Yellow power to yellow people.  
*Yellow power to yellow people.*  
Black power to black people.  
*Black power to black people.*  
X power to those we left out.  
*X power to those we left out.*

Fred Hampton,  
*American Revolution 2*  
1969

Buried in the March 23, 1973 Thursday edition of the *New York Times*—past the front-page news announcing the complete withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, the continued bombing of Cambodia, and early findings of the newly formed Senate Watergate committee; past a small article on the standoff between American Indian Movement activists and federal forces at Wounded Knee; past reports on the growing power of oil rich countries in the Middle East and rising food and retail prices at home—an article entitled “Appalachia’s Hillbillies Trek North for Jobs” described the bittersweet success of southern migrants to Detroit. Written by a journalist named William K. Stevens, the article looked at this invisible minority of Detroit’s population in order to tease out the broader historical fortunes of the generation of white rural-to-urban migrants who had flooded into the industrial cities of the Midwest during and after World War II. This period in American history saw the country’s greatest ever internal migration. Between 1940 and 1970, six million native born Southerners left the region of their birth for work in the North and West, and while the vast majority of writing on this exodus focuses on the exodus

of African Americans, over two thirds of the migrants were white and many were from Appalachia.<sup>1</sup> They were refugees from the failing farms and shuttered mines of the postwar South, doing whatever they could to move from the crumbling periphery of the American economy to its center, and by the 1970s, the majority of these white migrants had done just that. “It is an economic success story,” Stevens writes in the article. “The hillbillies for the most part have made it.”<sup>2</sup>

“Hillbillies,” he writes, “that is what they call themselves today, with a growing sense of pride.” Once an epithet with real heft in northern cities like Detroit, Stevens finds that the term doing curious work in 1973. Amused by the sight of a “Hillbilly and proud of it” sticker plastered on the rear window of a pickup truck, he notes that the “Appalachian migrants appear to be developing an explicit sense of ethnic identity that had been lacking in the past.” These people “have adapted as best they can,” he writes. They have saved their money, purchased “modest frame-and-shingle houses (“This Family Will Not Be Bused,” read signs on some of them,” improved their class position, “and in the process a kind of urban-hillbilly culture seems to have emerged. It has emerged in the popularity of bars like Li’l Abner’s [the hillbilly tavern where the article is set], and particularly in a passion for the kind of neo-country music played there and over local hillbilly stations like WEXL.” Then in an interesting turn—made more interesting still by the news of American Indian activists on the front of the paper—he makes clear that while the reclamation of the epithet and the assertion of ethnic pride might smack of the kind of radicalism displayed that same day on the front page of *The New York Times*, the “new feeling of pride expressed by [the] sticker does not mean that the hillbillies are about to create their own version of the black Chicano or Indian power movements. This is just not their way. They have not generally proved to be the organizing or joining kind.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> William K. Stevens, “Appalachia’s Hillbillies Trek North for Jobs,” *New York Times*, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

Stevens article puts aside the perhaps nagging likelihood that these people were the children or grandchildren of the miners and strikers of John L. Lewis' UMWA in order to hit the familiar beats of our stories of white immigration and assimilation in America. This is not a story about the past, but of new beginnings. People migrate, work hard, buy homes, produce a diasporic culture of sorts, and in doing so are entered into the multicultural fabric of the country. The racial subtext here goes unexplored. It is gestured to but not discussed—there is no bussing talk, just floating yard signs, bracketed in parentheses. And the normalcy of the whole process and idea that southern whites are not joiners is persuasively rendered through comparison to familiar figures of dissent: blacks, Chicanos, and Indians.

Some “hillbillies,” however, were the organizing and joining kind, even in 1973. And their urban-hillbilly culture, with its bars and music and working-class consciousness was widely understood as a contribution to American normalcy, but as a threat to it. This project follows one group of these self-professed dislocated radical hillbillies. Formed in the early summer of 1968, they called themselves the Young Patriots Organization. They were an anti-racist, working-class activist group made up of white southerners from Uptown Chicago that began as a street gang, realized themselves through partnerships with the Black Panther Party, and forged a unique strain of anti-racist hillbilly populism that spoke to the concrete realities of poor whites living in America during the 1960s and 1970s. For a brief moment they were partners in the original Rainbow Coalition—working alongside the Panthers as well as the Young Lords—and for an even briefer one, a network of the white radical poor stretching from New York City to Portland, Oregon. But by the mid-1970s, through a combination of state pressure, internal fissures, and the physical destruction of their neighborhood, the Young Patriots were gone, and as the memory of these poor militant whites who saw the poor of other races as their natural allies disappeared, the common sense of what was possible closed in around them.

But the group did exist, and its members were migrants very much like the people Stevens had met in Detroit, pilgrims along the great “Hillbilly Highways” that funneled the farmers and miners out of Upland and Lowland South alike and deposited them in great cities like Chicago, Detroit, and Milwaukee, as well as manufacturing hamlets like Muncie and Akron. Like so many migrants, they came seeking



better lives, but many the cities they arrived in—with their promise of steady, well paid industrial work—were beginning to register the early shudders of deindustrialization. Most migrants arrived with little to their name and settled in poor parts of the cities or in outright slums, and the neighborhoods they arrived in quickly became known as “Little Appalachias” and “hillbilly heavens.” White southern communities formed in areas like Cincinnati’s Lower Price Hill, Detroit’s Cass Corridor, and Baltimore’s Dundalk, Hampden, and Highlandtown neighborhoods. In Chicago, the majority of these migrants arrived in Uptown, a once prosperous North Chicago neighborhood on the shore of Lake Michigan which had become a port-of-entry for many different migrant groups during the years following World War II, but especially white southerners known as one of the country’s most notorious southern slums.

At the time, they were not welcome migrants, and press accounts during the fifties and sixties paint a picture in stark contrast to the *Times*’s invocation of curious but benign country folk out of water. Instead, they were often portrayed as invaders of the more civilized city, staking claim to that which was not theirs, and as a sort of contagion, polluting public spaces, corrupting the moral fabric, and unsettling the seemingly clear lines between peoples. As one headline put the question bluntly, were the hillbillies “A Disgrace To Their Race?”<sup>4</sup> Nor was this thinking confined to panicked local papers. Michael Harrington probed similar questions in his landmark work of liberal reformism *The Other America*. The “urban hillbillies,” as he wrote, were an anachronism of sorts—remaindered by automation and recession and thrust into the modern world of the cities like refugees from an earlier era.<sup>5</sup> They possessed, he wrote, “a loose, defeated gaiety...the casualness of a people who expected little...[and] in some ways, they resembled the stereotype of the happy-go-lucky Negro.”<sup>6</sup> In the view of Harrington, the citizens of the other America were “yesterday’s people,” economic and cultural remainders out of step with the “familiar America...celebrated in speeches and advertised on television and in the magazines” as having “the

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<sup>4</sup> Albert N. Votaw, “The Hillbillies Invade Chicago,” *Harper’s Magazine*, February 1958, 67.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York, N.Y.: Scribner, 1997), 96.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

highest mass standard of living the world has ever known.”<sup>7</sup> To the many midcentury social engineers, these black and white islands of deep poverty that appeared on the margins of the industrial core seemed to be remnants of the past, awaiting inevitable incorporation or annihilation.<sup>8</sup> In reality, they were early indicators of what was coming: zones of widespread un- and underemployment, of wageless life outside union protections. Incubators for anger, despair, and economic precarity, but also new responses to these conditions, new politics and forms of solidarity.

The Young Patriots Organization was one of the most interesting manifestations of the spirit of revolt that erupted in poor neighborhoods during the late sixties and early seventies. Poor, white, and southern, the group formed during the summer of 1968 in the long shadow cast by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and the rise of the white demagogue George Wallace. It was founded by Jack “Junebug” Boykin and Doug Youngblood, two Uptown youth activists associated with both JOIN—an influential SDS organizing initiative which had been taken over by community members in 1967—and members of a local street gang known as the Goodfellows who had been radicalized through neighborhood campaigns against police brutality. They began as a small, tight-knit cadre of young men who were attuned to wider movement politics but wanted an organization of their own to address the needs of the Uptown community. The group grew quickly and soon became one of the most prominent activist forces in the neighborhood, managing to fuse the community organizing model of JOIN with the burgeoning militant identity politics exemplified by the Black Power Movement, and especially the Panthers. At the group’s core was a handful of young Uptowners in their teens or twenties, including Junebug and Youngblood, the brothers Ralph and Hy Thurman, Bobby McGinnis, Bobby Joe Write and Jimmy Curry of the Goodfellows, Marcella Geary, Margie Terry, Carol Cronato, and Katherine Komatsu as well as a handful of new arrivals to the community like Andy and Mary Ellen Keniston, and Darlene and Bill Fesperman, a Chicago seminary student originally from North Carolina who would quickly

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<sup>7</sup> Jack E. Weller, *Yesterday’s People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995); Harrington, *The Other America*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> As Harrington wrote of one such representative place, “there was nothing legally or humanely that could be done short of the abolition of the neighborhood and the culture it contained.” *The Other America*, 101.

become one of the most visible members of the organization. They considered themselves radical “dislocated hillbillies,” and from this position they developed a far-reaching critique of class society in America as well as the racism that underwrote it.<sup>9</sup>

The Young Patriots were, first and foremost, community activists. They were embedded in Uptown, most as natives, and their politics were shaped by the concrete circumstances of the neighborhood in all its particularity. The organization was mentored by, and inherited the priorities of, earlier generations of neighborhood activists. Before the Patriots organized in the bars and on the corners of the southern slum, an alliance of students and neighborhood residents known as the JOIN Community Union had fomented working-class resistance around issues related to poverty and the dismal living conditions in Uptown. After JOIN was disbanded in the late 1960s, the Young Patriots carried much of this work forward. Their analysis always began at the level of material community need, even as they came to articulate it in their own language. At the same time, they were key figures in one of the sixties legendary radical political alliances: Fred Hampton’s Rainbow Coalition. The Rainbow Coalition was officially formed in the spring of 1969 under the guidance of Hampton, the Chairman of the Illinois Black Panther Party, who described it in essence as “a political coalition that respected ethnic communities of all kinds, led by [the] poor.”<sup>10</sup>

Central to Hampton’s definition was the notion of communities. The Coalition acted collectively at times, and was predicated on a radical notion of support and mutual indebtedness, but its aim was to empower individual groups organizing in the communities of which they were a part. Member groups were drawn from all across Chicago, and in addition to the Panthers and Patriots included the Young Lords, Puerto Rican activists from Lincoln Park; Rising Up Angry, white greaser radicals from Logan Square; and the Blackstone Rangers, a South Side street gang.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Letter from an Anonymous ‘Dislocated Hillbilly,’” in *From the Movement Toward Revolution*, by Bruce Franklin (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971), 111.

<sup>10</sup> Jon Rice, “The World of the Illinois Panthers,” in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, ed. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 55–56.

<sup>11</sup> Jakobi Williams, *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 128.

Their work together consisted of mutual aid programs, theoretical commiseration, and the dramatic performance of interracial solidarity, all of which was intended to push back against a shared set of issues, including “political corruption, police brutality, urban renewal, and gentrification.”<sup>12</sup> When a member of the Young Lords was killed in a police shooting, the Patriots and Panthers ran security at the funeral march through Lincoln Park. When the Patriots needed help setting up a free breakfast program, the Panthers provided blueprints, material support, and coverage in their newspaper, which had a weekly circulation of over 250,000 during this period.<sup>13</sup> And when Hampton wanted to make a public statement about the Black Panther Party’s commitment to anti-racism as a tool to fight oppression by the capitalists, the Young Lords and the Young Patriots stood behind him for the reporters and the cameramen, posed like chessmen who had abandoned the board.

The Rainbow Coalition was short lived. In the early morning hours of December 4, 1969, Fred Hampton was killed, shot as he lay asleep in his bed by a contingent of Chicago police officers. He was 21 years old. Later, a trial would prove that he had been drugged the night before by a friend and FBI informant, but his partners in the Coalition had understood the message of Hampton’s assassination as soon as the news broke. As the Illinois Black Panther Party began to break down in the wake of the killing, the coalition drifted. The Patriots continued their work in Uptown, but the forward momentum was gone. They underwent an acrimonious split, as one of their most visible members, known as Preacherman, decamped to New York City along with a handful of other Patriots, and suffered a serious blow as long gestating urban renewal plans consigned parts of working-class Uptown to removal. These years were a defensive battle, but they continued their work: operating survival programs like their free clinic and food pantries, and acting as a locus of energy for neighborhood activist energies. New fights and new partnerships energized the organization for stretches during 1970, but as the years drew the political defeats mounted and membership dwindled. By 1975, the group had faded away and the legacy

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>13</sup> Jessica Lipsky, “The Enduring Influence of the Black Panther Party Newspaper,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/history-black-panther-newspaper.php>.

of the group disappeared as Uptown gentrified and the last members left Chicago. There are no histories of the Young Patriots; they have not been the subject of academic study.

For a brief moment at the end of the 1960s, the Young Patriots seemed to augur some incomprehensible change in the natural order of things, even by the standards of the time. As a reporter for *Newsweek* put it in 1969, “in what must rank as one of the major curiosities of the New Left, yesterday’s rednecks have become today’s radicals.” Their partnership with the Panthers seemed to represent not only an overcoming of interracial hostility, but also an unsettling political awakening on the part of poor whites who, again according to the reporter, “had exchanged their built-in bigotry for textbook Marxism.”<sup>14</sup> The reporter of course overstated the case. The Young Patriots were never textbook Marxists (they never had much use for textbooks of any sort), and did not believe that bigotry was inborn (although some describe their process of overcoming it). But the group was fascinating precisely because it flaunted the common-sense assumption that poor whites could not find common cause with the poor of other races. Their disappearance from the historical record has much to do with their marginal position as urban slum activists, but as this project will show, this marginal position also gave rise to their captivating politics of solidarity. The populist politics they built with the Panthers, among other groups, emerged from the relationship between class, race, and life on the vanishing edge of society, and their story helps show us how solidarity is built and where it must be deployed.

To the extent that it is, the memory of the Young Patriots has been preserved and set down largely because of their association with the Panthers. I first encountered the group during a documentary about the Panthers by Stanley Nelson Jr. The Young Patriots appear late in the film, during its discussion of the Panthers increased attention to class issues during the late 1960s, via a clip from Howard Alk’s 1969 documentary *American Revolution 2*. In it, a white man in a white dress shirt with a heavy southern accent pinches a cigarette as he introduces Bob Lee, a section leader for Illinois Black Panther Party, to a

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<sup>14</sup> Robert S. Stokes, “Poor Whites, Blacks in Uncommon Alliance,” *Daily Times-Advocate*, September 22, 1969.

room full of Uptown Chicago residents, all white and jammed into what looks like a community center judging by the murals on the wall. For the rest of the scene, Lee works the room, explaining that despite what people might assume, the Panthers are here to support the people of Uptown – at the time Chicago’s second densest, overwhelmingly white slum – and what they need is a common understanding of what needs fixing.

Hesitance among the white crowd gives way to dialogue, to talk of shared interests and a plan to demonstrate the following day. What comes next in documentary are images of Panthers standing shoulder to shoulder with a group of white men wearing too tight jeans and denim jackets emblazoned with a pair of patches: one the Panthers’ famous “FREE HUEY,” the other the Confederate Flag. Even after the dialogue between the Panthers and the group from Uptown, the visual discontinuity of those two American symbols—one a banner of white supremacy, the other a rallying cry of Black Power—was completely mystifying; they should not be together, yet there they were. How to account for the proximity? How to square the aims of a black power group intersect with those of radical hillbillies? What was the basis of the solidarity which bound the groups together and what did one group offer the other? And on top of all of this—why I had never heard this story?

This project began as an attempt to answer some of these questions. In the pages that follow I believe I provide some of those answers even as I uncover many more questions. What I have attempted is to provide both a concise, contextual history of the birth, life, and afterlife of the Young Patriots Organization, and a theoretical extrapolation of the group’s far-reaching politics. This effort necessarily touches on a multitude of issues, subjects, and methods. It combines historical research, cultural analysis, and theoretical extrapolation in order to examine the thought and significance of the Young Patriot Organization. But while its avenues of inquiry are heterogeneous, certain broad themes unify the narrative. The first is this central question of solidarity. As Chandra Mohanty writes, “solidarity is always an achievement, the result of active struggle to construct a universal on the basis of

particulars/differences.”<sup>15</sup> This question of solidarity, of determining who shared particular interests and how they could be motivated to act on them, was central to the political life of the Young Patriot Organization and the answers to that question shifted over time.

At first, building a political community in Uptown meant confronting and grappling with the realities of class within the neighborhood then finding ways in which the individual experiences of the poor could be collectivized, focused, and deployed. Later, when the Young Patriots began building relationships with activists of color, that sense of unity and class consciousness within the southern migrant community of Uptown became the foundation for surprising acts of solidarity across lines of race. This was exemplified in the case of the Rainbow Coalition, and the Young Patriots carried that experiment in the unity of differences back into their neighborhood and their own partnerships. The history of the Young Patriots attests not only to how methods of constructing political unity develop and change over time, but also how the production of the universal that Mohanty mentions rests on, and draws real power from people understanding the particularity of their experience.

Expanding on this notion of the importance of particularity, a second purpose of this study is to examine the role of culture in the development of the Young Patriots and their politics. As Stuart Hall tells us, every political project is also a “project of producing a cultural definition of the people, of helping to constitute what the people are.”<sup>16</sup> Both JOIN and the Young Patriots understood that Uptown had a distinct culture produced by the huge population of displaced southerners, and that this culture was politically important. They were not “cultural nationalists.” They did not believe that material change sprung from the recovery of some lost culture or the adoption of a revolutionary one, but they did understand the need to make use of, indeed to radicalize, what they considered urban hillbilly culture. Beginning during the JOIN years, younger activists in Uptown identified the youth culture of their peers as an important site of ideological struggle. They reasoned that unlike organizing a workplace in which

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<sup>15</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, ed. Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 202.

laborers shared the “bread-and-butter issues” of wages and benefits and so on, organizing in a poor neighborhood with rampant unemployment required different modes of entry and different forms of collectivity.<sup>17</sup>

The early emphasis on youth culture—political education programs for youth gangs and protests against police brutality—grew into deeper reflections on the role of class in southern culture, white supremacy, and, ultimately, the possibility of radical hillbilly culture. Central to this was the understanding that culture was, as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall reminds us, “a noun of process”—that “while politics has to function on the terrain of the popular, the people and the popular are themselves constituted through discourses, collective practices, and cultural forms.”<sup>18</sup> In chapters two and three, I examine the Young Patriots use of poetry, political symbology, and country music to describe this process of polarizing culture in order to help define this notion of “the people,” and I also attend to the significance of the cultural forms they chose. These activists engaged with working-class culture despite a certain cultural chauvinism on the left—codified in Harrington’s “culture of poverty” thesis—that insisted the culture of poor whites required improvement and correction from outside. Standing this notion on its head, they insisted instead that not only was the culture of Uptown legitimate, but that it held resources for liberation. Working with the culture they had, the migrant music, speech, writing, and customs, these people politicized the life of their community from within.

The interplay between the role of the revolutionary and the community organizer form a third thematic current of this project. Like the Panthers and the Young Lords, the Young Patriots saw their work reflected in each of these figures which they understood to be representative of two distinct modes of organizing. At times, these modes came into conflict. As Doug Youngblood once wrote in *The Rag*, an Austin-based underground paper:

Entirely too many people are running around with the idea that an organizer is some kind of super-human being with a computer for a brain and an incredible charismatic power that enables

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<sup>17</sup> Allen Young and Susan Adelman, “A Newer New Left,” *Liberation News Service*, October 16, 1968.

<sup>18</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, New Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 49; Hall, *Cultural Studies*, 202.



him to influence, sway, or change the direction of another person's thoughts and ideas at the drop of a hat. While this is the objective of an organizer, it's not quite that simple. The life of the organizer is about as romantic as a fire hydrant. Very seldom does it rise above knocking on doors, endless hours of conversation, gallons of coffee, and lots of phone calls when you are in the bathtub. In no way is this meant to say that organizing is unrewarding... There is too much emphasis on the rewards and not enough on the ass-busting that produces them.<sup>19</sup>

This was an argument against the mystification of organizing work and it encapsulates the value the Young Patriots placed on a politics that was direct, plainspoken, and pragmatic. At the same time, as the group evolved they adopted more of the revolutionary rhetoric and presentation we associate with the militant organizations of the New Left. Much of this discursive and imaginative shift can be attributed to the relationship they developed with the Panthers and other elements of the non-student left whose horizon of political change was avowedly internationalist and revolutionary. This more militant discourse was an extension of the Patriots' critique of class society in Uptown and it helped them articulate the shared aims of coalitional work and relate to an expanding network of peer organizations. At certain moments, these two modes of organizing came into conflict—some of these moments were quite decisive. When Preacherman formed the Patriot Party, he did so on the grounds that the Young Patriots were reformists, who would “rather relate to some barroom friends” than act as revolutionary leaders.<sup>20</sup> But these instances of internal conflict were exceptions to a more general understanding that these different modes of organization actually enabled one another. As we will see throughout this study, especially in discussions of the group's survival programs, one of the most compelling arguments the Young Patriots made—whether it was about working alongside black radicals or insisting that decent housing should be available to people regardless of whether they had money—was that securing the means of survival was a radical act, and that if any proof of this need be sought one could simply look to the furious response that was be visited on those who sought to build “radical constituencies acting in their own self-interest.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Doug Youngblood, “Youngblood On Organizing,” *The Rag*, March 18, 1968, 6.

<sup>20</sup> The Patriot Party, “The Patriot Party Speaks to the Movement,” in *The Black Panthers Speaks*, ed. Philip S Foner (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1995), 242.

<sup>21</sup> Mike James, “Getting Ready for the Firing Line: JOIN Community Union,” *The Movement Press*, 1968, 2.

Finally, this dissertation explores the enduring questions raised by this particular history of organizing along the margins, or the marginalizing edge of the American white working-class. In 1964 when Students for a Democratic Society launched Jobs Or Income Now, the pilot program that would one day become JOIN, they did so in anticipation of an imminent recession that would put masses of Americans out of work. The lofty goal was to figure out how to radicalize what would be a suddenly remaindered swath of the working-class and the ideas the students put forward included organizing to demand the old New Deal demands of government commitments to full employment and, barring that, universal basic income.<sup>22</sup> But when the students arrived in Chicago, the people they came to organize expressed entirely different concerns. Most existed outside the formal economy, mothers doing spot work and fighting to stay on welfare, men who got by working for predatory, often criminal, day labor companies, and alienated young people, some of whom gravitated to the newly arrived radicals. Together, students and community members reimagined JOIN as a “community union” focused on meeting the immediate needs of their neighbors first and building political consciousness from there.<sup>23</sup>

All the groups that descended from that initial idealistic SDS program developed modes of organizing that arose “not from the floor of the great factory nor the desire to seize the depths of the [representative political] process” but from the material conditions of life in Uptown, an urban slum with a huge concentration of white southerners who were locked out of politics by the local elite during a time of enormous social upheaval.<sup>24</sup> And this particular concatenation of social, economic, and cultural factors required forms of organization and solidarity that were shocking, new, and often illegible to outsiders whether on right or the orthodox left. As neither “workers” nor “students,” the activists of Uptown existed on the periphery of both the New and Old Left, and they confronted a set of issues particular, if not unique, to their position on the margins: police brutality, dangerous housing, food scarcity, the indignities

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Rothstein, “A Short History of ERAP,” accessed May 2, 2019, <http://content.cdlib.org/view?docId=kt4k4003k7>.

<sup>23</sup> James, “Getting Ready for the Firing Line: JOIN Community Union,” 3.

<sup>24</sup> Joshua Clover, Twitter post, March 25, 2020, 10:19 a.m., <https://twitter.com/joshuaclov3r/status/1242833507954483201>

of the welfare system and the precarity of the renter as well as the class chauvinism of their comrades. These were the realities of wageless life, and the Young Patriots produced an urban populism to meet them.<sup>25</sup>

A few words about sources and methods. This project is deeply indebted to many people who worked in, on, and around the Young Patriot Organization, but none more so than Hy Thurman, one of the first and last Young Patriots, recruited alongside his brother Ralph by Junebug and Youngblood in the summer of 1969. The first time I met Hy he took me to the Meteor Buffet, a Chinese restaurant in north Huntsville where, as he put it, “all the good working-class people go to eat.” Now in his late 60s, Hy keeps the group alive, in memory and in practice—touring the country to speak and show films about the history and thought of the Young Patriots while orchestrating a resurrection of the group among local activist organizations in Huntsville. Our meeting came early in the life of my project, during the winter of 2018, and having only studied the organization from the remove of a researcher working with old newspaper papers and sparse secondary sources I didn’t know what to expect from the old militant, But Hy, it turned out, was as open, generous, and unpretentious with his story as his invitation to a buffet might signal. Over the course of a long afternoon he described his life with the Young Patriots, from his induction in its earliest days during the summer of 1968, to its dissolution in the mid-seventies, to his current work reconstituting the organization.

He spoke about the shock he felt as a teenager from rural Tennessee when he arrived in Uptown and witnessed first-hand the grim conditions of his new home, and of the deep friendships that he found among the Young Patriots and the activists of the Rainbow Coalition. These were powerful experiences that shaped the course of his life and transformed him into a lifelong organizer. “People in Huntsville think this is the sort of thing you do because you are gifted or have a certain talent,” he told me somewhat self-deprecatingly, “when the truth I have failed at everything else—marriage, jobs—this organizing is

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Denning, “Wageless Life,” *New Left Review*, no. 66 (2010): 79–97.

the one thing that I am really good at, it's the only thing I can do."<sup>26</sup> But he also talked about the individual and collective trauma that had shaped his life as an activist. Hy lost many friends to the pressures and vicissitudes of movement politics and spoke very candidly about his own struggle with the anxiety, grief, and depression the years had imparted. But despite this, the legacy of the Young Patriots was something he intended to keep alive. And so here we were at the Meteor Buffet, me taking notes as Hy jumped from sixties skirmishes with Chicago alderman to his work building tent pallets for the homeless in Huntsville to the mud at Resurrection city to marching in the streets of Uptown.

Some people I would speak to were not quick to claim the group's legacy, and some who I was able to identify and contact were not interested in returning their time with the group. Roger Gadway, once a member of the short-lived Portland Patriot Party, opened our discussion by telling me that the first thing I should know, "was that we failed," before offering a blunt assessment of his chapter's revolutionary naivete and tenuous connection to any sort of community.<sup>27</sup> For others, the personal history of the group is one deep loss. When I spoke with Ethan Fesperman, the son of Darlene and Bill "Preacherman" Fesperman, he described how his life had been shaped by the collapse of the Patriot Party in the wake of the Upper West Side police raid, an event that had precipitated his parents' separation and an enormous amount of anguish for his father. His relationship to the group's history and his father's role in it was personal and fragmentary. I remember sitting together in the café of a Barnes and Noble as he did the math and tried to determine whether he was there as a baby when the police officers held the group at gunpoint.<sup>28</sup>

Unlike with Hy, these discussions were dominated by a sense of loss. Some of the ex-members and peripheral figures I was able to track down declined requests to talk, perhaps out of disinterest and a desire to leave that story in the past, perhaps out of an abundance of caution. COINTELPRO documents list page upon page of informants which began reporting on the group as soon as they started work with

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<sup>26</sup> Hy Thurman, interview with author, January 15, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Roger Gadway, interview with author, August 3, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Ethan Fesperman, interview with author, June 15, 2016.

the Panthers; as James Tracy and Amy Sonnie write, “for a good portion of the Patriots’ existence, there were actually more people watching the group than there were members.”<sup>29</sup> I now have some answers to my first questions about the group and their absence from popular memory. The Young Patriots disappeared because the larger movements they participated in dissolved, and the neighborhood that created them changed as these “urban hillbillies” left for the suburbs or returned South or went underground. And they also disappeared because the spirit of coalition that emerged from those conditions went away, or changed, as the kind of urban populist politics they practiced no longer found echoes in a national movement. In their absence, the prevailing wisdom about the intransigence of crackers, rednecks, shit kickers, [and] white trash” rushes back in, and their old difficult to interpret and contextualize, the logic of them buried in the past.<sup>30</sup>

Reflecting on interrupted and insurgent narratives today, my first thought is of doing research in the Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation’s papers at Stanford, and how I sat for hours one afternoon looking through logs of phone taps the FBI had maintained for Black Panther Headquarters, marveling at the sheer scope and sense of narrative fulness they provided. How complete that story seemed compared to the fragmentary one I was pursuing. When I began this project, I assumed that the great challenge would be to find the sources necessary to create something like clear picture of the Young Patriots. Very little writing, whether scholarly or popular, focuses on the group, and to the extent that an archive exists it is scattered, distributed between people like Hy who have carried the pieces along for years and years, and marked by the silences produced by the collapse of the organization are also gaps in the archive. For

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<sup>29</sup> Billy Keniston, “Hillbilly Revolutionaries: White Rebellion Against Injustice & Racism in 1960s Chicago,” *Blue Mountain Center Commons*, accessed March 16, 2020, <https://commons.bluemountaincenter.org/a-white-working-class-rebellion-years-before-trump/>. Keniston’s essay is a reflection on the life of his uncle, Andy Keniston of the Young Patriots, and explores how intergenerational trauma disrupts narratives like the story of the Patriots. He describes his attempts to track down members of the group and the silence he encounters, much of which he attributes to physical and psychological harassment meted out by the law enforcement and informants as a result of the group’s proximity to the Black Panther Party.

<sup>30</sup> James, “Getting Ready for the Firing Line: JOIN Community Union,” 1.

much of the process, I felt like Noel Ignatiev's description of the researcher as paleontologist "who builds a dinosaur from a tooth, forced to reconstruct from fragments, and to infer."<sup>31</sup>

The Young Patriots were not survived by any sort of stable organizational archive, no correspondence between members or meeting notes or organizational documentation exist today, as far as I have been able to determine. But they did leave a great many fragments—essays and polemics in underground newspapers, profiles by curious or hostile reporters, mimeographed fliers saved somehow by European scholars of social history, stray mentions in academic studies of Uptown's ethnic communities, and so on. As Ignatiev said, this project has been an exercise in assemblage, of following these sorts of fragments on to other fragments in an attempt to describe the Young Patriots thoroughly enough that they might have a new explanatory power. To whatever degree this effort succeeds, it has relied on enormously helpful archives, both digital and physical, including the *Independent Voices* open access collection of alternative press newspapers, digital collections held by the Wisconsin Historical Society and physical holdings at both the Chicago Public Library and the Chicago History Museum.

I have also relied heavily on discussions with people like Hy and Ethan as well as with those who have studied the group from a number of different angles, such as Daniel Tucker, curator of the traveling exhibition "Organize Your Own: The Politics and Poetics of Self-Determination Movements." These conversations proved a crucial counterpoint to my archival work. They not only provided a great deal of connective tissue in terms of the group's narrative—situating episodes in time, contextualizing decisions and relationships—but they helped me understand some of psychological and emotional complexity that might otherwise have remained hidden behind the radical imagery. On two occasions in particular these conversations opened up totally unanticipated areas of study: an offhand mention of organizing blues and bluegrass shows by Hy led to a chapter on country music and an offer by Daniel Tucker to share a large collection of unpublished poetry formed the core of another.

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<sup>31</sup> Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 179.

This study is also deeply indebted to the little secondary literature that exists on the Young Patriots. In 2011, Amy Sonnie and James Tracy published *Hillbilly Nationalists*, which featured a chapter on the Young Patriots that was likely the first careful treatment the group received.<sup>32</sup> Their work gave me a foundation from which to begin and innumerable leads to follow. I have drawn deeply from several studies of the Black Panther Party in which the Young Patriots appear as supporting players. These include Jakobi Williams' work on the Illinois Black Panther Party and Rainbow Coalition in *From the Bullet to the Ballot*; Jon Rice's excellent historical reconstruction, "The World of the Illinois Panthers"; and the indispensable *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, by Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin.<sup>33</sup> Works on Uptown have also been indispensable in terms of tracking the local history and political economy that produced the group as well as the national context in which that history played out. *Uptown: Poor Whites in Chicago*, Todd Gitlin and Nanci Hollander's work of activist reportage during their time with JOIN was a wealth of first-hand material and Devin Hunter's unpublished 2015 dissertation "Growing Diversity: Urban Renewal, Community Activism, and the Politics of Cultural Diversity in Uptown Chicago, 1940-1970" formed the bedrock of my understanding of the neighborhood's history and power structure.<sup>34</sup> Thomas Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* frames my thinking about the early rusting of the rust belt and James N. Gregory's scholarship on southern outmigration structures my analysis of the spread and fortune of migrants during the postwar period.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Amy Sonnie and James Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Melville House, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Williams, *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago*; Jon Rice, "The World of the Illinois Panthers," in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, ed. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 41-64; Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr, *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, (University of California Press, 2016).

<sup>34</sup> Todd Gitlin and Nanci Hollander, *Uptown: Poor Whites in Chicago* (New York, N.Y.: Harper Colophon, 1970); Devin Hunter, "Growing Diversity: Urban Renewal, Community Activism, and the Politics of Cultural Diversity in Uptown Chicago, 1940-1970" (Ph.D., Loyola University Chicago, 2015), [https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc\\_diss/1640](https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/1640).

<sup>35</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*; James N. Gregory, "Southernizing the American Working Class: Post-War Episodes of Regional and Class Transformation," *Labor History* 39, no. 2

Finally, this work rests on a great deal of cultural study, which I mean in the broad double sense of both academic work within the fields of cultural and literary studies, and music, literature, and art itself. Thinkers like Stuart Hall, Noel Ignatiev, Nancy Fraser, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have led me to most of what this project has to say about the politics of race and its social production, as well as the politics of social life and sociality itself, while scholars of working-class music and art have helped my connect this theoretical work to the historically distant world of the Young Patriots. Karl Hagstrom Miller's *Segregating Sound* and Michael Denning's work on the concept of mass culture in particular allowed me to see points of connection between cultures and methods that were vital to this project. I should also say, by way of ending this introduction, that some of the great pleasures of this project have come from feeling reoriented by what I thought would be details or tangents but which taught me more than I could have ever expected about the subject at this project's heart. Huey Newton once said that "we [the Panthers] are interested in everything the people are interested in," and I have tried to take this as a cue in terms of this dissertation's method and content in the sense that I have tried to identify things that mattered to people in Uptown and treat those things—whether that be country music in the hillbilly bar or the discordant Confederate flag patch on a radical's jacket—as objects of real explanatory power. In other words, I have tried to develop a theoretical analysis that is informed by and open to that which it studies.<sup>36</sup>

What follows is a broadly chronological account of the development and dissolution of the Young Patriot Party punctuated by thematically structured investigations into their thought and work. Chapter one describes the formation of the Young Patriot Organization as well as the group's roots in earlier Uptown activist work. Chapter Two begins an investigation of the Patriots' cultural work as well as their understanding of culture's role in radical politics. It focuses on a series of poetry collections self-published by the group under the direction of Doug Youngblood and the ways in which this effort

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(1998): 135–54. The archives at Berea College were enormously helpful in this regard as well and I am endlessly appreciate of the patience and guidance of both Sharyn Mitchell and Harry Rice.

<sup>36</sup> Huey P. Newton, *To Die For The People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 50.



attempted to describe and enact community. Chapter three enters Uptown's hillbilly bars, a favorite Uptown organizing locale, and details the group's use of country music as an organizing tool. It also situates this effort in the context of wider arguments about the political utility of country music as it pertains to the American political right. Chapter four covers the Young Patriots attempts to prevent an urban renewal project in Uptown and their subsequent involvement in a proposed alternative housing project—the Hank Williams Village. Finally, a conclusion examines the afterlife of the Young Patriot Organization and offers concluding remarks.

## Chapter 1

The Mountains in Chicago:  
Appalachian Outmigration, Urban Populism  
and the Formation of the Young Patriot Organization

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.

*Antonio Gramsci*

had enough of waiting on being white

*Fred Moten*

In the late afternoon of July 18, 1969, a large crowd formed on the lawn in front of the Oakland Auditorium. A breeze off Lake Merritt moved the fog through the trees along the boulevard as the assembled stood and milled about in the grass between the water and the convention center, waiting in the golden temperance that settles in late in the day. Along the length of the grand, Beaux Arts building, inscribed above its graceful arches and brass reliefs, ran the equally grand words: AUDITORIUM OF THE CITY OF OAKLAND DEDICATED BY THE CITIZENS TO THE INTELLECTUAL AND INDUSTRIAL PROGRESS OF THE PEOPLE. A small scuffle broke out when a few members of the Progressive Labor Party (banned from attending) were ejected, disappearing in a fluttering cloud of political literature. Aside from that, it was warm and pleasant and the police kept their distance, packed into patrol cars that idled a few blocks away.

Depending on where you stood along the political fissures that spread through the American left like cracks in ice during the final years of the 1960s, the Auditorium's stately invocation of democratic potential and civic improvement was either an ideal caption for what was about to unfold or a bad joke, for the four thousand people overspilling the lawn had come that evening to attend the first—and only—National Conference For A United Front Against Fascism. Among the crowd that evening you could have found a great diversity of opinion as to whether the words hanging over their heads were an appropriate blessing for a summit of radicals. According to Bobby Seale, who had co-founded the Black Panther Party For Self Defense just two years earlier in 1966, the idea for a United Front Against Fascism conference came about in 1968, when the Panthers and the Peace and Freedom Party independently came to the conclusion that they needed to court the political support of a wide range of domestic militant groups. While the Peace and Freedom Party withered after the presidential election of 1968, the Panthers' popularity and moral authority among the various factions and parties on the left was only growing.<sup>37</sup> By the summer of 1969, Huey Newton was in jail, Edridge Cleaver had fled to Algeria, and J. Edgar Hoover had declared, in a statement widely circulated in newspapers that summer, that of “the black extremist groups” proliferating in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., “the Black Panther Party, without question, represents the greatest threat to the internal security of the country.”<sup>38</sup>

While the Black Panther Party's political ideology was initially formed around armed self-defense against the police, the group very quickly sensed the limits of such a center, and turned toward a strategy of what they called “survival pending revolution.” This reconception of self-defense emphasized building support within local black communities and increasing capacity for community self-determination. Under the oversight of David Hilliard and the majority female rank and file membership, this led to a set of famous social programs like the Breakfast for Children Program—first opened in

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<sup>37</sup> In April of 1969, the Students for a Democratic Society passed a resolution naming Huey Newton—then serving two to 15 years in prison—the “most important ‘political prisoner’ in the United States” and announced that it was time “for SDS to give total and complete support to [the Panthers’] defense efforts. To do less would be a mockery of the word ‘revolutionary.’”

<sup>38</sup> J. Edgar Hoover quoted in “FBI Director Blacks Black Panthers,” *Oakland Tribune*, July 15, 1969, 17. From *Black Against Empire*, Bloom.

1969—and the free clinics. But it also meant coalition building. Panther leadership had come to believe that the chief struggle was no longer for black nationhood, but rather the collective, coordinated, revolutionary efforts of a panoply of oppressed communities.<sup>39</sup> We can note this shift in the party’s foundational Ten-Point Program. In the first draft, penned in 1966 by Newton and Seale, the third point read, “We want an end to the robbery by the white man of our black community.” Two weeks before the Conference it was officially amended, and by the time the crowd assembled in Oakland it stated, “We want an end to the robbery by the capitalist of our Black and oppressed communities.”<sup>40</sup> After his release from prison in the spring of 1970, the Panthers would go on to adopt Huey Newton’s theory of “intercommunalism,” a theory of global solidarity among communities (rather than nations) subjugated by empire—but in 1969, they were beginning the very practical work of breathing these networks of alliance and support into being. Hence the breakfast programs, and all the talk of class. Hence the waiting crowd of several thousand, collectively radical looking people lounging at attention in front of the Oakland Auditorium. Hence the policemen just out of sight around the corner.

The National Conference For A United Front Against Fascism had been announced a few months earlier, with handbills circulated via local chapters around the country and notice posted in the May 31<sup>st</sup> edition of *The Black Panther*. “**PEOPLE!**” it began:

**ORGANIZATIONS! GROUPS! YIPPIES! POLITICAL PARTIES! WORKERS!  
STUDENTS! PEASANT-FARMERS! YOU THE LUMPEN! POOR PEOPLE. BLACK  
PEOPLE. MEXICAN AMERICANS. PUERTO RICANS. CHINESE. ETC. ETC. WE  
MUST DEVELOP A UNITED FRONT AGAINST FASCISM.**<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> After his release from prison, Newton would explain that the Panthers political philosophy had progressed from “black nationalism” to “revolutionary nationalism” or “intercommunalism. “Newton observed that the ravages of imperialism had created this vast world of the underserved, which had in turn engendered unique opportunities for a kind of fluid solidarity beyond misleading and antique notions of national boundaries.”

<sup>40</sup> Bloom, 300

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

The call for attendance was intentionally as broad as could be; only the Progressive Labor Party, the left communist group who had opposed the Panthers on grounds that the group's nationalism was reactionary, was barred from attending.<sup>42</sup> And those who arrived that Friday in July, just three days before Neil Armstrong took the first steps on the moon and one month before Woodstock, represented among them the various hopes and grievances and solidarities and contradictions of the American left during tumultuous, contentious times.

Robert Jones, a reporter for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, attended the conference and described the scene outside the auditorium as being next to festive, like a big picnic. "When the door opened almost two hours behind schedule," he wrote, "the 4,000 or so white students, blacks, Chicanos, Indians, Japanese, laborers and farmworkers lined up [and] were frisked at the door... If for nothing but its composition, the meeting was remarkable."<sup>43</sup> Over three hundred organizations attended the conference, according to the Panthers. The ideological spread evoked the Popular Front of the 1930s, running from liberal reformist to old-line Communist, but also present were representatives of more recent movements organized around race, gender, and cultural nationalism. The logic of the conference was to bring these myriad groups together and attempt to find the points at which their various political axis intersected. Thus the program was designed to present the Panthers alongside Students for a Democratic Society and various groups from the Women's Liberation Movement; the Chinese-American "Red Guard" alongside the Puerto Rican "Young Lords" and Latin-American "Los Siete de la Raza"; and the Third World Liberation Army alongside Berkeley City Council members and the Reverend Jesse Jackson.

As Jones wrote, "Seale...struck both the tone and content of the weekend" in his opening remarks on Friday night. When the doors to the auditorium finally opened and the thousands of attendees found

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<sup>42</sup> Smith, "Panther Leaders Blast SDS," August 16, 1969.

Chapter 1 <sup>43</sup> Jones, "Panthers' White Conference," *The Nation*, Aug 11, 1969, 102.

their seats, Charles Garry introduced Seale, then party chairman, who welcomed them in a spirit of revolutionary nationalist solidarity and laid out the lofty aims for the conference:

So the objective of this workshop is to bring forth the needs on a NATIONAL LEVEL, on a NATIONAL SCALE. We're moving UNITEDLY to raise the consciousness of the people, the workers, the preachers who teach the workers and other oppressed people who are in the churches; to raise the consciousness of the students to bring the struggles that they've been waging to the communities and tell the people what's been happening; so that they can understand that its necessary that they exhaust the political means for the struggle of the people; that they go forth and begin to really deal with it practically—a community action program. We are going to wind this session up tonight with NATIONAL COMMITTEES (plural) to COMBAT FASCISM... We have no time for a lot of ideological infighting and bullcrap.<sup>44</sup>

The “national committees” which broke out after the opening speeches were working groups focused on various communities’ relationship to and fight against political and economic oppression. But the overarching aim was placed on class struggle, unity among radical groups, and common enemies, personified most clearly by the police. As one student attendee summed it up: “Everybody I know has been hit by a cop.”<sup>45</sup> The central shared project that emerged at the conference, was a resolution to prioritize community control or “decentralization” of police. It was spearheaded by the Panthers who saw it as a pragmatic, reformist step to create police accountability, but vociferously opposed by the Students For A Democratic Society who balked at Panther insistence that white groups fight for local control within white communities. “Police decentralization for all communities, not just the Black community,” as David Hilliard put it. This argument, which came down to the revolutionary and democratic potential of white people would irreparably damage the relationship between the two groups, but as this fight was brewing an alternative approach presented itself.

Somewhere in the middle of a long line of speakers, a young white guy sidled up to the podium. According to one reporter, he was “a stocky Southern boy who had moved to Chicago” and lived for years in Uptown, “its northside ghetto.” He wore a dark jean jacket and sunglasses that perched in the middle of a round face atop which a beret sat cocked to the side with militant Panther swagger. Displayed

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<sup>44</sup> Seale, “Chairman Seale Sums Up Conference,” transcript of speech, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Jones, ““Panthers’ White Conference,”” 102.

on each of these, the beret and the jacket, was a bewildering set of signs and symbols. Pinned on his lapel was a round rainbow flag, hand painted in thin vertical stripes of color laid down over a Nixon/Agnew button. On his beret he had sewn a set of patches: two upraised fists breaking chain, a block of text that read, “Resurrect John Brown”; the ubiquitous Panther demand—“Free Huey”; and then next to that, impossibly, somehow: the stars and bars of a Confederate flag. He didn’t look like other white guys at the rally (although he too was a student and an intellectual and a poet) and when he started to speak with his North Carolina burr he didn’t sound like them either. “Now, we have come from Chitown,” he told the crowd, his voice high, almost reedy. “We come from a monster”:

And the jaws of the monster in Chicago are grinding up the flesh and spitting out the blood of the poor and oppressed people, the blacks in the Southside, the Westside; the browns in the Northside; and the reds and the yellows; and yes, the whites – white oppressed people. You talk about have any white people before ever known what oppression is? Come to uptown Chicago. Five pig cars on a square block. White pigs murdering, brutalizing white brothers. Is it? Is it? Is it? We say, we talk to people a lot, and they say, “You hillbillies ain’t planning on picking up a gun or anything are ya? I mean, that one you brought from Kentucky, or North Carolina.” And we say to ‘em, “Listen here, why, you know, a gun ain’t nothing,” you know. A gun on the side of a pig means two things: it means racism and it means capitalism. And the gun on the side of a revolutionary, on the side of the people, means solidarity and socialism. Right on?

You can hear the man working the crowd in the recording, laughing in the breaks as the big auditorium cheers. “Let me get a hold of that son-of-a-bitch—and you can beep it out if you want to. They beep out Johnny Cash, you know, ‘cause he tells the truth. When I go up before that McClellan,” he growled, taking aim at Senator John McClellan, chair of the Senate Subcommittee on Investigations, “on behalf of the Southern people, and on behalf of all people, I’m gonna bite off his head and spit it in Nixon’s face.”<sup>46</sup> On the recording, the crowd goes wild.<sup>47</sup>

The young man at the podium that night was Bill Fesperman, the 26-year-old field secretary of the Young Patriots, a group of self-proclaimed revolutionary hillbillies from the Uptown neighborhood on Chicago’s northside. The product of a half-decade of organizing and action by southern migrants, student radicals, and a multi-racial coalition of the Second City’s poor, the Young Patriots were, for the few years

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<sup>46</sup> “Young Patriots at the United Front Against Fascism Conference (1969) - Viewpoint Magazine.”

<sup>47</sup> Ibid..

they existed, partners in close coalition with the Black Panther Party via their Illinois chapter. In spite of their small size, the locality focus, and the set of explicitly Southern cultural trappings (the Confederate flag was the most dramatic, but not the only example) the group's alignment with, and acceptance by the Panthers, made them seem living proof of the potential for left-wing revolt within the white working class. In the weeks following the Conference for a United Front Against Fascism, the Young Patriots found themselves positioned in the fraught debate over white participation in the black liberation movement. One of the few concrete measures to emerge from the conference was a country wide petition campaign for community control of the police, whereby local communities would vote to establish oversight of local law enforcement. The Students for a Democratic Society balked. They supported such control in black areas, but maintained that in white communities it would undermine fights against white supremacy and "lead to white vigilante bands."<sup>48</sup> When they refused to circulate the petition their relationship with the Panthers dissolved.

In August of 1969, Bobby Seale and David Hillard did a round of blistering interviews in which they lashed out at SDS, dismissing them as "little Boy Scouts and Brownie groups," uncomfortable with "something that's obviously too revolutionary for them to deal with."<sup>49</sup> The Panthers saw SDS's reluctance as proof that the students wanted to dictate action in black communities, and insisted instead that to abandon white communities to white supremacy was deeply reactionary. They held up the Young Patriots as the counterexample—an antiracist white group who was willing and able to organize their poor and working-class neighbors in the name of revolution. This split between the Panthers and SDS, who just weeks earlier they had dubbed the black nationalist group the "vanguard" of the revolution in America, marked an important divergence in the history of the New Left.<sup>50</sup> In that history, the Young Patriots appear as an enigmatic footnote. Recognized by the Panthers, thrust into the spotlight of a national debate, they were, for a moment, the good white radicals that militants like Seale, Hilliard, and

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<sup>48</sup> Sale, *SDS*, 410.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, "Panther Leaders Blast SDS," 4.

<sup>50</sup> As Kirkpatrick Sale writes in *SDS*, this split between the Panthers and SDS had the effect of empowering the Weathermen faction of SDS that *they* were the vanguard of the New Left and spurred them toward greater militancy.



Elaine Brown were looking for. “The Young Patriots are the only revolutionaries we respect that ever came out of the mother country,” they declared in an interview with *Guardian* after the conference.<sup>51</sup>

Their relationship with the Black Panther Party was a pillar of the Young Patriots’ existence and the primary reason they stick in historical memory. But they were more than a white wedge in a set of internecine struggles on the Left, and more than just a footnote to Panther history. The group was a product of unrest and community organizing in one of Chicago’s most impoverished neighborhoods, and, while their membership was integrated (an important point to be discussed later), spoke in the name of the city’s poor southern whites, one of the city’s many enigmatic and misconstrued migrant populations. Drawn to the city by the promise of jobs, many of these migrants found themselves exposed to the leading edge of economic recession: persistent unemployment, ever worsening slum conditions in housing, violent over-policing, and the anti-democratic forces of urban renewal. Over the course of the 1960s, many groups formed in Uptown to respond to these issues. They ranged in structure from youth gangs to community unions and while their aims and strategies varied and conflicted they were deeply intertwined out of circumstance and necessity. They shared members, histories, and enemies. For much of the decade, southern migrant protest in Uptown took the form of the myriad contests through which the poor fight to control the conditions under which they live their lives: rent strikes, welfare office pickets, petitions, and marches, all aimed at bettering life and increasing community power in Uptown during a period in which a moneyed, property owning class was attempting to revitalize the blighted area.<sup>52</sup> The Young Patriots emerged from this network of local activists and street level organizers in 1969—after King had been assassinated and riots had swept through American cities like fire through tall grass—and called not for reform but revolution.

What does this mean, though, to call for revolution in the streets of Chicago? What makes a radical hillbilly radical? Is it a matter of style or substance? And if the answer is both then what is the

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<sup>51</sup> Smith, “Panther Leaders Blast SDS,” August 16, 1969.

<sup>52</sup> Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode.”

relationship between the two? Finally, is it a contradiction in terms to be radical *and* white during a period of white backlash and black power? Images of the Young Patriots hover just below the surface of historical consciousness, even on the left, even in the South. They're evocative and melancholic, and at certain points the images they left behind—these pictures of black and white militants standing together like chess pieces in insurrection—break the surface and appear again, jarring reminders of some unfulfilled project. But the story of the Young Patriots and what they stood for remains buried, and with it a full sense of their importance, appeal, and the real content of their radicalism. The aim of this project is to excavate some of that story and to frame what exists in a new light.

The Young Patriots insisted that poor white people could be radical agents of community control and anti-racist organizing. They carried on a history of self-organization that had been developed among the poor in Uptown and recast it in light of the cultural nationalist moment so important to the left in the late 1960s, and in doing so were able to interpret the politics of race and class in a way that spoke to, rather than alienated, their neighbors. Their wager was not only that poor white people could find common ground with poor people of other races, but that an interracial movement of the poor—that frustrated dream of the American left—was possible in Chicago in 1969, because of the great degree of overlap in the ways a diverse array of poor communities in the city were oppressed, often violently. The Young Patriots believed that members of the white working class could come to anti-racism and interracial solidarity through examining their own class experience and connecting it to the experience of others, but this analysis had to deal with the concrete. It needed to be rooted in particular historical experiences and the ways in which they intersected in particular places. Southern migrants in Uptown understood that the lack of control they had over their own lives was because they were poor, far from home, and marked out by their southernness. The Young Patriots' wager was that through organization, this common sense understanding of powerlessness could be sharpened into a populist class critique which could also serve as the foundation for solidarity with people of other races. To the extent that the Young Patriots inhere in American memory it is because they dramatized the possibility of white participation in an interracial coalition of the poor—not as leaders, or as allies, but as active participants

with shared interests. Historically seen as defectors from interracial coalitions, here was a time when poor whites not only chose solidarity over reaction but seemed to be among the vanguard of radical change. This image of coalition is compelling. But more important are the reasons and processes out of which the coalition was built and the pressures under which it dissolved.

### **Mountains They Are Moving**

The story of the Young Patriots begins before Chicago, in the great southern migration that spanned the first three quarters of the twentieth century, and in which people left their homes in hollows and foothills and marginal farmland of the American South at a rate unprecedented in the nation's history. In the full span of the century, over 8 million black southerners, 20 million white southerners, and 1 million southern-born Latinos, resettled outside the region of their birth—some for a time, some for good.<sup>53</sup> It is difficult to appreciate the massive scale of this movement, the greatest demographic and spatial reorganization seen in the country since westward expansion. Their movements changed American politics and culture forever; they filled the munitions factories during the war and the auto plants after it; they radically altered the racial makeup of American cities and their blue-collar workforces; they both countrified urban culture and had their country culture urbanized; and they became subjects and agents of our national discourse on poverty and assimilation. Such a massive migration carried out over the course of decades is difficult to speak about in general terms. It goes without saying these migrant flows were made up of people whose motivations, stories, and desires were uncountable by even the most clear-eyed demographer or statistician. But the great shape of the migration is important and revealing.

Migration out of the South has a long history. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, slaves and nominally free black laborers fled the region for work North and West, while white workers left either to pursue

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<sup>53</sup> Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 14.

abundant land outside of a slave society where it was monopolized, or, on the other hand, to extend that slave society into new territories.<sup>54</sup> Following the Civil War, these channels of migration were renewed. Census records report that 1 million southern-born whites and 335,000 southern-born blacks lived outside the region in 1900. But while the promise of western land or northern wages had long been a carrot drawing laborers out of the South, the scale and character of out-migration changed dramatically as World War I erupted and Congress moved to dramatically restrict immigration. In the decade leading up to the war, an average of 1 million immigrants arrived in the United States, with no quotas and relatively few restrictions on who was to be admitted. A combination of diminished travel from Europe and the Immigration Act of 1917 radically altered foreign immigration patterns, cutting off the nation's primary supply of industrial labor. And so, when the War arrived and millions of jobs appeared almost overnight, northern industry looked to the reserve labor power of the South.

Migrants followed the push and pull of major shifts in the national economy. By 1920, over 2.7 million southerners were living outside the region where they were born, and by 1930 that figure would rise to more than 4 million. This first phase of mass southern outmigration slowed during the early years of the Great Depression. During this period, return migration was observed, as many migrants—overwhelmingly white—who had made the journey north during the 1920s returned home. As the economy began to recover in the mid-1930s and word of jobs filtered down, outmigration resumed, tentatively at first, but growing in intensity as the economy improved. Then the country went to war again and outmigration exploded. As the historian James Gregory writes, “World War II initiated the greatest spatial reorganization of Americans in the nation's history, and southerners were at the heart of the

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<sup>54</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 28. Du Bois expands on this in an early chapter from *Black Reconstruction*:

The resultant revolt of the poor whites, just as the revolt of the slaves, came through migration. And their migration, instead of being restricted, was freely encouraged. As a result, the poor whites left the South in large numbers. In 1860, 399,700 Virginians were living out of their native state. From Tennessee, 344,765 emigrated; from North Carolina, 272,606, and from South Carolina, 256,868. The majority of these had come to the Middle West and it is quite possible that the Southern states sent as many settlers to the West as the Northeastern states, and while the Northeast demanded free soil, the Southerners demanded not only free soil but the exclusion of Negroes from work and the franchise. They had a very vivid fear of the Negro as a competitor in labor, whether slave or free.

process.”<sup>55</sup> Everything that had been held in check by the Depression, its lingering effect on the cost benefit analysis every migrant had to make before deciding to up and go, tales of immiseration and city breadlines, all of these resistances crumbled in the face of the wartime job boom, and reignited a migration trend that would continue for the next three decades at a previously unseen pace. By 1950, 7.5 million Americans who were born south of the Mason Dixon had settled across it for work. That number would continue to rise: to 9.8 million in 1960, 10.8 million in 1970, to its peak at 12 million in 1980.<sup>56</sup>

This second phase of southern outmigration—beginning with World War II and ending around 1970 when the migration flow reversed as northerners moved south in record numbers—reshaped America and its politics. It was “preeminently a blue-collar migration prompted by regional disparities in wages, jobs, and labor supplies,” writes Gregory, “a blue-collar migration aimed at the great job centers of the North and West during the prime decades of American industrial triumph.”<sup>57</sup> Migrants of all races left the largely rural south, gripped by rapid mechanization and hemorrhaging jobs, for the prospect of better work and wages in the north, and, relatively speaking, they found them. According to Gregory, “the data are quite clear: throughout the twentieth century, white migrants from the South have mostly done well in the economies of the North and West.”<sup>58</sup> They arrived in places like Detroit and Los Angeles and Chicago during a period of largesse that would become the benchmark for American prosperity moving forward. But as big as pie was in the postwar economy, and as well as recently arrived populations fared relative to their new neighbors or the friends and family they left behind, access to it proved uneven.

It is no coincidence that the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was founded in Oakland, a city which saw its black population increase 500% in the decade between 1940 and 1950.<sup>59</sup> Each of its founders was a migrant, brought to Oakland by parents fleeing the racial caste system of the South only to encounter a refigured racism in the West. Huey Newton was born in Monroe, Louisiana, Bobby Seale in

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<sup>55</sup> Bois and Lewis, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 28.

<sup>56</sup> Gregory, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Gregory, 38.

<sup>58</sup> Gregory, 83.

<sup>59</sup> Murch, *Living for the City*, 16.

Liberty, Texas, and Lil' Bobby Hutton, their first recruit, in an area of Pine Bluff, Arkansas known as "Pot Liquor." In fact, every early leader of the Oakland BPP (with the exception of Elaine Brown) had made this trip, usually as children, out of the South and into the city. In light of this, we might consider the politics of the Panthers as a politics of migrants, and their relationship with the Young Patriots as grounded in a shared project of reimagining the South in the North, and vice versa. It was a particular form of radical politics sparked by the shared experience of being recent arrivals who were unwelcome and unfamiliar to locals, and deciding to claim a space regardless.

But while the story of the Young Patriots is a migrant story, it represents a particular set of experiences within the larger mass movement. To look simply at the raw numbers on migration means confronting a whole set of popular assumptions about the exodus. While we typically think of twentieth-century southern outmigration as a black phenomenon, it was, quantitatively speaking, overwhelmingly white by a factor of 6 to 1. And of those white migrants, the majority found what they were after when they moved: steady employment, higher wages, home ownership, union membership, and so on.<sup>60</sup> In this glimpse of the big picture, all southern outmigration during the twentieth century was a response to large-scale, regional imbalances in wages and labor supply, and as a risk it was worth taking. But within this macro-economic imperative were distinct racial and regional imperatives. Black workers in the south were in search of better jobs, but also seeking to escape a racial caste system, to take the obvious example. There were, in other words, many great migrations within the Great Migration.

Black and white migrants left different, if overlapping Souths, and most had divergent experiences of the migration. Black migrants to the North and West tended to come from the deep south, comprised of around 600 counties from Southern Virginia to East Texas—roughly 200 of which had a black majority at the beginning of the 1940s—an area dominated by cotton cultivation. They went north and west along railroad lines, settling in Chicago, and Detroit, and Oakland, and Los Angeles. Their arrival meant dramatic demographic shifts in these urban centers, and in response they were met with

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<sup>60</sup> Berry, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles*; Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*.

organized hostility by white politicians, homeowners, and labor leaders, who aimed to keep them on the margins of social and economic life. “In Detroit,” writes the historian Thomas Sugrue:

as in every other Northern city with a sizeable black population, conflicts over race and housing moved to the center of local political debates. Detroit's whites, like their counterparts in Chicago, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and Trenton, resisted the African American migration regardless of the size of the influx of black newcomers. Elected officials in almost every major northern city grappled with public policies, from housing to antidiscrimination laws, intended to address the problems generated by racial conflict.<sup>61</sup>

Between 1940 and 1970, 40% of the South's 1940 black population left.<sup>62</sup>

White migrants, by contrast, came not from the deep south, but the areas that surrounded it—a band of states stretching from West Virginia to Texas. This “outer South” was whiter and its economy was built around general farming and extractive industry: coal mining in southern Appalachia, fishing on the coast, oil in Texas and Oklahoma, and timber wherever it could be felled and taken out. These migrants left the South packed into buses and cars and trucks, motoring north along roads that became known as the “hillbilly highways.” They settled in major urban centers as well as rural areas, small towns, and the growing suburbs and faced little of the outright hostility experienced by blacks. As Chad Berry writes, “white southerners—from the lowlands as much as the highlands, from a tremendous variety of backgrounds—were recruited and welcomed by northern industrialists and agriculturalists.”<sup>63</sup> Recent research has shown that southern-born white migrants, by and large, fared well when they reached the North. Most found jobs and homes, shed markers of southernness when needed, and disappeared into the growing blue-collar working class.<sup>64</sup>

White migrants who secured work in the postwar economic boom years of the North were, statistically speaking, the most representative figure of this great southern out-migration. In terms of sheer numbers, they outpaced African Americans in every wave of the exodus and—not discounting the

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<sup>61</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 13.

<sup>62</sup> The first wave of black migration out of the south occurred between 1910 and 1940 and doubled the percentage of blacks living in the North and West. See Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*; Lemann, *The Promised Land*; Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*.

<sup>63</sup> Berry, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles*, 6.

<sup>64</sup> Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*.

psychic challenges of leaving home and family—managed to stake out their own corner in the promised land with relative ease as they were added to the rolls of the tire factories and steel foundries and General Motors assembly lines which were both the guarantors and beneficiaries of an ascendant American economy. But again, even such humble fortune was unevenly distributed. Blacks fleeing the Jim Crow South encountered decades of organized hostility in the north where their arrival dramatically altered demographics and prompted backlash. But in the twenty-five years following the end of World War II, fat years for American industry busy converting war production into domestic production, some southern-born white migrants became a problem as well.

While much of the first wave of academic literature on southern white migration was an empirical response to their sensational reception by journalists, it shared some of the reporters' approach and focused heavily on the problems of adjustment. When the second wave of this scholarship arrived, it offered a corrective, painting a picture of a broadly successful white migration defined by economic attainment, difficult as it might have been.<sup>65</sup> But while this literature persuasively made the case that most white southern migrants did not remain mired in the poverty earlier scholarship identified, it deemphasized the experience of those who fell outside the social average. As J. Trent Alexander, a migration researcher, wrote recently, that while southern migrants broadly speaking were successful, certain populations within that regional descriptor did in fact experience prolonged, deep poverty. "In large cities, for instance," he writes, "Appalachian migrants' poverty rates hovered around 30 percent, which put them on par with those of Southern African American migrants as well as international immigrants from Eastern Europe, Mexico, and Vietnam." White migrants from the non-Appalachian South, comparatively, had an average poverty rate of "just over ten percent."<sup>66</sup>

The less fortunate of these white migrants did not disappear into the midcentury miracle of steady wages and regular employment, suburbs and homeownership. Instead, they found themselves thrown into cities like Detroit, Chicago, Cincinnati, and Baltimore, where rather than assimilate, they gathered

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<sup>65</sup> Berry, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles*; Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*.

<sup>66</sup> Obermiller et al., "Major Turning Points."



together in poor neighborhoods and in the process became conspicuous. While most southern migrants could shed negative class markers—accents, rural habits, etc.—and assimilate into the upwardly mobile classes of American society via a certain degree of economic success, those who clustered in poor migrant neighborhoods were saddled with stereotypes that naturalized their poverty. Through the familiar logic of scapegoating and othering, they became “hillbillies” in the city. Popular stereotypes held that Appalachian poverty derived from an intransigent, fatalistic culture which produced a region of primitive Americans almost removed from history. In the cities these stereotypes were useful in explaining and naturalizing grim conditions in the southern slums. Through this idea of the hillbilly, “our contemporary ancestors” out of place in the modern city, poverty could be explained away as cultural, a logical process by which the stigmas associated with this poor population were continually reinforced.<sup>67</sup> One poll of Detroiters in 1953 “asked residents to identify “undesirable” groups they wanted to see leave the city. “Poor southern whites” and “hillbillies” polled at 21 percent, second only to “criminals and gangsters” but well ahead of “drifters,” “negroes,” and “foreigners.”<sup>68</sup>

Even though the share of white migrants who wound up mired in poverty was relatively small, and most settled outside of these notorious southern slums, the migrant experience of entrenched urban poverty is an important component of the larger picture. The grim realities encountered by migrants who moved into the “southern ghettos” in cities like Cincinnati, Baltimore, Detroit, and Chicago are put into their proper context only when set alongside the more stable lives most white migrants found. These neighborhoods had a qualitative specificity, to borrow a term from the historian Moishe Postone—they were home to a particular minority experience of the outmigration which is both exceptional and crucial to understanding out-migration as a whole. So, while white southern migrants weren’t the Joads and Snopeses journalists and anthropologists once maintained they were, the lives and fortunes of the poorest

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<sup>67</sup> William Goodell Frost, third president of Berea college (serving from 1892-1920) used this paternalistic phrase “our contemporary ancestors” sympathetically, in order to insist on the quintessential American character of the mountaineers who he positioned as a kind of antique American stock removed from benefits and degradations of historical progress.

<sup>68</sup> Hunter, “Growing Diversity,” 122.

migrants do reveal the power of class and race to shape not only the outcomes of migration—employment, wages, homeownership—but the ways in which migration forced people concerned about their own situation to reflect on class and race in America. The Young Patriots were one of many groups who organized in response to life after the migration. In “Little Appalachias” like Cincinnati’s Lower Price Hill and Detroit’s Cass corridor, churches, social service organizations, student radicals, non-profits, political parties, citizen councils, radio stations, and police departments were all mobilized to address the white migrant problem. Some sought to solve it through social and cultural programs, some through assimilation or spiritual uplift. Others tried bulldozers and nightsticks. But in Uptown Chicago, the most notorious of the hillbilly ghettos, the Young Patriots took the situation of the migrant—their own situation and that of their neighbors—and transformed the discontent, anger, and fear into something radical.

### **Chicago’s Hillbilly Harlem**

Five miles north of the Loop, twenty-five minutes on the El, twenty by car, sits Uptown. To its north, the neighborhoods of Edgewater and Rogers Park, then Evanston and Northwestern University; to its West, Lincoln Square and Ravenswood; and to the East, Lakeshore Drive, Montrose Beach, the slate gray expanse of Lake Michigan. They called it “Hillbilly Heaven” after the end of the Second World War. One ½ square mile, home to some 80-thousand people at any given point during the 1950s and 60s; around half of whom are southerners, and most of these from southern Appalachia; 70% of those living in the densest areas (Central Uptown and the Broadway Corridor) were newcomers who had arrived since 1954.<sup>69</sup> It was the second densest neighborhood in Chicago after the black neighborhood of Lawndale, with a 13% vacancy rate and an accelerating form of blight—run down hotel apartments with no bath—unmatched anywhere else in the city.<sup>70</sup> One ½ square miles of giant, subdivided apartment hotels,

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<sup>69</sup> Hunter, 32.

<sup>70</sup> Gitlin and Hollander, *Uptown*, xix.

moldering ballrooms, flophouses, men's hotels and bars, empty lots and storefront churches; some single-family homes, earlier immigrants—Eastern European, Chinese, Japanese—weathering declining property values, some much nicer houses near the lake, home to people with means to capitalize on the decline, but mostly it was crowded apartments, with bad plumbing and insulation, scaffolded by multi-level wooden porches in the back, a respite in the summer, good for idling or people-watching or hanging wash, notorious for burning; and everywhere—everywhere excepting the moneyed collar on Uptown's eastern edge—representatives of the law, cruising Broadway and Lawrence, Kenmore and Wilson—"a police car every minute."<sup>71</sup> Check your watch: *every minute*"—out to keep the neighborhood tension tamped down: stop the fights, break up any kids to get a drag going, monitor the dealers and pimps, maybe kick around some hillbillies or agitators.<sup>72</sup>

It wasn't always like this. Originally Lake View Township, the area was annexed by the city of Chicago in 1871. In 1900, the city extended the Northwestern el line into the area, which in turn developed as a thriving retail and entertainment district.<sup>73</sup> By the late 1920s, the little township had been transformed into a business-friendly Bohemia just north of the Loop, and was home to film studios, ornate ballrooms, mobbed up cocktail lounges, and a solid middle class. Real estate developers built hundreds of two- and six-flat multi-family units as well as a handful of high-rise apartment buildings in the heart of the neighborhood. Well into the Depression, Uptown remained one of the most desirable "retail, residential, and commercial neighborhoods on Chicago's northside."<sup>74</sup> But things began to change as the country entered World War II and landlords began to subdivide their properties, especially the large apartment buildings East of Broadway in the Winthrop-Kenmore corridor, in order to make room for additional tenants, many of them servicemen and war industry workers.<sup>75</sup> As more and more people

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., xvii.

<sup>73</sup> Guy, "Down Home," 40.

<sup>74</sup> Grevstad-Nordbrock, "An Analysis of Diverse Gentrification Processes and Their Relationship to Historic Preservation Activity in Three Chicago Neighborhoods," 241.

<sup>75</sup> Guy, "Down Home," 59.

flooded into Uptown, willing to rent small rooms on a temporary basis, the incentive for more landlords to subdivide more properties went up and the population of the neighborhood became increasingly concentrated. “Consequently, rents dropped, short-term leasing became standard in the area, and landlords began to delay maintenance on their buildings. Many apartment buildings were converted into transient boarding houses or SROs” (Single Room Occupancies).<sup>76</sup>

Cheap rent and abundant, though substandard, housing transformed Uptown into a magnet for migrants seeking a foothold in Chicago. The neighborhood began to attract a diverse population of the working poor, including southern African Americans, Japanese Americans displaced from California, and Native Americans encouraged to relocate from Oklahoma and the Upper Midwest. But the overwhelming influx came from white Southerners, especially whites from the coalfields of Southern Appalachia which began to hemorrhage population in the postwar years. Long an area of small-scale subsistence farming, the arrival of Northern capital and the region’s internal population pressure combined to make work increasingly scarce and dangerous, sending the able, ambitious, and desperate alike outward. “The almost overnight development of the coal industry at the turn of the [twentieth] century followed by a drastic decline after 1924, the national depression between 1929 and 1937, and the increasing wartime production in major industries outside the region after 1940 served either to push or pull Appalachians about the mountain region and eventually uprooted them completely.”<sup>77</sup>

Farms became smaller and less productive in the first few decades of the century, making subsistence more difficult and reliance on coal jobs inevitable.<sup>78</sup> The human toll of this overreliance became clear as each fluctuation in the industry’s fortunes meant mass unemployment. Increasingly, those affected, whether out of work miners or families who depended on industrial work to supplement their farms, simply left the region for more stable work in cities. Oftentimes they returned home when coal

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<sup>76</sup> Grevstad-Nordbrock, “An Analysis of Diverse Gentrification,” 243.

<sup>77</sup> SMITH, “Where There Are No Mountains,” 184.

<sup>78</sup> The ecological base was overtaxed whether carved up among succeeding generations in large families, bought out by industry men,

production resumed or urban jobs dried up, establishing a pattern of “shuttle migration” that responded to the intraregional economic push and pull. After World War II, however, a series of strategic decisions by mine owners and United Mine Workers (UMWA) leadership combined to push southerners out of the mountains at unprecedented rates. Facing a decline in the demand for coal and a dramatic strike, mine operators and the UMWA struck an agreement that “traded union acceptance of mechanization and the resulting loss of jobs for high wages and a health and welfare fund that promised comfortable retirements and good medical care for both retirees and miners.”<sup>79</sup> As it would happen, job losses came quickly as production exploded: a single “continuous miner” machine enabled “ten men to produce three times the tonnage mined by eighty-six miners loading coal by hand.”<sup>80</sup>

Of the 475,000 people who worked in the deep mines at the end of World War II, fewer than half held those same jobs in 1960 and by 1970 that number stood at 107,000. Dramatic as these numbers are, and as singular and tyrannical as coal was, the rapid loss of mining jobs affected countless other industries which supported or benefitted from it. Coal was the center of a network, and as it dwindled so did the web of jobs at its periphery. Without the prospect of work in coal or the peripheral effects of coal wages, people left in staggering numbers. Between 1940 and 1970 over three-million people left the Appalachian region, with two-million leaving in the 1950s alone, a decade in which mining counties in Kentucky, West Virginia, Alabama and the Virginias lost between 15 and 30 percent of their population.<sup>81</sup>

During the war, Appalachians had been recruited by factory owners and their labor scouts, desperate for men and women to stock and sustain the arsenal of democracy. These industrialists were aided by the United States Employment Services, who would lend them everything from logistical coordinators to military convoys which would drive into the mountains and set up film equipment to

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<sup>79</sup> Williams, *Appalachia*, 318.

<sup>80</sup> Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 20.

<sup>81</sup> Eller, 20; Williams, *Appalachia*, 318; *Maryland in World War II*, 426.

project advertisements for factory jobs. One Baltimore firm, a fireworks manufacturer, hired a plane to blanket southern West Virginia with 50,000 recruiting flyers.<sup>82</sup>

Many of the migrants who left Appalachia for wartime jobs eventually returned home. Whether because work dried up, or became distasteful, or simply because that was the plan, to come and earn money and leave. But enough stayed put in the cities to establish routes of chain migration and port of entry communities such that even at low ebb migrant destinations were well known. Southern migrants began arriving in Uptown during the 1940s, at first drawn to the cheap and plentiful housing, then later, once a critical mass had developed, to the diasporic community as well. Between 1955 and 1960, Chicago received more than 26,800 migrants from Appalachia, and most of them poured into an Uptown under contention.<sup>83</sup> Coinciding with the postwar influx of migrants was the formation of a group named the Uptown Chicago Commission (UCC). The UCC represented commercial interests in Uptown as well as the desire of middle- and upper-class residents to check what they considered as growing blight and to stem or offset the arrival of low-income individuals and families. The group was supported by local businesses, including neighborhood banks and insurance agencies as well as more well-to-do landlords and, eventually, the city's Department of Urban Renewal. Emphatically pro-development, the group exemplified mid-century "liberal urbanism," convinced that modernization and expert management could rehabilitate Uptown with minimal conflict.<sup>84</sup> But this elite vision for Uptown—discussed at great length in chapter four of this project—quickly came into conflict with neighborhood groups and set the stage for two-decades of political struggle in Uptown. In a very real sense, they helped produce the Young Patriots by deciding to remove them.

Much of the conflict centered on the question of rehabilitation and removal. For years, those committed to neighborhood revitalization had campaigned against slum landlords who they saw as creating the conditions which attracted low-income migrants, but their piecemeal approach had done little

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<sup>82</sup> *Maryland in World War II*, 426.

<sup>83</sup> The third largest receiving city after Atlanta and Washington D.C.

<sup>84</sup> Hunter, "Growing Diversity," 9.

to reverse the more general trend. Beginning in the mid-1950s, the council of landowners, businessmen, and local politicians began to think in more comprehensive terms, putting together a series of “paper plans” aimed at engineering large-scale neighborhood rebirth. Chief among the problems were the hillbilly slums. As one city plan described the challenge: “Parts of the area have become ports of entry for newcomers to the city. Many of these persons are low-income, rural Appalachian whites for whom adjustment to an urban environment is difficult...Poor property maintenance standards of large numbers of families in the overcrowded and densely developed Uptown neighborhood often lead to rapid deterioration of housing.”<sup>85</sup> A municipal judge put the whole coded matter-of-factness of the situation a little more bluntly: “I can’t say this publicly, but you’ll never improve the neighborhood until you get rid of them.”<sup>86</sup>

The arrival and concentration of Southerners became both symptom and cause for neighborhood decline in the eyes of developers, and by virtue of their peculiar visibility—white but poor across the board, culturally distinct and suspicious of calls to assimilate—they helped transform the neighborhood into a peculiar postwar battleground where the relationship between race, class, and real estate was hashed out in some inverted echo of the canonical late-60s disturbances: black power, urban riots, early deindustrialization, and Urban Renewal. As neighborhood powerbrokers laid out their vision of Uptown’s future in stark terms, the poor and working class organized in response.

### **Organize Your Own**

Hy Thurman, one of the founding members of the Young Patriots was born in Dayton, the small East Tennessee town famous for hosting the 1925 Scopes Trial, into a poor family with limited prospects. The Thurmans were laborers, scratching out a living bringing crops in—beans, corn, strawberries—off farms

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<sup>85</sup> Gitlin and Hollander, xix.

<sup>86</sup> Votaw, “The Hillbillies Invade Chicago,” 64.

they didn't own.<sup>87</sup> "My mother and my elder sister had the same foot size," he told one interviewer, "but they only had one decent pair of shoes. My sister would go to school in them and she'd come home, and my mother would use them to go into town."<sup>88</sup> Hy's older brother Ralph left for Chicago around 1965, and in 1967, having dropped out of high school after the ninth grade and into the doldrums of small town life, Hy followed suit and left for Uptown. What he found shocked him. "When I got to Chicago I was reading on a third-grade level," Hy told me. "And so the only thing I knew about the North was what I'd seen on TV, which was totally fucking false. I get there and it's just, "My God, how can you live like this? It was dirty, there was no place to go, kids were playing in the street. There was no grass, no trees. A cop everywhere you looked." His adjustment was jarring. Work was secured quickly, but it came and it went. Day labor agencies might hire you out to fold cardboard boxes or run a forklift in a warehouse, but it almost never turned to solid employment (corruption here was rampant, and many employers signed agreements not to hire anyone who had temped through the agencies). Hy was employed when he could find work and sold plasma when he couldn't.<sup>89</sup>

Meanwhile, at the invitation of his brother, he took up with a street gang called the Goodfellows, a group of young men from the neighborhood—mostly southern and white, though not exclusively—who were at work pushing ambient, street level anger and pain toward something collective and self-reflective. A few years later this group would become the Young Patriots Organization, but they had their own roots in earlier Uptown youth gangs—the Peacemakers, and before them the Sinners. Little information exists on these earlier gangs, but they were known entities in the neighborhood where they were seen by many

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<sup>87</sup>McCanne, "The Panthers and the Patriots."; HL Mencken: "It would be hard to imagine a more moral town than Dayton. If it has any bootleggers, no visitor has heard of them. Ten minutes after I arrived a leading citizen offered me a drink made up half of white mule and half of coca cola, but he seems to have been simply indulging himself in a naughty gesture. No fancy woman has been seen in the town since the end of the McKinley administration. There is no gambling. There is no place to dance. The relatively wicked, when they would indulge themselves, go to Robinson's drug store and debate theology...."

<sup>88</sup> McCanne. A makeshift strategy that recalls the "day bed" situation in cities where migrants basically live in shifts, occupying beds and homes when others are at work.

<sup>89</sup> Hy Thurman, interview with author, January 15, 2018.



in the liberal upper class as alienated and excluded from more polite corners of society.<sup>90</sup> Buddy Tompkins, a member of the Peacemakers described the origin of the group:

I started bummin around on Leland Avenue. That's where the fun begun. That's where I learned the life of Chicago. The restaurant there on the corner of Leland and Sheridan, they used to call the Hut, Dixie Hut—it's gone now—that's where we used to hang out, a bunch of boys there, all from the South... You'd meet a bunch of guys, mess around with em. Usually when you'd first meet you'd have to fight about half of em. I guess about twenty-five of us went around together for about eight, then months. Then we decided we was gonna organize, gonna name the bunch... Wore our jackets like we was a gang. We were tryin to fight everybody. We just had our one place, we didn't want nobody else comin in and messin it up...<sup>91</sup>

During the mid-1960s, Tompkins and some of his friends began to work with a group of student organizers who had appeared in the neighborhood and started beating the drum of radical self-determination. The JOIN—Community Union was a collection of local leaders, student organizers, curious neighbors and militant youths who worked together to advocate for the interests of the poor and unemployed in Uptown. JOIN emerged as a political force in the neighborhood during the mid-1960s and helped to organize everything from rent strikes to community plays to a Welfare Union, which mounted sustained protests of paternalism in social services and in a dramatic series of protests occupied the local welfare office to demand “the recognition of motherhood for refusing work...the institution of Christmas bonuses” and “right of recipients to organize.” JOIN—which in its original, bulleted incarnation (J.O.I.N.) stood for Jobs Or Income Now—began as an internally controversial program of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

In 1963, a split solidified within the influential student group over the question of where and who the students should be organizing: one faction wanted to remain on campus, to organize the students; the

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<sup>90</sup> In 1956, Albert Votaw, recently named the first director of the UCC and soon to be author of the infamous essay “The Hillbillies Invade Chicago,” published in *Harper's* in 1968, went out on a walking tour of the neighborhood and, in the process of inspecting one slum apartment, “found himself in contact with” a group of young men who called themselves “The Peacemakers.” Describing his encounter in a letter to another UCC board member, Votaw described how he “was invited to a meeting of the Peacemakers, and they made me an ‘honorary member’ (which means, I suppose, that I don’t have to carry a switch-blade or wear a jacket) and have confided in me from time to time about their desire for a club room, for recognition, and for various other needs which appear to be more psychological than financial or physical.” He noted that a youth counselor had encouraged him to maintain contact with the gang and expressed his hope that good relations could lead to the social integration of the boys Hunter, “Growing Diversity,” 87.

<sup>91</sup> Gitlin and Hollander, *Uptown*, 375.

other insisted it was time to move out into the world and organize the poorest of the poor. The second group called itself the Economic Research and Action Project, or ERAP, and counted among its ranks several prominent SDSers, among them Tom Hayden, Todd Gitlin, Richard Rothstein, and Rennie Davis. Driven by a new economic analysis which predicted an imminent economic recession “of major proportions” and the resultant rise of an army of the unemployed, surely furious at a power structure that stood by as their jobs were offshored or automated out of existence, ERAP set about recalibrating SDS to organize and analyze the jobless.<sup>92</sup> This focus on the working poor was reinforced by the early rumblings of black power, heard in calls from SNCC leaders like Stokely Carmichael to white radicals: if you want to help, “organize your own.” As Kirkpatrick Sale writes in his history of the student organization:

the cause therefore seemed clear: organize the poor and the unemployed. The means seemed to have been given: a SNCC-inspired movement. The agents were to hand: the dissatisfied students of the university. Even the money was available: early in August, the UAW gave SDS \$5,000 for "an education and action program around economic issues." (Hayden wrote to Gitlin: "It is time to rejoice. We have the \$5,000—more than that ... Maybe we're beginning to move. Pacem in terris.")<sup>93</sup>

In Kirkpatrick Sale’s history of SDS, he describes the creation of ERAP as a sign of the “growing leftward restlessness” of the group, its month by month inching from Gandhian to Guevarian in tone and outlook, a tendency which troubled the academics within the group as much as it promised to satisfy the anti-bureaucratic, insurgent dreams of those SDS members beginning to feel the whole operation was “high on analysis, low on action.”<sup>94</sup>

Jobs Or Income Now (JOIN), was the organizing arm of ERAP.<sup>95</sup> Its pilot program, funded by that initial UAW grant and staffed solely by University of Michigan sophomore Joe Chabot, set up in

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<sup>92</sup> As Sale notes, the recession predicted in the “Triple Revolution” thesis did not come to pass. As he writes, “a whole new series of economic and military props (Vietnam, the moon) becomes created in the second half of the sixties to forestall economic crisis and keep people occupied.” Regardless of what happened though, this economic formulation was, at the time of its inception, extremely influential within SDS, effectively changing the course of the organization. Sale cites a list of “sophisticated and capable people of many political views” who developed the thesis and signed the final report, including W. H. Ferry, Michael Harrington, Gunnar Myrdal, Robert Theobald, and Linus Pauling. 65.

<sup>93</sup> Sale, *SDS (Students for a Democratic Society)*., 66.

<sup>94</sup> Rothstein, “A Short History of ERAP”

<sup>95</sup> In good dualist, mind/body fashion, ERAP maintained an academic research center in Ann Arbor, far away from the cities where the organizing was to take place.

Chicago in the summer of 1963, establishing the first JOIN office on North Kedzie Avenue and began—with very little success—attempting to “politicize” white teenagers like the Peacemakers. Chabot’s midterm report to headquarters was grim:

I have had [a] little experience on the streets with the unemployed fellow[s] around 19...but I have not been accepted by any group of older teenagers of this neighborhood. They don't understand me. They are suspicious of me as well as everyone else who tries to have anything to do with them ... . Communication is very difficult on every level—almost impossible when I try to ask direct questions of how a fellow thinks about anything in particular. Just to understand the slang would be a matter of probably six months.<sup>96</sup>

But while the lack of immediate gains frustrated some of the more impatient students, ERAP leadership committed to expanding efforts, geographically and strategically. In a December 1963 National Council meeting—attended by both Bob Dylan and Alger Hiss—leadership decided to establish ten projects, each in their own city, and staff them with student organizers committed to the slow work of community organizing. Their sense of who to organize shifted as well. Originally concerned with poor white and black youth—who Gitlin assumed would be natural allies in the event of the oncoming recession—J.O.I.N. would now work among the more general population of the poor and unemployed with the aim of playing midwife to an “Interracial Movement of the Poor,” as it was conceived in an essay by Tom Hayden and Carl Wittman.

With this flowering of ERAP initiatives in the summer of 1963, the Chicago branch of J.O.I.N. relocated to Uptown, down the street from an unemployment office. For the next half-decade it moved in fits and starts. Students came and left. Uptowners were attracted and repelled. SDS brass including Bob Ross, Rennie Davis, Nancy Hollander and Todd Gitlin, moved to the neighborhood; Chabot eventually took off with the project’s car and the \$115 from the till. Debates raged about whether the groups should focus on employment—what some considered the only fundamental economic concern—or issues the community deemed most pressing (the JOIN or GROIN (Garbage Removal or Income Now) debates). Money dried up and SDS brass argued over back and forth over whether ERAP and its children were an organization distraction or whether that framing was getting it all wrong and SDS should just *become*

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<sup>96</sup> Chabot, “interim report” to NO, November 6, 1963, quoted in Sale.

ERAP. But in Uptown, J.O.I.N. was able to slowly build a group of neighborhood leaders committed to advocating the interests of the poor.

The student organizers began with the slow work of introducing themselves, talking to people on porches and outside of welfare offices, sussing out issues, major and minor, getting a sense of how influence flowed in the neighborhood, and slowly raising the possibility of meetings. Their first concerted action was to organize a “grievance committee,” where someone in the neighborhood could bring a work-related complaint, such as late or withheld pay, on-the-job harassment, etc. and the individual’s concern could be addressed through collective action like a business picket or a pressure campaign directed at a local alderman. However, as more community members dropped in to the JOIN office it became clear that employment was not the only, or even the primary concern for many people in Uptown. A fortuitous encounter at the welfare center between Rennie Davis and a woman named Mary Hockenberry, who had raised six children in the neighborhood and was well known and respected by her neighbors, brought her into the fold. Hockenberry’s influence drew a number of other women to JOIN, including Little Dovie Thurman and her aunt Big Dovie Coleman, their friend Virginia Bowers, and a former factory worker from Kentucky named Peggy Terry.<sup>97</sup>

As these women became involved in the organization, they made it clear that many of the issues people faced in Uptown preceded or even precluded employment. The women formed a welfare committee within JOIN and eventually organized a coordinated, multi-tendency protest of the local welfare office, demanding more caseworkers and greater transparency; delivering a 10-point Welfare Bill of Rights; and walking out of the office with a collection of manuals to educate their neighbors on policy. A few months later, the JOINers and GROINers came together and the women organized a picket of the welfare office, demanding protection for day laborers—the notoriously underregulated arrangement of casual employment assigned via a predatory placement agency which was predominant in Uptown. Their pressure “won a Day Labor Center in the Montrose Urban Progress Center,” and made clear that

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<sup>97</sup> Sonnie and Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power*, 81–85.

collective action could yield immediate gains.<sup>98</sup> As the project took on a life of its own and was, in a real sense, remade by the participation of its community members and their own understanding of their needs, J.O.I.N. dropped the bullets and the singular focus on full employment and became the JOIN—Community Union.<sup>99</sup>

Over the course of two years, JOIN became a fixture in Uptown. The organizers were eventually seen as committed and their approach to mounting pressure campaigns as useful. Bobby Joe Wright, a young guy from Georgia, described the shift:

See, like it used to be you'd walk from Clifton to Wilson and somebody said, "Oh, there's one a those JOIN Communist people." It's not like that any more. People know JOIN's there. And if they have any problem they try to get in touch with JOIN. I'm known as JOIN in the neighborhood. It's nice to walk down the street and know that I'm known as JOIN and people are not callin you Communist. I feel more dedicated than when I started cause things are startin to happen and I was partly responsible for buildin' things that happened ... . It all causes things to happen, it causes people to get together. People know it's urban renewal tearin' down the neighborhood and they know they're gonna be kicked out and that's a good feelin' when they start organizin' to do somethin about it. You get a great feelin' when you see a group a people standin' around demanding stuff that is rightfully theirs. I mean it's theirs and they never had it before and they want it now. It makes me feel good that after a year and a half the neighborhood has changed like that.<sup>100</sup>

But even as the J.O.I.N. of Hayden and Wittman was reimagined in light of on-the-ground community concerns, class tensions persisted within the group. This was especially acute among young members like Bobby Joe Wright who were attracted to the political promise of the group but were “peeved” with a lot of the middle-class student assumptions and prejudices (ie. “college bullshit”) inescapably embedded in its structure.<sup>101</sup>

These long-standing tensions came to head around a proposed rent-strike. In July of 1966, a child was bitten by a rat one night in an Uptown apartment and the parents of the child, hopeful given JOIN’s

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<sup>98</sup> Sonnie and Tracy, 95.

<sup>99</sup> James, “Getting Ready for the Firing Line: JOIN Community Union.”

<sup>100</sup> Gitlin and Hollander, *Uptown*, 424–425, quoted in Sale.

<sup>101</sup> Sonnie and Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power*, 46.

successful campaign against a negligent landlord in May, called on the group to organize a strike.<sup>102</sup> As the child's mother described it:

Our bathroom ceiling is falling down, the insulation is peeling off the wiring...[The landlord] turned off our lights the day before our rent was due. The baby's milk is spoiling in the refrigerator and I don't know what we're going to do tonight, because the lights usually keep the rats away...The landlord won't admit there's any rats or roaches or bedbugs in the building. A hundred dollars a month with our own furniture! He says, 'Well, I know welfare rent schedules and I can get a hundred dollars for the apartment.'

Despite the depravity of the situation, JOIN's student organizers were split on calling the strike.

According to Gitlin and Hollander, they wondered aloud at a meeting whether tenants were ready for the action or if community people understood the risk. Two organizers in particular urged patience, suggesting that the building's new manager might become an ally if everyone could remain diplomatic.

The prevarication infuriated community members, especially Buddy Tompkins and Gerald Akers, two of the under-25 set who had become very active in JOIN, but were quick to deride ex-student hypocrisy:

"Who could believe the ex-students were committed to the community when they could always slink back to middle-class comfort? Then why should they hold power in a poor people's organization? And if the poor could not rule there, where else could they?"<sup>103</sup>

### **The Goodfellows March**

That tension was resolved, and the rent strike approved, but Tompkins and Akers, realized that they needed their own group, not a committee, or a caucus, something with a degree of autonomy and freedom from JOIN. They booked a meeting room at the nearby Urban Progress Center to discuss the group's issues and priorities, and when pressed for a name they chose the Uptown Goodfellows. Over twenty people attended the first big meeting of the group, and fifty turned out for the second, and so in the summer of 1966, the Goodfellows became a player in the increasingly complex network of neighborhood politics. The Goodfellows were the direct predecessor of the Young Patriots. At their core, was a cadre of

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<sup>102</sup> "JOIN Pressure Successful: Harried Landlord Bows."

<sup>103</sup> Gitlin and Hollander, *Uptown*, 381.

young men, some legacy members of the old Peacemakers gang and some youth leaders who had come up with JOIN, including Peggy Terry's son Doug Youngblood, Bobby McGinnis, Junebug Boykin, and Hy's older brother Ralph Thurman. At a glance, they looked a lot like you might expect from a white, urban street gang of the era. Committed to an air of working-class cool, members wore their hair slicked back and ducktailed, and observed the unofficial dress code: t-shirts, denim, leather when and where you could afford it (boots and jackets). They eventually locked down a clubhouse which was both a "band hall and a local youth hangout," and a few members formed a band.<sup>104</sup> They hung out in the JOIN office, but also in pool halls and hillbilly bars and street corners of Uptown, committed to the sort of conspicuous idling that intends to attract recruits and repel just about anyone else. At the same time, they were doing more than hanging out—or rather, their hanging out was more than hanging out. As restricted as Uptown could seem, they were not insulated from the world, and were watching what was going on around them, watching the students and the older neighborhood leaders, watching the nearby black and Latino gangs that were starting to talk about various people powers, watching all these various groups beginning to conceive of themselves as political units in their own right. And all of it prompted the compound question which the Goodfellows attempted to answer and embody: what did it mean to be young, white, southern, poor, and radical in Uptown, Chicago?

They worked some of these answers out by being together in spaces and groups they made their own, as distinguished from spaces surveilled or owned by others. For young men like Ralph and Hy Thurman, new to the city and hundreds of miles away from home, a gang like the Goodfellows helped provide a sense of self and a relation to the rest of the world. Similar to other migrant institutions like the "storefront church" and the hillbilly bar, youth gangs were makeshift social networks where the urbanizing southerner made sense of this paradoxical situation. In one sense we can think of these institutions as the community and kinship networks left behind in the migration reconstituted under the

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<sup>104</sup> Sonnie, Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power*, 46.

duress and freedom of the North.<sup>105</sup> Like a southernized bar, or a church convened in an abandoned garage, the street gang was one of the few institutions considered *of and for* the southern migrants—but unlike the brick and mortar social club, it was mobile. If you were in, the whole of Uptown—or its exterior became yours—your turf in a city where you owned little or nothing. And while the bars and makeshift churches were, in their own ways, improper institutions of “urban hillbilly” life, the gang was illicit and often criminal, and participation in it seemed to concretize and amplify the collective migrant experience of being unwelcome in Chicago.

But membership also meant a very stark understanding of insiders and outsiders, allies and enemies. If JOIN had brought resources and a leftist theoretical analysis of power—disseminated both in reading groups and through collective action itself—the people of the neighborhood brought a granular, empirical, pragmatic understanding of the ways in which powerlessness was felt and negotiated in Uptown (as well as, it’s important to remember, the hidden trapdoors in powerlessness: solidarity, sabotage, necessary ingenuities). For the Goodfellows, all of the obscure, conspiring, inhospitable realities of life in Uptown and all the SDS explanations of the historical mechanisms of class struggle converged and were made manifest in the police. Distrust of the police in Uptown would have been common at this time. In 1959 the local Summerdale precinct had been the center of a massive police scandal, in which eight officers were convicted of running cover for burglaries and transporting stolen

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<sup>105</sup> In his poem “Small Farms Disappearing in Tennessee,” Jim Wayne Miller describes this pattern of transubstantiation:

Parts of farms turn up in unlikely places:  
weathered gray boards from a Tennessee burley tobacco  
barn are up against a wall of an Ohio  
office building, lending a rustic effect.  
A Tennessee county church suddenly appeared  
disguised as a storefront in Uptown Chicago. (109)



goods in their squad cars.<sup>106</sup> The events were hugely embarrassing for the Daley administration, who was moved quickly to rename the precinct.<sup>107</sup>

In 1966, however, the pressing concern was the more visceral issue of police brutality. In their earliest meetings, when the Goodfellows sat down to decide what their issues were—what aspects of life in Uptown they wanted to see change and could speak to with unique authority—they very quickly settled on the police abuse. Many poor people in the neighborhood felt officers acted with total impunity and employed petty harassment to keep them cowed, but the young men could recount a litany of abuse ranging from regular beatings to murder. They began collecting testimonies from community members and established a police patrol, taking inspiration from Black activists in Watts after the 1965 riots.<sup>108</sup> The

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<sup>106</sup> Benzkofer, “The Summerdale Scandal and the Case of the Babbling Burglar.”

<sup>107</sup> Hunter, “Growing Diversity,” 95. The scandal was also embarrassing for Votaw and the UCC who, in the late 1950s, began partnering with the police to develop and carry out a high-profile, well publicized crackdown on criminal behavior on Wilson Avenue. The commission’s long-term aim was luring developers and business back to Uptown and hoped that ridding the corridor of “panhandlers, drunks, bums, and derelicts” was an early step in the process. Votaw, a former investigative reporter who understood the importance of a media campaign, touted the operation’s success in a press release titled “Wilson Avenue District Gets Face Lifting: Police, Court Rid Area of Undesirables.” Hunter describes a 1963 episode where Kemper Insurance, “a major player in Loop real estate” who had remained in Uptown through the 1950s, went to the UCC with complaints about “dubious characters” near their headquarters. The UCC in turn asked Commander Fahey to police area loiterers, and his patrolmen arrested “over 300 Indians and [giving them] 15 to 20 days on the ‘farm.’”

<sup>108</sup> On the first night of the community patrol, Marvin Jackson and his friend Bob saw police beating a Mexican-American boy on Wilson Avenue and stopped to take down badge numbers. Bob was arrested for disorderly conduct and assault. Later, Marvin wrote a “Ballad to Michael”—a hymn for the beaten man:

It was late one night, the cops was riding round  
Looking for someone to stomp into the ground  
When just as they passed  
A little boy threw a glass  
They stopped but they didn’t hear a sound  
They remembered Michael from some time ago.  
He was fast asleep and so he didn’t know.  
Two policeman came inside  
And turned on all the lights.  
They grabbed him and then they said Let’s go.

As they opened the door that led into the street  
They shoved him and he fell to his feet.  
And when he turned around  
They knocked him to the ground.  
They hit him til his head began to bleed.

By this time another policeman joined the fun.  
He tried to get up but he was nearly done.

abuse continued so they reconsidered their tactics. Convinced of popular support from their neighbors and in possession of over fifty signed affidavits from community members, the young men went against the urgings of JOIN organizers and began orchestrating a march on the police department where they would demand civilian review, a stop to police brutality, and the dismissal of a notoriously violent officer.<sup>109</sup>

They set the date for August 6 and started circulating buttons:

PEOPLE  
MUST  
CONTROL  
THEIR  
POLICE

The students at JOIN were worried about retribution from the police and thin support for the demands, but a very public beating days before the scheduled march pushed more hesitant people toward the protesters. Amelia Jenkins, an older woman from the neighborhood who witnessed the beating, told organizers, “We have read your letters on police brutality...Most of us all said to ourselves, O.K. now, JOIN must be stretching it just a little. But after witnessing this incident last night, it has made a believer out of us.”<sup>110</sup> In the lead up, Jimmy Curry, Ralph Thurman, and Bob Lawson worked the pool halls and hillbilly bars, trying to convince people to turn out. They even made overtures to nearby black and Puerto Rican gangs, foreshadowing the interracial alliances to come. When the day of the march came, three hundred people from the neighborhood assembled outside of the JOIN offices, including black and Puerto

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I could tell he was in pain  
But they kicked him just the same  
Michael pleaded but they kept on with their fun.

Still they beat him with their clubs and fists and feet.  
Michael was helpless as he lay there on the street.  
Plenty people were on hand  
But no one would give a hand  
As poor Michael just lay there in the street.

I wonder what this world's becoming to.  
You can't even trust the men in blue.  
I'm sure the man above  
Don't mean this to be love.  
If he did then it's not right for me and you.

<sup>109</sup> “JOIN Unhappy with Reporting; a Letter to the Editor.”

<sup>110</sup> Gitlin and Hollander, *Uptown*, 387.

Rican allies from the South and West Sides.<sup>111</sup> As James Tracy writes, “The moral imperative of stopping police harassment had united families from different parts of town, rival gangs, young and old. Young men with nicely greased pompadours took the lead greeting neighborhood mothers, student activists, and local youth, gathered together to demand ‘community control of the police.’”<sup>112</sup>

And still the many SDS organizers wavered. After a final plea to call off the march on the police precinct and to consider the blowback, Peggy Terry dressed them down: “Who knows better what the Summerdale cops will do to you than the people they been killing.”<sup>113</sup> With that, the march began without the students, winding its way toward the police station on Foster Avenue. When they arrived there was a standoff, peaceful but tense, and the marchers delivered their demands to the police who promised they would be considered and “sent downtown.”<sup>114</sup> A crowd of around 500 witnesses—some counter-protestors chanting “Sam Must Stay,” and waving their own signs of police support—had assembled as well, and watched as the march unfolded without incident. Also present was the Chicago Department’s “Red Squad,” whose surveillance reports confirm both that the march was local and that the city’s records on Uptown activists were quite extensive. According to Devin Hunter, “intelligence officers recorded the names of dozens of ‘known’ subjects marching, only two of whom were outside JOIN.”<sup>115</sup> Two weeks later the police mounted a raid on JOIN offices, taking letters and records and destroying the rest. Officers arrested several organizers on charges of drug possession and held Melody James, JOIN’s “theater coordinator” at gunpoint as they completed the raid. Two days after that, patrolmen shot and killed Ronnie Williams eight times after he ran from them following a fight with his brother, a Goodfellow named Kenny Williams.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Hunter, “Growing Diversity,” 324.

<sup>112</sup> Sonnie and Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power*, 49.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* 115.

<sup>114</sup> “They Marched, They Talked, They...”

<sup>115</sup> Invest Report, Demonstrations: JOIN, August 12, 1966. JOIN, 1964-1968, CPDRS Files, CHM, quoted in Hunter, “Growing Diversity,” 324.

<sup>116</sup> Sonnie and Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power*, 50.

## **Patriots and Panthers**

August 1966 marked a turning point in Uptown. An intensification of the struggle that seemed to clarify the stakes and lines for those involved. The police response to the march, unofficial retribution but very thinly veiled, was fierce and suggested as yet unexplored options for repression, while the Goodfellows felt confirmed in their protest and buoyed by support, ready to push things further. Also telling was the response of the liberal middle class. The *Uptown News*, which had been relatively sympathetic to JOIN activities in the past, immediately derided the march, telling protestors they “would have been better to stay and protest for a worthy cause” like housing “than to charge police brutality”; a sentiment echoed by Alderman Robert J. O’Rourke, who told the newspaper, “I personally have not been advised of any brutality by the police.”<sup>117</sup> Even the images of the march perplexed the skeptical. In one instance of telling irony, the *Chicago Sun Times*, evidently baffled by the site of white protesters against police violence, reported the march as a rally of white supremacists, angry at the police for interceding as they themselves brutalized marchers working with Dr. Martin Luther King’s Open Housing actions.

Backlash to the march fractured the group. As Junebug Boykin wrote in *The Movement*, the underground newspaper put out by San Francisco Bay Area Friends of SNCC, “What happened was that after that march guys went their separate ways and the cops really let them have it. Then before you know it there was no more Goodfellows.”<sup>118</sup> Some members left for good. Others were worried about retaliation and kept their distance. A kernel remained committed, and over the winter they began to organize again, to talk to the young people, to “try to get through to them” as Boykin put it, and by summer they reemerged. They managed to secure a headquarters of sorts, which they called Goodfellow’s Hall (“All we have in the place is a ping-pong table and a jukebox. But we will get more machines to put in the place. It’s not so hot in here now, but it’s started and we’re fixing it up”) and slowly they reconstituted the group’s mission and membership.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> “JOIN Unhappy with Reporting; a Letter to the Editor”; “Great Week for Uptown -- Buses, Fire Station...”

<sup>118</sup> Movement article

<sup>119</sup> Boykin, “Goodfellows Find Place,” 11.

JOIN, meanwhile, had begun to succumb to its internal class tensions. Anger over their hesitancy to support confrontational actions and a growing sense that community people were ready to exercise full control of their own organization spread among the membership, and in December 1967 they asked the students to leave. “From now on we intend to do our own talking without the aid of student interpreters,” Peggy Terry wrote in a *Movement* article simply titled, “Let’s Get It On,” announcing the split.<sup>120</sup> With JOIN effectively disbanded, the nucleus of Uptown radicals began the new year fanned out across a handful of different overlapping ventures—the young toughs were in the Goodfellows hall, the welfare mothers were helping build the National Welfare Rights Organization, and an ex-preacher from Kentucky named Chuck Geary was brainstorming ways to take on the Department of Urban Renewal. Inspired in part by the Ex-JOINers Doug Youngblood, a bit older than the average Goodfellow, and Mike James, one of the students who remained in Uptown following the split, formed the National Community Union (NCU), an organization devoted to training activists to organize in poor and working-class white neighborhoods, while Peggy Terry became an increasingly prominent voice on the national left, which saw her quite hopefully a leader who could help the movement “broaden its base to begin reaching ordinary working people.”<sup>121</sup> That June she would appear and speak at the Poor People’s March on Washington, and in August she was nominated to the presidential ticket of the Peace and Freedom Party, alongside Eldridge Cleaver, as an alternative to the specter of George Wallace.<sup>122</sup>

The Young Patriot Organization formed early in the summer of 1968, as a radical organization “of, by and for poor whites.”<sup>123</sup> On its face, the rationale seemed more fitting for a Wallace rally than the New Left, but the logic spoke more to the class distance from student politics and the liberal establishment than any commitment to racial exclusion. The specifics of the group’s foundation remain muddy, but accounts indicate the Patriots were formed by Junebug Boykin and Doug Youngblood in

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<sup>120</sup> Terry, “Let’s Get It On,” 8.

<sup>121</sup> Avakian, Truskier, and Scarrmon, “Caucus Calculations on Cleaver and Rubin.”

<sup>122</sup> Sonnie and Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power*, 134–36.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

order to address the needs of Uptown through the model provided by the Black Panther Party.<sup>124</sup> Born out of a summit of Goodfellows, ex-JOINers, and local activists, the group distilled and adopted an ethos of hillbilly radicalism. Their structure was “organized, but unorganized,” as Hy Thurman put it; like the Panthers they had a leadership council, and chairmen to oversee various issues and campaigns, but the structure was loose and never shed its roots as a social organization.<sup>125</sup> While the group is remembered—in some ways rightfully so—as a fairly macho organization, and the relatively light historical record is heavily weighted toward the voices of the men who founded it, several women soon joined the organization and became some of its most active members. Like the Panthers, their style of dress had militant notes, but with a glaring southern twist: they sported golden berets, boots, and blue denim jackets bearing Confederate flags and “Free Huey” patches. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the flag was adopted in order to be inverted. The Patriots leveraged its visibility as a symbol of “southernness” and rebellion only to propose the unity of working-class people against those who exploited them. “Some people ask us why we still wear the Confederate flag,” one member told a reporter, “it’s a symbol of the working class and how wrong they are about blacks. We aim to change its meaning.”<sup>126</sup>

The group adopted many of the issues that had been central to JOIN: urban renewal, working-class racism, food scarcity, tenants’ rights, and police brutality. These were the unbearable everyday aspects of life in an urban slum like Uptown, and being consigned to them both drove the group to organize and work with others who shared their same concerns. These were “boundary struggles,” as the political theorist Nancy Fraser puts it, fights along the edge of society, where political actors attempt to contest dominant institutions of social reproduction and the form of organization begins to edge toward the criminal and the radical, often taking unanticipated shapes.<sup>127</sup> Located in a particularly vexed,

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<sup>124</sup> Interview with Hy, describes influence of Panthers.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid..

<sup>126</sup> Stokes, “Poor Whites, Blacks in Uncommon Alliance.”

<sup>127</sup> Fraser and Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation*, 54.

marginal postwar space—an urban slum overfilled with white migrant southerners, the Young Patriots found themselves near the heart of the contradictions that defined the life of the poor in “the affluent society.”<sup>128</sup> “Not only police brutality,” as Junebug once wrote, “but bad housing and food co-op and everything wrong with this damn society.”<sup>129</sup> Adding to these forms of economic pressure, the southern whites of Uptown also experienced discrimination as migrant southerners. Viewed by the local white power structure in Uptown as a vestigial sliver of white America, potential white supremacists or race traitors, and a clear impediment to bettering the neighborhood, raising property tax revenue, and attracting capital investment, the threat to middle- and upper-class white mores was distilled in the quasi-racialized figure of the white (but not quite) “invading hillbilly.”<sup>130</sup> The Patriots would turn this formulation on its head, using the conditions of Uptown and the maligned culture it produced in order to articulate a more egalitarian future with increased provisions for the poor.

The group began by growing itself, sussing out young people who might be interested and bringing them aboard. Youngblood described the effort to organize the scene as a gradual process of turning social energy into solidarity:

Organizing is in part a slow, filled with personal hurts, learning and hardening process of making contacts, developing relationships, and building overlapping networks or spiderwebs of many contacts and relationships. It is coming aware of, understanding and knowing of people known in every bar on the Avenue; guys who know most people on most corners, key hustlers in many scenes; the matriarch in a group of buildings on a block; steady workers as well as work-for-awhile - hustle-for-awhile people; first shift workers and second and third shift workers (they're very different); on-my-own people and those who are deeply involved and dependent on relationships with people of three or four extended families; young guys into cars; those into music; and those into pool halls and small-time hustles; teenagers that run with the guys and those that are into steady chick scenes; what all night restaurants of blue vinyl that catch a hodge-podge of comers on main thoroughfares are all about, as well as those restaurants with steamed windows, single brand music jukeboxes, and home-cooked-specialties where customer, waitress and owner all know one another, and if you don't, it at least reminds you' of the place you hung out in your home town.

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<sup>128</sup> Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*.

<sup>129</sup> Boykin, “Goodfellows Find Place,” 11.

<sup>130</sup> Votaw, “The Hillbillies Invade Chicago.”

That summer, the earliest members, including Hy and Ralph Thurman, Youngblood, Junebug, and Bobby McGinnis, went to Washington for the Poor People’s March, and lived in Resurrection City, talking with civil rights activists from the Mountain and Deep South around the campfires set around West Potomac Park.<sup>131</sup> They saw Peggy Terry speak before a crowd of thousands, clashed with the middle-class leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Council—including Jesse Jackson, one day inheritor of the Rainbow Coalition name—before returning home to the slow work of agitating on the corners and in the hillbilly bars.

August was a tumult. Peggy Terry, Doug Younglood, and Mike James were gone, touring the country as the Peace and Freedom Party’s answer to Wallace as Chicago erupted in violence. Hippies, Yippies, students, and radicals of all stripes poured into the streets to protest the appointment of the pro-war Hubert Humphrey to the top of the Democratic ticket. The Patriots were not present at the riot, but one future member was. Like many in Chicago, Bill Fesperman, a twenty-five-year-old seminary student from China Grove, North Carolina was radicalized by the experience, and seeking a party to join, or perhaps to lead, arrived in Uptown along with his wife Darlene and enlisted. Adopting the name “Preacherman,” the rhetorically gifted Fesperman quickly became the group’s most vocal and visible members. But the Patriots were not the only group of radicals absent from the chaos of the Convention riots. Formed earlier that year on Chicago’s West Side in the wake of Dr. King’s assassination and led by the young and exceedingly charismatic Fred Hampton, the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party stayed clear of the student-led demonstrations that August—no doubt remembering Mayor Daley’s infamous order that police “shoot to kill arsonists” and “shoot to maim looters” during the uprising that consumed the West Side following King’s death.<sup>132</sup>

An ad man named Mike Gray, who had literally been drawn off the set of a Kentucky Fried Chicken commercial and into the riot alongside his camera crew, captured the brutality of the event but

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<sup>131</sup> Chase, “Class Resurrection: The Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 and Resurrection City.”; Hy Thurman, interview with author, April 15, 2020.

<sup>132</sup> Rice, “The World of the Illinois Panthers,” 50.



was perplexed by the lack of the Panthers. Pouring over film with his newly hired editor Howard Alk (“a beefy, bearded show business dropout...cofounder of Chicago’s Second City theater troupe” and known Bob Dylan associate), the two became fixated on the question of why black activists had skirted what seemed like an epochal event on the American left.<sup>133</sup> The film that resulted from their quest for an answer became known as *American Revolution II*. “The result,” wrote Roger Ebert upon the film’s release in May of 1969, “is a film every Chicagoan should see. But that’s a cliché. What I want to say is: If you were disturbed by what happened last August and if you wondered, however vaguely, how such a cataclysmic week should apparently have no aftermath, then you should see this film and see what has happened.”<sup>134</sup>

What Gray and his camera crew found, “following their noses” as Ebert put it, was not an explanation of an explosive event, but a world of ongoing radical organization they did not suspect existed.<sup>135</sup> While filming that fall, Gray captured the first contact between the Illinois Black Panther Party and the Young Patriot Organization. The meeting between the radicals happened by chance. In a moment of soul searching, the upper-crust liberal white congregation the Church of Three Crosses in Lincoln Park had invited Robert “Bobby” Lee III, Field Secretary of the IBPP, to speak about the violence of the DNC riots and the sentiment among radical youths on the same evening they had invited the Young Patriots to discuss police brutality in Uptown.<sup>136</sup> This clerical error produced a pair of strange contrasts: first between the Panthers and the Patriots, then between the Patriots and the liberal congregation. Years later Bobby Lee recounted his amazement at how the event unfolded, in an interview with the historian Jakobi Williams. Happy to receive the Panthers, the well-to-do white audience listened respectfully and asked questions, but was unable to contain its “intense hostility” and contempt for the white radicals. “Coming from the South,” said Lee, a native of Texas:

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<sup>133</sup> Cross, “Mike Gray: In A Hurricane, The Eye,” 17.

<sup>134</sup> Ebert, “American Revolution Two.”

<sup>135</sup> Ibid..

<sup>136</sup> Williams, *From the Bullet to the Ballot*, 132–33.

I had never seen that before, because in the South whites were united around race...I had never seen whites attack poor whites before. I had never seen poor whites having to explain themselves to other whites before. When I [was called upon] to speak, I made my speech, and it was an emotional tie-in with the [Young Patriots] because I felt the hostility toward them. And that was the beginning of [our alliance].<sup>137</sup>

Lee's glimpse of class solidarity was a piercing of the veil, and it became the seed of the Rainbow Coalition. "After the crowd left," says Lee, "the Patriots were still there. We asked the Minister if he could let us have his office." During this meeting, the two groups struck an immediate accord. Lee explained the Panthers' analysis of race, capitalism, and their philosophy of "survival pending revolution," while the Patriots described their own particular strategies of combating racism and fomenting anti-capitalist critique among poor white communities. At the end, recalled Lee, "We asked the Patriots if they could work with the Panthers and they said yes."<sup>138</sup>

The Young Patriots were not strangers to the Black Panther Party. They had modeled themselves after the national organization in important ways and some members had had contact with Panthers during Peggy Terry's campaign with Cleaver during the summer and fall. But it was this connection with Bobby Lee that brought the groups together. The bond was political, but it was also deeply social. Lee was a southerner who had become an organizer studying activists as they plotted and rapped in the Houston nightclub his mother ran, and he took quite quickly to the Patriots' streetwise radicalism. As he would later recall, "I had to run with those cats, break bread with them, hang out at the pool hall...I had to lay down on their couch, in their neighborhood. Then I had to invite them into mine."<sup>139</sup> This time together was a time of collaboration. Lee and the Patriots identified concrete issues their communities shared—police harassment, food and housing insecurity, lack of healthcare—and began to develop intellectual and rhetorical strategies for politicizing those issues in order to explain and encourage collaboration.

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>138</sup> Bobby Lee, interviewed by James Tracy, [http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Unity\\_Support/pdf/Interview\\_with\\_Bobby\\_Lee\\_by\\_James\\_Tracy.pdf](http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Unity_Support/pdf/Interview_with_Bobby_Lee_by_James_Tracy.pdf)

<sup>139</sup> Sonnie and Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power*, 77.

Lee kept the relationship with the Patriots from Fred Hampton for three weeks, doing his due diligence assessing the potential partnership, but the Chairman was encouraged by the partnership and kept his Field Secretary on the Uptown beat. In mid-February, 1969, Hampton met with Cha Cha Jiminez of the Puerto Rican radical street gang known as the Young Lords, and the two spoke about the prospect of forming a multi-group partnership alongside the Young Patriots, poor white radicals from Uptown. Jiminez agreed.<sup>140</sup> On February 27<sup>th</sup>, Fred Hampton announced the formation of a “Rainbow Coalition.” Centered around the Panthers, the Patriots, and the Young Lords, the Coalition was a class-based alliance of radical groups that cut across ethnic lines in a dramatic show of solidarity. A major aim of this alliance was of course to overcome the ideological hurdles of racism, fatalism, and cultural nationalism that precluded interracial solidarity. But the logic of the coalition also held that even though the effects of poverty were unevenly experienced along lines of identity race and ethnicity, often in ways that generated intense antinomies among the working-class, the shared material conditions of the poor could still provide the foundation of solidarity. According to Lee, the Rainbow Coalition was Hampton’s “code word for class struggle,” but this was a take on class struggle that was decidedly contemporary, even futuristic: “an amalgam that combined the ambiance of ‘West Side Story’ with the theory and discipline of the National Liberation Front,” as the *New York Times* put it.<sup>141</sup>

Membership in the Rainbow Coalition meant entering into a loose but committed activist cooperative. Groups supported one another in political actions, met to discuss organizational strategies for dealing with everything from establishing breakfast programs to preventing police infiltration, and publicly performed interracial solidarity, becoming an image of the society they hoped to help create. Hampton was, by all accounts, an effective leader of both the Panthers and the coalition. “He was a very humble person and didn’t walk around like he was God’s gift to the movement.”<sup>142</sup> The Panthers technically led the group, but the structure was horizontal rather than hierarchical. The groups established

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<sup>140</sup> Fernández, *The Young Lords*, 42.

<sup>141</sup> Kaufman, “Black Panthers Join Coalition With Puerto Rican and Appalachian Groups.”

<sup>142</sup> Fernández, *The Young Lords*, 44.

and coordinated Free Breakfast Programs, collectively feeding “thousands of children each morning,” and appeared in solidarity for various protest efforts.<sup>143</sup> Reporting on the early days of the coalition was sparse but curious. Local papers described the surprising appearance of Black Panthers at urban renewal hearings in Uptown, and the presence of southern whites at a massive protest of “Spanish speakers” over the police killing of Manuel Ramos, a 20-year-old member of the Young Lords.<sup>144</sup> When the groups collectively took over the McCormick Theological Seminary in May, national outlets like the Associated Press reported the occupation was carried out by “a group of students, street gang members and neighborhood organization leaders.”<sup>145</sup> Groups would request support or plan actions together, but the intention was always to enhance the ability of individual outfits to organize within their own communities.

In Uptown, the Patriots occasionally called on the coalition for public shows of support, as in the example above, but more frequently they worked with the other groups, and Bobby Lee especially, to incorporate their message that poor and oppressed people of all races were allies and not enemies into local community organizing. When they went into the hillbilly bars with their berets and Rebel flags, and their “Free Huey” and “Resurrect John Brown” patches, to talk about what was wrong with Uptown and how the poor people needed to move together to fix it, the aim was to wed populist critiques of elite domination and the interracial solidarity posed by their work alongside the Patriots and the Young Lords. In doing this, they recast the anti-racist commitments of JOIN in the light of the Rainbow Coalition, claiming a place for poor whites on the multiracial revolutionary vanguard. The Young Patriots’ developed their analysis of whiteness through confronting power, first in the immediate and concrete forms of landlords, the police, welfare agents, and various proponents of urban renewal, then at the level of capitalism. White southerners in Uptown occupied and illuminated a paradoxical place in the social order. They were of course “white,” but they were also outsiders within broader white society. In the eyes

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<sup>143</sup> Sonnie and Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power*, 172.

<sup>144</sup> “Patriots”; “Group Stages Protest Over Police Action.”

<sup>145</sup> “Church Seminary Is Seized.”

of the local middle- and upper-class, they were economically marginal, socially cliquish, and culturally distinct—newcomers, or invaders from a part of the country that had been mythologized as foreign, retrograde, even primeval cradle of white America.<sup>146</sup> In Chicago, the regionally inflected poverty of the white southern migrant produced something on the order of an “off-white” ethnic status, overtly captured in the term hillbilly and implicit in concerns that they were potential agents of both dangerous race-mixing and importers of Jim Crow.<sup>147</sup> The urban hillbilly became a figure out of time and place—an historically residual character in the industrialized core that frustrated racial hierarchies, seemed lightly attached to the sacrifices demanded of city life, and resisted opportunities to assimilate.

As with so many elements of their political analysis, the Young Patriots embraced this negative assessment of their people’s potential and used it to illustrate both a disidentification with mainstream white society through a critique of class and the logic of interracial solidarity with the poor of all races and ethnicities. In many ways it was a non-assimilationist philosophy. Rather than attempt to enter into mainstream society by shedding their class and regional markers, they accepted their rejection from the institutions that produced straight society, understood that as a source of power and solidarity, and tried to articulate and build parallel forms of communal support and political expression around the fact of their exclusion. And they saw their own marginal, paradoxical status as poor whites uprooted and superseded by capitalism as a key figure in the historic task of the working people to build a world free of the domination of one class or race over another.<sup>148</sup>

The figure of the radical hillbilly, who recognized the benefits of whiteness but attempted to undermine them, revealed that the full privileges of “whiteness” were not inborn or automatically recognized but conditional, bestowed through economic and social advancement, by “getting ahead” through participation in the world of work and aiding in the reproduction of nation, empire, and capital.

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<sup>146</sup> Bibliographic note on the “idea of Appalachia”.

<sup>147</sup> Abert Votaw’s Harper’s essay: “A disgrace to the race?” Obermiller notes approvingly that Votaw, “The Hillbillies Invade Chicago”; Obermiller et al., *Appalachian Odyssey*, 153. I am indebted to Stefano Harney for the formulation of the “off-white.”

<sup>148</sup> Ignatiev, “White Worker, Black Worker.”

For southern migrants who bore markers of a region described as backward and deviant by sociologists and journalists alike, matriculation into dominant society required adaptation and a particular level of deference, but the door was open for those interested and able to walk through. Statistically, most white migrants did make this transition—they entered into the workforce in great and willing numbers and—if we recall the *New York Times* article that opened our introduction—through their normal participation rendered the hillbilly a quaint and unthreatening, another white subculture brought into the fold.<sup>149</sup> The Young Patriots represented an alternative to this dominant trajectory, and they theorized non-participation in mainstream society a practice of solidarity and source of strength. As Preacherman would put it in the *Patriot* newsletter: WE ARE THE LIVING REMINDER THAT WHEN THEY THREW OUT THEIR WHITE TRASH THEY DIDN'T BURN IT and WE DON'T MEAN TO BE CRACKERS IN THE MAN'S SOUP FOR ANOTHER FOUR HUNDRED YEARS.<sup>150</sup> Theirs was an off-whiteness in the service of the wider coalition.

As historians of the New Left have argued, the “lumpen thesis” exemplified by the Black Panther Party and widely accepted among radicals at the time, while unsuccessful in its goal of building a mass movement was a conscious attempt to address and outpace contemporary forces of reaction, including white working-class backlash to the black power movement, conservatism within the labor movement, endemic poverty at the center and periphery of the urban core, and the spirit of internationalism brought on by US military efforts abroad.<sup>151</sup> As an organizing strategy, this focus on the most marginalized in society came with real limitations. Groups like the Patriots built memberships out of very young people who lived hard lives that often overcame them. Party members dropped out of touch, went to jail, disappeared with money, went South back home. When government surveillance intensified during the late 1960s, the milieu from which these organizations recruited proved to be especially fertile ground for paid informants. And in the case of the Patriots, whose poor white community was under threat of

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<sup>149</sup> Stevens, “Appalachia’s Hillbillies Trek North for Jobs.”

<sup>150</sup> “The Patriot: Peoples News Service,” March 21, 1970; “The Patriot: Peoples News Service,” July 21, 1970.

<sup>151</sup> Fernández, *The Young Lords*, 222.

removal through urban renewal, the possibility was very real that their social base could vanish. Organizing in these communities required consistent pressure and sustained recruitment efforts. Coalitional practice was one way to overcome turnover and uneven participation, but these urban populisms always found themselves in conflict with groups whose positions were more stable, whether that be landowners who profited from the maintenance of property relations or the operators of charities and non-profits who attempted to repair the damage done by the system without ceding too much of their own authority in the process.

At the same time, the marginal position of these groups lent the left an important and enduring perspective, even as their revolutionary project was frustrated. When “whiteness studies” developed as an area of coordinated inquiry within the academy during the early 1990s, it emerged from critical engagements with histories of productive wage labor and property. Seminal works in the field, including David Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991), Cheryl Harris’ “Whiteness as Property” (1993) and Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White* (1995) centered the role of whiteness, a racial category raised to a national ideology, in stabilizing divisions of labor and relations of property across much of American history.<sup>152</sup> Harris, a legal scholar, argued that whiteness, once a phenotypical descriptor, had been transformed over the long sweep of American history into a category of identity accompanied by a set of “assumptions, privileges, and benefits” that were recognized under American law as a property interest, a social status that conveyed value to individuals but that also needed to be defended against competitors—historically Black and Native American peoples—on the market and in the courtroom.<sup>153</sup>

Roediger and Ignatiev, on the other hand, examined the effect this complex of benefits had on the development of the American working-class. Their work was an attempt to correct for the racial blind

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<sup>152</sup> These early canonical works only scratch the surface of the academic literature on “whiteness.” To this early, and highly influential set of whiteness studies we should add, Theodore Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race* (1994), Barbara J. Fields’s deeply influential essay the social construction of race “Ideology of Race in American History” (1982), and Toni Morrison’s study of whiteness in American literature, *Playing in the Dark* (1992). David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (London; New York: Verso, 2007); Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–91; Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>153</sup> Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1713–14.

spot in the work of New Labor Historians, whose massively influential and generative attention to the ways in which working people had been disciplined into accepting the industrial morality of capitalism also ignored the presence and importance of non-white labor. This, they argued, mistook the experience of one segment of workers—whites—for the experience of the working-class as a whole and in doing so blinded these inquiries to the function of racial ideologies within the history of class formations as well as the labor process itself. In contrast, Roediger and Ignatiev tracked the ways in which the complex of benefits and advantages actively shaped the development of the 19<sup>th</sup> century white working-class and their culture. Roediger, following from a line in Du Bois, argued that over and above the material advantages of whiteness, its “pleasures” could function as a sort of “psychic wage,” offsetting the alienation and indignity of class subjugation, while<sup>154</sup> Ignatiev examined the assimilation of Irish immigrants through their admission into the trades that constituted “white man’s work” (by virtue of their exclusion of Blacks), and while his analysis focused more on whiteness as a technique for maintaining functional divisions within the productive process and undercutting interracial solidarity on the shop floor, his analysis overlapped productively with Roediger’s. Both books contained much broader arguments about how whiteness functioned to preserve an alliance between workers and capital, particularly in the face of anticapitalist alternatives.<sup>155</sup> Due in part to their popularity and the controversy they engendered, these works received criticism for the explanatory power and epistemological stability they attributed to whiteness, but it demanded that whiteness be grappled with as a primary process of working-class fragmentation, one which was compounded by deep tendencies within the tradition of American organized labor and thus could not be overcome through race-blind organization.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Young Patriots Organization carried out their own investigation of these themes on the street corners and in the hillbilly bars of Uptown. Theirs was a vernacular whiteness study, defined as much by their distance from the world of waged work as their

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<sup>154</sup> Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 13.

<sup>155</sup> Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 112, 184.



claim to the stabilizing effects of whiteness. However problematic the lumpen thesis might have proved in the end, it penetrated a realm of activity and experience obscure to most investigations of whiteness as a homogenizing force. While white southern migrants who arrived in Chicago throughout the 1950s were able to find dependable, long term work that paid much better than anything they could have found in the South they left, this changed with the decade's end. Between 1959 and 1963, the number of southern whites in Chicago seeking work relief and unemployment nearly doubled.<sup>156</sup> In 1966, the year of Dr. King's open housing demonstrations in Chicago, the Goodfellow's march on the Summerdale police department, and the founding of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in Oakland, survey data put unemployment in Uptown at 27% for those seeking work, a figure that rose to 47% when it included those no longer attempting it. Just 39% of residents reported having full time jobs.<sup>157</sup>

US labor agencies had been documenting the rise of permanent, structural unemployment in American cities since the early 1960s, but it was not until 1966, that the Bureau of Labor Statistics coined the term "subemployment" to describe the chronic status of this disproportionately black and brown surplus population. In Uptown, the prevalence of this wagelessness created unbelievable misery, but the distance from the possibilities of middle and upper-class life also produced the sorts of openings and escape hatches that the Young Patriots took advantage of to organize their people. Locked out of the institutions that historically acculturated migrants to the white-working class, perched on the edge of a contracting postwar economy, and in possession of a history of dispossession, the Young Patriots forged a unique, makeshift understanding of excluded whiteness. Rather than take up the issues traditionally associated with the working-class, they organized around things like police brutality, welfare, urban renewal, and residential segregation. Their urban populism was based on a bricolage of influences and theory, concrete experiences and imaginative extensions of hardship, country music, squatted symbology,

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<sup>156</sup> As Devin Hunter writes, manual and "low-skilled" work was fairly plentiful in Uptown during the immediate postwar years. A 1959 survey of southern whites found that 76% find satisfactory work within two weeks, and while it was not the stable work of the war era it was much better than the prospects they would have had in the south. Major employers included the Bell and Howard telephone plants near Skokie, the LeSalle Candy Company south of Uptown, and local businesses such as Combined Insurance and Kemper. Hunter, "Growing Diversity," 281.

<sup>157</sup> Guy, *From Diversity to Unity*, 101–2.

and collective practice—and it worked, in very difficult conditions. As Bobby Lee recalled, “the Uptown neighborhood was prime recruiting zone for white supremacists. Most of the cats who were in the Patriots also had at least one family member in the Klan... Cats like Mike James and Junebug...worked hard to fight that mentality...drove a wedge in that bullshit, that white supremacist bullshit, their groundwork was just amazing, out of this world.”<sup>158</sup>

Ultimately, the Patriots realized through study of their own situation, that putting their off-whiteness to work in the service of the Rainbow Coalition was putting it to work in service to themselves. Alongside the Panthers and the Young Lords, they realized a version of the “interracial movement of the poor” predicted by Hayden and Wittman in 1963 but achieved, ironically, only after parting ways with the students. By the summer of 1969, when Preacherman stood on the stage of the Oakland Auditorium, the Young Patriots had leapt into the churning currents of history. Their time there would be brief, but for a moment they seemed to augur something new. As one reporter from *Newsweek* put it in September of that year: “By any normal sociological yardstick, a group of Chicago youths known as the Young Patriots should be the violent antithesis of the Black Panthers...[they] are predominantly poor white migrants from the rural South who came to the city with dreams of money-strewn streets...only to have their vision shattered by urban poverty.” They should, he continued, “represent backlash at its worst. And yet, in what must rank as one of the major curiosities of the New Left, yesterday’s rednecks have become today’s radicals.”<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Bobby Lee, interviewed by James Tracy, [http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Unity\\_Support/pdf/Interview\\_with\\_Bobby\\_Lee\\_by\\_James\\_Tracy.pdf](http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Unity_Support/pdf/Interview_with_Bobby_Lee_by_James_Tracy.pdf).

<sup>159</sup> Stokes, “Poor Whites, Blacks in Uncommon Alliance.”

## Chapter 2

Radical Hillbillies:  
the *Time of the Phoenix*, and the  
Politics of the Culture of Poverty

[W]e are living in a topsy-turvy world, a  
world where we cannot find our way by  
abiding by the rules of what once was  
common sense.

Hannah Arendt,  
“Understanding Politics,”  
1954

Anybody who has any common sense  
knows that the poor whites in  
Chicago’s Uptown district are our  
friends.

Fred Hampton,  
*Odyssey: Journey  
Through Black America*,  
1969

When, in the early days of 1969, the Good Fellows became the Young Patriots, they did so in the long shadow of the year they had just survived. In April of 1968, Dr. King was murdered in Memphis and more than 120 cities burned. In May, his Poor People’s Campaign [PPC] descended on Washington D.C. without him, and three thousand of the nation’s poor set up a shanty town they called “Resurrection City” on the National Mall and remained there for six weeks. Peggy Terry, who was a member of the PPC’s

steering committee, had been asked to give a speech as a representative of the poor whites, and so she and a group of JOIN members from Uptown made the trip to Washington. They set up in the camp where they stayed through the persistent heavy rain, the intermittent fights and “endless bologna and cheese sandwiches,” and then on June 5<sup>th</sup> the murder of presidential front-runner Bobby Kennedy.<sup>160</sup> On June 16<sup>th</sup>, 50,000 visitors came to the camp for Solidarity Day, to see the City and hear its people speak. When Peggy Terry addressed the crowd, she spoke about solidarity in dark times. “We, the poor whites of the United States, today demand an end to racism, for our own self-interest and well-being, as well as for the well being of black, brown and red Americans who, I repeat, are our natural allies in the struggle for real freedom.”<sup>161</sup>

Terry’s son Doug Youngblood, a young JOIN leader at twenty-seven, attended as well and wrote in a letter to *Movement* that he felt “what was going on in D.C. is one of the most important events to happen in a long time”:

I am aware what a liberal reformist bunch of shit the whole Campaign is, but let me emphasize again the changes that the poor people are going through. A lot of “radicals” are damning the PPC and SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Council] and are standing on the outside looking in... One thing a good organizer learns is not to get ahead of the people you are working with and that’s what most “radicals” are doing. Black, White, Mexican, Puerto Ricans, Indians, the entire spectrum of poverty is there talking and learning and it may not be radical enough for some but to me it is one of the most radical events I’ve ever been a part of.<sup>162</sup>

On June 23, the PPC’s permit expired. The next day, police cleared Resurrection City of its remaining inhabitants, “arresting stragglers without serious incident and charging them with congregating without a permit.”<sup>163</sup> But the Uptown contingent returned home to Chicago convinced that they had seen something transformative “around the campfires, the culture tent, the chow tent” of Resurrection City.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> William Wingell, “A Poor White Woman Speaks,” *York Daily Record*, June 20, 1968.

<sup>161</sup> Amy Sonnie and James Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times* (Brooklyn, N.Y: Melville House, 2011), 59.

<sup>162</sup> Doug Youngblood, “Letter from Youngblood,” *The Movement*, September 1, 1968.

<sup>163</sup> John Kelly, “Before Occupy D.C., There Was Resurrection City,” *The Washington Post; Washington, D.C.*, December 4, 2011, sec. METRO.

<sup>164</sup> Youngblood, “Letter from Youngblood.”

Then in August, the Democratic National Convention unleashed hell in Chicago some fifteen miles south of Uptown. Inside the convention hall, party heavies flexed every conceivable muscle to prevent anti-war delegates from making their case on floor, while just outside the party's authoritarian id reached full fluorescence as police brutally beat peace marchers and reporters in what a later federal commission declared a "police riot" in the streets of downtown Chicago.<sup>165</sup> As the bloody summer ended and the nation lurched toward a presidential election in November; new political alliances grew and then frayed, old centers of power held, voices of revolution and reaction mounted. Anything seemed possible. In Uptown, JOIN tried to process the events of the last few months while every other group in the movement seemed to be moving at once. Following the bloodshed at the convention, SDS membership exploded on campuses across the country, the Weathermen began their Days of Rage in Chicago, and the Black Panthers made a feint toward the establishment, running Eldridge Cleaver for president with the Peace and Freedom party. Sensing a chance to take her message about the white working class national, Peggy Terry decided to run alongside Cleaver with the primary goal of squaring off against George Wallace and offering poor and working class-whites an alternative to the narrow politics of racial grievance.<sup>166</sup>

On November 5, 1968, Richard Nixon narrowly won the presidency, defeating Hubert Humphrey by seven tenths of one percent in the popular vote. He did so with electoral votes from the South: Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, Florida, North and South Carolina all went Nixon, a result virtually unheard of for a Republican presidential candidate. George Wallace though, won 13.5% of the popular vote, took the Deep South—Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana—and publicly claimed the credit for the Republican victory: "Mr. Nixon said the same thing we said."<sup>167</sup> The Cleaver-Terry Peace and Freedom ticket won less than one percent in the states where they made the ballot, and

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<sup>165</sup> Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (Simon and Schuster, 2010), 690.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 61

<sup>167</sup> Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 353.

Peggy Terry came away worried that her message of poor and oppressed people's interracial solidarity, the message of JOIN and Dr. King and Resurrection City, had failed to register at any level.<sup>168</sup> As 1968 ended, JOIN seemed to have reached the end of an arc. One full year after their independence from SDS had been "granted" at a national conference in Bloomington, Indiana the last of their financial support had disappeared and their quixotic foray into national electoral politics had ended as quickly as it had begun.<sup>169</sup>

But even as JOIN's old structures were falling away, the chaos and violence and dashed hopes of 1968 seemed to affirm the group's core mission with a new intensity. And so, as the new year began, radicals in Uptown looked to reaffirm their poor people politics in light of the emerging political order and without any of the institutional support and conceptual fetters of their earlier middle-class allies. Sometime during the dawn of 1969, the remaining members of the Uptown Good Fellows declared themselves reborn, reconstituted in the light and the pressure of Third World Liberation and revolutionary solidarity. The YPO was formed out of the Good Fellow's core. It was the same group of young men who had been trained by, and in turn, trained the students, organized the march on the Summerdale Police Station, and written for movement newspapers, but the challenges they faced, and the methods of resistance that the times seemed to require had changed. The new group was born from the more radical core of the Uptown Goodfellows, those younger activists like Junebug Boykin, Doug Youngblood, Mike James, Hy and Ralph Thurman who had been leaders in JOIN and its affiliate groups, and who had come fully into their own after SDS left the neighborhood. With such a familiar membership, much of the YPO's mission was to continue work already underway in the neighborhood. Activists in Uptown were in the midst of a struggle with the UCC and the city over plans to build a college on Clifton and Racine and displace 2500 poor residents. But the new name also signaled real change, and as they became the Young Patriots, these activists claimed a place as poor whites in an interracial movement of oppressed peoples.

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<sup>168</sup> Sonnie and Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power*, 63.

<sup>169</sup> Bob White, "Where the People Are the Community," *The Rag*, February 5, 1968, Vol. II, No. 13.

This conceptual shift drew on militant theories of revolutionary internationalism and third world liberation that were everywhere on the student left, but it took direct inspiration from groups like the Black Panthers and Young Lords, whose organizational structure and radical style seemed like a clear model for their own street level politics. Reimagining the group along these lines allowed them a new kind of visibility within Uptown and it opened up the possibility of making new connections outside of the neighborhood. But it also raised the rather foundational question of what made a white group radical. Many groups in the movement had overwhelmingly white memberships, but few conceived of themselves as white organizations. This was due both to an understandable desire to promote diversity of participation and avoid association with white supremacists, and a sincere belief that the interests of poor and white working people were inherently reactionary. The Young Patriots dismissed this line of reasoning as a pernicious product of middle-class hang-ups. They took the founding principles of the NCU—

1. That organizing on campuses and in rural areas is not enough if we are to build a Movement that is both powerful and enduring.
2. That to become this we must build a base among the poor and working-class whites if we are seriously to challenge the “power-structure” of this country.
- [And] 3. That the organizing of working class and poor whites can best be done by people from that background who will be in charge and give direction to the action of the programs set up by the National Community Union.

—and restated them along the line of “people power.” Here, poor and oppressed whites could work in revolutionary solidarity with poor and oppressed people of other races if they could understand the roots of their shared exploitation as well as the ways in which systems of power worked to obscure it.

They knew firsthand the challenges of organizing poor southerners who had been brought up in a segregated society that prioritized white racial unity over any measure of class solidarity with African Americans. As one Southern woman in Chicago put it, “the only thing I knew about my people’s past was that we lynched niggers; in school they never told us we were a part of one of the most militant labor movements in the history of the world.”<sup>170</sup> But as the last chapter argued, the experience of migration to

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<sup>170</sup> Mike James, “Getting off the Interstate: Or, Back Home in Heartbreak, USA,” *The Movement*, September 1968.

the city unsettled southern identity in ways that produced new forms of marginalization and new opportunities for solidarity. The YPO took that unsettled identity and used it as the cornerstone of a political movement of poor whites against their exploiters in the middle and upper classes. As Bill “Preacherman” Fesperman laid it out, “We say there’s two kinds of white people. There are honkeys and there are hillbillies. And hillbillies are not the people who own Remington Arms or DuPont, and they’re not the Kennedys, the Rockefellers, they’re the oppressed people.”<sup>171</sup>

This paradoxical figure of the urban hillbilly, or the dislocated white southerner, allowed them to mount a defense of poor whites that was not a defense of whiteness and racial privilege, but instead a recognition of the political possibilities opened up once white people recognized and abandoned any pretense to it. James Tracy and Amy Sonnie have called this evocative though loosely defined articulation of poor white people’s political power “hillbilly nationalism,” but it is crucial to note the ways in which it was designed to exceed and even undermine the framework of something like the nation or a discrete people. The YPO attempted to develop a critical, yet ultimately affirmative analysis of the revolutionary role of poor whites in an interracial alliance of poor and oppressed people. This would be made manifest quite dramatically in the creation of the Rainbow Coalition, but it was equally true of their political struggles within Uptown.

The following two chapters examine how the YPO used the notion of the urban hillbilly to help articulate and build class based interracial political power. This chapter takes up the question of culture. It examines how the YPO looked to the southern migrant culture of Uptown to define themselves as a political group and build capacity to do work within their community. As we will see, the Young Patriots took a makeshift approach to political culture. They took what was common, ubiquitous, and often the rightful property of others, and used it to build their own vernacular discourse. This chapter examines this approach in relation to their political symbols and poetry, and the following chapter traces it in relation to country music, but they took a shared approach to a variety of materials. As Kent Ono and John Sloop

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<sup>171</sup> “Counterorientation Week UNC, Chapel Hill, N.C.” SAC, Charlotte to FBI Director, 17 August 1968, “Black Panther Party, North Carolina, 3 of 15. <https://vault.fbi.gov/Black%20Panther%20Party%20>



argue, the political possibility of vernacular discourse is not only counterhegemonic but affirmative, allowing people to articulate locale rationales that could not simply be reduced to the rejection of a dominant culture. To do this, communities liberally co-opt and squat elements of the dominant culture and in doing so construct ways of speaking, thinking, and being together “out of cultural fragments.”<sup>172</sup> While many outside observers considered Uptown to be a place without culture or politics, the Young Patriots helped build both in order to survive and to resist.

### “Urban Hillbillies” and the Culture of Poverty

In order to understand what made the Young Patriots unique among white radical groups, it is important to understand their focus on culture. As Stuart Hall reminds us, any nationalist undertaking involves:

[a] project of producing a cultural definition of the people, of helping to constitute what the people are. Although politics has to function on the terrain of the popular, the people and the popular are themselves constituted through discourses, collective practices, and cultural forms. Politics must make use of the popular, but the popular can never be taken as given or fixed; it is always created by people, who in going about their daily lives collectively determine distinct ways of doing things and responding to shared conditions. The popular is produced, in other words, not given. Neither though was this category of “the people.”<sup>173</sup>

The Patriots claimed the hillbilly culture of Uptown, and they used the language, symbols, and art of that culture to help define the political community they acted in the name of. In what follows I will examine the group’s political symbolism and some of their poetic production, but it must be noted how counterintuitive, and even radical, their use of migrant southern culture was.

The term “urban hillbilly” first appeared in Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* (1962), where the author used it to illustrate the book’s most famous formulation: “the culture of poverty”. Meant to amplify the paradoxical nature of their presence in the modern city, urban hillbillies were for Harrington a striking, counterintuitive example of the grotesque iterations of modern poverty his book

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<sup>172</sup> Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, “The Critique of Vernacular Discourse: Communication Monographs: Vol 62, No 1,” *Communications Monographs* 62, no. 1 (1995): 22–23, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03637759509376346>.

<sup>173</sup> Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, ed. Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 202.

sought to thrust under the nose of a slumbering comfortable country. That book became a cornerstone of 20th century liberal thought on the endurance of poverty in an affluent society. In it, Harrington aimed to shatter the nation's "implicit assumption that the basic grinding economic problems [of the United States] had been solved" in the years following the second World War.<sup>174</sup> He pointed to readily available census data which proved that between 40 and 50 million Americans lived in poverty, members households that survived on an annual income of 3000 dollars or less. The poverty he was describing was new, Harrington argued. It was not the general, calamitous poverty of the Depression, mourned by politicians and chronicled by great artists. Instead it was the invisible secret of the postwar boom. Invisible, of course, to those middle and upper-class readers to whom the book was addressed. All too visible to the one in four citizens Harrington described as trapped by the culture of his other America.

Borrowed from the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, Harrington used the concept of a culture of poverty to explain to readers of the upper classes—those "who could make the difference"—why the poor are poor, arguing that the poor in America are born into an economic position whose structuring realities by and large prevent its escape.<sup>175</sup> But in order to emphasize how he believes the subjective worldview of the poor is deformed by economic inequality he turns to the notion of culture. The culture of poverty is for Harrington a total mode of being, "a way of looking at reality, a series of attitudes, a special way of life," and "everything about [the poor], from the conditions of their teeth to the way in which they love, is suffused and permeated by the fact of their poverty."<sup>176</sup> Harrington presents the urban hillbillies he encountered in St. Louis as an operative example of people disfigured by their culture of poverty.

"Properly speaking," he writes:

only part of this group comes from the hills to the big city. The others are Arkansas cotton pickers, people from southeast Missouri ("Swamp East Missouri," they call it), Oakies [sic] on the West Coast who never recovered from the migration of the thirties. Yet they share common problems—the fact that the backwoods has completely unfitted them for urban life—a common poverty, and they often like the same "country music."<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York, N.Y: Scribner, 1997), 1.

<sup>175</sup> Harrington, 15.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 96–97.

Harrington's picture of these people is familiar. They are the paradoxical white newcomers ill fitted to urban life and cloistered among their own. They keep and are kept to themselves, form insular communities with their own styles and customs, and are wary of outsiders. They have their own way of speaking; their own churches; their own social networks, which elevate and are structured by kin; and their own music, hillbilly stuff electrified by radio exposure. This collective insularity, he reasoned, produced shared values, casual attitudes toward cleanliness, education, sex, marriage, violence, etc., and the maintenance of this complex of distinctive behaviors prevented their improvement. All that was good, the "loose, defeated gaiety" of these people, encountered on a summer evening when "the air was filled with hillbilly music from a hundred radios" was ultimately null, "contained in an environment of misery" and inextricably fused by the fatalism of the nativist.<sup>178</sup>

Harrington's grim conclusion to his tour of supplemental poverties was unequivocal. Of the urban hillbilly slum, he wrote "there was nothing legally or humanely that could be done short of the abolition of the neighborhood and the culture it contained."<sup>179</sup> Stark as they might seem, Harrington's views on culture and poverty were widely shared. Both his low estimation of what constituted the culture of the poor, and his insistence that that culture was an impediment to betterment and full lives, were shared by professional social thinkers on the left and the right. In part, they reflect a theme that runs throughout this project, what Nadine Hubbs calls "the overwriting of working-class realities by middle-class narratives."<sup>180</sup> Harrington was always clear about the audience for *The Other America*. It was the middle class, the wealthy, those at the levers of power who were to be shocked into action. As he concluded in the book's final chapter, "the fate of the poor hangs upon the decision of the better-off."<sup>181</sup> *The Other America* proved to be incredibly influential among the better-off. The slim book sold some 70,000 copies

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid.. 100.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.. 101.

<sup>180</sup> Nadine Hubbs, "'Them's My Kind of People': Cross-Marginal Solidarity in Country Music of the Long Seventies," in *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music*, ed. Mark Allan Jackson (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 170.

<sup>181</sup> Harrington, 162.

the year of its release, found its way to the desk of President Kennedy where it became a major “spur toward the War on Poverty.”<sup>182</sup> But by way of that phrase “the culture of poverty”—one which Harrington would later disavow, according to his biographer—the book also helped justify a set of middle- and upper-class attitudes about the culture of the poor which would remain central to debates surrounding postwar poverty and its relief.

The Young Patriots rejected this approach outright. Like the Black Panther Party, they believed that the culture they needed was the culture they already had, but not in the simple sense that culture was something to be celebrated uncritically.<sup>183</sup> Their understanding of culture and its political utility was derived in part from the Marxist left. They saw culture as a way of life produced by—but not reducible to—economic and historical circumstances and emerging out of “the interactions between different groups or social classes.”<sup>184</sup> Understood as a product of particular economic arrangements, rather than a driver of poverty or prosperity, culture wasn’t inherently progressive or regressive. Instead it simply named the field of attitudes, beliefs, and expressions shared by a group of people within a particular position in society. This more neutral understanding of culture resembles what Antonio Gramsci called *senso commune* or (roughly) “common sense”: the “heterogenous bundle of assumed certainties that structure the basic landscapes within which individuals are socialized and chart their individual life courses.”<sup>185</sup> For Gramsci, each class, or “particular grouping” of people has its own common sense; a mass of attitudes and assumptions, often contradictory or running at cross purposes, that explain their shared reality and relation to other groups and classes, but not in any unified, programmatic sense.<sup>186</sup> Common sense is the realm of the popular, to recall Hall’s earlier formulation, and the role of the organic

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<sup>182</sup> Jefferson R. Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 213.

<sup>183</sup> Boots Riley and Rickey Vincent, “Forward,” in *Party Music: The Inside Story of the Black Panthers’ Band and How Black Power Transformed Soul Music* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), xi.

<sup>184</sup> Hall, *Cultural Studies* 1983, 37.

<sup>185</sup> Kate Crehan, *Gramsci’s Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2016), 43.

<sup>186</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Reprint, 1989 edition (New York: International Publishers Co, 1971), 330.

intellectuals of any class is to transform common sense into an effective politics, a “coherent unity” of thought in touch with both “the intellectual” and “the simple.”<sup>187</sup> The reason for this, argues Gramsci, is that while common sense is always conflictual and always harbors elements that will impede, in his case, a progressive political movement, its obvious proximity to people’s everyday lives and culture endows it with an authentic claim to truth which is very difficult to simply produce. As a result, rooting politics in the popular demonstrates “that ‘everyone’ is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone’s individual life, but of renovating and making ‘critical’ an already existing activity.”<sup>188</sup> The aim of such a synthesis was to create an understanding of politics which would enable progress for a mass of people rather than the creation of a specialized political class.

The Patriots were not acolytes of Antonio Gramsci, but his notion of the political power of a “renewed common sense” nicely frames their productively critical approach to cultural organizing in Uptown. While thinkers like Harrington, and many of the student organizers from JOIN, looked at the hillbilly ghettos as neighborhoods whose cultures prevented their becoming proper political actors, the YPO saw the culture of the poor in Uptown as the inspiration and raw material for building resistance. Which is just to say that they knew what is known in every poor community: that their culture was valuable and often good; that things like music or slang or folk wisdom recognized and registered social reality in very deep ways that were obscure to, or even hidden from outsiders; and that any move to encourage self-determination among the poor would necessarily cultivate this culture rather than abolish it. To many organizers or activists of the professional classes, the political quality of poor and working-class culture was either invisible or clearly retrograde. But to activist groups within these neighborhoods, local culture was an essential tool in building political power to better economic conditions. These people, poor people largely, understood in their way that culture is that realm of human activity where the

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<sup>187</sup> Gramsci, 324, 330.

<sup>188</sup> Gramsci, 330–31.

structural realities that govern and undergird life are interpreted and expressed in undeniably human terms.

The question that confronted the Patriots was how to make the persuasive case that poor white people in Uptown had more in common with their poor neighbors than with those who were better off, and improving their living and working conditions depended on organizing together as a moral and political bloc. As Fesperman put it, “We got some special things to say to white people, and that’s that brothers and sisters, it’s about time we decided who we identify with in this country.”<sup>189</sup> And again, the seemingly paradoxical answer the YPO arrived at, was that in order to convince poor whites that they should not only identify with one another, but with their poor Cuban, Puerto Rican, Indian American, and African American neighbors, they would embrace and leverage the figure of the urban hillbilly more consciously than ever before. During the JOIN years, the term hillbilly had been a useful signifier; taking it up and making it their own allowed some poor migrants to embrace their way of life and southern roots, while explaining their unique subordinate social position in Chicago. The Patriots extended this line to different ends. They used the figure of the hillbilly to highlight cultural cleavages within white America and to name a disaffiliation from both reactionaries on the right and the middle-class left.

### **Radical Symbols**

One of the most obvious and consequential ways in which they managed this was evidenced in their choice of political symbols, which were by and large repurposed from the realm of “common sense” and put into the service of an interracial coalition of the poor. Take the group’s new name, The Young Patriot Organization. Like many things about the group—their iconography, their claim to a radical hillbilly culture, their calls for “white power” in the service of black liberation, their very place within the Rainbow Coalition—this new name appears as a contradiction. In a year when “radicals” and “patriots” named antithetical factions in the culture wars over Vietnam, student protests, and black power, this group

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<sup>189</sup> “Counterorientation Week UNC, Chapel Hill, N.C.” SAC, Charlotte to FBI Director, 17 August 1968, “Black Panther Party, North Carolina, 3 of 15 <https://vault.fbi.gov/Black%20Panther%20Party%20>

claimed the latter designation. One article suggests that the name derived from a local motorcycle gang, The Lincoln Park Patriots, but in 2016, Hy Thurman explained that the Young Patriots “adopted the older, historical meaning of patriotism by identifying and understanding themselves as popular revolutionaries overturning the exploitative system through self-determination, education, [and] anti-racism.”<sup>190</sup>

But it is also true that the name *was* intended as a contradiction, and that contradiction was intended to complicate rather than just appropriate the mantle of the patriot. If indeed it was the aim, as Hy suggests, to reclaim an older sense of the word, and to force patriotism to mean revolutionaries working against oppression rather than any support of US nationalism, it was only possible to see the term in this light after it had undergone a kind of critique through juxtaposition. By superimposing the patriot and the radical the YPO set the two terms into a kind of semantic conflict, the purpose of which was wrenching popular concepts out of their familiar frame and putting them to new work for their own political ends. This first act of self-re-definition on the part of the Young Patriots wasn’t an exercise in etymology, or even history, but in the political use of symbols and language. They were not proposing a scholarly correction to common sense understanding. Instead they were squatting American symbolic language, taking from it what they wanted and then leaving it in such a state as to frustrate prevailing notions of, in this case, American patriotism in the late 1960s.

When the Goodfellows changed their name, they also made another, more controversial iconographic decision. They adopted the symbol of the Confederate battle flag, which they wore on their hats and jacket alongside a number of other political symbols, most notably the Panther’s patch demanding, “Free Huey.” As Fesperman explained their use of the flag in 1968, “A hundred years ago, this flag that I wear on my cap represents the Confederate States of America, we were beat down, and we beat down people for a hundred years and we know what it’s like to beat down people. We are getting ourselves together, we’re angry about it because we were beaten down today.”<sup>191</sup> The use of the

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<sup>190</sup> Barbara Joye, “Young Patriots,” *Great Speckled Bird*, March 9, 1970; Sam Gould, Mary Austin Speaker, and Chris Martin, eds., *Against the Picture-Window: A Time of the Phoenix Compendium* (Society Editions, 2016).

<sup>191</sup> Jakobi Williams, *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago*, 135.

confederate flag, like the invocation of patriotism, was intended to legitimize the group within the neighborhood, to situate the YPO within a set of familiar, commonly held political associations. On the one hand, their choice of the flag was a pragmatic one. They were after a symbol of southern group identification which the Confederate flag seemed to provide. It was ubiquitous in Uptown; it adorned the walls of hillbilly bars, flew from car antennae, and was easy to pick up in a military surplus store and sew on the back of a jacket for cheap.<sup>192</sup> In a slum where much of life seemed bleak, the flag appeared to channel alienation into rebellion and willful disaffiliation with middle-class urban society. It was rude and partisan and dangerous.

On the other, the flag carried an undeniable history of white supremacy and racialized violence. Never the flag of the Confederacy, the “Battle flag” achieved its deep, metonymic association with the Old South anachronistically, during the years of Jim Crow and desegregation. Designed by William Porcher Miles, the flag consisted of two blue bars crossed diagonally on a field of red and studded with thirteen white five pointed stars, one for each state in the Confederacy (including rump governments in Kentucky and Missouri). It had been rejected as the national flag of the CSA, but after the First Battle of Manassas—when it had proved difficult to distinguish between the national flag of the CSA and American flag of the Union Army—Miles’ flag was taken up for the express purpose of use in battle. Properly known as “the flag of the Army of Northern Virginia,” and informally referred to as “Beauregard’s flag” the “battle flag” became “the Confederate flag” sometime after World War II. It was brought into political circulation in 1948, when angry Southern Democrats flew it as they marched out of the convention hall in protest of the party’s adoption of the Trumanites’ civil rights plank. Later that year, the Dixiecrats adopted the flag as their official banner at a rump convention in Birmingham, and over the next few years a number of Southern states worked the design into their state flags.<sup>193</sup> During this period

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<sup>192</sup> Sonnie and Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power*, 155.

<sup>193</sup> Edward Folliard, “Dixie Rides Again, Flying Its Battle Flag of the Confederacy But Not All Southerners Agree On Why Vogue Began—Or When,” *The Washington Post*, November 13, 1951; Cliff Mackay, “Flag Of Rebellion,” *Afro-American*, September 8, 1951; “Confederate Flags on Autos of Teen-Agers Arouse Ire in N.J.,” *New York Herald Tribune*, August 29, 1951.



it also enjoyed a surprising resurgence outside of the South. In 1951, newspapers across the country reported that it was being waved at college football games in Charlottesville and flown from car aerials and bike handlebars in New York and New Jersey. When Gen. Douglas MacArthur returned to the United States in April of that year, he was met by a great and admiring throng, and the rebel flag outnumbered Old Glory 2:1.<sup>194</sup>

It was during these years that the battle flag effectively subsumed all other symbols of the Confederacy, taking on their associations and in some cases their very names; the “Stars and Bars,” for example, was originally the nickname of the national flag of the CSA, but by the middle of the 20th century, when the flag was remobilized for a renewed racist sectional politics, it too became one more name for the ever proliferating battle flag. The Confederate flag’s adoption by anti-integrationist Dixiecrats revived the symbol and put it to use in the defense of Jim Crow, but couched this in broader language about resistance to federal intervention, states’ rights, economic renewal in the South, and moral hypocrisy in the North. When the civil rights movement began high profile actions in the South, the flag was everywhere. When James Meredith, flanked by federal marshals, attempted to enroll at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, “[t]housands of Oxfordians massed behind Confederate battle flags.”<sup>195</sup> But no politician of the era planted the Confederate flag in as firmly an unreconstructed fashion as George Wallace. At his inauguration as Governor of Alabama in 1963, Wallace stood on the spot where Jefferson Davis had accepted the provisional presidency of the CSA in 1861 and, as the historian John Coski writes,

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<sup>194</sup> “MacArthur Is Greeted By Rebel Flags,” May 5, 1951. In the Summer of 1951, the US Air Force was moved to ban the display of the Confederate battle flag from bases and service aircraft (“Air Force Puts Ban On Rebel Flags”). *The Chicago Defender* relayed the following story, which offers a sense of how African-American newspapers responded to the resurgence:

Reports become increasingly frequent of the appearance of Confederate flags on war ships, military planes and other vehicles in war zones in Korea and occupation zones in Germany and Japan. One story contains ironic humor. In Korea certain bombastic and boastful Texans insisted on decorating their jeeps and recon cars with Lone Star flags and even more Southerners stuck Stars and Bars on their vehicles. Korean and Chinese sharpshooters, abysmally and blissfully ignorant of the fact that the South is still fighting the Civil War of ninety years ago, assumed that the flags means that the occupant of the decorated and beflagged car was at least a one-star general. Promptly the sharpshooters sought to plug the Americans between the eyes. Military records do not reveal how many bullets found their mark. (“Confederate Flags! A Fad Or Revival of Fanaticism”)

<sup>195</sup> Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 169.

“explicitly linked his stand against federally mandated integration with the Confederacy’s resistance to federal interference” when he made his famous declaration: “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”<sup>196</sup>

One obvious reason for its popularity was its ability as a symbol to implicitly claim a romantic continuity across various periods of Southern history without making explicit claim to the white supremacist ideology that underwrote them, and in whose service it was originally marshalled. Southerners who opposed the use of the flag considered it either nakedly racist or unpatriotic, while those who supported it either dismissed these charges or considered them a virtue. These white southerners summoned the symbol in defense of a number of things; many overtly racist (segregation, anti-miscegenation, racial terrorism) others more carefully cloaked in (states’ rights, Wallace’s formulation of “property rights are human rights, too”), still others in a set of positive characteristics (rebelliousness, resilience, self-reliance, etc.) apparently severed from the material reality the flag once underwrote.<sup>197</sup> As Guy Davenport described the banner’s paradoxical endurance: “[I]t is a captured flag, a defeated flag, a flag that belongs to history. But it is an emblem of racist militias, of the Ku Klux Klan, and of various college fraternities.”<sup>198</sup> Mae Henderson described it as a “*floating signifier*’ of whiteness,” a useful term in describing a thing to which many—but not any—meanings might attach.<sup>199</sup>

Stuart Hall described floating signifiers as things—symbols, notions, things themselves—whose meaning “can never be finally fixed, but [are] subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation. To the losing of old meanings, and the appropriation and collection on contracting new ones, to the endless process of being...made to mean something different in different cultures, in different historical formations, at different moments of time.”<sup>200</sup> But while meaning is always slippery and

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<sup>196</sup> John M. Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 151.

<sup>197</sup> Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 317.

<sup>198</sup> Guy Davenport, “The Confederate Battle Flag,” *Callaloo* 24, no. 1 (2001): 51.

<sup>199</sup> Mae Henderson, “For Which It Stands,” *Callaloo* 24, no. 1 (2001): 88.

<sup>200</sup> Stuart Hall, “Race - the Floating Signifier,” accessed January 21, 2019, <https://www.kanopy.com/product/stuart-hall-race-floating-signifier>.

contested, those struggles and slippages are carried out, as Hall reminds us, in real historical situations with meaningful, if contested, parameters. The status of Southern “whiteness,” as Henderson points out, is and has always been central to the ways in which that flag lost or gained meanings. Most uses of the flag either actively “secure the notion of white privilege under the cover of sentimentalized racial shibboleths appealing to tradition, heritage, and legacy” or attempt to bracket its historical origins and public employment by segregationists and racial terrorists in order to claim some properly distanced remainder: a vague quality of rebelliousness, freedom, endurance, what have you, of the South but not its history of white supremacy.

The intended difference in the Patriots’ approach should be clear. Their politics rested on an attempt to overcome their subordinate class position without reaffirming the racial privileges that constitute “whiteness.” They advanced no romance of the Old South and made common cause with groups that were obvious enemies of racial and class subordination. Their employment of the flag, then, was as an emblem of disaffiliation employed in protest of its own history. Like an inverted version of the Biblical parable of the wineskins, they attempted to pour new meaning into an old, ubiquitous symbol in order to burst it. As Hy Thurman explained in a 2016 interview with James Tracy, “In the 1960s in Uptown and in the south the Confederate “Rebel” flag was found in most bars, on bumper stickers, clothing etc. and other locations. It was present so much it was almost invisible.” When the YPO went about their organizing work they:

would wear the Rebel flag we would place a free Huey button, Black Panther button and a rainbow button surrounding the flag...It did invoke much conversation. Not so much as the flag as the other buttons. We would explain the Young Patriots goals and that all poor people have the same poverty and the poor Blacks, Latinos, American Indians and Asians are all being exploited and kept in poverty by the capitalist system.

According to Hy Thurman, as the group “grew politically” they abandoned the flag, concluding that there was “no place in the movement or the world for the Confederate flag. It symbolizes a period of time when our black brothers and sisters were mere property to sold or destroyed at the white man’s

convenience.”<sup>201</sup> But it was a prominent symbol used throughout the Patriot’s most active period, and remains associated with them to this day.

In recent discussions of the flag, Hy Thurman has disavowed its use, stating that he “would not recommend it’s [sic] use by any group or anyone or any purpose and believe that it should be destroyed as a tribute to those who suffered pain and anguish in a great dark period of our history.”<sup>202</sup> But the thinking at the time was that it was something worth wresting from the hands of racists not for its own sake, but in the hopes it could be in a sense inverted.<sup>203</sup> The Patriots weren’t the only ones attempting this. The civil rights group Southern Students Organizing Committee named its newspaper *The New Rebel* and chose as its symbol a Confederate Flag overlaid with black and white clasped hands. Both of these groups were committed to counteracting the symbol while retaining some positive valence of regional rootedness and cultural specificity. There was, to be sure, a degree of glib utopianism in the Patriots’ use of the flag, a faith that one set of associations could be counted on to trump another, or to think that covering it in the presence of non-white members of the community was enough to hedge against unintended offense. And there was also an element of trollishness; adopting the flag in any form was just the type of decision that would have triggered a fight with the dubious student organizers. Its use and disavowal raise interesting questions. Can a symbol of racial oppression be a tool in the work of a group opposed to it? Can the undesirable elements of a political icon be purged and some positive connotations salvaged? Can new wine bust old bottles, as the parable went?

At the same time, their use of it indicates something crucial about their relationship to the culture of the space they sought to organize. In an interview with the artist Chris Gould, part of a collective who recently republished a collection of poems and songs collected and written by the YPO, he made the important point that not only were the Young Patriots attuned to the cultural dimension of radical politics,

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<sup>201</sup> Hy Thurman, *Revolutionary Hillbilly: An Interview With Hy Thurman of the Young Patriots Organization*, interview by James Tracy, January 28, 2016, <https://jamestracybooks.org/2016/01/28/revolutionary-hillbilly-an-interview-with-hy-thurman-of-the-young-patriots-organization/>.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>203</sup> “Counterorientation Week UNC, Chapel Hill, N.C.” SAC, Charlotte to FBI Director, 17 August 1968, “Black Panther Party, North Carolina, 3 of 15. <https://vault.fbi.gov/Black%20Panther%20Party%20>.

they were attentive to the complications and contradictions of the culture they drew on to define themselves. Over the course of their existence and more than any of the white radical groups who they counted as contemporaries—including The White Panthers, Rising Up Angry, and SDS—they attempted to develop a critique of subordination that could speak in the language of marginalized whites. Southern signifiers hailed residents of Uptown, then Black Panther Patches turned the sense of the symbol on its head. Such a critique was rooted in local culture and appeared as familiar but was designed to yield unfamiliar results. We can see this in the adoption of the term the “patriots,” a move intended to both legitimize the group in the eyes of neighbors (many of whom would have approved of this designation) *and* suggest a different definition of patriotism. In each instance the familiar terms are being complicated or turned on their head in order to describe new solidarities in old words.

But beyond the cultural critical work of these recontextualized symbols, the use of the flag made an interesting ethical claim. Consider again Preacherman’s words. “*This flag that I wear on my cap represents the Confederate States of America, we were beat down, and we beat down people for a hundred years and we know what it’s like to beat down people. We are getting ourselves together, we’re angry about it because we were beaten down today.*” Buried in the jackknife syntax is an uncomfortable, transgressive claim: *those of us wearing this flag today know what it is like to be hurt because we once hurt others under its sign; now we refuse that prerogative.* The way he describes the symbol and the history of subjection it recalls does not avoid the history of violence inflicted upon African Americans by white southerners. Instead Fesperman, speaking for the Patriots and poor whites more generally, claims some intimate, shameful knowledge of what it feels like to deal out violence, to know what it’s like to beat people down, or be given the opportunity to beat people down, and then he disaffiliates from this power and declares his intention to subvert it. As Hy told me once, the flag didn’t get many questions but the other buttons did.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Hy Thurman, interview by author, January 15, 2018.

These decisions about iconography and naming are the sorts of important, load bearing choices that have to be made when defining any political group. Implicit in them are fundamental questions about politics and the foundations of political power: Who constitutes the group in question? Which “people”—in the sense of political community—does the group claim to speak for? How does the group play an active role in definitions of “the people”? But the Young Patriots realized that integral to these very fundamental questions about building local political power was this issue of culture, and that the sprawling, chaotic, ideologically diverse migrant culture of Uptown—the distinctive ways in which people there made their lives and gave their lives meaning—was a critical source of social legitimacy and political power. From the moment the group formed, the YPO looked at the social world of Uptown as both an expression of the neighborhood’s power structure and as an array of rhetorical models for describing the ways in which that power was kept out of the hands of working people.

They understood, for example, that the country music people listened to in the bars explained economically compelled migration and collective nostalgia, or that loitering, storefront churches, and street games were all responses to the allocation of public and private space in the neighborhood. In their organizing, they attempted to make these links explicit, to show how the way life was in Uptown was in part a product of political decisions made without their input. But they also recognized how powerfully cultural practices communicated these abstract social relations and so incorporated these practices in developing and disseminating their radical political program. Put differently, the group prioritized intervening at the level of culture and to doing politics in the language of the neighborhood.

### **The Time of the Phoenix**

As Gramsci wrote, a philosophy of praxis, one that achieves an organic unity between intellectuals and the great mass of people, begins as a criticism of common sense which is at the same time rooted in common sense, “in order to demonstrate that ‘everyone’ is a philosopher.”<sup>205</sup> It demonstrates this not so

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<sup>205</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 330.

that an elect few of the people might gain admittance into the select class of professional philosophers, but to create a pragmatic philosophy that can “make politically possible the intellectual [and material] progress of the mass.”<sup>206</sup> For the Patriots, making the symbolic and iconographic choices they did was one element of communicating a political ideology via familiar cultural markers, but they also engaged in the production of culture itself. Beginning in 1969, the Patriots began work producing a series of poetry chapbooks called *Time of the Phoenix*.

The little books were printed by the press at Columbia College Chicago. They were paper bound and stapled along the spine. Their front covers featured two color woodcuts and geometric designs while the backs were stamped with the imprimatur “YPO.” The first issue of *Time of the Phoenix* was published in 1970, two more followed in 1973, and the last was released in 1976.<sup>207</sup> Each of the four issues they put out held somewhere between 50 and 130 poems and songs, all collected in and around Uptown. Taken together they represent the largest collection of writing by the most marginalized and least visible in the neighborhood. Like Gramsci, *TOP* made the claim that “everyone” was a poet, and that the poetry of poor people was a valuable and sufficient locus of thought and expression that knew and sensed things others could not. But perhaps more importantly, the chapbooks helped produce a sense of community that reflected the Italian theorist’s description of political education. As an aesthetic project, the collections collected and preserved diverse expressions of marginalized life in a working-class community that was slated for physical removal. The comingling of Spanish idioms, street slang, Appalachian nostalgia, and militant bravado insisted on a civic reality that many would rather ignore and it fixed it in language. Politically, the hope was that through the collective process of description, the speaking community could also be moved to action.<sup>208</sup> And underwriting all of this was a desire for self-expression, a need to speak

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>207</sup> Describe how I have access to all of this.

<sup>208</sup> In his essay “The Study of Philosophy,” Gramsci describes the way in which study of the self can produce class consciousness: “In acquiring one’s conception of the world one always belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and acting. We are all conformists of some conformism or other, always man-in-the-mass or collective man. The question is this: of what historical type is the conformism, the mass humanity to which one belongs” (Gramsci, 324) And later in the same essay, “Critical understanding of the self takes place therefore through a struggle of political “hegemonies” and of opposing

and be heard. Many of the poems that appeared in these collections were very private pieces, prayers and laments, while others were bits of song or jokes. At a first glance, they might seem supplementary to a project. They exhibit little literary pretension or overt connection to a political program. But in actuality they were at its heart, records of the lives, and the form of life, the activists were seeking to defend.

While many members of the interlocking Uptown activist organizations contributed to the series over its run, it was primarily overseen by one YPO member who we have already discussed, albeit in passing. His name was Douglas Jones Jr., but he was called Youngblood. The oldest son of Peggy Terry and Douglas Jones, he was a self-educated poet, writer, and radical, and a constant presence in Uptown community politics. He was born in 1941, just twenty miles outside of Chicago. His mother had grown up between Oklahoma and Kentucky, though, and during the war—with her second husband fighting in Europe—she moved the family around in search of war work, stopping briefly in Viola, Kentucky, where she worked in a shell-loading plant, painting the ends of tracer ammunition, before settling in Jackson, Michigan, where she tested airplane radios and brought home ninety dollars a week.<sup>209</sup> Doug spent most of his childhood in Michigan, but dropped out of school after sixth grade and joined a travelling carnival which, as one *Chicago Tribune* reporter put it, “permitted him to view a good bit of the world and, at the same time, to compile a sizable juvenile arrest record.”<sup>210</sup> Once, he explained to a reporter the story of his chosen name. Back in the late thirties, when things were very hard for his parents, his birth father had stolen a pig and had the misfortune to be identified. In hopes of avoiding detection, he took on the maiden name of his wife’s mother—Youngblood—and disappeared.<sup>211</sup> It was, then, a twice pilfered name, fitting for a street tough and a radical, and it served Douglas Jones Jr. for many years.

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directions, first in the ethical field and then in that of politics proper, in order to arrive at the working out at a higher level of one’s own conception of reality. Consciousness of being part of a particular hegemonic force (that is to say, political consciousness) is the first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice will finally be one (333).

<sup>209</sup> Sigerman, *The Columbia Documentary History of American Women Since 1941*, 55-57.

<sup>210</sup> Clarus Backes, “Poor People’s Power In Uptown,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 29, 1968, sec. 7, 46.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*.



In 1958, Youngblood quit rambling for Chicago, where his mother had moved a few years before. While living in Michigan, Terry had become involved with various activist organizations, including an anti-nuclear group named Women for Peace and Communist Party USA, but it was in Chicago that she fully committed herself to the civil rights movement and became deeply involved with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Youngblood was radicalized through his mother's example. Terry learned the ins and outs of protest and organizational development while working behind the scenes at CORE, but as that group became more militant and skeptical of white liberal support she began to question her utility for the movement. In 1962, Terry's friend and civil rights activist Monroe Sharp encouraged her to look into a new project being developed by SDS, this one aiming to organize poor whites in Terry's own neighborhood of Uptown.<sup>212</sup> At first skeptical of organizing a predominantly white community during the dynamic years of the civil rights movement, Terry followed Sharp's advice. As James Tracey writes, "[Sharp] all but dragged Terry to the JOIN office, leaving her there with the friendly admonishment, 'This is where you belong... You have to really know who *you* are to ever know who *we* are.'<sup>213</sup>

Youngblood became involved with JOIN thanks to his mother's involvement and was an early and invaluable link between the SDS organizers and the Uptown migrant youth. Just twenty-three when JOIN moved into their first Uptown office on Ainsle Avenue in the fall of 1964, Youngblood was likely as excited by the arrival of the young radicals as they were to find in him a streetwise ambassador to the southern community. Youngblood quickly became an active member of the JOIN Community Union in Uptown and an eventual co-founder of the Young Patriots. Described by one newspaper as "young, spike thin, [and] crudely handsome in full cavalry mustache and tiny goatee," he had, by the late 1960s, become an effective and charismatic leader within the community. He was especially adept at interpreting and distilling different levels of political struggle and communicating their importance and interrelatedness to different audiences. In the mid-1960s he began writing for *Firing Line* the JOIN newsletter edited by

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<sup>212</sup> Sonnie and Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power*, 20.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*,

Terry and distributed in the neighborhood, where he covered everything from movement news to the social importance of Hank Williams's country music. Then he wrote for SDS affiliated national underground newspapers outlets like *Movement* and *New Left Notes* where he reflected on political strategy from the point of view of the poor, helping to organize the organizers and inject a collaborative energy into student debates about the working class. Moreover, he believed sincerely in the importance of media as a means of counter-programming. In a long letter published in the November, 27, 1967 edition of *New Left Notes*, Youngblood issued a call for seriousness:

I contend that we don't have the ten to fifteen years everyone is talking about and that the next two or three will be a life and death struggle for the movement just to establish itself (numerically, ideologically, and financially) and become powerful enough to deal with the reactionary forces that are even now trying to halt the liberal line of thought alive in America today. I believe that through the media of television, radio, newspapers, and general propaganda they can not only halt the liberal line but bring about a complete reversal.<sup>214</sup>

Anticipating intense backlash by the state, he insisted that in order for "the movement" to survive they must "become powerful enough to repel any attack they might use against us" adding in parenthesis: "(HUAC, The McCarran Act of 1950, "operation dragnet"—for "operation dragnet" see REALIST #75, June 1967 and the BERkeley [sic] Barb, Vol. 4 #24, Issue 96, page 4.)."<sup>215</sup> Part of building power was counter-programming, and essential to counter-programming was building and extending alternative media, useful, partisan sources of knowledge, information, and discussion exemplified here by underground newspapers like *The Realist* and the *Berkeley Barb*.

It is clear from Youngblood's writing during these years that he was an attentive reader of radical media and knew firsthand its consciousness raising capacity. But he was also insistent that the variety of positions and experiences on the left should not be relegated to supporting roles in the student movement. As he wrote in the letter just cited, "The way I see it, the movement is like a wheel, with lots of different groups being the spokes...But the students are only one spoke, not the whole wheel...It's time to start

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<sup>214</sup> Doug Youngblood, "Seriousness in the Movement, Students and the Revolution," *New Left Notes*, November 27, 1967.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid..

looking around at the rest of the country and talking to the people you see out there.”<sup>216</sup> Youngblood realized that there were real tendencies within the student movement to discount the working class as part of a radical movement in the 1960s, and as ridiculous as this position seemed to him, he engaged and argued against it for the sake of the larger movement. At the same time, he knew that SDS organs had virtually no effect on the ground in Uptown and were in no way a substitute for local media performing similar functions but for a different constituency. JOIN’s newsletter *The Firing Line*, did much of this work in Uptown, but when the students pulled out of the neighborhood in the fall of 1967 and JOIN dissolved in or around the fall of 1968, that newsletter disappeared as well.<sup>217</sup> In the years that followed, various papers and newsletters appeared in the neighborhood, but Youngblood pursued a different type of publication.

In 1969 he began work on a participatory poetry project called *Time of the Phoenix*.<sup>218</sup> For each edition, Youngblood gathered dozens of poems from poor people in Uptown, typed them out in a simple but uniform style (titles centered in all caps, authors name offset below and to the right), and arranged them so that the variety of voices and concerns could reproduce a community on the page. While Youngblood was the driving force behind the publication, and members of the YPO appeared as frequent contributors, the bulk of what was published came from people who might only be peripherally associated with the group, and as the project progressed, its scope and range of voices grew. The first issue of *TOP* contained around 30 poems. The core of that collection was contributed by members of the Young Patriots and former JOINers, and their titles reflected the history of these groups and their struggle in Uptown: “Summerdale March, 1966”; “Chicago: Election Time 1968”; “Uptown Chicago Kind of Blues” “Dear Model Cities” etc. But it also explored a broad set of themes—including region (“A

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid..

<sup>217</sup> Mike James, “Getting Ready for the Firing Line: Organizing in Uptown in the 60’s. Remembering JOIN Community Union,” *Next Left Notes*, September 1, 2006, 10.

<sup>218</sup> Doug Youngblood, ed., *Time of the Phoenix*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The Young Patriots Organization, 1970); Doug Youngblood, ed., *Time of the Phoenix*, vol. 2 (Chicago: The Young Patriots Organization, 1972); Doug Youngblood, ed., *Time of the Phoenix*, vol. 3 (Chicago: The Young Patriots Organization, 1974); Doug Youngblood, ed., *Time of the Phoenix*, vol. 4 (Chicago: The Young Patriots Organization, 1976).

Southern Band of People,” Georgia Atkins), race (“The Color of My Skin,” Sharon B. Garner”), and gender (“You Think ‘Cause I’m a Woman”)—which would prove to be abiding concerns of the series. The final issue of *TOP* contained over 130 poems from nearly 50 different poets, preachers, musicians, and children.

In 2016, a little over half of these poems were published by the artist collective Society Edition under the title *Against the Picture-Window: A Time of the Phoenix Compendium*.<sup>219</sup> In an interview with the artist and curator Anthony Romero, Hy Thurman described why the project was unique and important. “A misconception about poor and working class people is that they don’t keep diaries and they don’t write down their thoughts,” he said. “If we search people’s diaries we will find it stuffed with notes, reminders and even stories and poems of their everyday lives.” He continued:

*The Time of the Phoenix* should not be read for entertainment or literary values. Instead it should be read with the understanding that between its covers are real life stories of people who witnessed unimaginable hardship and horrors. The real value comes from their blood, sweat, tears, poverty, hunger, sickness, and the most devastating, the high murder and infant mortality rate that they suffered without assistance from a system that was suppose to protect them.<sup>220</sup>

Hy is right to point out that these books and the collection they reappeared in have a documentary quality, that they make perceptible something real about the life of the poor in Uptown. His focus on the material situation that produced the poems recalls James Agee’s insistence that if it were possible, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* wouldn’t be a book at all, but “photographs; fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement.”<sup>221</sup> But the material reality out of which this poetry emerged is part of its literary value, for these poems use language in unique and surprising ways, they reinterpret folk material, bring strange idioms into contact, and together round into a polyphonic expression of the particular and the universal experience of Uptown.

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<sup>219</sup> Daniel Tucker, curator of the traveling “Organize Your Own” exhibit, shared his scans of *Time of the Phoenix* with me. Hy Thurman prepared the PDFs from original copies during work with the editors of Society Editions on *Against the Picture Window*, which selected and curated a little under half of all the poems published during the *TOP* run. *Against the Picture Window* was a collaborative effort between the editors at Society Editions (Mary Austin Speaker, Chris Martin, and Sam Gould), Hy Thurman, and Daniel Tucker. Sam Gould, interview with author, telephone,

<sup>220</sup> Hy Thurman, “Get Together: an interview with Society Editions” in *Against the Picture-Window*, 2016.

<sup>221</sup> Walker Evans and James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (HMH, 2001), 10.

The fullness of the project depends on the dozens of individual poets whose words were collected for the little magazines, but the outline of the project came from Youngblood. “Youngblood encouraged them to write what they could and he would edit their grammar and structure,” said Thurman. “For those that could not write they would voice their materials to someone that could write and it would be transcribed.”<sup>222</sup> Somewhere between Charles Olson and Alan Lomax, Youngblood oversaw all aspects of *Time of the Phoenix*—from gathering to editing to hawking—but before he began collecting and distributing other people’s poetry, Youngblood wrote his own. In fact the first piece he published in an underground newspaper with national circulation was a poem that appeared in the October 2, 1967 issue of *New Left Notes*. Credited simply to “Youngblood,” by then both *nom de plume* and *nom de guerre*, “poem in the grass” was both chronologically and conceptually a first poem. In it the speaker, a young man very like its author, sits on the lawn at the University of Chicago feeling torn, “wishing i had an education / but knowing my place is with my people,” wrestling with the sufficiency of art in 1967: “Leaves of Grass is bullshit!” he explodes:

had Whiteman really been hip  
 he’d prophesized  
 the destruction of democracy.  
 he’d known about the dismantled dream  
 i am part of.  
 “but the country was young then”  
 and the bearded father spoke with  
 only limited meaning  
 in that  
 the poems he wrote are out of context  
 with this age.<sup>223</sup>

The arc of Youngblood’s dialogue with Whitman begins confrontationally, demanding that the dead poet answer the question of art’s political responsibilities. “(does peace come thru “soul searching”? / are the ranks of the fascists any thinner because of it?)” the speaker asks as he sits on the college green, measuring the classed pleasures and contradictions of intellectual life against the political exigencies of

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<sup>222</sup> *Against the Picture-Window: A Time of the Phoenix Compendium*.

<sup>223</sup> Doug Youngblood, “Poem in the Grass,” *New Left Notes*, October 2, 1967.

the moment. In 1967, the young poet promised Whitman's verdant American democracy is left "clutching / the dead grass of doubt," watching the country celebrated by the old poet go to war abroad ("Viet Nam") and at home ("Al. Miss. / & Ga."). At first he wants to hold Whitman to account, but as the poem proceeds his confidence in his target falters—"maybe i don't understand Walt! my fault? yours? / ??????????????????"— and the tone shifts.<sup>224</sup> On the green university grass the speaker sees his enemies, pillars of the political order: the politicians who uphold the draft and license war, the teachers who "teach the great lies," his "brothers" consumed by racism. *These* are the people "who make me (in my frustration) strike / at you," he says:

i apologize for the first line of this poem.  
your poems are beautiful, Walt.  
beautiful like the grass I lie on  
beautiful like the breeze that cools me  
but your poems are about ideas  
that the leaders have cheated us out of  
we want them back  
they are ours  
they belong to the people.

Having come to an accord with Whitman, the speaker arrives at a solution to his quandary:

today I am becoming for the first time  
a poet  
and  
will use words until guns are necessary<sup>225</sup>

To reach the point of resolution where the promise of poetry can be reclaimed, Youngblood's poet must move through his indictment of Whitman, who is initially read as a metonym for all poetry, toward a critical relationship with the old bard's language. He recognizes, in other words, that while Whitman's time may be out of joint with his own, an era where the celebration of the nation seems either naïve or venal, the task at hand is actually to make the Whitmanian move of connecting language to a democratic spirit.

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid..

<sup>225</sup> Ibid..

“i feel silly about some of this poem,” the speaker says at its close, “but one thing i know is / that i am in love with freedom / i am drunk with the desire to see a / free America.” “poem in the grass” was a first statement of desire and intention by a young radical, but the questions Youngblood raised in the poem and the terms he set for defining a free America would, as we have seen, occupy his thoughts and efforts for many years to come. Like Whitman before him, Youngblood was setting himself the task of finding a poetic language that could capture the contemporary texture of American social reality; and while the ultimate object of this poetic language was to be concrete social change, the figure of Whitman helped crystallize where the political power of poetic language—the means to speak of society and the means to speak against it—might be found.

As F. O. Matthiessen writes, Whitman “understood that language was not ‘an abstract construction’ made by the learned, but that it had arisen out of the work and needs, the joys and struggles and desires of long generations of humanity, and that it had ‘its bases broad and low, close to the ground.’”<sup>226</sup> All of Youngblood’s poetry displays this same affinity for language as lived and articulated by the great mass of people; it is exuberant and slangy, populist in tone and attitude. But his activist commitments meant putting that language to work, and in this his position brings to mind an observation Stanley Cavell made around the same time about Henry David Thoreau. In a little book entitled *The Senses of Walden*, written in 1972 when Cavell was preoccupied with the war in Vietnam and the protest movements roiling on American campuses, the philosopher of “ordinary language,” returned to *Walden* and read it as a text about the possibility of renewal in America. Taking up Thoreau’s description of *Walden* as an “heroic book,” Cavell writes: “The writer is aligning himself with the major tradition of English poetry, whose most ambitious progeny...had been haunted by the call for a modern epic, for a heroic book which was at once a renewed instruction of the nation in its ideals, and a standing proof of its resources of poetry.”<sup>227</sup> For a young poet and a radical like Youngblood, the answer to the dilemma of

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<sup>226</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1968), 517.

<sup>227</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 6.

protest or politics was a synthesis of the options; or as Cavell gets at it through Thoreau, a renewal of politics through the resources of poetry.

As a poet and a poor person who had been brought up in an exceptional southern milieu and then immersed himself in a sometimes-inhospitable student movement, Youngblood was attuned to the ways in which the world he came from was generally unwelcome in middle- and upper-class circles, intellectual or otherwise. In his argument with Whitman, he lays out an intellectual case for taking poetry and political philosophy out of the academy and returning it to the people the old poet celebrated; with *Time of the Phoenix* he tried to enact this. In a way, he saw the magazine as an expressive space for the excluded wisdom Du Bois described; hillbilly wisdom, yes, but also the wisdom of poor women and members of Uptown's Puerto Rican, American Indian, black and white communities. And at the same time the project aspired to more than a politics of recognition. Its aim, as stated earlier, was not that the validity of the marginalized perspectives it contained would be acknowledged by some vague poetic establishment. That idea was generally mocked in the magazine. As David Hernandez wrote in his poem "Fame," "now that i have been discovered / i will no longer write nasty poems about America. / i will no longer hang her flag in the bathroom. / i will no longer scream the only good system / is the Chicago sewer system / even though it clogs up at times."<sup>228</sup> Instead, *Time of the Phoenix* wanted to bring into being an alternative discursive community that could support and contribute to working class political action. To help produce the rallying cries and common sense that could draw a group together. It rested on the principle of collective self-authorization: that people became poets through the simple act of writing poetry, and that groups became communities through self-consciously acting in concert.

Like the underground newspapers, these poetry chapbooks both documented a community and helped bring that community into being as a group with shared interests. *Time of the Phoenix* made visible a range of ethical and political commitments, ethnic and cultural experiences, points of sympathy and distinction, all in the name of solidarity among Uptown's poor, all through the power of expressive

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<sup>228</sup> David Hernandez, "Fame," in *Time of the Phoenix*, vol. 4 (The Young Patriots Organization, 1976).



language. In this sense it was both a forum for individual expression and the creation of a collectivity in which individual expressions became part of a sprawling dialogue. It was also a source of intellectual and aesthetic legitimacy. Published by a local college, it was smartly designed, had handsome covers and real physical heft. It looked and felt like part of the larger literary counter-culture, and as a result it could circulate outside Uptown like any other radical poetry magazine. More importantly, however, the publication ratified the project within the neighborhood. Among a group of people who had been the object of so much writing and observation by reporters, social scientists, police officers, and city officials, *Time of the Phoenix* was a platform in which they could write about themselves in whatever way they desired. It was self-authorizing, legitimized by its community rather than those outside of it, and because of this it facilitates people's participation in a larger political and aesthetic discussion on their own terms and in their own words.

As a result, we might say that the chapbooks were fundamentally organized by a vernacular criterion, rather than an aesthetic one in the sense that they were an enactment and assertion of identity both opposed to and independent of political and cultural domination. In their form, they resemble overstuffed and unruly efforts like community cookbooks and newspapers, ordered by a cumulative and inclusive logic that in turn produces its own open, potentially democratic aesthetic that can hold together (or perhaps is the holding together of) "notes, reminders and even stories and poems of...everyday lives."<sup>229</sup> These ideas were often expressed overtly in the poetry itself, as in Rhoda Eisner's "Untitled (Unofficially named RAINBOW PEOPLE OF UPTOWN CHICAGO) A message to Mayor Richard J. Daley, Mayor of the City of Chicago," where she writes: "At night a man's voice cries for long past days in Tennessee / His guitar and voice are blended into one instrument / Of audible tenderness" which is in turn heard by "others in Uptown": the "wailing baby...hungering for food that is not there," the "Black, white, brown, red, yellow man [to whom] Uptown promises day-labor / If your lucky" and so on and so

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<sup>229</sup> Hy Thurman, "Get Together, an interview with Society Editions".

on.<sup>230</sup> But oftentimes, the poems simply offered themselves as fragments of experience, as in Ralph Thurman's prayer "My Belief": "Many lives are lost / In Vietnam; / If I had my way / There wouldn't be a one. / There would be peace on earth / Goodwill toward men. / That's my belief, / In the Holy Name, Amen."<sup>231</sup> And while the chapbook brings Thurman's private anti-war prayer—a literal bringing low of the angel's annunciation to the shepherds—into its discursive public, the "picture-window" goes both ways, preserving a sense of Uptown's interior that is very difficult to find in any other historical record.

For the YPO, *Time of the Phoenix* was a source of and repository for what Du Bois called "excluded wisdom," the specific knowledge held by those who have been kept from exercising democratic control over their lives. As Du Bois wrote in 1920, "only the man himself, however humble, knows his own condition. He may not know how to remedy it, he may not realize just what is the matter; but he knows when something hurts and he alone knows how that hurt feels."<sup>232</sup> The chapbooks were an expression of political subjugation and resistance in the vernacular language of the poor, but they made the larger case that what they wrote and the way in which they wrote carried a powerful critique; that their exclusion from power was itself a source of wisdom. In this way, while four chapbooks are spanned by certain broad but unifying themes—migration, race, anger and insecurity, solidarity, ghettoization in many different forms—they are collectively, individually, intrusions into and dismissals of what passes for proper poetics and politics. As with their co-option to political symbols, the YPO wanted to claim poetry as a democratic activity, an act in which the politics of language and the language of politics converged.

All of which is to say that for the Young Patriots, Youngblood, and many of the poets who were involved, *Time of the Phoenix* was a tool for building class consciousness among an ethnically diverse economically marginalized people in Uptown. It was a project that brought together expressive material from the community in order to help people sense the contours of the community and see themselves as

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<sup>230</sup> Rhoda Eisner, "Untitled (Unofficially Named RAINBOW PEOPLE OF UPTOWN CHICAGO) A Message to Mayor Richard J. Daley, Mayor of the City of Chicago," in *Time of the Phoenix*, vol. 4, 1976.

<sup>231</sup> Ralph Thurman, "My Belief," in *Time of the Phoenix*, 1970th ed., vol. 1, 1970.

<sup>232</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1999), 143.

inside of it. Youngblood's vision for the poetry magazine was one without familiar literary barriers. Inclusion in it was much less a matter of aesthetics than geography and political sympathy—which neighborhood and grassroots struggle you hailed from—and yet this criteria yielded a polyglot field of voices, styles, and forms that produced their own thematic slant rhymes and echoes. Surveying the issues back to back, you are struck by the sheer variety of expressive forms they contain: lyrics, cut-ups, protest chants, vignettes of street life, original songs, rewritten familiar songs, songs in Spanish, eulogies, jokes, odes to lovers, prose exercises, anonymous submissions, street talk stretched over iambs and trochees, memories of home, contemporary broadside ballads, children's rhymes, etc. etc. etc.

The collections are a testament to all the things that language can do, and all the ways it can be done to. In one very short poem, Bobby Joe Wright wrote “I finally found somethin’ that someone don’t / own or control. / What’s that? The rain.” But *Time of the Phoenix* is a reminder that language is a great commons as well, a free source of pleasure for those without means. In an untitled poem from the second issue of *TOP*, Rhoda Eisner describes the power of the project by way of yet another paradox. She writes, “The hurts and disappointments are ours in common lot. / This we share, but there is another bond and that is our hope / And destiny because they are mixed together / By our existence together.”<sup>233</sup> It is in the existing together—neighbors on a cross street, or a community meeting, or the printed page—that the common lot comes into view, and we can hear the rhyme between Alfredo Matias, a member of the Young Lords who was born in Puerto Rico who writes: “Where are the latin poets? / Maybe at the neighborhood tavern, like the / rest of the latins drowning their thoughts / in American beer and wine. / Thinking about home / where the land is warm with plenty of sun.”, and Lon Owsley, who writes: “Back in the Blue Ridge Mountains / Near my Appalachian home / On the porch of a miner’s shack / An old shacker rocker is sitting all alone / And I remember that old rocking chair / My Grandpa used to own. / I

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<sup>233</sup> Rhoda Eisner, “Untitled,” in *Time of the Phoenix*, vol. 2, n.d.

bring back childhood memories / Of many, many years ago; / When my Grandpa used to come home /  
Worn out by the coal.”<sup>234</sup>

### **Rainbow People of Uptown Chicago**

The Young Patriots were born into coalitional struggle. Not only into the Rainbow Coalition—that would come a bit later—but into the Voice of the People (VOP), a collection of 17 Uptown organizations who had banded together in order to prevent the city, local business owners, and the Department of Urban Renewal from displacing several thousand poor residents in order to build a college near the Wilson “L” station (this struggle is discussed in Chapter 4). This group also had its culture jammed symbol: a field of rainbow stripes, hand painted over Nixon/Agnew buttons, meant to represent the diversity and unity of Uptown’s poor. From the beginning, then, the question of finding the proper relationship between more particular and more general experiences was a primary concern. When the Rainbow Coalition formed in the Spring of 1969, the Panthers, Young Lords, and Patriots had to work through similar questions, to think through what they meant as a coalition and how that joint identity doubled back to change those of the individual groups. In some ways, the logic of these coalitions was more surprising and remarkable to those outside of them. When asked by a student movement newspaper about the improbability of working with the Panthers, and especially the Patriots, Cha Cha Jimenez, head of the Young Lords responded, “We have a rainbow coalition within the Young Lords (we’re all different colors)... We’re poor and oppressed people here and we’re fighting for independence... We’re fighting for freedom together... there’s no other way to fight for it.”<sup>235</sup> But even if the poor shared objective conditions that could allow them to come together and seek a common cause, those linkages and affinities had to be described convincingly, and this is why the question of culture was so important.

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<sup>234</sup> Alfredo Matias, “Who Are the Latin Poets,” in *Time of the Phoenix*, vol. 4, 1976, 15; Lon Owsley, “Shacker Rocker,” in *Time of the Phoenix*, vol. 4, 1976, 31.

<sup>235</sup> “We’re Fighting for Freedom Together,” *The Movement*, July 1, 1969, 13.

When Michael Harrington looked at the “music filled miserable country neighborhoods” of urban hillbillies, he saw a culture—a whole way of life—that furthered subordination and nothing else. From where Doug Youngblood stood things looked different. In an ode to Chicago, published in the final issue of *TOP*, he marveled at the city he hated and loved:

Carl Sandburg has called you: “hog butcher  
of the world” & others  
have spent their ink on your myriad essence.  
& now it is I who walks your streets  
& tastes your vibrations and doings.  
Busy...you are always busy! & twinkling  
in electric language  
& tall shafts of glass & steel jut skyward  
from your boundaries  
a touch of foreign nations is ringing in your  
noise and criss-crossing all identities  
In the alphabet.<sup>236</sup>

For those like Youngblood, who lived inside the peculiar mid-century slums and wanted to change them from within, culture could not be reduced to a simple impediment. Like Gramsci’s description of common sense, they knew the culture of their neighborhood was a complex contradictory network of beliefs and practices, actions and reactions; that it could work you over or be put to work, but that it was an effective medium for communication because it was by definition close to the lives of those they were trying to organize. In the following chapter I will examine how the Patriots folded country music into their radical politics. It is a striking case of political struggle over a cultural form in that it bucks conventional wisdom about the politics of the genre, but for the YPO it was at root an art form emanating from the political and economic conditions that structured life, and because of that it could be relied upon—if properly positioned—to help reveal and possibly change these structures.

Marx famously said that working-class revolutionaries must draw their poetry from the future, rather than the past. This notion points toward something very important about the Patriots’ project as well as the Rainbow Coalition, and that is that it was all, in a sense, a performance of solidarity. Not a performance in the sense of public entertainment, of something insincere and deceptive, but performance

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<sup>236</sup> Doug Youngblood, “Chicago,” in *Time of the Phoenix*, vol. 4, 1976, 94.

in the sense of an imaginative enactment. While the activists involved in these groups accepted the logic of the alliances as common sense—there’s no other way to fight for freedom, as Jimenez put it—they knew the coalition, with their uniforms and contradictory flair was necessary precisely because these ideas of working-class interracial solidarity were not widely shared.<sup>237</sup> The future they wanted had to be brought into being, and part of that was this collective enactment of the social relations and the collective practices that either did not exist yet or were unevenly distributed and so had to be spread around. Acting out solidarity is perhaps a rather mundane interpretation of Marx’s formulation, but for the Patriots, bringing radical ideas into the everyday and everyday ideas into radical thought was always part of the project. In one sense, their use of culture was fairly straightforward: they drew on the past to make sense of the present and imagine a place in the new world to come. But in another sense, they were making the claim that to get to that egalitarian future they had to go through, not around, a renewed hillbilly culture.

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<sup>237</sup> Cha Cha Jimenez, “We’re Fighting for Freedom Together. There Is No Other Way,” *The Black Panther*, August 2, 1969.

### Chapter 3

#### Sing Me Back Home:

#### Country Music and Radical Community Organizing in Uptown Chicago

Hegemonizing is hard work  
Stuart Hall

It's a big job just gettin' by with nine kids and a wife  
But I've been a workin' man dang near all of my life  
And I'll keep on workin' long as my two hands are fit to use  
I'll drink a little beer in a tavern  
and sing a little bit of these workin' man blues  
Merle Haggard,  
“Workin’ Man Blues”

If 20 casual visitors had to nominate a Chicago neighborhood for oblivion, the Uptown community near the Wilson Avenue L station might get 20 votes. It is seedy, dreary, congested, despairing—a multiracial poor people’s patch, Appalachia in Chicago. Crumby taverns, shabby resale shops, broken glass and broken hopes are its trademarks.

*Chicago Daily News*  
September 27, 1969

On October 13, 1968 Gurney Norman, a writer from Eastern Kentucky living in California, went to see George Wallace speak at San Francisco’s Cow Palace. All across the country that campaign season, the American Independent Party’s candidate for president had preached his gospel of the blue-collar American little man, fulminating against the bureaucrats, pointy-headed professors, hippies and freaks, and here he was, bringing his staging of this conflict squarely to the doorstep of the counterculture. The atmosphere was tense. Eleven thousand people had materialized, and fights were breaking out as Sam Smith and His American Independent Party Band—Wallace’s house hillbilly act band—warmed up the crowd.<sup>238</sup> Norman had come, equipped with a knowing sense of irony, to gawk at the spectacle and had

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<sup>238</sup> Peter La Chapelle, *I’d Fight the World: A Political History of Old-Time, Hillbilly, and Country Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 216.

little expectation he would be moved by Wallace's backwoods charade, but when he finally saw "the reality of [Wallace's] following . . . Heard the reality of his musical band," it produced "a sadness so large that my sudden boredom with it [was] transcended."<sup>239</sup> The phony hillbilly band was what really did it. Advance publicity of the rally had advertised "country music," but the music Sam Smith's ensemble played was not, to Norman's ear, country at all. "A combo in which the predominant instruments are a trumpet and a drum, playing *hillbilly*" he wrote, "is about as arousing, as funky, as down-home as a convention of Jaycees at a Holiday Inn." And yet, the assembled crowd loved it. "Sam Smith played "Hello, Dolly!," and everybody applauded like it was Hank Williams they were hearing. Sam Smith would invoke the names of people like Hank Thompson and Merle Haggard, and the folks would nod and smile and then *go right on nodding* when Smith turned around and offered us "Ode to Billy Joe". . . played as an *instrumental on a trumpet!*"<sup>240</sup> What upset Norman was not the inauthenticity of the music, per se, but the psychic contortion implied in its sincere celebration by "all the lonesome, uprooted, transplanted and therefore homeless country boys and hillbillies" who Wallace had come to address. In the combative atmosphere of the rally, conflict bred belonging, and "the shouting match with the beards," as Norman put it, engendered a sense of identification which in turn "allowed George Wallace to once again get away with his claim that he's an honest-to-god country boy with red-clay dirt under his fingernails and chicken gravy on his tie."<sup>241</sup> Meanwhile, he continued, the same vengeful politics allowed "Sam Smith . . . to get away with *his* claim that his music is country music, music from the soil, music made by the oppressed, and not the oppressor." Standing among people he imagined as his "kin," workers who had arrived in California from their homes in places like Kentucky and Alabama and Oklahoma, Norman was overcome by despair at the warped sense of identity Wallace offered these people. They "really believed that image of themselves," he wrote, "And that is why it's all so sad."<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Gurney Norman, "A Kentuckian at the Wallace Rally," in *One Lord, One Faith, One Cornbread*, ed. Fred Nelson and Ed McClanahan (Anchor Press, 1973).

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii-xxiii.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii-xxiii.



Norman's rebuttal to Wallace and Sam Smith and his brothers and sisters who had forgotten themselves was twofold: that country music was the music of the oppressed, and that poor hillbillies should recognize that their oppressors were wealthy politician hustlers like Wallace and not hippies and people of color. And yet he had witnessed the rally and felt at a loss in terms of action. "The question," he wrote at the end of his piece, "is how do you respond when a relative that you love goes for your throat?"<sup>243</sup> This chapter explores the same knot of questions and attempts an answer. It examines the case of the JOIN Community Union and the Young Patriots Organization, two white southern migrant activist groups from Chicago who used country music as a tool to build working-class, anti-racist class consciousness in the neighborhood of Uptown during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and worked alongside other radical groups, most notably with the Illinois Black Panther Party as members of the Rainbow Coalition.

Their left interpretation and operationalization of country music cut against the contemporaneous right-wing embrace of the genre by George Wallace and Richard Nixon. Seeking the ear of Middle America, these politicians claimed country music for the right, and as the musical establishment of Nashville welcomed their overtures, the genre's association with conservative politics was so thoroughly cemented that it endures to this day. During these same years, the activists who made up JOIN and the Young Patriots engaged in a counter-hegemonic struggle over country music, which they held to be both an important record of popular working-class thought and, as a musical form with interracial roots, evidence for solidarity with oppressed people of all races. These groups used country music as an adhesive element in their politics: they sang country songs at rallies, quoted Hank Williams in their newsletters, and mined its blue-collar aesthetic for useful and persuasive symbols of class identification, but they also used the spaces in which it circulated to articulate and organize an egalitarian left populism. By intervening at the level of the neighborhood at this particular historical conjuncture, a moment of great cultural change when both the future and lines to a usable past were being contested, JOIN and the Young

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., xxiv.

Patriots used country music to effectively express a political philosophy of working-class consciousness and radical interracial solidarity. It was, crucially, the hyper-local, grassroots nature of JOIN and the Young Patriots that allowed them to enlist country music and elements of working-class culture, in their radical political program. During the social tumult of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when riots, protest movements, and revolutionary ideas about race, gender, and the nation threatened to upend familiar mores for the country's white working class, country music became a contested cultural property, and figures from academia to the counterculture to the silent majority worked to stake their claim and delineate its politics.

On a national and mass cultural level, this rush was won by the political right and was exemplified by the Nixon administration's move to embrace country music as the soundtrack of an American counterrevolution. This accord was hammered out in boardrooms on Music Row and the stage of the Opry and it solidified a strong, deeply articulated association between country music and political conservatism that persists to this day. The Patriots engaged in a struggle to polarize country music along a left-populist line. Their politics were counterpoised to the political right, obviously, but so too were their tactics and they moved to politicize country music within the wider national context but at the level of community. As with their cultural work described in the last chapter, this was an effort to localize and rearticulate elements of working-class cultural, to test reimagine them in the flashing neon lights not of Nashville, but of Uptown, their new home.<sup>244</sup> This relationship to country music as a mass cultural form was dialogic and participatory, and in much the same way they developed a critique of capitalism and solidarity out of an understanding of their own off-whiteness in Chicago, they crafted a vernacular country music culture in the city which was both critical of the genre's corporate form and comfortable embracing and doing work with its content. The Patriots' approach to country music, then, had a dual outlook: it was, in a sense, an attempt to claim, or reclaim, country music from the forces of political

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<sup>244</sup> "Swingin' Doors" by Merle Haggard. Copyright 1967 Sony/ATV Tree Music.

reaction, but this struggle understood itself as counter-hegemonic and was interwoven with a participatory material politics carried out at the level (and within the possibilities) of the neighborhood.

### **The Right Goes Country**

As is now commonly acknowledged, country music became a question of some national political importance beginning in the late 1960s.<sup>245</sup> This phenomenon began with George Wallace, who, in his presidential bids in 1964 and 1968, transformed the common southern political practice of campaigning alongside country music acts into a national strategy for galvanizing white working-class voters.<sup>246</sup> Wallace's strategy was then mainstreamed by Richard Nixon, who in a series of spectacles embraced country music from the White House in an effort to express his solidarity with the American working-class, effectively formalizing a political association with the Republican Party that endures to this day. Wallace's apprehension of country's political power was instinctive—he was raised on the music, observed its use by his political mentors, moved among its stars as a member of the southern political elite, and never forgot its ability to reach an audience and move a crowd.<sup>247</sup> Nixon's approach was calculated and corporate. After narrowly defeating Hubert Humphrey and gaining the White House in 1968, the president and his advisers immediately set to work on reelection. The approach they devised came to be known as the "Southern Strategy," and was essentially an attempt to absorb the lesson of George Wallace, whose historic third-party run that same year had earned him 13.5% of the national vote, carried five southern states, and made surprisingly deep inroads with blue collar workers in the North. As Jefferson Cowie has argued, the new administration interpreted Wallace's success as clear evidence that "the white working-class vote was politically up for grabs and [that] Nixon could be the leader to knit

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<sup>245</sup> Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Duke University Press, 2007); Charles L. Hughes, "Pride and Prejudice: Race and Country Music in the Era of Backlash," in *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017); La Chapelle, *I'd Fight the World*; Bill C. Malone, *Country Music USA: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2018).

<sup>246</sup> Parker Ramsay, "Politics and Country Music in the Political Campaigns of George Wallace, 1958-1972" (BA diss., University of Cambridge, 2013).

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 12.

them into a new political coalition,” to break these stalwart voters away from the Democrats and absorb them into the Republican base.<sup>248</sup>

The approach they devised was to mount a cultural campaign. Rather than make commitments to the material betterment of the working-class, the administration would pursue a politics of recognition and celebrate the worker *as an ideal*. This appeal to the “allegedly superior moral backbone and patriotic rectitude” of the American worker, always defined against the non-productive protesters and freeloaders stereotypical of the left, led Nixon, as it had Wallace, to country music.<sup>249</sup> He brought country stars such as Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, and the Osborne Brothers to perform at the White House, declared October “Country Music Month” in 1970, ’71, ’72, and ’73, and famously appeared as the guest of honor as the Grand Ole Opry christened its new “mod tile and plate-glass” performance center where, standing on stage next to Roy Acuff, he solemnly proclaimed to the assembled thousands: “country music is America. It started here. It’s ours. It isn’t something that we learned from some other nation, it isn’t something that we inherited . . . . It’s as native as anything American we could find.”<sup>250</sup> As Diane Pecknold has argued, this was in many ways an experiment in co-branding between Nashville and the White House, whereby the industry could improve its cultural standing and the president might transform “an established marketing demographic into a political one.”<sup>251</sup> But for the president and his men, who believed the nation was “in motion between a Democratic past and Republican future” but needed a push in the right direction, country music did deeper ideological work.<sup>252</sup> It provided a blueprint for recomposing the Republican base, a “New Right” composed of working-class whites alienated from their traditional home in the Democratic Party.

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<sup>248</sup> Jefferson Cowie, “Nixon’s Class Struggle: Romancing the New Right Worker, 1969-1973: *Labor History*: Vol 43, No 3,” *Labor History* 43, no. 3 (2002), 269.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>250</sup> B. Drummond Ayres Jr., “Nixon Plays Piano on Wife’s Birthday At Grand Ole Opry,” *New York Times*, March 17, 1974; Richard M. Nixon, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard M. Nixon, 1974* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 1975), 280.

<sup>251</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 219.

<sup>252</sup> Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1969), 463, quoted in Cowie, “Nixon’s Class Struggle,” 260.

This theory, laid out in a 1971 *Washington Post* editorial by Kevin Phillips, one of Nixon's aides and the author of the 1969 book *The Emerging Republican Majority*, saw great potential in the lesson of hillbilly music. In the piece, titled "Revolutionary Music," Phillips argued that country music made sensible the sort of white solidarity that could anchor a new politics. Describing it as "basically the folk music of English-Irish-Scotch rural and small-town America," Phillips advanced the familiar argument that country was the "folk music" of the contemporary working-class, but then he made an interesting leap. "There is another sort of American folk music too," he wrote "the 'ethnic hours' of Italian, Polish, Greek, Czech . . . [and] Hungarian] . . . that fill a large slice of radio programming from New England to the Middle West." Phillips concluded, "Conceivably, the next American social era could be dominated by these forgotten whites . . . [who] are tired of hearing about equal justice for blacks."<sup>253</sup> In this right-wing theoretical articulation, country music became a way for conservative operatives to imagine what a pan-ethnic—but always white—working-class coalition might look and feel like. Nixon's political appeal to the white working-class was by design more mannered than Wallace's, but both envisioned the same base galvanized against a similar set of enemies on the left. In effect, they both heard in country what Noel Ignatiev would later describe as "whiteness," an ideology that "provides the illusion of common interests between the exploited white masses and the white ruling class."<sup>254</sup> The Uptown activists would turn this formulation on its head.

While Cowie argues that Nixon's quest to build an enduring Republican base atop blue-collar resentment ultimately failed, the notional association achieved between stolid conservatism and country music did not. This relationship, although forged in an era of remarkable upheaval, proved incredibly durable, so much so that it has taken on an aura of eternal validity—a sense that country music is and has always been essentially, inescapably conservative at its core. In recent years, a great deal of scholarship has worked to critique the ease, if not always the validity of this association. In his essay "Richard Nixon,

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<sup>253</sup> Kevin Phillips, "Revolutionary Music," *Washington Post*, May 6, 1971, A19.

<sup>254</sup> Noel Ignatiev, "Black Worker, White Worker," *The Workplace Papers* (Chicago: Sojourner Truth Organization), 22.

Johnny Cash, and the Political Soul of Country Music,” an introduction to a collection titled *The Honky Tonk on the Left*, Mark Allan Jackson captures the thrust of this position. “For too long,” he writes, “the conservative end of country music’s political spectrum has gotten the lion’s share of the ink, leaving the progressive spirit in country underrepresented in general or ignored completely in some cases.”<sup>255</sup>

Jackson’s essay and those that accompany it make crucial interventions into a dominant political narrative by describing and pushing back against what Nadine Hubbs has called “the overwriting of working-class realities by middle-class narratives,” which have produced unnuanced, simplistic accounts of country’s politics.<sup>256</sup>

These critical engagements with the genre and its middle-class overwriters often point to the diverse, conflictual variety of political thought, identity expressions, and counterintuitive solidarities that often exceed narrow estimations of country’s political horizons. But while attention to progressive flashes in country history is essential to an evolving critical view of the genre, less attention has been paid to how country progressivism directly confronted and struggled against reactionary expressions of the genre. As Nick Murray writes in a review of the collection in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, “isolating “progressive” moments in country history does provide for an interesting counter-narrative, but it can also lead to simplifications, particularly when writers value the integrity of the category over the complexities—or messy contradictions—of the music and its history.”<sup>257</sup> Interrupting normative narratives about the intransigent politics of country music is certainly laudable, but Murray rightly identifies a tendency within much of this writing to read exceptions as rules as if in the pursuit of a secret, stable progressive politics secreted away within the genre, oftentimes coupled with a political faith in an equally stable notion of a working-class with unified interests. What then do you do with exceptions?

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<sup>255</sup> Mark Allan Jackson, “Richard Nixon, Johnny Cash, and the Political Soul of Country Music,” in *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music*, ed. Mark Allan Jackson (Amherst; Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 20.

<sup>256</sup> Nadine Hubbs, “‘Them’s My Kind of People’: Cross-Marginal Solidarity in Country Music of the Long Seventies,” in *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music*, ed. Mark Allan Jackson (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 170.

<sup>257</sup> Nick Murray, “The Other Country,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, accessed 20 November 2019, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-other-country/>.

How might we analyze overlooked and surprising expressions of left country without undervaluing the powerful, dominant narratives created by country's embrace by the conservative establishment? How do we assess left country without erasing the knot of political contradictions that sit at the music's center? One strategy is to avoid approaching country music as a thing with a unified or settled politics, and instead as a cultural form overflowing with contradictory political positions and possibilities that must be actively negotiated by people. Put differently, country music is an ideologically complex genre whose—broadly speaking—populist politics often express deeply contradictory positions on central political issues such as race, gender, and the nation. The same of course is true of the multiform politics of the American working-class from which the music emerged. The business of country music, however, is fully aligned with the interests of capital, and thus the interaction between country's commercial imperatives and its populist politics produce endless contradictions.<sup>258</sup> The Young Patriots put country to work by exploiting these contradictions, transforming it into a tool to combat the politics of national figures like George Wallace and Richard Nixon. To do this they intervened at the level of their own community, grounding the music in a particular social location and reincorporating it into community life along their own political line.

### **The Barn Dance and the Barrooms**

For JOIN and the Young Patriots, country music was a crucial expression of radical hillbilly culture. Both groups embraced it as an organizing tool as well as a resource for pushing back against the cultural chauvinism prevalent in quarters of the radical left. JOIN used local bands made up of amateur musicians to draw people to parties in the hope of enlisting them as organizers, included record reviews in their

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<sup>258</sup> Nick Murray, "Agriculture Wars," *Viewpoint Magazine* (blog), March 12, 2018, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2018/03/12/agriculture-wars/>. Murray's essay describes the fetishized relationship between contemporary country music's evocation of "farm life" and the big business forces systematically undermining farming as a vocation. Quoting Brandon Soderberg's review of Luke Bryan's *Farm Tour...Here's to the Farmer* (named after Bryan's annual "Farm Tour" sponsored by Deltapine, DeKalb Genetics Corporation, Bayer, and Monsanto), he concludes that one of the genre's defining political problems is that it has "plenty of sympathy, maybe even empathy, but a profound lack of solidarity."

mimeographed newsletter, *The Firing Line*, and sang songs at rallies, marches, and victory celebrations. Later, the Young Patriots would weave country music into their Pantheresque messaging, adopt a uniform of redneck chic, and even host music nights in the bars where they emphasized the interracial roots of country and the blues. Country music served an instrumental, propagandistic purpose in the service of populist egalitarianism, but it was not simply a tool. These groups also used it as an intellectual resource, a way of thinking through the question of how working-class culture might be harnessed for progressive ends. As Mike James wrote: “Country and Western music is American; it reflects the good and the bad . . . It’s been around a long time and been listened to by millions, yet most radicals—”who seek to change America”—have listened only cynically, BECAUSE THEY ARE CYNICAL ABOUT THE PEOPLE.” But, he argued, while it had been dismissed by many on the left as a crude and maudlin vehicle for false consciousness:

The conditions, grievances and demands—telling of the potential for radical organization—are conveyed in the music. Listen to Merle Haggard’s jail songs (“Branded Man”—I paid the debt I owed, but they won’t let my story go untold . . .); Waylon Jennings’ “Living in the Love of the Common People”; Johnny Cash’s “All God’s Children Aren’t Free” and Roll Call”; . . . Dolly Parton’s “My mistakes are no worse than yours ‘ Just Because I’m a Woman””; . . . Bobby Bare’s “Detroit City”. . . Openings on race, the war, the job, male chauvinism, economic exploitation, and cultural and political alienation are there . . . Americans, ARE WAITING ON THE MOVEMENT.<sup>259</sup>

In another piece, a column from *The Firing Line*, titled “Country Soul,” Doug Youngblood described country’s deep relationship to black popular music like soul and the blues. In an interesting restatement of the Rainbow Coalition’s logic, he argued that the “soul” of these various working-class expressive forms, separated by racialized marketing categories, issued from the same wellspring: that “awareness of all the dirt poor people have to put up with.”<sup>260</sup>

Contra the theories of Wallace and Nixon, country music here was a way of thinking solidarity across racial divisions—sonic and affective proof of some shared social position. For JOIN and the

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<sup>259</sup> Mike James, “Getting off the Interstate,” 5.

<sup>260</sup> Doug Youngblood, “Country Soul,” *The Firing Line*, 8 February 1968. For an excellent analysis of the role racialization played in the creation of distinct genres like “country” and “the blues,” see Karl Hagstrom Miller’s *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).



Young Patriots, then, country music was full of potential, of openings, of complexity constantly overwritten or ignored by the middle-class narratives Hubbs describes. It was the music of everyday life and, as such, opened onto the politics of everyday life. But these openings and potentials were starting points, opportunities to “articulate a thrust” as James put it.<sup>261</sup> The possibility for a progressive politics was present in the migrant culture of Uptown, but it was the task of the organizers to reframe its social world as political—to show their neighbors that the deprivations they suffered, and which structured their lives, could be changed through political action, and that their own culture held the tools for doing this work.

Country music became a tool of the Young Patriots for the rather obvious reason that it was ubiquitous. Like the Panthers, who Jon Rice argues “did not imitate white America” but nevertheless created a style that was “distinctly American,” the Patriots evidenced great appreciation for elements of the white working-class culture even as they stood it on its head.<sup>262</sup> If you lived in Uptown during the fifties or sixties, the music would have been everywhere. The voices of Bobbie Gentry and Johnny Cash, or the driving banjo of Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys—beamed from nearby radio stations like WLS and distant ones like XER, just across the Mexican border—would have drifted through windows and screen doors, out onto the crowded back porches, with their crisscrossed wooden stairways strung with washlines leading down the backs of buildings and into the alleys, and lending these working-class neighborhoods a distinct, ramshackle, backend, allyside reality. You could have heard all manner of southern music in these neighborhoods—sacred harp singing in the storefront churches and guitar pulls at the barbecues, bluegrass wherever old timers had saved their fiddles and banjos and, beginning in the mid-1950s, Elvisified rockabilly rhythms blasting out of the cars cruising the avenues or idling on the block. It would have been a source of comfort and community for people who felt far away from home or kin as well as a viable cultural product whether for profit or pleasure. It was popular music, increasingly

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<sup>261</sup> James, “Getting off the Interstate,” 5.

<sup>262</sup> Jon Rice, “The World of the Illinois Panthers,” in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, ed. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 53.

enjoyed by the country as a whole, and yet it retained a regionalism and class character (however authentic) that especially reflected the lives of white working-class southerners. And so, in a little Appalachia like Uptown, it was everywhere.

But of all the places you could hear country music in Uptown, all the rented rooms and street corners and impromptu block parties, of all the places people got together to listen and dance and drink, none were as popular or as notorious as the “hillbilly bars” along Wilson and Kedzie Avenues. The citified cousin of the honky-tonk—the rural roadside bars that sprang up like so many derricks in the Texas oilfields on the heels of Prohibition’s repeal—the hillbilly bar or hillbilly tavern was any urban juke joint or dive that catered to southern tastes. Typically staffed and patronized by southerners, a few of the bars would have been owned by an erstwhile briarhopper from Kentucky or West Virginia who had managed to secure economic footing in the neighborhood, but most were operated by native Chicagoans simply responding to southern demand for fellowship and entertainment, and the surest draw for southern crowds was country music.<sup>263</sup> They had names that evoked climes southern and western, the Wagon Wheel, The Southern Inn, Red Dog’s and the Blue Moon. Owners threw up southern décor, from corny stuff like prop wagons that served as stages and potato sack table cloths to Confederate flags.<sup>264</sup>

The primary thing that distinguished a hillbilly bar from any other working-class watering hole was the country music, which was a proven pull for a homesick southern audience, and one that must have brought in enough money on fifteen cent beers to compensate for city dwellers who were turned off by the stuff. “To hell with the other people,” said one bar owner who had seized the entrepreneurial moment and entered the hillbilly trade, “We cater to southern people.”<sup>265</sup> What this meant, in essence, was a well-stocked jukebox and dance floor, however makeshift. Bars stocked jukeboxes with 45s by popular performers like Ernest Tubb, Hank Snow, Kitty Wells, and Red Foley, as well as groups that

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<sup>263</sup> Roger Guy, *From Diversity to Unity: Southern and Appalachian Migrants in Uptown Chicago, 1950-1970* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2007), 76.

<sup>264</sup> Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Duke University Press, 2007), 51.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

might have played locally and done well enough to cut a few sides with a small regional label.<sup>266</sup> Thanks to a curious exemption from royalty fees, written into the 1909 Copyright Act in the hopes of promoting penny arcades, jukeboxes were relatively cheap; single plays were ten cents, or three for a quarter well into the late 1970s.<sup>267</sup> Sometimes taverns held listening parties for live shows like the Grand Old Opry or played host to a guitar pull, but the real money maker was live music, which the bars booked as often as possible, drawing from a particularly deep pool of touring and local acts. Because musicians who performed hillbilly or country music had been “aggressively excluded” from the unions and licensing societies that structured the music business and insured that performers were paid for work, whether as

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<sup>266</sup> In Bernard Asbel’s profile of the National Barn dance, he interviewed a local Chicago record salesman named Joe Sipiora to figure out just who was into this country stuff (“In Chicago, the pattern of record distribution is a miniature census bureau”). Until it closed in 1974, Sipiora’s business Singer One-Stop dominated the “one-stop” market for record sales in Chicago. A one-stop acted as a middleman between distributors and retailers. Because the majority of records stores were small, independent operations that didn’t buy stock in bulk, record labels and regional distributors preferred to sell in large quantities to a wholesaler who then went on to service the retailers. A small record store couldn’t meet a minimum order limit for a single label like, say, Columbia, but they could meet the minimum order of a wholesaler who would bundle the various releases – this from Columbia, that from Victor, this from RCA -- and deliver them in one stop (thus the name); a small jukebox operator could buy 45s at five cents over the wholesale price. As an intermediary between labels and retailers, a one-stop like Sipiora’s would have worked a few different angles: they would have stocked small displays in supermarkets and suburban department stores (rack-jobbing, they called it), managed the accounts of dozens of mom and pop stores with distinct tastes, and supplied the 45s that spun in jukeboxes all over the city, from bars to clubs to poolhalls. For record labels, these de facto sub-distributors meant a loss in profit, but it saved them the trouble of accounting for taste on the ground, of determining which store moved jazz and which store moved classical and how the supply chain should be adjusted to account for it. Sorting and implementing all of this information fell on the one-stopper, whose meat and potatoes was tracking and interpreting tastes from the level of the individual record store or juke joint, to the aggregate demands of major metropolitan areas. Joe Sipiora had a unique glimpse into what people listened to in Chicago during his time at Singer. By tabulating what labels pushed and record stores bought, what sold, sat on the shelves, and what got sent back for a refund, by replacing 45s that had worn out in jukeboxes and trashing disks that never got played, he would have had as thorough a sense of what people were buying in the city’s shops as anyone, and in addition to that he would have also known what they listened to in their taverns and dives, how they spent their dimes as well as dollars. When Asbel, asked about the popularity of country music in Chicago, Sipiora’s response was frank and anthropological: “Wherever transient populations exist we sell a lot of C&W [country and western] records. We sell them nowhere else.” The reporter got the same straightforward response from George Topper, the owner of Wil-Ken Music, an Uptown record store located a Wilson and Kenmore Avenue that moved a great deal of country music. The area is “loaded with Southerners,” said Topper. “They come up here to get factory and construction jobs at higher pay. They come to this neighborhood until they get settled permanently. Wherever you find furnished rooms and low-priced hotels, you find country-and-western music.” At the time, country wasn’t especially popular in Chicago, accounting for just 2% of record sales city wide. But at Wil-Ken that figure stood at 30%.

<sup>267</sup> The margins on a jukebox were substantial. Because they were exempted from licensing fees, a jukebox owner made pure profit once 45—for which the purchaser paid less than a dollar—received, say, ten plays at ten cents a pop. As a given 45 could stand as many as 5000 plays before wearing away to noise, a buyer might gross \$500 on a \$1 dollar 45.

salaried members of a radio barn dance or as rights holders for their own material, the tavern circuit was a crucial source of income for country performers as well as a force that shaped their music.<sup>268</sup> The styles here would have been more squarely southern than the kind offered on radio shows like the Barn Dance, “nasal and twangy” stuff according to one northern writer—bluegrass, rockabilly, Texas swing—music meant to get a crowd dancing and keep them drinking.

For natives, the appearance of the hillbilly bar was typically troubling, a harbinger of migration and their flourishing an unwelcome sign of an established community of transients.<sup>269</sup> Since the twenties, when the earliest southern migrants began to develop enclaves in the industrialized sections of Chicago’s North Side, the bars that sprang up to serve them were viewed as the physical manifestation of a creeping low-class southerly menace, and they developed a reputation for seediness and violence that confirmed northern fears about the moral turpitude of the newcomers suddenly in their midst. Over the years, they became a bugaboo for the press as well as local politicians and when the migration would boom, or the market for unskilled labor would contract, they received renewed attention. Newspaper features and magazine articles that covered the rural-to-urban migrants during the 1950s and 60s routinely pointed toward the bars as evidence of southern degeneracy driving some general moral decline.

In Albert Votaw’s infamous 1958 *Harper’s* essay he dismissively reports that “the chief social diversion [of southern migrants] is to gather with friends, noisily in the one institution they have originated up North—the hillbilly tavern.” A local newspaper abandoned the sociological pretensions altogether and opted for more lurid copy: “Skid row dives, opium parlors, and other assorted dens of iniquity collectively are as safe as a Sunday school picnic compared with the joints taken over by clans of fightin’, feudin’ southern hillbillies and their shootin’ cousins who today constitute one of the most dangerous and lawless elements of Chicago’s fast growing migrant population,” proclaimed the Chicago

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>269</sup> Bill C. Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1968), 633.

Daily Tribune in a 1957 expose with the eye-popping headline “Girl Reporter Visits Jungles of Hillbillies.”<sup>270</sup>

More sanguine accounts of southern migration saw claims like these as overwrought but agreed that the bars were important spaces in the communities. As the sociologist Lewis Killian wrote in his study *White Southerners*, “The activities that gave the [urban] white southerners their highest visibility as a group took place in the hillbilly taverns and, paradoxically, in the churches.”<sup>271</sup> That bars and storefront holiness churches might constitute the social infrastructure of a community confounded natives, but like so much of life in Uptown it was a pragmatic, makeshift response to dislocation and tenancy. Absent the social networks that gave working class life in the south a sense of familiarity and coherence—family ties, church communities, local economic networks—and hard up for space to congregate and socialize in a neighborhood they occupied as literal and existential tenants, white southerners in Uptown made social space wherever they could—on porches and stoops, in yards under shade trees, and all throughout the wide alleys of the neighborhood. But for many—and especially men—the tavern became a cornerstone of social life in a hostile city. It provided entertainment and refuge, especially for youth chafing under the pressures of policing and the harassment suffered on the streets. And perhaps most importantly, it provided people a sense of community and belonging. A sense that this was, or could be, *your own territory*. Home away from home. “The South” in Chicago.

As one of the few places that felt homey in the city, the bars displayed their own political economy—a particular relationship between the economic world of the day laborer or the factory worker and the class politics that structured his life: police surveillance, predatory credit, goads toward assimilation, and so forth. Some bars cashed checks or ran tabs on spec for familiar faces and maybe their cousins in a pinch; some circulated job postings or passed notice along by word of mouth. And there was always, of course, the music which wed all the conflicting positions and beliefs of the urban hillbilly: the

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<sup>270</sup> Albert N. Votaw, “The Hillbillies Invade Chicago,” *Harper’s Magazine*, February 1958, 63; Normal Lee Browning, “Girl Reporter Visits Jungles of Hillbillies,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 3, 1957.

<sup>271</sup> Lewis M. Killian, *White Southerners* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 109.

nostalgia for home and guilt over leaving it; the lures and conveniences of the technological society and the comforting, hidebound customs of an older one; the daily experience of having perhaps more cash on hand than you'd ever had in your life and at the same time feeling alienated from your surroundings.

As Killian explained, these establishments were essentially “immigrant institutions,” “not a reproduction of a familiar and established feature of the ‘native’ culture of the migrants,” but instead substitutes “in a new milieu for other features not so easily reproduced: the country store or filling-station where the men gathered for ‘bull sessions’ and horseplay, dances at the school house, and the roadhouse, with its illicit but fairly well hidden activities.”<sup>272</sup> At night, these bars featured live music and dancing, the entertainment provided by local or touring country acts that ranged in size and style, from small outfits playing guitar and fiddle to electrified rockabilly bands.<sup>273</sup> In the 1950s and 60s, the live music in these bars would have been rough, relative to the country music heard on a show like the *Opry*. During the daytime, before the music started, the bars served as community spaces. Patrons drank and played the jukebox but also swapped tips on work, talked politics, and collectively processed day-to-day life in places like Uptown or Akron or suburban Detroit.

Despite their light imprint on the historical imagination, hillbilly bars were one of the quintessential country music institutions of the postwar period. During the postwar era of southern slums, Uptown was home to more than 150 bars, dozens of which booked nightly live country music in order to attract southern migrants. These venues effectively sustained a country scene in Chicago. It was unpolished and gritty, and it was deeply meaningful for these southerners who could claim little of city life their own.<sup>274</sup> But despite their counterintuitive presence in major metropolitan areas across the country, and despite their appearance in song after song about urban malaise and rural folk far from home, the hillbilly bars became a footnote in the story of country music. In part, this was due to their

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<sup>272</sup> Killian, “Southern White Laborers in Chicago’s West Side,” 308.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 299. Killian described the hillbilly bars of the 1940s as featuring bands that “ranged in size from one guitar player, dressed in a ‘cowboy outfit,’ to orchestras including two or three Spanish guitars, a steel guitar, and a “fiddle.” One tavern featured two such bands, which take turns playing from 7:30 p.m. until 5:00 a.m.”

<sup>274</sup> Devin Hunter, “Growing Diversity: Urban Renewal, Community Activism, and the Politics of Cultural Diversity in Uptown Chicago, 1940-1970” (Ph.D., Loyola University Chicago, 2015), 92.

literal disappearance. As the postwar white migrant cohort assimilated and moved toward the suburbs, many closed or simply rebranded to attract new patrons. At the same time, the obsolescence of the hillbilly bar can also be read in light of one of the most significant shifts in the country music industry. In a way, these establishments were holdovers from the post-Depression adolescence of country music, when the hillbilly business was beginning its boom but had yet to be consolidated and shaped into a coherent industry. During the 1930s and 40s, the country trade was regional, built around a loose network of radio stations and live performance spaces. It was a riot of entertainment ventures designed to capitalize on enthusiasm for modernized rural music, and these gambles were undertaken all across the country, from Maine to Los Angeles to Texas to Baltimore.<sup>275</sup>

But while the hillbilly bar had been a fixture of Chicago since the 1920s, it was not the only game in town. And in fact, history of country music in Chicago is especially revealing when it comes to the ways the genre's class politics evolved as its commercial potential and cultural status grew. For the first half of the twentieth century it was one of the busiest recording centers in the country, third only to New York and Hollywood (it was overtaken by Nashville in the mid-1950s), and it was the birthplace, in 1924, of *The National Barn Dance*, a hillbilly variety show broadcast from WLS. At the same time migrant dirt farmers picked and fiddled in dives out on West Madison, the voices of professional hillbilly performers

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<sup>275</sup> In recent years, academic and popular writing on early country music culture has complicated what has come to be known as the "southern thesis," the notion that, as Clifford R. Murphy explains in *Yankee Twang*, "country music is inherently southern" and that all non-southern expressions are fundamentally derivative (22). In particular, a number of explorations of country's development in, or on the outskirts of, northern cities have expanded our sense of who made and enjoyed this music. These books often dovetail with the story of southern outmigration, but some detail pre-migration, or "native" non-southern country musics. For the history of New England country and the "hillbilly orchestras" of Maine and Massachusetts, see Clifford R. Murphy, *Yankee Twang: Country and Western Music in New England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014). For information about the "folk music parks" of border states like Maryland, Pennsylvania, and the bluegrass festival scene in Ohio, Indiana, and Maryland, see Henry Koretzky, "Night Falls on Sunset Park," *Bluegrass Unlimited* (January 2013); Thomas A. Adler, *Bean Blossom: The Brown County Jamboree and Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Festivals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); and Neil V. Rosenberg, *Bluegrass Generation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018). Paul L. Tyler's article "Hillbilly Music Re-imagined: Folk and Country Music in the Midwest," *Journal of American Folklore* (Spring 2014), reconstitutes the significant contribution of rural mid-western musicians during the spread of and early enthusiasm for country music, persuasively arguing for a level of autonomy long denied them. In addition, see the following three strong monographs on country and bluegrass scenes in northern industrial centers: Tim Newby, *Bluegrass in Baltimore* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015); Craig Maki and Keith Cady, *Detroit Country Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); and Jon Hartley Fox, *King of the Queen City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

like Gene Autry, Red Foley, Lulu Belle and Scotty were beamed out of the Windy City every Saturday evening—from 7:30 until midnight—via a 50,000-watt clear channel station that blanketed half of the country. These two types of country music had stylistic differences to be sure, but they also illustrate an important difference in the presentation of class. As a reporter profiling the *National Barn Dance* drew a distinction between the style of country music performed on the radio, which he described as “uptown hillbilly,” and the music in the bars, which was “nasal and twangy,” “less slicked up” and “more sincere” than the stuff on WLS; this music he wrote, was “hungry hillbilly.”<sup>276</sup>

When, in the late 1950s, the production of what had once been hillbilly music was finally consolidated in Nashville, an organizational achievement best symbolized by the creation of the Country Music Association in 1958, the music was given what boosters had long sought: a center. This corporate victory marked a transformation in what Diane Pecknold has described as the “intractable struggle to locate and control the image of a nationalized country music,” for once the music had a center, everything outside of it was reorganized as its periphery.<sup>277</sup> The creation of a country music periphery had both literal and symbolic effects. In terms of the geography of the trade, once Nashville became the unquestioned seat of the genre those sites of country production outside of it became less autonomous.<sup>278</sup> Some, like the New England country described by Clifford R. Murphy in *Yankee Twang*, faded away under the homogenizing pressure of Music City, but most underwent a form of passive reorganization, becoming increasingly important as spaces of professionalization for musicians looking to make their way toward the center or as stops on the touring circuit of national acts.<sup>279</sup> But the dialectics of centralization also created the possibility of alternatives as the nascent industry exercised its newfound control over the

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<sup>276</sup> Bernard Asbel, “National Barn Dance,” *Chicago*, October 1954, 23.

<sup>277</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 80.

<sup>278</sup> By the mid-1960s, Nashville had overtaken Chicago to become the third-largest recording center in the country and was home to ten recording studios, more than 25 record companies, offices for the nation's leading performing rights organizations, and hundreds upon hundreds of studio musicians, producers, songwriters, and publishers.

<sup>279</sup> Clifford R. Murphy, *Yankee Twang: Country and Western Music in New England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).



genre and the “intractable struggle,” once a vying for dominance was displaced and reframed in terms of challenges to the newfound institutional spirit of Music Row.

### **Class Consciousness in Heartbreak, USA**

Though not always framed in these terms, JOIN and the Young Patriots presented an insurgent alternative to institutional country music at a moment when the good business sense of Nashville was leading the industry to align with the politics of the American right wing. Their vision of country music and its politics was local to Uptown and uninterested in the authority of official and totalizing formulations, whether from George Wallace, Richard Nixon, or Roy Acuff. In fact, their great discovery was partisan in nature. Instead of intervening at the center of country’s power, the strategy of traditional electoral politicians, they embraced the conditions of the periphery and held them up to critique the center. With regard to the possibility of progressive country, the great intellectual discovery of JOIN and the Young Patriots was that their marginal social position was not only reflected in the aesthetics and philosophy of country music, but in its political economy: in the way it circulated in working-class spaces like the hillbilly bars and how the character of that circulation elaborated class distinctions and between Nashville and a place like Uptown. And because their political theory of country music was rooted in the world around them it was the kind of theory that could be put into practice.

They realized that the bars, places with names like the Dew Drop Inn, Ted’s 10-High, and the Wagon Wheel Lounge, were a strategic space to “recognize and cultivate all the positive content hidden and mystified within the various so-called processes of alienation” in order to focus a general discontent toward specific political ends.<sup>280</sup> This was pragmatic in the sense that the bars were one of the few places poor people could and did gather in Uptown, a crowded neighborhood of renters with little public space. They used the bars as sites for cultural programming: they held “From Blues to Bluegrass” jam sessions intended to highlight interconnections between black and white southern music; collected poetry and

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<sup>280</sup> Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, trans. David Broder (London; New York: Verso, 2019), 58.

songs for their chapbook series, *The Time of the Phoenix*; and as an opportune space for the footwork of community organizing, for turning neighbors out to meetings, raising money for survival programs, recruiting marchers for a protest or rally, or just getting a rap going, applying and reapplying the activist pressure to Uptown's everyday problems.<sup>281</sup> Here, country music became an emotionally resonant entry point into the various indignities suffered by working people; whether as a literal starting point for a conversation intended to move someone to participate in a protest action, for example, or as a more ambient cultural expression of social reality that kept people primed for certain political appeals.

The first, which I will examine here, was an appeal to class-consciousness: it attempted to take experiences of individual exploitation that so much country music rehearsed and reframe them as collective issues facing all working people. The second, which I will explore next, was the question of race, and how the roots of country music exemplified a common culture divided by race in service of capital. These arguments were made in essays and newsletter columns, but they were put in to practice through organizing and ass-busting as Doug Youngblood put it, and through this work country music became a weapon against "class-obfuscation and racial division."<sup>282</sup>

Mike James laid out the contours of the group's class appeal in the essay cited earlier in this chapter, "Getting Off The Interstate: or, Back Home in Heartbreak, USA," published in *Movement* during the fall of 1968. Like much of the writing the Uptown activists did for these papers, James' essay was an attempt to educate the wider New Left about the realities of white working class life, but in this particular study he addressed that through a defense of country music. "In a recent issue of THE GUARDIAN (May 18, 1968)," he wrote:

cultural buff columnist Pandora spewed forth a bitter and absurd criticism of C&W. Pandora stated that C&W barely qualified as music, and described it as "a saccharine concoction of neurotic self-pity, hand-on-the-heart patriotism, Simon-pure religious fundamentalism and know-nothing machismo . . . Big city sophisticates tend to dig it as some kind of high camp, but poor dumb slobs who find their way into White Citizens Councils in the South in some desperate search for identity take it straight."

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<sup>281</sup> "Blues to Bluegrass," *Keep Strong*, February 1976, 40–41.

<sup>282</sup> James, "Getting Off the Interstate," 5

To James, this line of argument wasn't just snobbery, it was indicative of much of the left's deep-seated mistrust of people they wanted to organize. It was crucial, he argued, that "movement people" took country music seriously because it had a great deal to say about "the impact of social, political and economic forces as they have arisen out of and shaped the lives" of the American working-class. "No revolution will happen in America unless these people are a part of it," he wrote. "No revolution will happen if radicals reject these people, if they accept the words of spokesmen of the cultural wing of the bourgeois left."<sup>283</sup> As the Young Patriots would argue, these bourgeois attitudes about art and ideology dismissed whole realms of radical potential out of hand and did so at the expense of examining how working-class forms connected to people and often shaped their lives.

Their counter-argument was that country music was a preeminent form of working-class cultural expression, and that if you treated it as such it could open up real possibilities for radicalizing people along left lines. Essentially, they understood the politics of the music as individual—and typically individualistic—expressions of the objective realities of the working poor. None of this meant country music was "radical," or even that it had a coherent politics that one could point to or map along the American electoral spectrum. Instead it was, as Michael Denning teaches us, an artistic form "divided against itself." Like all art created in a corporate capitalist system, country music is neither the wholly "manipulative industrial product" condemned by the columnist in *The Guardian*, nor the "entirely...authentic cultural creation" dreamed of by cultural nationalists, but a cultural form in which both qualities were present and in tension.<sup>284</sup> Or as James puts it:

what's important about the objective reality of C&W is that it makes clear a lot of what America is hard and ruthless, messing over some (classes of) people a whole lot more than others. The music tells us that. Just as there is paradox and contradiction in the lives of the people who write, sing and listen to C&W, there is paradox and contradiction in the songs. We're not talking about

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<sup>283</sup>Ibid. Later in the essay, James recounts a story by Todd Gitlin about visiting Cuba for the Cultural Congress of 1968: While Irwin Silber of SING OUT magazine was publicly condemning virtually all American cultural forms (some will also recall his earlier vicious attack on the electrification of Dylan), Carl Davidson was getting worked over by a guide, a young fighter in the revolution. She responded to his put down of Americans with "who do you think you are? You can never win if you hate the people" (15).

<sup>284</sup> Michael Denning, "The End of Mass Culture," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 37 (1990): 5.

political people, but rather people who've been worked over politically. Stonewall Jackson sings songs about little people, but also about Minute Men rolling over in their graves in response to draft card burning. The same is true of the truck driving songs of Dave Dudley. Paradox, contradiction, inconsistency America. Don't hide, deal with it!<sup>285</sup>

The problem was not to interpret country music, however, but to change the reality it described.

For the organizer, the move from interpretation to action meant grappling with these contradictions and attempting to resolve them to the degree that they could then be polarized along a particular political line. This was as true of Nixon, who proclaimed country music's American nativity from the Opry stage, as it was of the Young Patriots working in the seedy bars of Chicago. It meant plausibly organizing the genre's sentiments and describing them as a conceptual unity and pinning that interpretation to a politics. But what do we mean by "organizing" the genre's sentiments? As the sociologist Richard A. Peterson writes, the thematic world of country music is, and has always been filled with "images of class difference and exploitation"—bad bosses, lost farms, vagrancy, migration, social exclusion, flat tires, jail, cross-class romance, and so on.

But more often than not, these themes are resolved at the level of the individual, whether tragically or, as the "Workingman's Blues" epigraph suggests, in a sense of personal pride in the inherent dignity of labor and hard-won gains however meager. As Peterson argues, this individual relationship to the structural forces they describe often expressed a sense of fatalism or an identification with dominant systems of economic, racial, and gendered oppression, but rarely did lyrical or thematic content rise to the level of something like a class, or anti-racist critique.<sup>286</sup> Jefferson Cowie expresses a similar sentiment when discussing Johnny Paycheck's 1977 anthem of refusal, "Take This Job And Shove It." As he writes, "despite the title, the song is less about open rebellion than it is about a "hidden transcript" of resistance

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<sup>285</sup> Mike James, "Getting off the Interstate: Or, Back Home in Heartbreak, USA," *The Movement*, September 1968, 5.

<sup>286</sup> Richard A. Peterson, "Class Unconsciousness in Country Music," in *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music*, ed. Melton Alonza McLaurin and Richard A. Peterson (Taylor & Francis, 1992), 47.

that takes place internally, far from the outward contest of power relations...the narrator is unable to act; his rebellion is only a fantasy.”<sup>287</sup>

For the Young Patriots, the way to square this particular circle—to “deal with” this paradox, as Mike James put it—was by putting country music to work as an organizing tool. It helped build the group’s internal culture and sense of identity in a number of ways. They continued the JOIN habits of featuring bands at rallies and sponsored parties, and also used figures from the country music Pantheon to frame their vision of radical politics: activists named both a playground they established through much protest, as well as a proposed housing project in honor of Hank Williams; Preacherman invoked Johnny Cash alongside Huey Newton during speeches; and even John Prine appears in one of the poems the group published, a bard clarifying the life of the listener “pick[ing] his way through / stories of our lives.”<sup>288</sup> And while there was no house band—like The Lumpen for the Black Panthers and the MC5 for the White Panthers—members were musical and picking parties or jams were staples of Patriot social life.<sup>289</sup> All of this tethered the group to the history of the South and to a visible subculture in the North and when it was combined with a politics of community self-determination it affirmed the currents of righteous political content that were often obscure, even to people in Uptown. Like the poetry chapbooks that the Young Patriots published and the inverted symbols they wore, country music became an avenue for self-reflection on the spirit and historical experience of the white working-class as well as the political tasks set before it. Figures like Hank Williams and John Prine were recognized and beloved because they felt and could convey so deeply the realities of working-class life that their stories became something like community narratives, collective reflections and feelings of trial and tribulation.

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<sup>287</sup> Jefferson R. Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>288</sup> Dan Liss, “Poem for John Prine,” *Time of the Phoenix 4*, 1974, personal collection.

<sup>289</sup> Hy Thurman, interview with author, December 4 2018. For more on White Panther and Black Panther associated acts, see Rickey Vincent, *Party Music: The Inside Story of the Black Panthers’ Band and How Black Power Transformed Soul Music* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013); Benny Munday, “The MC5 And John Sinclair: The Rock and Roll Revolution Began in Detroit,” *PleaseKillMe*, December 2017.

The group also used the music to organize within the community, often in very direct and instrumental ways. As Hy Thurman has said in interviews, country music and police brutality were two of the preferred conversation starters when the organizers “wanted to talk to poor whites about living conditions in Uptown and try to get them involved in the Young Patriots to improve their living conditions.”<sup>290</sup> As with their adoption of the label “Patriot” and use of the Confederate flag flanked with Panther patches or symbols of revolution, the group felt that country music, properly situated, could create an opening onto talk about the plight of poor southern people in Uptown and—if the rap went well—move toward talk of fixing it. Talking music in the hillbilly bars was one way the Patriots “met their neighbors where they were,” physically as well as philosophically, and recalls some of Saul Alinsky’s rules for radical organizing, including his insistence to work within “the expertise” of the people you organize and to remember that “good tactics [are ones] your people enjoy.”<sup>291</sup> It was one more tactic in their broad strategy of politicizing the familiar and developing modes of collective education that were close to those the group wanted to move toward action.

This of course was also true of the right-wing political movements the activists defined themselves against. Gurney Norman described how country music at the Wallace rally became a method of uniting supporters against those hippies and freaks—a staged fight that must have felt meaningful enough that the working-class rally goers tolerated, even applauded the phony hillbilly tunes. JOIN and the Young Patriots drew their water from the same well, and sometimes emphasized similar elements of country music as Wallace; both groups prized the genre for its directness, its southernness, and its workerist perspective, but the radicals used these things to ground an alternative, egalitarian populism deployed against figures of capital like the wealthy and political elites. In this convergence, we can see the fraught but crucial relationship between political possibilities and political as well as the historical and conceptual challenge which country music presented for the activists.

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<sup>290</sup> Hy Thurman, *Revolutionary Hillbilly: An interview with Hy Thurman of the Young Patriots Organization*, interview by James Tracy, February 29, 2016.

<sup>291</sup> Saul Alinsky, *Rules For Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 128.

It was a contested form that many groups of many political persuasions were actively trying to claim in an era of tremendous social upheaval. What the Patriots recognized, and what we can see in their approach to culture more generally, was that the struggle over country music was not simply a process of interpretation. Instead, the group had to help actively produce its politics, at least within the orbit of their influence. As Michael Denning writes, “*No* popular cultural practice is necessarily subversive or incorporated; it takes place in a situation, becomes articulated with a ‘party’ in Gramsci’s sense: an organized way of life, an alliance of class fractions, a conception of the universe, a historical bloc which creates the conditions for a political use or reading, the conditions for symbolizing class conflict.”<sup>292</sup> JOIN and the Young Patriots attempted to polarize country music, but they also created the conditions for its political reading through their work as organizers. In other words, they brought to country music a politics, within which the genre’s often contradictory political possibilities might be organized conceptually and then realized through active participation. This was not a corporate or academic argument about the politics of country music, but an interpretation of it that affirmed people’s understanding of how the world worked. The Young Patriots understood country music as indicative of populist beliefs shaped by objective conditions of exploitation that could be polarized along a number of political lines, and their response was to tighten the dialectical screws by both explaining how the music’s individual expressions of class were general ones and then associating the music with a liberatory grassroots political movement.

### **“What Poor Peoples Knows”**

Part of this elaboration of country music’s class character involved an argument for the music’s place in the work of a multiracial movement. While the bourgeois left considered it reactionary treacle and right wanted to elevate it as the silent majority’s rejoinder “to the to the tribal war dances, adolescent grunts and marijuana hymns that have taken over so many pop stations,” the Young Patriots embraced country

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<sup>292</sup> Denning, “The End of Mass Culture,” 14.

music as both one of the great contributions of poor whites to cultural scene, and a multicultural, interracial form at root.<sup>293</sup> Although this understanding did emerge in its own way from study of the genre and knowledge of its history, it was not an academic argument about country music. It was a principled stance and it happened to be true but it was struck for political reason of helping poor white people see themselves as the partners of oppressed people they likely did not know in this interracial movement of the poor.

As discussed, this historical task had been given new focus since the 1968 campaign of George Wallace and the reactionary vision of culture that he campaigned on. Youngblood wrote about Wallace in a number of articles during the late 1960s, regularly pointing out that the danger and talent of Wallace was that he offered marginalized working whites a vision of a place at the center of politics, a herrenvolk democracy where their liberty was expanded and position guaranteed at the expense of ethnically determined out groups. The party line response to these politics from Youngblood and the Patriots was a fairly standard materialist, antiracist rebuttal. "Racism," he wrote, "sets one section of the working-class against another and keeps them from seeing that it is in their class interests...to make the demands of some workers the demands of all workers. They cannot be divided for in division is defeat."<sup>294</sup> But they understood that their mission was to not only provide for poor whites an alternative explanation of their alienation and how capitalism created divisions among the working-class, but to help build the interracial, intercultural unity that could counter the visions of Wallace and later Nixon.

This strategy would be formally realized in the Rainbow Coalition, but it was deeply influenced by the group's earlier experience with the Poor People's Campaign organized by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC). During the summer of 1968, around the time the Young Patriots first formed, several members attended the Poor People's March on Washington and spent weeks living in the multi-ethnic shantytown participants called Resurrection City, also discussed in

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<sup>293</sup> Kevin P. Phillips, "Revolutionary Music," *The Washington Post*, May 6, 1971, sec. General.

<sup>294</sup> Doug Youngblood, "George Wallace: No Friend of the 'Little Man,'" *The Movement*, November 1, 1968, Vol 4, Issue 10 edition, 7.



Chapter Two. For these young activists, the event was a revelatory glimpse of a movement at scale and for a moment it truly seemed to augur a radical future, but two things in particular influenced the group's future development, especially with respect to the question of culture as a unifying force. First was the presence of hundreds of Appalachian people, black and white, who had come from mountain counties in the states of Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia. Estimates put attendance from the Upland South at as many as five hundred Appalachians, the majority of whom were white. Assembled by the Appalachian Volunteers and the Highlander Center, this delegation came to protest hunger and poverty in the mountain south as well as to stand in support of their allies from other regions in the country.<sup>295</sup> For the Patriots, most of whom had bussed down from Chicago, this was an opportunity to reconnect with their own people, as it were, and to build relationships with some of the southern activists who organized the groups, including Myles Horton and Candie and Guy Carawan, the cultural wing of the Highlander Center. These were friendships that the group would maintain for years and they constituted one of their main connections to activities in the South.

Equally important for the group was the role of the arts in Resurrection City. Convinced of the need for a space of cross-cultural exchange, Reverend Frederick D. Kirkpatrick of the Southern Christian Leadership Council worked with Horton, the Carawans, and Ralph Rinzler of the Smithsonian Institute to establish a cultural tent known as the "Many Races Soul Center" in the middle of the encampment. Over the month and a half of Resurrection City's existence, the Soul Center played host to a wild variety of the country's expressive forms, from poetry to dance to literature, but music was especially popular. As the historian Robert Chase writes, "sessions were often held on Appalachian work songs, black spirituals and similar work songs, Gospel, blues, country, traditional Mexican American songs, and Indian chants as well as folk stories."<sup>296</sup> In the aftermath of the Campaign, many on the political left derided the

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<sup>295</sup> Robert T. Chase, "Class Resurrection: The Poor People's Campaign of 1968 and Resurrection City," *Essays in History* 39 (1998), <http://www.essaysinhistory.com/class-resurrection-the-poor-peoples-campaign-of-1968-and-resurrection-city/>.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*

movement for its reformism, but the Uptown activists saw the event differently.<sup>297</sup> In a letter to *Movement* in September of 1968, Youngblood wrote that while people were rightfully skeptical of asking the government to address the movement's demands, "the important thing that is happening is going on around the campfires, culture tent, and chow tent." Those were the places, he argued, where experiences were being shared and poor people were actively "redefining themselves as to what their lives should be about."<sup>298</sup>

That experience in D.C., which put such an emphasis on cultural exchange as a way to build trust and reinforce shared ideological commitments, clearly influenced the ways the newly formed Young Patriots would think about the role of culture within a multi-racial movement pushing for deep change. Since the late 1950s, the cultural politics of Uptown had been actively managed by the local political elite on the UCC, who had worked industriously to market the neighborhood as a diverse "city within a city" without acknowledging the presence of poor white southern migrants who formed its majority minority but "weltered this idealized fabric."<sup>299</sup> During these years, the UCC held a number of Folk Fairs in order to celebrate the variety of ethnic communities in Uptown but were quite selective in terms of which peoples and traditions to recognize and highlight.<sup>300</sup> According to Hunter, despite the fact that the Fairs were held in the heart of Uptown's Appalachian area no southern migrants performed and none of the numerous local taverns that hosted live music were asked to participate. Instead, the organizers leaned on neighborhood institutions which had "successfully marketed ethnicity to the middle class and elite" such as a local tiki lounge and an Austrian yodeler.<sup>301</sup>

Hillbilly culture as it was actually experienced by working-class people in Uptown was never welcomed by the stewards of the neighborhood who saw it as a source of civic and cultural decline and it

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<sup>297</sup> "If what you want is jobs / for everyone, you are still the enemy," wrote Diane DiPrima, "Revolutionary Letters No. 19 (for The Poor People's Campaign)," *Ann Arbor Sun*, February 15, 1969.

<sup>298</sup> Doug Youngblood, "Letter from Youngblood," *The Movement*, September 1, 1968, 7.

<sup>299</sup> Hunter, "Growing Diversity," 147.

<sup>300</sup> As discussed at length in Chapter 4, the UCCC's motivation in staging the Folk Fairs was to advertise Uptown as a "city within a city" as part of their prolonged effort to attract urban renewal funding.

<sup>301</sup> Hunter, "Growing Diversity," 176–80.

was precisely for these reasons that it became a potent weapon for the Young Patriots. Country music in particular helped answer the implicit question of how white members of a multiethnic organization could signal their ethnicity. Blue denim work jackets, leather boots, big belt buckles, the occasional cowboy hat and the politically inverted Confederate flag helped symbolize the commitment of a radical fraction of the white working-class to the larger coalition. It was a natural way for the Young Patriots to distinguish themselves from middle-class straight society and amplify the toughness and borderline illicit cool of the hillbilly by enlisting that figure in a larger fight against oppression. But it was also a way to stress the interdependence of diverse working-class cultures, not as a celebration of diversity, but as a weapon against oppression.

One of the ways they did this was to present country music not as “a capsule of renascent cultural traditionalism,” as a Nixon advisor put it, but as a particular expression of a much wider culture of the American poor that could only be fully appreciated in its unity with other forms.<sup>302</sup> In his regular music column for *The Firing Line* (JOIN’s house organ, which briefly survived the students’ ouster) Youngblood reflected on the working-class essence that united all poor peoples’ music, an authentic quality born out of toil which he termed “soul.” While many people associate soul strictly with black music, he wrote, “‘Soul,’ as we understand it, means an awareness of all the dirt poor people have to put up with and that that awareness (feel) comes only from having lived it.” Soul, in other words, names here a kind of knowledge born of the necessity to work, and, he argues, it characterizes the blues, and R&B, and of course soul music, but so too is it true of country, “the music of miners, workers, share-croppers, migrant workers, tenant farmers, factory workers. Who has experienced more of the dirt that poor people have to put up with than them?” He then lists black and white music he prizes for its soul, Jackie Wilson’s “Stop Doggin’ Me Around” and Bobbi Gentry’s “Ballad of Billy Joe”; Frank Miller’s “Black Land Farmer” and James Brown’s “Prisoner of Love”; Leon Ashley’s “Lora” and Aretha Franklin’s “Respect,” before concluding with the following: “We feel that those who label [C&W] as ‘apathetic’ have no

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<sup>302</sup> Kevin Phillips, “Special Suvery: A Return to Economic, Social, and Political Basics?,” September 11, 1972.

understanding or idea about the lives of the people who live those stories. These people know that things are not as they should be...They understand that life for them is just keeping ahead of the world. But knowing is the meaning of 'soul,' and we say again that Country & Western music has 'soul' 'cause poor peoples knows!"<sup>303</sup>

In an interesting series of argumentative moves, Youngblood arrives at an understanding of the kinship between black and white popular music through an examination of country's "soul," its "awareness of all the dirt poor people have to put up with." Put another way, he comes to understand that the core of country music is a kind of class knowledge, the self-awareness of those who must sell their labor to live, and that this knowledge is plural, it is what "poor peoples knows." This understanding of the musical kinship of southern popular music was, even at the time, common sense to anyone who considered the stuff squarely, but for the Young Patriots it confirmed their sense of the potential rainbow politics of working-class culture and they put this vision of deep musical unity into practice most literally by organizing a series of country shows. Held in what passed for the activist art infrastructure of Uptown, a combination of hillbilly bars and the various non-profit centers (and non-profit centers named after hillbilly bars, such as the Dew Drop Inn Migrant Center), these shows touted local artists who performed a variety of southern styles and featured blues and bluegrass music as well as country acts in order to point to their common roots.<sup>304</sup> Put together for publicity as well as political purposes, they were good ways to bring attention to an upcoming action or perhaps raise money for one of the group's survival programs and they helped reinforce the Patriots' reputation as a radical organization with a real community presence. In terms of political education, they staged, in a very accessible way, the relationship between country or hillbilly music and black American traditions like the blues. In the mid-seventies, during the twilight of the group's life, Hy Thurman formalized this practice and created an

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<sup>303</sup> Doug Youngblood, "Country Soul," *The Firing Line*, February 8, 1968.

<sup>304</sup> See Whet Moser, "A Group of Uptown Revolutionaries Reemerges With a Concert," *Chicago magazine*, accessed March 30, 2020, <http://www.chicagomag.com/city-life/January-2016/The-Young-Patriots-Organization/>; Rick Kogan, "Young Patriots' History Is a Lesson for Political Activists of Today," *chicagotribune.com*, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/music/ct-young-patriots-organization-hideout-jon-langford-ent-0209-20160208-column.html>.

organization he called From Blues to Bluegrass, which brought folk and country acts into the community to do benefits, fund music education programs in Uptown, and talk about the interracial history of Appalachian music.<sup>305</sup>

In wedding this sort of argument about culture to an interracial political struggle, the group intuited that racialized fractures in working-class art were proxies of racialized fractures within the working-class itself. Country music was particularly vexed in this respect, and claiming it as a site of interracial solidarity opens onto a deep history. As Bill Malone wrote in the first edition of his seminal history *Country Music USA*, published in 1968, “Nowhere is the particular love-hate relationship that has prevailed among the southern races more evidenced than in country music.” Although the tradition was associated almost exclusively with southern whites, it clearly bore the influence of many non-white ethnic groups, from Mexican songs and guitar techniques found in the western-swing of musicians like Bob Wills to the rhythms and instrumentation of French-American Cajuns, to the steel-guitar, one of the music’s definitive sounds and a product of Hawaii.<sup>306</sup> And while a great many influences disappeared into the whiteness of country, the contributions of black music were foundational in terms of instrumentation, technique, and repertoire. After the Civil War, black styles like the blues, and African instruments like the banjo began to circulate in the wider South and mix with white church and social music. This was especially prevalent in places like railroad yards and lumber camps where black and white workers labored alongside one another and enjoyed a degree of cultural mixing uncommon in domestic and social spheres.

As Karl Hagstrom Miller argues in his book *Segregating Sound*, even in a racially stratified South, social mixing among the working-class had, by the turn of the twentieth-century, produced a

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<sup>305</sup> “Blues to Bluegrass,” *Keep Strong*, February 1976, 40–41. It is difficult to determine how long Blues to Bluegrass lasted, but the following advertisement appeared in the Chicago Tribune on September 9, 1976: FREE GUITAR LESSONS offered by Blues to Bluegrass will begin at 6:30 p.m. Monday in the Uptown Center, 4520 N. Beacon St. Classes are restricted to residents of the Uptown, Edgewater, and New Town areas who cannot afford to pay for lessons. For more information contact Mike Scott or Hy Thurman, 561-8033.

<sup>306</sup> Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 26–27; John W. Troutman, *Kika Kila: How the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Changed the Sound of Modern Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

shared repertoire of rural songs and styles that would form the well-spring of America's traditional and popular music. Beginning in the 1910s and accelerating in the 1920s, however, this music underwent a process of active musical segregation by which the country, led by the recording industry as well as prevailing scientific theories of cultural heredity "came to compartmentalize southern music according to race [and a] fluid complex of sounds and styles in practice, southern music was reduced to a series of distinct genres associated with particular racial and ethnic identities."<sup>307</sup> Out of this shared repertoire came "hillbilly" and "race" records, the progenitors of country and folk music on the one hand, the blues, soul, funk, and hip-hop on the other. As Miller argues, this generic binary reinforced the juridical logic of Jim Crow in the popular imagination and helped organize the public's perception of the relationship between race and culture, suggesting a direct and essential correspondence between people and genre, but in reality, these terms "corresponded to the musical lives of no particular sets of artists or audiences."<sup>308</sup> They were marketing categories that drew on fictions of race to determine the reality of the music itself for decades. As Malone wrote in 1968, "one of the most striking characteristics of country music has been the almost total absence of Negro performers."<sup>309</sup>

The Young Patriots' approached country music as both a tool to raise class consciousness and as an object lesson in the ways the American workers remained connected despite a history of racial division and class mystification. They saw it as a product of what we might call the unequal interdependence of the American poor, united by their material position in a class society, divided along numerous axis of identity that furthered exploitation, but nevertheless was reliant on one another to overturn the system. Their interpretation was never a dominant one. At the same time the Patriots were enlisting Hank Williams as a revolutionary figure in the streets of Chicago, Richard Nixon was speaking from the Opry stage, his advisors were using the music to reimagine the Republican party as a home for all white

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<sup>307</sup> Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid*, 188.

<sup>309</sup> Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 27.

workers, and the Nashville record executives on Music Row measured the cultural and politics winds and chose what seemed like an inoffensive middle-ground. But the Uptown activists put country music to work in their own community, they took the lessons of the Resurrection City Soul Center and adapted it to the Chicago hillbilly bar. In doing so, they brought a radical grassroots politics to country music. This active process realized certain political potentials within the form. Just as Sam Smith's dubious country performance became something affective within the arena of the Wallace rally, the radical potential of the music of white migrant discontent was realized in the rent strikes and building occupations and solidarity marches of the Young Patriots and their Rainbow Coalition. They embraced the form for its directness, its southernness, and its workerist perspective, and used these qualities to ground an alternative, egalitarian populism deployed against capital and the wealthy and political elites.

### **Hillbilly Counterpublics**

The hillbilly bar was the peripheral community space where thought and practice met to make sense of the way things really were in Uptown. As Doug Youngblood once told Guy and Candie Carawan:

The bars are one of the social gathering places in the city. The church is not as strong as it is in the South. There's not that much opportunity for the kinds of religion we learn in the South. When you get off from work, you head right to one of the hillbilly bars, where you're among your own people and you feel free and you don't have to worry about how your voice sounds, how you're dressing.<sup>310</sup>

To many people, the social character of these spaces was invisible or a threat to public order, but the Young Patriots, like the Goodfellows before them, saw the hillbilly bars as both a recruiting ground and a true hearth of neighborhood working-class political culture. In a neighborhood with little public space, where homes were cramped and overcrowded, and the police force that patrolled the streets and corners was quite antagonistic, the bars offered one of the few places where a social world could flourish. These were places people gathered, talked to one another and complained about their problems; about

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<sup>310</sup> Guy Carawan and Candie Carawan, *Voices from the Mountains* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 73.

harassment by the cops, or bad, dangerous jobs and the inability to get one, about protests and race riots and assassinations in the news, and the draft that swept the young men out of the neighborhood.

As with the country music that filled the jukebox or the makeshift stage, the Young Patriots brought their politics to these spaces in order to persuade and organize, to try and polarize social energy along the line of rebellion. By doing this conceptual work in these particular spaces, the organizers forged new accords between working-class culture and radical politics. They created what Nancy Fraser calls “subaltern counterpublics,” an alternative partisan public sphere “where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”<sup>311</sup> Country music was a part of this larger discursive project. In the context of this effort it became both a propaganda material of sorts, a familiar thing recast in the light of class solidarity assuring the white southerners of Uptown that they were already in possession of something radical. Fraser’s concept is particularly useful because it highlights the insurgent nature of the critique put forward by radical hillbilly groups. The program of working-class interracial solidarity exemplified by the JOIN Community Union and the Young Patriots and their Rainbow Coalition, was defined in opposition to the reactionary platforms of prominent politicians who hoped to gain the sympathy of white workers, but also to the much wider history of class domination and racism in America. It offered alternative interpretations of whiteness, solidarity, and country music, and perhaps most importantly, it offered alternative modes of participating in politics during a period of pitched political action and reaction, at the level of the community and in a language of everyday life.

At the end of Michael Denning’s *The Cultural Front*, a sweeping treatment of the relationship between art and the working-class during the 1930s and 1940s, the author reflects on the defeat of that movement, embodied by the collapse of the Popular Front alliance of socialists, communists, and radicals who for a time had their hands at the levers of cultural production. Looking back on the American Century from the twenty-first, Denning points to a handful of novels that constitute something of a

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<sup>311</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 67.



postwar micro-genre of “reflections on [the] failure and defeat” of the left.<sup>312</sup> These works are haunted by the tragic collapse of the “Old Left” and the rise of the New Deal order, and Denning enumerates the now-familiar set of explanations they rehearse. Was it the external pressure of McCarthyism and the Red Scare? The anti-communism of social democrats who broke away and entered the post-war order hoping to reform it? Perhaps the party faithful’s unyielding support for Stalin’s USSR? Or was it “race politics,” as some on the right and left came to believe, which split and alienated the white-working class base and shattered the dream of a mass movement united only by a sense of their historical project as class? Denning argues that what changed was the working-class itself, primarily through the mass migration of blacks and whites out of the South into the factories and defense plants of the North and West.

“The inheritance of the Jim Crow South moved North,” he writes. “The second-generation immigrant working class that had built the CIO and the Popular Front was displaced by a new working class, and the shape of working-class politics and culture was changed irrevocably.”<sup>313</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. and George Wallace became national political figures, the Democrats sent white southerners to the White House, “race” and “hillbilly music” went from regional styles to national ones, and the tastes, aesthetics, and attitudes of the migrant southerners and their children reshaped working-class culture in many ways the Old Left was unable, or unwilling, to see. Denning points to two novels in order to make this point. The first is Harriet Arnow’s 1954 epic of white migration to Detroit, *The Dollmaker*. A harrowing account of a strong mountain woman crushed by the adjustment to clock-life, city streets, and industrial unionism. But Arnow’s work, drawn from her own experience leaving Kentucky for Michigan during the 1950s, was the exception; “few American writers or artists recognized the significance of the migration,” writes Denning.

On this point, he turns to Clancy Sigals’ 1961 *Going Away*, a semi-autobiographical underground bestselling account of a cross-country tour through the ruined factory towns and living rooms of the

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<sup>312</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, New Edition (London: Verso, 2011), 467.

<sup>313</sup> Denning, 467.

defeated left. This book, Denning writes, is revealing, not for what it sees so much as for what it cannot. In an excellent symptomatic reading of how the novel's search for the vanished proletarian figure blinds it to the working-class under its nose, he calls up a fleeting encounter between the protagonist and a young hitchhiker. Driving east through Wyoming, the narrator stops and takes on a young man in "dirty jeans, a T-shirt...and army shoes. He was about twenty-two...had long Elvis sideburns...[and was] on his way back to Kentucky after two years in California working in an aircraft plant near Oakland."<sup>314</sup> As Denning writes, Sigal's narrator is immediately uncomfortable with the boy, "this sweaty guy with the dirty face," who hopes to ride along as far as Chicago, and he quickly begins lying in order to ditch him. The next morning he leaves the young migrant on the shoulder of the highway with ten dollars—"To give him more would have been like buying my conscience"—and escapes to continue his quest.<sup>315</sup> "The Kentucky hitchhiker," writes Denning, "is not the America Sigal's narrator is looking for...But the hitchhiker haunts the book; as the narrator tries to get the news from Hungary on the Radio, he hears Elvis Presley singing 'Love me Tender' and 'Heartbreak Hotel.' Like many on the cultural front, Sigal did not full register the meaning of Elvis or his Kentucky hitchhiker."<sup>316</sup>

In Denning's book, the narrator's dismissal of the hitchhiker is symptomatic of the left's distaste for the unruly, seemingly apolitical nature of this new working-class culture. So concerned is he with a past political order that he cannot recognize the potential cultural insurgency sitting in his passenger seat. "Decades later," adds Denning, "the inheritors of the Popular Front musical culture were still arguing whether "[Pete] Seeger should have put away his banjo and apprenticed himself to Elvis Presley."<sup>317</sup> This missed connection between the old organized left and the new working-class being constituted in the largesse and dislocations of the Second World War was real, and particularly visible in its inability to impact the popular music of the generations to follow. "Benny Goodman, Count Basie, and Frank Sinatra

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<sup>314</sup> Clancy Sigal, *Going Away: A Report, a Memoir* (New York: Open Road, 2013), 159.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid*, 160.

<sup>316</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 468-69.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid*, 470.

all lent their names to Popular Front Benefits and alliances; Muddy Waters, Hank Williams and Elvis Presley never did.”<sup>318</sup> Unlike the laborist left of the pre-war years, the urban insurgent movements of the 1960s never approached the centers of cultural production. Instead, they operated on the periphery, as consumers and appropriators, rather than producers of mass culture. As with all insurgent arrangements, this had its disadvantages—these groups were never unified in the sense of the Popular Front and in fact inherited a national culture defined by the ongoing fracture of the country’s working-class. But the Young Patriots didn’t seek the recognition of Music City, they simply took Hank Williams’ name and put it on a playground they had wrestled away from a private developer, or a housing project that was monument to communitarian ideals and an impediment to the schemes of capital, and in doing so they actualized a tendency or thrust contained within the music.

In his book *Real Country*, written in and around the musical dives of Lockhart, Texas, Aaron Fox, an anthropologist and musician, writes that one of the ways country music exemplifies working-class culture is its dialectical ability to both describe and change our sense of the real by thinking through and playing with something like common sense, however mythologized that common sense might be—“the always fraught emergence of reflexivity from practical knowledge, and the always fraught re-embedding of reflexive knowledge in intuitive practice,” as he puts it.<sup>319</sup> Country music is an artistic form that is incredibly adept at taking the historically contingent stuff that makes up historically contingent peoples’ experience of the everyday and raising it to the semi-mythic category of “everyday life.” Like so much working-class art, Fox argues, country music operates in a cultural space that both plays with our sense of the world and attempts to describe it as it is, but it is “in moving through this domain of culture,” one committed to both playing with and affirming reality, “that contingent ideological narratives and theories

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 36.

become embedded and (re-) naturalized in the normative density of “the real” — in everyday experience and...practical consciousness.”<sup>320</sup>

Beer joints and honky-tonks are one of many spaces where this sort of working-class practical consciousness gets produced and re-produced, but they reveal and indulge in the inseparability of art and the social. In Uptown, the Young Patriots organized in the hillbilly bars because these marginal social centers were sites of production: of urban hillbilly consciousness and common sense, of southern class culture in Chicago, and of country music, with all its penetrating, playful wisdom. The Patriots organized in these spaces because the spaces enabled organization, but also because they were hidden abodes of sociality, and in a neighborhood like Uptown, where the working-class community was quite literally under threat of removal, maintaining these connections and putting them to work was a matter of survival. This sort of organized political survival and the forms it took—and almost took—in Uptown form the subject of the following chapter, but the cultural practice of the Young Patriots helped make that resistance possible. Through their efforts, in other words, country music became a way of thinking about getting down to do the necessary work. It was an effective, imaginative approach to organizing a scattered working-class community, and it was affirmative, attempting to reach members on terms that moved them and engage reflection and critical practice.

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 4

### Surviving Uptown:

#### People Removal, Social Reproduction, and the Hank Williams Village

all people need good housing. most people have bad housing.  
we are trying to get good housing.  
other people are trying to get bad housing.  
we are making up plans. they probably are to.

Gretchen Ryker, age 7  
*Uptown Light*, vol. 111, issue 6

No improvement can ever be achieved without some suffering.  
Urania Damofle  
Chairman, Uptown Community  
Conservation Council

Lots of times, you have to straighten out the tenancy, which  
is probably the biggest problem in fixing up a building. You  
must get rid of your undersirable tenants who would  
contribute to the building's wellbeing....  
A slum is not buildings, a slum is people.  
Mike Paque, Uptown rehabber, 1974

The first meeting of the Uptown Community Conservation Council (UCCC) culminated in an argument over the definition of the concept of class. Newly formed in the summer of 1967, with a long-awaited mandate from the city to approve a plan for Uptown's renewal, the group—individually appointed by Mayor Richard Daley—convened with a sense of purpose and excitement. Ten of the eleven members of the council met that evening at Preston Bradley's Peoples Church. Along with a Commissioner from the City's Department of Urban Renewal, a Mr. Lewis Hill, they arrayed themselves on the stage of the church beneath a large mural depicting an ecumenical vision of Christ appearing before the people of the world in all their varied stations, and opened the meeting with a sense of shared enthusiasm at what

promised to be a “giant step forward” for the neighborhood.<sup>321</sup> The previous September, Chicago’s Department of Urban Renewal (DUR) had named a 457-acre area in Uptown a conservation zone, opening the taps for federal renewal dollars on the condition that the city was able to obtain community approval for any plans.<sup>322</sup> This decision to grant Uptown the status of a conservation era was the product of a decade of work by the local leaders of the Uptown Chicago Commission (UCC). Since the late 1950s, these business people and local landowners had petitioned the Daley administration for the money and power to reverse Uptown’s decline and begin its revitalization, and here, after so many years, the beginning of such a project seemed in sight.

The process for the project, as outlined in a series of meetings and newspaper articles, looked something like this: after the city announced its decision to grant Uptown its much coveted conservation status, the Mayor’s office requested community groups put forth names of individuals to sit on the UCCC; Daley then reviewed the submissions and, acting in consultation with the DUR, appointed a body intended to “represent the interests of small property owners, tenants, and businessmen”; this Conservation Council then received renewal plans from the DUR, presented them to the wider Uptown community, recorded this feedback, and determine which plans had “community support”; these recommendations were then sent back to Daley and the DUR who, having satisfied the requirement for community approval, could receive federal funds for renewal efforts.<sup>323</sup> The initial phase of the renewal effort, however, targeted a 158-acre parcel of land bounded by Argyle and Montrose Avenues, Sheridan Road, and Marine Drive, right in heart of Appalachian Uptown.<sup>324</sup> But despite the fact that there were some 50,000 poor white southerners who called the neighborhood home, many of them tightly clustered in the particular area under discussion, no poor people had been appointed to the board.

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<sup>321</sup> Todd Gitlin and Nanci Hollander, *Uptown: Poor Whites in Chicago* (New York, N.Y.: Harper Colophon, 1970), 331.

<sup>322</sup> “City To Fill Renewal Positions In Uptown,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 19, 1967.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>324</sup> “Name Uptown Council For Urban Renewal,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 15, 1967.

JOIN's appearance at the meeting that evening was surely expected. Afterwards, as the attendees filed out, policemen set "snapping pictures" of the activists. But even so, those in charge weren't happy about it. As the meeting began and the activist presence was registered, Urania Damofle, a longtime Uptown resident, advertising entrepreneur, advocate of Urban Renewal, and the chairwoman of the new UCCC, attempted to set the tone for the discussion and remind everyone of their stake in the matter at hand. "You are our guests here," she told the likely troublemakers, "and I hope you will behave as proper guests do...I as chairman have only objective views on the future of the community."<sup>325</sup>

Whether anyone believed the renewal process could go off without controversy, or whether this was a feint intended to establish some measure of decorum before the protest began, Damofle attempted to proceed with the meeting as planned. But the contingent from JOIN did not sit by. Just a few years earlier, the city undertook one of the largest urban renewal projects in the nation in the Hyde Park-Kenwood area. At the behest of the University of Chicago, they cleared over 100-acres of land and drove over 4,000 families—most of them poor and black—out of the neighborhood in an effort to curtail "blight" and restore the area to its earlier semisuburban character.<sup>326</sup> As Jane Jacobs later wrote, "by blight they mean that too many of the college professors and other middle-class families steadily deserted this dull and dangerous area and their places were often, quite naturally, taken by those with little economic or social choice among living places."<sup>327</sup> Poor Uptown residents were quite familiar with the discourse of blight and, in light of what had happened in Hyde Park-Kenwood, afraid of where it would lead. Sensing this, Commissioner Hill invited everyone to kindly remember that "We're not discussing urban renewal... We're discussing conservation."<sup>328</sup> Unmoved by this plea, the meeting began with JOIN members asserting their position not as "guests" of the community, but as members of it.

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<sup>325</sup> Gitlin and Hollander, *Uptown*, 331.

<sup>326</sup> Whet Moser, "Chicago's Urban Renewal Displaced an Astonishing Number of People in the 20th Century," *Chicago Magazine*, accessed February 19, 2018, <http://www.chicagomag.com/city-life/January-2018/Chicagos-Urban-Renewal-Displaced-An-Astonishing-Number-of-People-in-the-20th-Century/>.

<sup>327</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 57–58.

<sup>328</sup> Gitlin and Hollander, *Uptown*, 333.

Doug Youngblood opened the exchange. You say you're really interested in the area. Why don't about five of you get off the board and let some people on who know what's going on?" he asked the assembled counselors. Damofle and Youngblood then went back and forth. How long had he lived in the neighborhood, she asked? A year and half, he responded. To which she replied that she, having perhaps a greater investment in the matter at hand, had lived in Uptown "twenty-one years." This did not satisfy the southern element in the room. "I'm not being represented," announced an older JOIN member: "I have never seen actual representation by actual people who have earned their living by the sweat of their brow. It has always been property owners. For your own sakes, make room at that table for people who do not have what you have. Not for the sake of the poor or anyone else, but for your own sakes!"<sup>329</sup> Likely worried that the meeting was on the verge of a shouting match or a sit in—favorite tactic of these agitators that it was—Damofle and the DUR commissioner urged cooperation. "There must be participation and responsibility on everyone's part," he insisted, "We're not going to solve our problems by making generalized criticisms. We must have mutual respect and understanding between groups." Damofle then offered to ask the Mayor if it would be possible to amend the process and add "members of the lower socioeconomic classes" to the board, a qualified concession that satisfied no one, including the man from the DUR who threw up his hands and announced: "When you say other socioeconomic classes, I don't know what you mean; anyway, the Mayor has already made his choices."<sup>330</sup>

All the talk of classes with their opposed interests rankled the commissioner from the DUR as well as the men and women of the council, but the reason for the protester's criticism was very clear. The city itself had announced that the commission was intended to reflect the interests of small property owners, businessmen, and tenants, but the board that sat at the front of the room that evening was constituted entirely by the professional upper-crust of Uptown. No representatives of the poor sat on the body despite the fact that 20% of Uptown's population lived below the poverty line, and while Mayor Daley's appointees stressed their impartiality and their faith that their interests were not particular but

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 334-5.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 334.



general and aligned with the community as a whole, this first summit broke along lines that would never be bridged. As the meeting ended in the reprimands of the city commissioner and the *whirr-and-click* of the policemen's cameras, the two sides of this fight began to size one another up, but the shape of the struggle that was to come was only edging into view. Uptown's designation as a conservation area, and promise of federal dollars to guarantee a revision of the neighborhood, initiated an outright battle between competing visions of the neighborhood's future. In many ways this fight defined the Young Patriots. It was a constant in their story. They were formed in the shadow of the threat of renewal and fought its agents for the majority of their political life. It clarified their tactics and immediate commitments as well as their vision of an enduring radical community, and it concretized their understanding of class struggle and the coalitions required to fight it at many different levels. At the same time, this battle was also defined by the Young Patriots as they worked alongside a neighborhood coalition known as the Voice of the People to develop strategies to resist displacement.

While the members of the UCCC expected the meeting in June to validate the authority vested in them by the city of Chicago, it proved not to be the triumphant realization of the spirit of renewal long dormant in Uptown, but a prelude to what a protracted four-year battle that would lay bare the cleavages in the community and heighten the tension between local elites and a diverse but consolidating community of the poor. For the next several months, these arguments turned on questions of process. As the UCCC awaited concrete proposals from the DUR they held meetings designed to gather community recommendations as well as to build enthusiasm for the possibilities of renewal.<sup>331</sup> JOIN, meanwhile, had entered into a period of crisis, and in the waning days of 1967 asked the students within the group to leave the organization. "From now on," wrote Peggy Terry in an editorial in *The Movement*, "we intend to do our own talking without the aid of student interpreters."<sup>332</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, this split opened up space for new iterations of southern white organizing in Uptown, including the Young Patriots, but in

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<sup>331</sup> "Hearing Scheduled on Uptown Renewal," *Chicago Tribune*, February 11, 1968.

<sup>332</sup> Peggy Terry, "Let's Get It On," *Movement*, January 1968, 4, no. 1 edition, 8.

the moment the question of whether and how the community union's energy would be reorganized remained open going into the winter of 1968.

Then, during the first few months of the new year, several things happened very quickly and the situation snapped toward focus. First, two plans for the 158-acre phase one renewal parcel emerged: one from the DUR, which was submitted to the UCCC in February and called for the razing of hundreds of housing units and new construction for "a range of income and family needs...Of these, up to 20 percent may be made available for low income...housing," and another from Rodney and Sydney Wright of the newly arrived planning firm Wright & Associates. This plan, submitted to the UCCC in March, employed a new design philosophy known as "advocacy planning," a participatory process designed to reflect "what the people in the community advocate...for development."<sup>333</sup> By Wright's own admission, this plan differed little from the DUR's. It recommended closing more streets to car traffic and demolishing far fewer existing residential structures. Whatever daylight existed between those two initial plans was forgotten, however, when the board of the City College of Chicago selected the working-class core of Uptown as the site of a new 25-million-dollar junior college campus. This area included two of the neighborhood's most stable communities, the Kenmore area, home to the greatest concentration of white southerners and Native American migrants, and the Winthrop area, one of the oldest black communities on the northside, which had been established during the 1920s by people employed in domestic work in Uptown and Evanston.<sup>334</sup>

This decision was hailed by developers, politicians, and local elites alike as the perfect vehicle to "upgrade" the neighborhood by attracting "the stable family element" and "stable income families," as Alderman Robert O'Rourke told a reporter. State Senator Robert Cherry suggested that the "college might also work for the upgrading of the community by causing the demolition of the many taverns on Wilson

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<sup>333</sup> Barbara Amazaki, "Tell Uptown Renewal Plan," *Chicago Tribune*, February 18, 1968; Barbara Amazaki, "Uptown Project Detailed," *Chicago Tribune*, February 25, 1968; Barbara Amazaki, "Submit Plan for Uptown: Two Community Groups Propose Development," *Chicago Tribune*, March 10, 1968.

<sup>334</sup> Intercommunal News Service, "Uptown Chicago Commission: Front, Fraud, or Fiction?," *Keep Strong*, December 1979, 38.

Avenue” and UCCC chairman Damofle added that it might help forestall the neighborhood becoming “a jungle of mountains.”<sup>335</sup> Shortly after its announcement, the college plan was absorbed by the UCC and the DUR and became the centerpiece of Uptown’s urban renewal struggle. For these developers, it provided the key to improving the neighborhood, but for the poor people who lived in its footprint—estimates would range between 2,000 and 4,000 residents—it meant displacement, and so just as it focused the interests of those proponents of renewal, so too did it begin to unify community activists.<sup>336</sup> The first group to emerge in opposition to the college site appeared in the Spring and called themselves the Voice of the People (VOP). A coalition of some fifteen community organizations, the VOP was led by a spindly, magnetic preacher and employment activist from Kentucky named Chuck Geary. Described by one paper as “the white Jesse Jackson,” Geary’s coalition was composed predominantly of white southerners—many of whom were ex-JOIN organizers—but it was emphatically interracial, counting among its membership southern whites, African Americans, Japanese Americans, Native Americans, and Spanish speakers who lived in the dense rental area under threat of demolition.<sup>337</sup> Asked by a reporter why the VOP opposed the school, Geary replied that the “junior college isn’t for our children. All it will mean to most of us is losing our homes and having no place to go.”<sup>338</sup> And so the group began to organize and protest and piece together a counteroffensive.

The Young Patriots formed early in the summer of 1968, shortly after Geary inaugurated the VOP and they quickly assumed a leadership role within the coalition. Those like Doug Youngblood who had worked with JOIN had been involved in the early phases of the anti-urban renewal agitating, but as perhaps the primary structural threat to the working poor in Uptown, the fight against the college was formative for the group both because it bound them together as a group and because of the cooperative nature of the coalition itself. During this period, Geary developed a very close relationship with Rodney

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<sup>335</sup> Robert Svejcara, “Junior College Site Hailed As Asset For Uptown Area,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 21, 1968; Robert Svejcara, “2 Uptown Groups Fight Plans for 15 High Rise Units,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 22, 1968.

<sup>336</sup> Amazaki, “Submit Plan for Uptown: Two Community Groups Propose Development.”

<sup>337</sup> John Casady, “Uptown Poor Stage March,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 19, 1968; Tom Fitzpatrick, “Uptown Warrior: No Money But I Got Lots Of Guts,” *Chicago Sun Times*, June 17, 1970.

<sup>338</sup> Casady, “Uptown Poor Stage March.”

and Sidney Wright, the architect and city planner who in March had proposed an alternative development plan, and working with their firm, with its staff of three (a VISTA architect rounded things out) the Voice of the People began to develop an alternative land-use plan. The result of this experiment in advocacy planning, which involved dozens and dozens of meetings over the course of more than two months, became known as the Hank Williams Village. Geary and the Wrights submitted the project as a counterproposal to the studies by the DUR and the Chicago City College Board sometime in late June. The *Tribune* noted the proposed project on June 23, the day after Resurrection City was dismantled, and then again on the June 30<sup>th</sup>. “The proposed Hank Williams Village,” wrote Reporter Edith Herman of the VOP’s plan, “named after the country music composer and singer, would be an eight-block community of mostly renovated apartments bounded by Montrose and Wilson avenues, Beacon street, and the ‘L’ tracks.” And, as a fourth of the Village’s footprint would overlap the site of the proposed junior college,” wrote Herman, this plan from the community marked “an attempt to make their pledge ‘we shall not be moved’ a reality.”<sup>339</sup>

The Hank Williams Village proposed the rehabilitation of apartments rather than their demolition, argued against the logic of relocation, and offered an alternative vision of cooperate living uniquely tailored to Uptown’s poorest residents. Surprisingly, given the struggle that would ensure, the proposal drew initial, tentative praise from some officials of the DUR. David Larson, an assistant deputy commissioner with the department, told reporters that “This is the kind of locally-sponsored developments [sic] that we hope can be included in the Uptown renewal project,” adding that pending financial discussions, “here is enough room in Uptown to accommodate both developments.”<sup>340</sup> But the Hank Williams Village did not produce a consensus within Uptown; in fact, the polarity of the issue made more visible than ever the class cleavage that defined life in the neighborhood, the institutions that fell along either side, and the dueling visions for the future that these institutions adhered to. With the introduction of the Village, what had begun as a unified effort by a confident local elite to remake a

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<sup>339</sup> Edith Herman, “Propose Village in Uptown,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 30, 1968.

<sup>340</sup> Herman, Propose Village in Uptown.”

neighborhood in decline suddenly became a contentious fight between fiercely opposed interests those elites had hoped could be kept in check. Instead, this struggle over a few acres of substandard, dangerous housing, a fight which would not be settled until the summer of 1971, and only then after many surprising shifts in fortune and momentum, the nature of Uptown's internal contradictions would be thrown into dramatic relief.

Because the UCCC would ultimately refuse to concede the necessity of removing hundreds of units of housing and thousands of poor people in order to build the college—even in the face of alternative locations, competing plans, and hesitance on the part of local and federal arms the DUR—the fight over Uptown's renewal came to turn on the question of removal versus rehabilitation. The terms of this debate were effectively set by insurgent neighborhood activist organizations like the Voice of the People and the Young Patriots, as well as their supporters in the local middle-class and the business community (a high-water mark for these group's wider acceptance and pull). Through the proposed Hank Williams Village, these groups were able to not only undermine a project of removal, but to articulate and advance a concrete alternative that met the needs of the poor and the wider community that surrounded them, and incorporated a radical understanding of social provision into the construction of collective housing. This radical assertion of the right of the community to exist under collectively determined conditions, regardless of the fact that they did not own land in Uptown. This fight paralleled the second subject of this chapter, the Young Patriots' community service "survival programs," including their free food and breakfast programs, daycare center, and their community health service. Taken together and understood as complimentary exercises in community self-defense, these two fights illuminate a moment in which radical theories of class, race, and social revolution, were given a definite if fragile shape.

### **The Uptown Citizen's Commission and the Marketplace for Urban Renewal**

Struggles over the purpose of new residential housing in Uptown came to a head in the fight between the Hank Williams Village and the city's junior college, but these issues had been at the heart of Uptown politics for decades. Their roots lay in the neighborhood's unique position in postwar Chicago. As I

discussed in Chapter 1, Uptown was founded at the turn of the century as something of a proto-suburb, a shopping and entertainment center designed for middle-class families, located right on the shore of Lake Michigan and just a stone's throw north of the downtown Loop. During the 1920s, the neighborhood experienced both a construction boom, in which towering apartment complexes were built and an influx of well-heeled residents excited to fill them. The decade also saw the construction of enormous theaters and movie houses along Broadway, Uptown's central corridor, as well as a host of smaller clubs, taverns, and speakeasies. Retail and commercial development followed as well, drawn due to the neighborhood's proximity to the dense, developing North Side as well as rail and road transportation. By the middle of the decade the area was home to a number of large, well-capitalized banks, insurance agencies, and department stores.<sup>341</sup>

By the end of the twenties, Uptown had become a relatively prosperous, largely middle-class neighborhood with a very wealthy, if thin, resident upper crust of bank executives, businessmen, and politicians. In terms of demographics, the neighborhood had a very dense central core bordered on the east by the affluent Gold Coast and the northwest by the Lakewood-Balmoral area, an "old money" section defined by single-family homes, spacious wide blocks, and a "sober late-Victorian and Arts-and-Crafts-style that reflected the upper-middle-class White-Anglo-Saxon Protestant population of the district."<sup>342</sup> The neighborhood was also very white, aside from a single "segregated block" in the heart of Uptown between Wilson and Leland Avenue, which primarily home to the black service workers employed by local elites. Although the ethnic composition of the neighborhood would change dramatically in the 1950s and 1960s, Uptown's property owners diligently maintained the color line, stemming the integration Uptown and containing its black population within a single block.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Devin Hunter, "Growing Diversity: Urban Renewal, Community Activism, and the Politics of Cultural Diversity in Uptown Chicago, 1940-1970" (Ph.D., Loyola University Chicago, 2015), 39.

<sup>342</sup> Hunter, 26-27.

<sup>343</sup> Devin Hunter notes that a 1931 compact signed by 1,500 Uptown property owners agreed not to sell or lease properties to blacks until 1951, and that an early property owners group, the Central Uptown Chicago Association, enforced the covenant through the 1930s and 1940s, only allowing African Americans to rent, buy, or own property on the neighborhood's single segregated black block (21-22).

The Great Depression did not so much upend Uptown as intensify all of the contradictions baked into its rapid ascent. As the national economy cratered during the 1930s, so too did the commercial engine at the heart of Uptown. Businesses shuttered, capital investment evaporated, and those many middle-class residents without the financial means to weather the tumultuous decade abandoned the formerly comfortable perch. Most importantly, however, the Depression decisively altered who lived in Uptown and how they lived there. As the area began to hemorrhage wealthier renters, building owners, particularly those in control of the large apartment hotels, began to carve spacious apartments into smaller one and two-room units that they could rent to a poorer, and increasingly transient clientele. As Devin Hunter writes in his history of urban planning in Uptown, the economic collapse “insured a market for ultra-low rent housing” and landowners immediately capitalized on the demand.<sup>344</sup>

This practice of subdivision continued throughout the Depression, and as the rentals multiplied, renters appeared to fill them. Uptown, thanks to its profligate housing stock, became hyper absorbent of these unsettled Americans. This trend continued, and its effects compounded, over the next two decades: during World War II, the abundance of rentals drew war workers to Uptown, and when the war ended and these residents left, the same buildings were filled with economic migrants to Chicago. Among this postwar wave of newcomers were the white southerners that would, beginning in the 1950s, come to define the neighborhood, but they were not alone. During the 1940s and 1950s, Uptown also developed sizable American Indian, Japanese American, and Puerto Rican populations.<sup>345</sup> These people were delivered to Uptown by the various upheavals of the era. Japanese Americans were relocated from internment camps, American Indians were drawn from reservations through federal resettlement initiatives, Puerto Ricans were pushed in from other neighborhoods, and the white southerners fled economic collapse. The arrival of these newcomers dramatically reshaped the neighborhood’s demographics and fundamentally altered the course of its politics.

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<sup>344</sup> Hunter, “Growing Diversity,” 19.

<sup>345</sup> Hunter, 8.

By the mid-1950s, much of Uptown's core—the retail and entertainment areas along Broadway and the dense warren of converted apartments, home to the neighborhood's poor, that surrounded it—had entered a state of clear physical deterioration. A combination of per-household overcrowding and the highest rate of vacancy in the city had contributed to wear and tear to many of the large apartment hotels and the practice of intense, unauthorized apartment subdivision had produced a surplus of substandard rental units, many of which were nothing more than kitchenettes and lacked baths or toilets. According to Hunter, although a “1939 survey showed a rather even distribution of one-through six-room apartments, by 1960 one- and two-room units accounted for over 50 percent of Uptown housing.”<sup>346</sup> In 1955, a handful of influential Uptown residents—businessmen, politicians, and property owners—formed the Uptown Chicago Commission (UCC), a “citizen's council” that aimed to “develop common goals and interests” among neighborhood stakeholders in order to head off decline, improve the neighborhood in terms of planning and land use, and thus return it to the position of esteem and productivity it had once occupied.<sup>347</sup> The UCC immediately became the primary civic and political organization in Uptown and remained so for decades. It was directed by the “Committee of Five,” a group initially composed of the vice president of the Upton National Bank, the president of the Association of Food Dealers, a prominent architect, an influential realtor and lawyer, and executive director Albert Votaw, a young outsider to the neighborhood who the membership had hired in 1956 and who shaped the course and image of the organization in its early years.<sup>348</sup> Votaw who was a Quaker, had been a conscientious objector during the Second World War, and was for a period a rising star on the anti-Communist left before he became involved in community development in Chicago, was also the author of the infamous *Harper's Magazine* essay “The Hillbillies Invade Chicago,” discussed in Chapter 1.<sup>349</sup>

The formation of the UCC marked a turning point in Uptown's politics. Prior to the creation of the group, citizen's councils and business clubs who had acted collectively to shape the neighborhood

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 35-6.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>348</sup> “Uptown Group To Hold First Board Parley,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 16, 1956.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 57.



were largely reactive, intent on preserving the neighborhood's character by preserving a racial and economic status quo. The UCC, in contrast, was forward looking. By the group's estimation, the neighborhood was in decline, but this fact represented an opportunity, and they decided that if they could not restore it to its past they would bring it into the future. This postwar optimism was not unique to Uptown, or to Chicago. During the late 1940s and 1950s, city planners across the country, empowered by the state and a booming economy, took up the charge to revitalize American cities through highway and housing construction; the clearance and rebuilding of slums; and the use of public funds to buy and transfer private property to public and private developers. Collectively known under the heading of "urban renewal," these practices defined the interventionist approach of the era's professional planners. Many of these urbanists saw themselves as working in tradition of earlier progressive urbanists like Edith Elmer Wood, Jacob Riis, and Lawrence Veiller, activists who had campaigned against tenements and urban decay during the early decades of the century.<sup>350</sup>

Chicago pursued urban renewal efforts aggressively during these years, undertaking major highway projects and slum clearance that displaced tens of thousands of people, most notoriously in Hyde-Park Kenwood. But as Jane Jacobs wrote, the city's initiatives were not "uniquely opprobrious": "Hyde Park-Kenwood is significant mainly because the diagnosis and the corrective measures of the plan are typical—just slightly more ambitious—of plans conceived for gray area renewal experiments all over the country. This City Planning, with all the stamp of orthodoxy on it, not some aberration of local willfulness."<sup>351</sup> By 1960, the UCC was submitting plans to city in the hopes of bringing the powers of this orthodoxy to bear on the neighborhood's core. At this point, "over half the housing units were one or two rooms. Thirty-eight percent of all units were deteriorated in some respect; 27 percent lacked what the census called "adequate plumbing facilities," and in 1961 "11 percent of store spaces were vacant, 21 percent in 'marginal uses' (pawn and second-hand shops, missionary churches and fly-by-night

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<sup>350</sup> Wendell E Pritchett, "The 'Public Menace' of Blight: Urban Renewal and the Private Uses of Eminent Domain," *Policy Review* 21 (2003).

<sup>351</sup> Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 59.

businesses), and 17 percent in taverns.”<sup>352</sup> It had become, in the words of Michael Harrington, “one of those “miserable country neighborhoods springing up in the cities of the other America”—a white southern slum.”<sup>353</sup>

As Devin Hunter describes, the UCC produced two major urban renewal plans in the decade between 1955 and 1965. The first, overseen and drafted by Votaw, he argues, was marked by a spirit of liberal urbanism. Formally submitted to the city in 1957, Votaw’s plan was the culmination of a public relations blitz promoting the neighborhood as a unique, socially diverse area in need of rescue; not yet a slum, but “on the brink.”<sup>354</sup> For two years he led “blight tours,” taking members of the media around in a bus to point out the creeping decrepitude, petitioned city officials, and even made his case nationally when he published his now famous essay on the hillbillies invading Chicago.<sup>355</sup> He also developed, with the cooperation of the UCC board, an interesting rationale as to why Uptown, among all of Chicago’s neighborhoods, deserved the limited, and much sought after funds of the DUR, arguing that the neighborhood’s great ethnic and cultural diversity made it both worthy of reclamation and an ideal testing ground for urban renewal. In his submission to the city he wrote, “Uptown is literally a city within a city. A conservation plan for Uptown could provide clues and lessons for the city as a whole which, like Uptown, must find some way of developing a healthy environment for all sorts of widely different groups.”<sup>356</sup>

As one set of players in the “the competitive urban renewal marketplace,” the UCC offered Uptown as an ideal “laboratory for middle-class and elite approaches to the general urban challenges of decentralization, suburbanization, and deterioration,” but the plan failed to move the Daley administration and their requests—3 million for additional surveys and money for “spot clearance” of blighted

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<sup>352</sup> Todd Gitlin and Nanci Hollander, *Uptown: Poor Whites in Chicago* (New York, N.Y.: Harper Colophon, 1970), xix.

<sup>353</sup> Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York, N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 101.

<sup>354</sup> Hunter, “Growing Diversity,” 88; Albert N. Votaw, “The Hillbillies Invade Chicago,” *Harper’s Magazine*, February 1958.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 89. Votaw described these tours as “a tourist’s look at the problem’s confronting redevelopment.”

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

buildings—were not granted.<sup>357</sup> Inexplicably, the city declined to make a determination on the plan for several years. In the meantime, Votaw’s relationship with the UCC ended. As Hunter speculates, this was perhaps due to the fallout from a 1960 fire that ripped through an old, shoddily converted six-flat apartment—home to fifty people—on the 4700 block of Kenmore, killing two young children and their father. The mother of the family survived, but only after leaping from a window of their third-floor apartment and fracturing several bones.<sup>358</sup> In the aftermath, an angry Votaw was interviewed by *Edgewater-Uptown News*, and told a reporter that “land clearance and public housing are the only answer, although we’d welcome private housing if the rentals would fit the community.”<sup>359</sup> This invocation of public housing may not have ended Votaw’s tenure at the head of the UCC, but it did prompt a furious response from a member of the board, a vice-president of a local insurance company, who wrote in a letter that “If such an area as Uptown Chicago...with all its natural municipal advantages, is in the need of public housing...then I believe we should turn the entire city of Chicago back to the Indians!”<sup>360</sup> Whatever the case, Votaw resigned shortly thereafter and the tenor of urban planning in the neighborhood changed.

For their second plan, the UCC went out-of-house, contracting with the firm of Jack Meltzer, an urban planner who had been head of planning for the University of Chicago’s South East Chicago Commission. In 1959, the board of the UCC—with money raised from local banks, insurance companies, one hotel and a hospital—paid Meltzer and Associates \$60,000 to conduct their surveys and produce a vision for Uptown’s revitalization. Three years later, in May of 1962, the Meltzer plan was delivered, calling again for the clearance of housing in the “blighted core,” but also the construction of high-rise buildings for three local insurance companies and the razing of Winthrop Avenue to make way for 300 car parking lot for the Bank of Chicago (a major underwriter for the survey, notes Devin Hunter).<sup>361</sup> But

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<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 99. Hunter notes that the spot clearance identified in the proposal would have effectively isolated the poor core of the neighborhood from its more prosperous surroundings through the creation of several parks.

<sup>358</sup> Hunter, “Growing Diversity,” 209–10; “Probe Arson In Deaths Of Two Brothers,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 14, 1960.

<sup>359</sup> Hunter, “Growing Diversity,” 209.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 224

during the course of the study, the city simply ran out of money for urban renewal and even Daley was unable to raise money and refill the coffers, suffering what Hunter calls his “first noteworthy political defeat since his ascension in 1955.”<sup>362</sup> Then, in 1965, after another—but not the last—period of limbo, gears began to turn again as funding streams recovered. That year the city both shelved the Meltzer plan and formally granted Uptown “conservation status,” and while it would take two more years to secure promises from Washington and form the proper boards and councils in the community, the decade long campaign of the UCC was coming to fruition.<sup>363</sup> In the meantime, however, pressure mounted: Uptown landlords stopped putting money into buildings that might be torn down; local youths marched on the police station as riots broke out in ghettos across the country; and Votaw’s “hillbilly invaders” were getting themselves organized, building a base of working-class power that would transform the urban renewal struggle as well as the neighborhood.

### **The Hank Williams Village**

The plan for the Hank Williams Village, an eight-block complex of collectively managed renovated apartments, was first submitted to the UCCC in the summer of 1968, and in the months that followed it evolved to become a richly realized plan for cooperative housing and governance. From the moment Geary and the Wrights unveiled the plan to the committee, the Village was given real consideration. The physical plan was undeniably professional and while the cooperative structure was considered ambitious, it was not so politically or economically threatening that the UCCC rejected it outright. For the duration of 1968, the Hank Williams Village was entertained as the alternative plan for the junior college site. For stretches in 1969 it became the preferred plan and for a moment seemed poised for success. It was a remarkable achievement in conceptualizing a cooperatively managed poor community based on the needs

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<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 271.

demonstrated and articulated by the people who lived there, and it offered a philosophical alternative to the prevailing urban renewal philosophy of improvement by removal.

The Village, as it became known, emerged from a “resident-led planning process” in which the Wrights acted as scribes to collect and coordinate the input of dozens of Uptown residents. Through a series of interviews, focus groups, and community discussions conducted in the spring of that year after the unveiling of the DUR’s plan, Wrights and their assistants distilled a set of basic principles for neighborhood redevelopment. First, that “plans should not displace residents”; second, “that demolition should be kept to a minimum”; and third, “that cooperative and non-profit ownership structures should be instituted to keep rents low.”<sup>364</sup> These commitments became guidelines for the design of the Village and helped structure subsequent phases of the planning process in which community members were asked to reflect on their concrete needs and then asked to imagine how they might be met in a collectively managed community. The outline of the Hank Williams Village emerged quite clearly in June of 1967, and its features and philosophy emerged more fully as subsequent rounds of community study and planning refined and added to the design. This process would go on to produce more detailed plans for the community and its financing as well as a new organization in the form of the UAPPC, but it remained committed to the initial principles laid out above and never deviated from its basic but strict commitment to rehabilitation as an alternative to renewal and the necessity for collective management. As Geary put it: “The only hope for lower income people is cooperative housing...Only those that have been poor know what it’s like for us. We don’t want welfare based on the profit system.”<sup>365</sup>

The most detailed description of the Village came from a proposal submitted to the UCCC by the Voice of the People Ad Hoc Committee, likely in the fall of 1968 or the winter of 1969.<sup>366</sup> In it, the VOP laid out the governing philosophy as well as the particulars of their vision for the community. The physical plan for the Village was based on expressed community needs that had been translated into

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<sup>364</sup> D. Bradford Hunt and Jon B. DeVries, *Planning Chicago* (Chicago: Routledge, 2013), 127.

<sup>365</sup> Herman, “Propose Village in Uptown.”

<sup>366</sup> “Proposal for ‘Hank Williams Village,’ submitted by Voice of the People Ad Hoc Committee,” n.d., Uptown Chicago Commission Papers, box 16, folder 3, Chicago History Museum (hereafter cited as UCC Papers).

architectural and urban designs by the Wrights and called for the reconceptualization of the neighborhood that prioritized walkability, recreation, and community space. “The Village will be built around people on foot, rather than automobiles,” it read. Sunnyside Avenue, the east-west corridor that ran through the center of the proposed area, would be closed to traffic and converted into a grassy mall, while the streets that crossed it would be closed off and rebuilt as dead-end residential drives. Pedestrianization via the construction of cul-de-sacs and the central mall was prioritized to create public space within the village as well as to calm traffic, a source of great concern among residents who pointed to the alarming number of accidents and hit and runs that happened in the neighborhood. Substandard housing would be remodeled rather than removed through a large-scale rehabilitation program. Rodney Wright recommended that only fifteen of the 146 buildings in the area would be torn down while the remaining 130 structures would be refurbished in an effort to minimize displacement, save money, and preserve the residential character of the neighborhood. As he told a reporter some months later, “the buildings [in the Village area] are structurally sound, they have 14-inch-thick walls and can last another 50 years. Why destroy them?” In order to bring down costs and create work within Uptown, Wright also called for enlisting the labor of local people—“We don’t expect to find expert plumbers, but some can paint and others can install linoleum, and maybe do some simple carpentry.”<sup>367</sup> Those buildings that were beyond repair would be replaced by new structures. Complementing this, the plan called for a large-scale tree planting, along streets and behind houses, in order to green the neighborhood and provide residential streets shade. The alleys that ran behind apartment buildings—one of the defining physical features of Uptown—and which served a litany of purposes given the neighborhood’s lack of public space—from garbage dump to parking lot to makeshift garage—were to be torn out and replaced with “trees, grass, and playlots” which led to onto the central mall.<sup>368</sup>

The physical plan for the Hank Williams Village amounted to a dramatic revisioning of poor and working-class residential housing in Uptown. The design was progressive for its time, and the advocacy

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<sup>367</sup> “Improvement Project Focused on Uptown,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 5, 1969.

<sup>368</sup> “Proposal for ‘Hank Williams Village,’ UCC Papers.

planning process especially so, but the truly radical elements of the proposal came from the participants' vision for a cooperative alternative to life as perpetual renters. As Hy Thurman put it later, the Village was intended as "a replica of a southern town with its own services...and government," but one planned and executed by the residents in light of their needs and according to an implicit set of values that stressed communitarian solutions to providing social services.<sup>369</sup> As the proposal stated, design of the Village was intended to meet "the specific needs of Uptown residents"; it would "provide low-income housing while being at the same time an economically integrated community"; it would provide "co-op services which will be economically and socially advantageous to all residents" promoting "mutual responsibility" as well as "mutual advantage"; it would preserve the character of Uptown both as a "port of entry" for new arrivals to Chicago and as "a racially integrated community"; and finally, its organization would "citizen participation in neighborhood government."<sup>370</sup>

"It is," the writers argued, "to the best of our knowledge, the only plan for urban renewal in Uptown which has arisen fully and spontaneously from the needs and participation of neighborhood residents, and as such is plan which can best guarantee continuing participation of residents in the planning and retention of their community."<sup>371</sup> This social plan for the Hank Williams Village was the political compliment to Wright's rehabilitative vision and in many ways the heart of the project as a whole. In the proposal, the VOP outlined a number of programs and organizational structures intended to define the cooperative community as an engine of collective self-reliance and build the capacity of poor residents to act collectively as a political force within the larger Uptown community. As the plan stated, "it is our belief that citizens will only contribute to and care for a community in which they have an interest," and to these ends the proposal included an infrastructure for building and sustaining a community in control of itself. Membership in the village was to be offered first to those who already resided in the rehabilitated zone, then to those who had "participated and worked on plans" for the

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<sup>369</sup> Hy Thurman, *Revolutionary Hillbilly: An interview with Hy Thurman of the Young Patriots Organization*, interview by James Tracy, February 29, 2016.

<sup>370</sup> "Proposal for 'Hank Williams Village,' UCC Papers.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*

Village, and finally to those from “other areas who show both interest in and need for the advantages which the Village will provide.”<sup>372</sup> Three types of housing were envisioned: private ownership of buildings in which the owner resided in their own building; condominiums; and ownership by a non-profit corporation, the Village Inc., with a resident manager. Structures not owned by area residents were to be purchased as funds became available to prevent the involvement of absentee landlords. The Village aimed to purchase these properties with funds from both private investment and the Federal Housing Authority (FHA), and manage them through “a property and rental service...run from the town hall.”

This town hall was the centerpiece of the Hank Williams Village. According to an early newspaper article, the town hall “would be built at the corner of Racine and Sunnyside avenues to be used as an entrance to the development, and serve as an employment center, a rental bureau, and a community house for the 8,000 residents of the proposed area.”<sup>373</sup> The VOP’s proposal described the facility, which would “function as the physical and social center for the Village,” in more detail, stating that:

Facilities and Services of the town hall will include: a rental service and welcoming committee for new residents; a job-finding service, predominantly for new residents; a welfare advisory service; business offices for the co-ops; a nursery and baby-sitting service for mothers who must work; town hall meeting center and auditorium.

The network of planned cooperative facilities included a grocery, credit union, pharmacy (which the plan noted had “already begun”), laundry, and furniture exchange. These co-ops were envisioned as open to members from the wider community and as ways to provide goods and services to residents at discounted rates, bring money into the Village. In addition to the co-ops, the planners also proposed playgrounds for children, a dance hall and garage for teenagers, a tavern and dance facility for adults, as well as two essential social service institutions: an emergency medical center, intended to be developed into a neighborhood clinic, and a community owned hotel for new arrivals to Uptown who were seeking to settle in the Village or the surrounding neighborhood.

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

<sup>373</sup> Herman, “Propose Village in Uptown.”



Politically, the Hank Williams Village was intended to establish the threatened working-class community a permanent part of the wider Uptown community, and its planners devised a cooperative governance structure that would not only prevent the removal of a concentrated group of the neighborhood's poorest residents, but promote principals of self-determination and self-governance through civic and economic cooperation. Although the plan was supported by neighborhood groups deemed radical, and many members of those groups were active as individuals in the planning process, it was not an overtly or rhetorically radical document. There were no calls for collectivizing property or annexing the Gold Coast. Instead, the advocacy planning process was able to take the neighborhood-unionist philosophy that JOIN and the Young Patriots had helped foment, diffuse, and keep alive in Uptown, and imagine it as a set of social institutions specific to the Village. Thus, the plan was heavily marked by a shared sense of and commitment to interracial, working-class interests. The name "Hank Williams Village," the planners wrote, was chosen "in honor of those who presently constitute a majority of area residents," but as they sought to maintain and celebrate racial integration, "renaming of streets, malls, parks and facilities in other of other resident minorities will be encouraged."<sup>374</sup>

In many ways, the Village was the culmination of the half decade of activist and organizing efforts that began with SDS and JOIN in 1964 and grew to encompass groups like the Patriots, the Voice of the People and Wrights at the end of the decade. These groups represented different corners of Uptown's working-class population, but they shared many goals and often overlapped in their efforts to advocate for their members. The threat of urban renewal strengthened these relationships, as the people living within the footprint of the city's various plans realized their removal was the primary condition for the improvement of Uptown and the Hank Williams Village emerged from this meeting and fusing of activist energies and tactics. What united the various groups was their shared sense of exposure. As renters who were often seen as transient, they had little weight in local politics, but through the Village they were able to forward the quite radical claim that they should be given a say in the neighborhood's

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

future regardless of the length of their tenure or whether they owned property. The Village was devised to forestall physical removal, but it became a rather daring and imaginative response to a particular local battle, with its long history and rather unique political actors, but as an experiment in instituting cooperative living as a practice of large-scale mutual aid.

These individual battles, whether they were pickets at the welfare office or free breakfast programs or rent strikes, are all examples of what the political theorist Nancy Fraser describes as border struggles, so named because they occur along the lines that delineate the processes that constitute the formal capitalist economy from the social world that surrounds and sustains it.<sup>375</sup> As Fraser argues, most analyses of anti-capitalist organization have prioritized labors struggle at the point of production—in factories or at worksites where value is being produced and then expropriated—to the exclusion of the regenerative activities—the caregiving, education, socialization, and non-remunerated labor—that makes that makes wage-labor, production, and accumulation (and thus labor struggle) possible. This traditional mode of analysis, she continues, privileges of a certain category of labor, typically waged and concrete, and a certain category of worker, typically male. As Fraser writes, the division between production and reproduction is “deeply gendered, with reproduction associated with women and production with men,” but it exists as more than just a categorical distinction.<sup>376</sup> The realm of “social reproductive” activity, she argues, is productive work but is not recognized as such. Instead, it occupies the paradoxical status of necessary but unremunerated “non-economic” labor, a secret realm of work that constitutes the background conditions of possibility for the formal economy.<sup>377</sup> As a result, the economy relies on “activities of provisioning, caregiving, and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds” that it also

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<sup>375</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism,” in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya, 2017, 21–36; See also, Nancy Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode,” *New Left Review*, April 2014, 55–72.

<sup>376</sup> Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode,” 62.

<sup>377</sup> Fraser extends this further than some early Marxist feminists who saw “social reproduction” as primarily or exclusively concerned with women’s economic role in the biological reproduction of the working-class. This more recent understanding greatly extends the concept to cover all socially reproductive activities required to produce and reproduce society as a whole.

“accords no monetized value and treats...as if they were free.”<sup>378</sup> These activities shape the human subjects of a capitalist society and constitute them “as social beings” in relation to one another, they help define their sense of the world as well as their place in it, and prepare them in turn to enter into the world of production or reproduction. The brunt of this activity is unwaged, and occurs outside of the workplace—in “households, neighborhoods, civil-society associations, informal networks, and public institutions such as schools”—but without it, production as such could not be carried out.

That the border between these realms is a structural feature of capitalism has always been true, Fraser argues, although the question of where the line is drawn between activities of economic production and social reproduction shift over time and are reformulated anew—through active contest—at pivotal historical conjunctures. Because capitalism relies on the reproductive activities of subjectivation, affective labor, and care, social reproduction is necessary. But because the economic system’s overriding tendency is toward increasing capital accumulation, the necessary work of constituting the world outside of work is systematically elided or devalued. This dynamic, writes Fraser, leads to periodic crises within the sphere of social reproduction, as capitalism’s drive toward greater profitability destabilizes “the very processes...on which it relies.”<sup>379</sup> (For example, wages in the United States have remained stagnant since the mid-1970s, while the cost of things like education and healthcare have continued to rise.) As with crises of production, the crisis tendency within social reproduction means that economic pressure is constantly pushing the ability of the system to reproduce itself toward its limit, and when it crosses the threshold of tolerability—whether in the form of a rise in the price of bread, or cuts to nutritional assistance—people respond by contesting the authority of the economic and claiming a role in the determining the rules of consumption, perhaps in a bread riot or a protest by a welfare union.<sup>380</sup> Like social-reproductive activity itself, the forms of protest that emerge when it is thrown into crisis are often discounted by or invisible to traditional critics of capitalism. Unlike the workplace strike with its direct

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<sup>378</sup> Fraser, “Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism,” 23.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>380</sup> Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.* (New York: Verso, 2019).

threat to productive capacities, these instances of social conflict and political activity often take place outside the relationship of the wage and are carried out by people who do not think of themselves as workers, but they are contests for the conditions under which the background of work is to be done.

Fraser's analysis helps us understand both the historical plight Uptown's southern migrants and the forms of resistance they developed. Pushed from their homes by the collapse of stable waged work and the communities it sustained, these people arrived in Chicago and attempted to make lives on the unstable edge of a contracting economy. Because a relative few found work that provided the something like the family wage, with its attendant benefits and social stability, the prevailing relationship to work and the class consciousness of industrial laborers was tenuous. Instead, successful radical organizing groups in Uptown always found that they needed to think and operate outside of the world of waged-work, and at times the law. The Hank Williams Village represents a large-scale response to social reproductive struggles in Uptown, but it was envisioned alongside many other efforts to stabilize the lives of the neighborhood's poor. The Young Patriots survival programs were the radical compliment to the Village plan. The too shared the Village's sense of claiming access to things that were necessary—sustenance, shelter, and so on—but their willingness to flaunt the law and make demands of the system made clear they considered survival a question of community self-defense.

### **Survival Pending Revolution**

When Bobby Lee met the Young Patriots at the Church of Three Crosses in the fall of 1968 and the groups embarked on their tentative partnership, the first thing they discussed was setting up “serve the people programs—free breakfasts [and] people's health clinics.”<sup>381</sup> In September of that year, the Oakland Panthers—under the chairmanship of Bobby Seale while Huey Newton was in prison—announced their intention to launch a Free Breakfast for Children Program.<sup>382</sup> Seale, a “staunch advocate of community

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<sup>381</sup> Interview with Bobby Lee by James Tracy,

[http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Unity\\_Support/pdf/Interview\\_with\\_Bobby\\_Lee\\_by\\_James\\_Tracy.pdf](http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Unity_Support/pdf/Interview_with_Bobby_Lee_by_James_Tracy.pdf)

<sup>382</sup> Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 182.

programs” since his time working with the North Oakland Neighborhood Anti-Poverty Center as a college student, reasoned that a free breakfast program, in which Panthers prepared hot meals for school children using donated provisions could help build the Party, meet real material needs within the community, and bolster the group’s reputation “in the public relations battle with the state.”<sup>383</sup> Officially launched in early 1969, the community service programs quickly became the central focus of the Black Panther Party. By 1970, a newly free Huey Newton described them as the foundation of their political philosophy, calling them “survival programs.” As he explained to a crowd at Boston College in November of that year:

A Ten Point Program is not revolutionary in itself, nor is it reformist. *It’s a survival program.* We feel that we, the people are threatened with genocide because racism and fascism is rampant... We intend to change all of that. In order to change it, there must be a total transformation. But until such time that we can achieve that total transformation, we must exist. In order to exist, we must survive, so, therefore, we need a survival kit. The Ten Point Program is a survival kit, brothers and sisters. In other words, it is necessary for our children to grow up health, with minds that can be functional and creative. They cannot do this if they do not get the correct nutrition. That is why we have a breakfast program for children. We also have community health programs. We have a bussing program... This too is a survival program.<sup>384</sup>

The Panthers began their life in 1966 as the Black Panther Party For Self Defense and even today are remembered most for their militarism. Images of black men and women dressed in leather jackets and berets with shotguns and bandoliers, standing at attention during large rallies, or storming the halls of government in Sacramento became indelible symbols of an era of protest and rebellion. The institution of survival programs marked an evolution in the Panther philosophy of self-defense, extending it beyond its initial formulation from “guns to butter,” as the historian Joshua Bloom puts it, while retaining the language of life and death.<sup>385</sup> Panther chapters organized and operated a dizzying number of free programs in their communities: food and clothing drives; health clinics, drug rehabilitation initiatives, and

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<sup>383</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>384</sup> “Let Us Hold High the Banner of Intercommunalism and the Invincible Thoughts of Huey P. Newton, Minister of Defense and Supreme Commander of the Black Panther Party,” transcript of Newton speech at Boston College, Black Panther, January 23, 1971, supplement, B quoted in Bloom and Martin Jr., *Black Against Empire*, 354.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 181. Bloom adopts this formulation from an essay by George Murray in which he writes: “A revolution will smash, shatter and destroy the oppressor and his oppressive system, return all the power, the milk, eggs, butter, and the guns to the people.” “Panthers’ Fight to the Death against Racism,” *Rolling Stone*, April 5, 1969, 14.

the pioneer Sickle Cell Anemia Research Foundation; housing cooperatives and free pest control programs, plumbing, maintenance, and renter's assistance efforts; volunteer ambulance and elderly escort services; busing to prison services for the family members of the incarcerated; liberation schools, child development centers, and—in virtually every chapter—free breakfast programs, which at their peak between 1969 and 1971 operated in over 35 cities across the country and reported feeding children in the tens of thousands. (For the sake of comparison, in the 1967 the U.S. Government's allocated just \$600,000 for such breakfast programs.)<sup>386</sup> By 1972, after the Panthers' Free Breakfast had entered the national consciousness, government funding for free breakfast increased dramatically, and 1.18 million were being served).<sup>387</sup>

In the fall of 1968, this nascent Panther focus on community programs would have made immediate sense to the Young Patriots, who were both involved in community wide projects like the planning and agitation for the Hank Williams Village and attempting to define themselves as an independent organization with particular roles and capacities. As with Panther chapters across the country, survival programs became a vehicle for the Young Patriots to meet community needs, establish grassroots methods to organize and provide provisions, and dramatize the failure of civic institutions to provide for the health and well-being of the poor. The first Patriot community program, a free breakfast service carried out in conjunction with their partners in the Rainbow Coalition, began in the early winter of 1969. It was followed by a community pantry, a legal aid service, and a community health clinic—all provided to the people of Uptown for free and without condition.

Like the community unionist tradition of JOIN, which mobilized activists to respond to the concrete needs of individual community members, the focus of the survival programs initiatives was the direct provision of goods and services. But by establishing and promoting them as regular programs provided by a local radical organization they encouraged the community to relate to the programs as a set of institutions running parallel to, and often in defiance of, the social programs of the city's welfare

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<sup>386</sup> Bloom and Martin Jr., *Black Against Empire*, 184.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

apparatus. Young Patriot programs operated on the edge of the government's long war on poverty, addressing material needs with limited resources—food donated by groceries or sympathetic social organizations, labor volunteered by doctors and lawyers, and funds given by local churches.<sup>388</sup> They addressed the material needs of the Uptown poor and materialized the Patriot's philosophy of self-reliance in the face of oppression. At the same time, the existence and implementation of the programs served as a condemnation of systemic negligence, condescension, and overt aggression on the part of the state. To borrow a formulation from the political theorist Kathi Weeks, the survival programs were, like all forms of political organization, “both deconstructive and constructive projects...at once agents of critique and invention.” The survival programs were constructive, but their existence and operations constituted critique. They were positive negations of the status quo that brought alternative forms of social organization into being in order to provide basic necessities: food, shelter, healthcare, and so on, the fundamentals of social reproduction that Fraser outlines.<sup>389</sup>

Unlike the plan for the Hank Williams Village, which was an attempt to operate largely within the boundaries of local governance, these programs were carried out beyond those margins. Like the Panther programs, these were monitored by the police and local officials, and routinely broken up on legal grounds only to be reformed in a cycle that in time became familiar. But while the fight for the Hank Williams Village and the Young Patriots survival programs were distinct forms of border struggle, they complemented one another, insisting that in a portion of Uptown under threat of physical removal, the work of social reproduction was an act of community self-defense that must be carried out by any means necessary.

Although the community program impulse took a variety of forms, the most fully realized programs involved providing food and healthcare to the poor. The Patriots launched their version of the Free Breakfast for Children Program and a community food pantry early in the winter of 1969. At the

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<sup>388</sup> Church controversy news clippings.

<sup>389</sup> Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 95.

time, Uptown did have institutions that would provide similar services, but many in the community avoided them because the approval process was quite strict and at times invasive. As James Tracy and Amy Sonnie write, the Montrose Urban Progress Center, a federally-funded War on Poverty program, required all recipients to demonstrate need, even going so far as to require home inspections by center employees where larders were checked to insure families were not hiding food and gaming the service.<sup>390</sup> This sort of monitoring was a common feature of social programs in Uptown and the indignity of the experience was a primary object of protest for JOIN's welfare mothers earlier in the decade. In contrast, the Young Patriots programs were free of any form of bureaucratic screening. Members petitioned local supermarkets for goods and area churches for funds, they collected and prepared the food, advertised the service in the community and managed its distribution.

According to Carol Cronato, a member who helped organize and oversee nutrition programs, the free breakfast program grew so quickly that it was relocated from a neighborhood apartment to the neighborhood Hull House, where the Patriots could provide meals for large groups. At its height, the program served breakfast to over four-hundred families a week, and provided staples gratis to many more.<sup>391</sup> The food programs continued at the Hull House for several months, and initially had the enthusiastic support of the organization's director, but one day he called the Patriots and told them the partnership would be terminated. According to Cronato, the director provided no rationale for the decision but that "someone had likely scared him away." The end of the breakfast program was a blow to the group. As Cronato recalled, "these programs meant the most to us. Even more important than the politics. They gave us a chance to serve our people and learn how to work with other communities."<sup>392</sup> Even after the formal free breakfast program had ended, however, the group continued community provisioning efforts. One article in the *Southern Illinoisian* titled "Project Applesauce" described an afternoon offensive, inspired by "a Southern Illinoisian article... which explained there was a surplus of

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<sup>390</sup> Amy Sonnie and James Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times* (Brooklyn, N.Y: Melville House, 2011), 172.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 173.



Lodi apples due to market conditions,” in which the Young Patriots descended on Carbondale, Illinois, bought 50 bushels of apples at 50 cents per, distributed them to 175 families in the northeast of the city, and returned the baskets.<sup>393</sup> For most members of the Young Patriots, the survival programs were a way to materialize the idealism of radical politics and see the revolutionary ethos of the Rainbow Coalition at play in the everyday life of the neighborhood. Hungry people needed these services, but so too did the organizers.

As small chapters of the Young Patriots were established around the country under the somewhat contentious direction of Preacherman, survival programs proliferated with them. They became an ideal method of introduction to new communities, and the groups displayed real creativity in identifying needs and defining programs. In Yorktown, where Preacherman established his breakaway headquarters, the Patriots established a home repair collective—putting out ads in underground papers for “plumbers, painters, and plasters”—and in Portland, Oregon the local chapter gathered, split, and distributed cord wood to the poor for heat in the winter.<sup>394</sup> But the most enduring of the Patriot survival programs was the Uptown community health clinic, which was established in November of 1969 and became so well-known and trafficked that a *Tribune* reporter in 1971 declared it the prototype of the city’s free clinic movement—“Grumblings, hostilities toward anything Establishment, a sense of mission, persecution, saintliness, of impending doom or victory. Such is the stuff of free health care in Chicago.”<sup>395</sup> Initially, the Young Patriots set up the clinic in an apartment on Sunnyside avenue, which they had rented to run a week-day child center with the landlord’s approval.<sup>396</sup> The office operated on Saturdays and was staffed by volunteer doctors and medical students attracted to the operation through relationships the Patriots had built with Chicago healthcare activists in groups like the Student Health Organization and the Medical

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<sup>393</sup> “Project Applesauce,” *Southern Illinoian*, August 5, 1969.

<sup>394</sup> “Patriot Party Press Release” (The Patriot Party, January 1970), giNewsletter876000, Wisconsin Historical Society, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15932coll8/id/49978/rec/1>.

<sup>395</sup> Terri Schultz, “Our Town,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 7, 1971.

<sup>396</sup> “Evicted Group Reopens Free Medical Center,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 15, 1970.

Committee on Human Rights.<sup>397</sup> Services included free wellness exams, basic dental work; dietary, psychological, and drug counseling; and preventative screenings for lead poisoning and diabetes. The clinic operated for two months in this fashion and, according to Marcelle Warden, a Young Patriots member, “served more than 150 persons,” but on December 28, the group was evicted.<sup>398</sup> The owner of the apartment told the Patriots the issue was noise, complaints from other tenants about a loud Saturday night party, but the organizers suspected police intervention.<sup>399</sup> “[We] never had parties in the apartment,” Bobby McGinnis told a reporter after the eviction. “We would come to the apartment on Friday nights to clean it up for the Saturday medical services, and after 5 p. m. on Saturdays we would stay a few hours to clean up after us... Anyone who lives in the neighborhood knows we don’t have time for parties, and everyone knows that’s not the reason we were kicked out.”<sup>400</sup>

The Patriots and clinic volunteers assumed the police were behind the closure. Ted Stein, a lawyer with the Legal Aid Bureau, pointed out to reporters that earlier in the month, six police officers had forced their way into an apartment where members of the clinic’s medical committee, composed of several Young Patriots and “10 or 15 medical students” were meeting, and the day the eviction notice was delivered “two men in a Plymouth circled the block taking photographs” as the office was broken down.<sup>401</sup> Dr. Bruce Douglas, chair of dental and oral surgery at Presbyterian-St. Luke’s hospital and one of the clinic’s main volunteers, also reported police pressure. In November he had been visited by members of the CPD’s Gang Intelligence unit who warned against associating with the Patriots (“this might not go so well for you in the future”). The day of the eviction Douglas told reporters he was writing a letter to Mayor Daley in protest of the events, asserting his political independence from the Young Patriots and promising to continue his work as a medical professional serving a needy community.<sup>402</sup> A

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<sup>397</sup> “Evicted Group Reopens Free Medical Center”; “Picket Offices of A.M.A.,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 20, 1969; Robert Cross, “Chicago’s Dissident Doctors,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 4, 1972.

<sup>398</sup> “Evicted Group Reopens Free Medical Center.”

<sup>399</sup> “Why Did Free Clinic Close?,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 31, 1969.

<sup>400</sup> “Evicted Group Reopens Free Medical Center.”

<sup>401</sup> “Why Did Free Clinic Close?”

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*

few weeks later, however, the doctor told reporters he had changed his mind: “When asked if he sent the letter,” a *Tribune* article on January 15<sup>th</sup> read, “Douglas, who is now running for state representative from the 11<sup>th</sup> district, said ‘he decided not to.’”<sup>403</sup>

Despite the show of force from local authorities and an initial loss of some professional support, the Young Patriots reopened the clinic, first in their headquarters, an apartment at 4408 N. Sheridan Road, and later in a storefront across the street. Over time, the Young Patriot Community Health Clinic (alternatively the Young Patriots Uptown Health Service) became one of the most well-known and capable free clinics in the Chicago area. A 1971 profile of the clinic reported a volunteer staff of 12 doctors, 20 nurses, several lawyers, and over 50 community volunteers, that saw over 600 patients a month on a budget of around \$300 dollars.<sup>404</sup> An advertisement from *The Seed* the same year listed the operating hours as “from 7pm Mon, Tues and Thurs...Sat. from 10-12 for children only” and solicited financial support: “supplies and drugs cost plenty \$\$. ”<sup>405</sup> Services ranged from screenings for heart, lung and venereal diseases to basic psychiatric counseling and treatment for addicts as well as home health checks and door-to-door diabetes canvassing. Community volunteers were available to act as advocates and often helped patients navigate referrals to services outside the neighborhood.<sup>406</sup>

Once the clinic was established, the primary work of the Young Patriots was to raise funds and act as liaisons between the medical workers and the community, but they also considered it their responsibility to defend the clinic from closure, and use it as a base to agitate for the expansion of health services in the neighborhood. In the fall of 1970, Katherine Komatsu one of the Young Patriots’ most dedicated health activists, led an occupation of a local outpatient clinic demanding the extension of operating hours. 41 people, including four doctors and several nurses, were arrested in the protest, which drew the attention of agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation as well as the police, but the action

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<sup>403</sup> “Evicted Group Reopens Free Medical Center.”

<sup>404</sup> Schultz, “Our Town.”

<sup>405</sup> “Young Patriots Uptown Health Service,” *The Seed*, May 1, 1971.

<sup>406</sup> Schultz, “Our Town.”

succeeded in convincing the city health commissioner to open the clinic on Saturdays and hire additional doctors.<sup>407</sup> Through this combination of direct action and sober partnership with politically sympathetic medical professionals, the Patriots managed to keep the clinic afloat and operational well into 1972 despite attempts from the city board of health to eliminate free clinics through an expansion of licensing requirements, and what's more helped to galvanize a growing "medical-dissident scene" in Chicago where young doctors critical of the American healthcare system were attempting to hash out alternative's, "the counterculture's crude model for the future," as one magazine profile put it.<sup>408</sup>

The clinic became the most substantial of the Young Patriots' survival programs, and in its solidity and incorporation—however fraught—into the world of professional class coalition building and municipal regulation it resembles the vision for the Hank Williams Village. But like that grand plan for a communitarian Uptown, the clinic was underwritten by the same radical commitment to survival that defined the breakfast programs or the Portland cord wood delivery service. All were creative and militant acts of collective care, attempts to move the line of what the poor were asked to accept in order to satisfy basic requirements of health and well-being undertaken self-consciously as a community. These survival programs were a defining feature of the urban populism developed by groups like the Panthers and the Young Patriots who, at the peak of their effectiveness, developed their social base through concrete service to the community. But, as Patriots like Carol Cronado attested, the serve the people initiatives—which aimed to provide "all the necessities people do without," often along the edge of the law—grounded the revolutionary politics of these groups.<sup>409</sup>

In one sense, survival programs were expressions of the revolutionary future in the present; provisional structures operating by insurgent logics held open in the face of the status quo. In another, they were products of the past, informed by memories of social worlds before the city. In his memoir,

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<sup>407</sup> Charles Mount, "41 Are Arrested In Protest of Uptown Clinic's 5-Day Week," *Chicago Tribune*, November 7, 1970.

<sup>408</sup> Cross, "Chicago's Dissident Doctors," 21.

<sup>409</sup> David Hilliard and Lewis Cole, *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2001), 212.

David Hilliard, who served as the interim chairman of the Black Panther Party between Seale and Newton, and who oversaw the group's turn toward developing and promulgating community programs, remembers the efforts as distinctly southern. Like most prominent Panthers, Hilliard was born in the South—his family had migrated from Rockville, Alabama to California in the early 1950s—and he, more than most, attributed the work of the Party to the traditions of southern black social life that had been inherited from the earlier generation. “When I think about the influences that inspired the spirit and work of the Black Panther Party—many of which are still not understood,” he wrote:

this [black Southern] culture figures large among them. Many of the most important members of the Party—people like John and Bobby Seale and Geronimo Pratt, Bobby Rush and Fred Hampton—were imbued with the moral and spiritual values of their parents; and the work that went into the Party, our dignity as an independent people, the communal ideal and practice that informed our programs, all stem in part from the civilization of which my mother and father were so representative a part.<sup>410</sup>

The “sense of the South” he described is defined by memories of his aunt’s annual “communal feast”—the Big Meeting—and the collective farming practices of his Rockville family.<sup>411</sup> It was selective, certainly (as when Geary described the interracial Hank Williams Village as modeled after a small southern town) but it drew a line through time and space, connecting traditional social practices and revolutionary political projects to insist that the right of the poor to endure would be defended.

### **In the Eye of the Storm**

“You see this button?” Charles Geary leaned back in his old chair amid the clutter and chaos of his office at 1316 Wilson Avenue. The reporter leaned to examine it: a round piece of plastic pinned to Geary’s shirt marked by five vertical bands of color—yellow, brown, black, red, white. “Five different colors,” Geary told him, “and they stand for all the different people who live in this area.”<sup>412</sup> Charles (sometimes Chuck) Geary was a migrant from Horse Branch, Kentucky who had arrived in Chicago in the mid-1960s

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<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>412</sup> Fitzpatrick, “Uptown Warrior.”

with nothing but “my suitcase and two pennies. It was the same old story,” he once wrote.<sup>413</sup> After many return trips, he settled in Uptown with his family and began working as an employment advocate, eventually becoming the director of the Tri-Faith Employment Center, and then, with the founding of the Voice of the People and an escalating comfort the tactics of protest politics, a prominent local radical.<sup>414</sup> As a columnist for the *Tribune* put it, “In his own way, Geary had what admirers of the Kennedy family like to call charisma. But his was earthy and real, born of life in the slums.”<sup>415</sup>

The rainbow button Geary wore was the emblem of the Uptown Area People’s Planning Coalition (UAPPC), a housing advocacy organization that grew out of his Voice of the People organization and worked with the Wrights to develop and push the plan for the Hank Williams Village. In another example of creative negation, the multicolored pins were actually Nixon/Agnew campaign buttons. Geary had managed to secure some 50,000 of them following Nixon’s victory in November of 1968, and would throw parties where the coalition members would gather to eat and drink and hand paint the buttons one by one, slowly replacing the red, white, and blue NIXON/AGNEW lettering with the banded emblem of the coalition.<sup>416</sup> While this radical palimpsest was quickly adopted as the badge of Fred Hampton’s Rainbow Coalition, and was even banned alongside black power buttons by the USPS in the New York City, it was designed by members of the UAPPC for the Uptown housing fights.<sup>417</sup> It was a striking symbol of solidarity and interracial cooperation, but the canvas of the campaign buttons also echoed an insurgent claim to presence for the poor people who wore it.

According to the reporter, who had visited the Kentucky preacher and rabble rouser in the summer of 1970, Geary considered the pin, and implicitly the politics of the UAPPC, as like something out of biblical narrative. “You ever hear of the great speckled bird?” he asked, “Well this is something

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<sup>413</sup> Charles Geary and Leonard Grossman, *What I’m about Is People* (Chicago: Childrens Press, 1970), 29.

<sup>414</sup> “New Job Center Opens,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 25, 1968.

<sup>415</sup> Bob Wiedrich, “Tower Ticker,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 1, 1973.

<sup>416</sup> Guy, *When Architecture Meets Activism*, 99.

<sup>417</sup> Michael Hanrahan, “Ban On Flag Pins Cuts United Parcel Trips,” *Daily News*, July 30, 1970. According to a short profile of Geary in the *Uptown Sun Times* (cited here as “Uptown Warrior: No Money But I Got Lots of Guts”), Geary gave the pins to Jesse Jackson for Operation Breadbasket and Bobby Lee for distribution among the Panthers in Chicago, to Eldrige Cleaver in exile in Algeria, as well as to allies in London, West Berlin, and Sweden.

like that.”<sup>418</sup> It is an odd moment in the reporter’s little profile, noted but unremarked upon, perhaps intended as a bit of color—a whiff of the mountains in Chicago, but on Geary’s part the comment was likely quite sincere beneath its overt rusticism (one of his real talents in city politicking). In the Bible, as in the southern hymn named for the great speckled bird, the hymn which had made Roy Acuff the chief singing star of the Grand Ole Opry in the late 1930s and 1940s, the creature was a representation of the true church beset by enemies and pretenders. As the hymn puts it:

All the other birds are flocking 'round her  
And she is despised by the squad  
But the great speckled bird in the Bible  
Is one with the great church of God.

All the other churches are against her  
They envy her glory and fame  
They hate her because she is chosen  
And has not denied Jesus' name.

Desiring to lower her standard  
They watch every move that she makes  
They long to find fault with her teachings  
But really they find no mistake.

As a religious man and a leader among very poor people, one can understand Geary’s attachment to this image of the bird—beset by her numerous enemies but anointed and thus certain of victory, eventual though it might be—during these years of struggle against displacement. “They [developers and city officials] want a Gold Coast here and...you can’t do that with pig farmers and Indians off the reservation,” Geary once said, “you gotta get rid of them.”<sup>419</sup> These seemed to be the stakes: a junior college or a progressive enclave of the poor, removal or the realization of years of working-class political struggle. Either way, the Hank Williams Village was the hinge on which the future of Uptown turned.

As 1968 rolled into 1969, the radicals felt some wind at their back. The Young Patriots were starting their breakfast program and talking solidarity with the Panthers, Geary and the Wright’s had formed the UAPPC, and persistent pressure from the community was keeping the Hank Williams Village

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<sup>418</sup> Fitzpatrick, “Uptown Warrior.”

<sup>419</sup> Mike Gray, *American Revolution 2*, 1969.

on the table during discussions with the DUR. During the winter, fight over the college plan the Village moved to a series of hearings overseen by the UCCC and the activist coalition adopted what they saw as a complimentary set of tactics. The Wrights conducted a series of feasibility studies and prepared alternative college plans for submission to the council while the Patriots recruited young Uptowners and worked with Bobby Lee and the Panthers to “get a tight organization” going capable of turning out protesters and educating them on the college issue. Geary, for his part, moved back and forth between the Wrights and the Patriots, coordinating the campaign and acting as the project’s spokesman.<sup>420</sup>

Despite initial indications by members that the Village might prove an endorsable alternative to the junior college plan, the UCCC remained committed to the building of the school. Over time, some members, particularly Damofle, had grown suspicious that the community proposal was nothing more than a pretext to delay development long enough that federal funding would disappear, and so in the early months of 1969 the UCCC attempted to wrap up the requisite hearings and come to a decision. The coalition meanwhile responded by creating a series of alternative plans and by flooding meetings with protestors. In February, Rodney Wright proposed a high-rise design for the junior college. The previous fall he had also suggested an alternative site for the college in the Broadway-Catalpa area, just north of the college’s proposed footprint, that would have required demolishing 18 rather than 700 housing units, but both proposals were dismissed as inefficient uses of space.<sup>421</sup> At the following meetings, the Young Patriots arrived with “hundreds” of protestors, according to *Kaleidoscope Chicago*.<sup>422</sup> Backed by the clapping, chanting crowd, Geary railed against the inflexibility of the UCCC and demanded a clear plan for relocating the 1,700 residents set to be displaced.<sup>423</sup> In March, Wright and Geary returned to the

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<sup>420</sup> “Patriots,” *Kaleidoscope Chicago*, February 28 — March 10, Vol. 1, Issue 8 edition.

<sup>421</sup> “High Rise Jr. College Suggested For Uptown,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 9, 1969. When asked by the reporter from the *Tribune*. Gerald W. Smith, executive secretary of the junior college board, not only said that he was unaware of community protest over the plan but that it was the board’s belief that 22 acres, and no less, was the appropriate footprint for a junior college. When the reporter noted that an earlier approved site for the college was only 10 acres, Smith responded that this was true but that the site was so cheaply acquired that the college made the recommendation anyway. These sorts of reports did little to quell the fear of activists that the removal of poor areas was a fundamental condition of the junior college’s construction and that UCCC and College Board worked hand in glove to make sure this came to pass.

<sup>422</sup> “Patriots.”

<sup>423</sup> Joseph McLaughlin, “Uptown Model Cities Plan Approved,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 23, 1969.



committee, and citing a study conducted by the city's own Department of Urban Renewal that found all 43 residential buildings within the planned college area "suitable for rehabilitation," requested the Conservation Council perform a walk-through of the housing slated for removal. The UCCC consented and, in mid-March toured the area with Wright. Per a reporter from the *Tribune*, the six Council members concurred with the DUR report and found "buildings that are run down, but can be saved." The question was where the money for rehabilitation would come from, and Chairman Damofle put it to Wright, who responded that it "would have to come from the same sources that would pay for relocating the people."<sup>424</sup>

In early May, the UCCC made a surprising decision. After months of maintaining the college plan was the only viable option, they seemed to soften their stance and promised Wright, Geary, and their coalition that the land for the college would not be cleared "if the protesters can arrange financing and submit an adequate rehabilitation plan by May 15."<sup>425</sup> With no further specifications offered by the UCCC, Wright and Geary set to work assembling a financial plan, which they brought back to the council for presentation in late May. There, before an assembled crowd of some "300 Uptown residents and landowners," Wright laid out his plan to finance the construction of the Hank Williams Village, which included \$475,000 in pre-construction commitments from businesses, individuals, and foundations; an agreement with a mortgage banking company to finance construction pending the approval of federal loans; a partnership with a realty company owned by Harvey M. Rawson ("an energetic builder of federally assisted housing"), who pledged to cooperate in all residential building; the endorsement of a major coalition of local churches; and the verbal support of "9 of the 46 property owners...contacted so far." According to the paper, the plan was "received enthusiastically by about half of the spectators, including members of the Young Patriots street gang," but Urania Damofle moved immediately to quell the excitement, announcing a subcommittee to investigate the validity of Wright's arrangement. "I'm not

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<sup>424</sup> Joseph McLaughlin, "Uptown Council Takes Walk to See If Housing Can Be Saved," *Chicago Tribune*, March 23, 1969.

<sup>425</sup> Seslar Thomas, "Uptown College Site Foes Asked to Provide Alternate Plan," *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 1969.

stupid,” she said. “I know that when you’ve got a commitment, you’ve got a commitment, and you don’t go hemming and hawing when someone asks you to make clear exactly how it would work.”<sup>426</sup>

Nevertheless, the protesters left the meeting with a sense they stood on firmer ground than ever before.

That summer, the Wrights worked with Harvey Rawson to talk about design work for the Village, Geary studied urban renewal law about federal funding and relocation, the Patriots ventured to Oakland to attend the Black Panther Party’s United Front Against Fascism, Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, and Damofle continued her investigation into Wright’s financing, presiding over a series of subcommittee meetings that grew so heated that “several subcommittee members even accused fellow members of being unfair to the [Uptown People’s Planning] coalition.”<sup>427</sup> But nothing much moved on the issue of the Village until suddenly, in August, the UCCC received word that the regional office of the Department of Housing and Urban Development had informed city officials that the plan to relocate those displaced by the college did not meet department standards and had been ruled “insufficient” and as a result the project would not be eligible for federal funds.<sup>428</sup>

Then, before the UCCC could recalibrate the city college board abandoned the Uptown site. Citing a DUR report that the land in question would not be obtainable for three-to-five years, chancellor Oscar Shabat waved his hand and killed the plan. “We are no longer in the business of clearing land or people,” he said. “The Riverview property [an alternative site suggested the year before] is vacant and already cleared.”<sup>429</sup> While Damofle was incensed by the decision—“I’m speechless. About 98 per cent of our community wanted a junior college and they’ve worked so hard,” she told reporters—Geary and his coalition rejoiced.<sup>430</sup> Like dominoes, local papers and former Model Cities officials endorsed the plan for the Hank Williams Village and called for its acceleration. On September 7, an editorial in the local *Lerner Newspaper* chain headlined “Now Uptown Can Unite” announced its support of the Village as both sound

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<sup>426</sup> Thomas Seslar, “Uptown College Foes Give Their Plan,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 25, 1969.

<sup>427</sup> “Canvass Chamber Members on College,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 22, 1969.

<sup>428</sup> Guy, *When Architecture Meets Activism*, 173.

<sup>429</sup> “Reactions Varied on ‘Lost’ Junior College,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 7, 1969.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*

in design and appropriate for the community. “It was conceived in Uptown by the people who live there,” the article read, “Instead of urban renewal’s dehumanizing notion, one that tears people away from their homes leaving them to find new slums somewhere else, the Hank Williams Village promises the people a new life.” In a full throated endorsement of local management and the civic incorporation of the poor, it concluded that the “time is right for Uptown to come together and start working constructively to make the Hank Williams Village a reality.”<sup>431</sup> In response, Damofle denounced the supporters of the Village “bleeding hearts” and “militants,” insisting that “the Coalition is only a paper organization... They attempt to create divisiveness in a community by playing the ‘haves’ against the ‘have nots’”<sup>432</sup>

Suddenly, after two years of sustained planning and protest, the improbably necessary Hank Williams Village seemed perched on the edge of reality. In interviews with Wright from that fall he spoke of “an optimism never present before” as money began to trickle into the UAPPC coffers, including an anonymous twenty-three-thousand-dollar donation intended to acquire options on property, financial commitments from local foundations to renovate several buildings, and a grant to continue urban planning and social program design work in anticipation of the Village’s realization.<sup>433</sup> Geary was travelling, heading to Boston and Washington, D.C., with the Wrights or by himself, trying to corral investment for the Village.<sup>434</sup> Preacherman and Bobby Lee were on the road as well, speaking at college’s and community centers, spreading the gospel of the rainbow coalition and Fred Hampton’s vision of class struggle, and sowing the seeds for new chapters of the Young Patriots Organization. The Patriots, likely at the height of their national influence following the summer’s event in Oakland, opened their day care center and the first health clinic in the apartment on Sunnyside Avenue that November.

But despite the surprising reversal by the college board and the air of possibility that settled on the coalition and their plans, the situation began to spin out of control as the year closed. In November, Preacherman orchestrated a split and left for New York City along with a handful of Young Patriots

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<sup>431</sup> “Now Uptown Can Unite,” *Lerner Newspapers*, September 7, 1969, UCC Papers, box 16, folder 3

<sup>432</sup> Quoted in Guy, *When Architecture Meets Activism*, 166; Hunt and DeVries, *Planning Chicago*, 128.

<sup>433</sup> “Improvement Project Focused on Uptown”; Guy, *When Architecture Meets Activism*, 175.

<sup>434</sup> Guy, *When Architecture Meets Activism*, 174.

including Darlene, with the aim of taking Uptown model national. Bitterly deriding his former comrades for their lack of vision, he named his breakaway group the Patriot Party.<sup>435</sup> Wright received a letter from a UCC member comparing the Hank Williams Village to “Nazi culture,” the Southerners to “volk” who were—in a confusing historical analogy—pursuing the construction of an “ethnic ghetto,” complete with a gestapo police force in the Young Patriots.<sup>436</sup> Meanwhile, actual police surveillance and harassment of the Uptown activists increased. Geary’s wife and children, including Marcella, a Young Patriot, were stopped, charged with disorderly conduct, and beaten by police one evening coming back from the grocery.<sup>437</sup> The clinic was monitored and its doctors were visited by members of the Chicago Red Squad, the optimism of the fall was dropping away. Then, in the early morning of December 4, 1969, Fred Hampton was assassinated by a team of Chicago Police officers, shot in the head in his bed as he slept deeply—drugged the night before by William O’Neal, a friend and FBI informant. Hampton’s murder traumatized the Chicago left. Andy and Mary Ellen Keniston, who had journeyed from Ohio to join the Patriots in 1968, lay in bed for hours, terrified and listening to the news reports, debating whether to stay in Uptown or leave when they could.<sup>438</sup> Later that month, when the health clinic was evicted, the optimism of the fall had been replaced by a deep sense of paranoia and fracture. “Things have been kind of falling apart,” Bobby McGinnis told a reporter a few days before the decade ended, “It’s really strange how we’re losing some of our support, but I guess the pieces sort of fit together.”<sup>439</sup>

With internal fissures raw and the stakes of state violence becoming more and more apparent as the new decade dawned, the promise of the Hank Williams Village—a home of sorts, *by, of, and for the poor* as the paraphrased Patriot founding mantra went—must have seemed like a lifeboat for the radicals

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<sup>435</sup> “Patriots Bring Breakfast, Medical Care To Poor Whites In New York,” *Liberation News Service*, December 24, 1969; The Patriot Party, “The Patriot Party Speaks to the Movement,” in *The Black Panthers Speaks*, ed. Philip S Foner (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1995), 239–43.

<sup>436</sup> Guy, 175–76.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*, 174–175.

<sup>438</sup> Billy Keniston, “Hillbilly Revolutionaries: White Rebellion Against Injustice & Racism in 1960s Chicago,” *Blue Mountain Center Commons* (blog), accessed March 16, 2020, <https://commons.bluemountaincenter.org/a-white-working-class-rebellion-years-before-trump/>.

<sup>439</sup> “Evicted Group Reopens Free Medical Center.”

of Uptown. But on February 4, 1970, the college board—again with no warning—reversed their decision to abandon the original site. The junior college plan, and the removal of the poor, was a reality once again. According to Oscar Shabat, the sudden change came about because of the newfound flexibility of the college board, which agreed to “a temporary campus of mobile classrooms” and a four-year window to acquire the land for a permanent structure. Lewis Hill of the DUR promised the coverage of all costs related to the relocation of the 500 families currently housed in the school’s footprint.<sup>440</sup> But opponents of the college saw it as confirmation that the UCCC would never let the Village come to pass. “It seems,” said one former local official, “that no matter what the community believes about the site, those board members are going to put a school on property needed for residential use.”<sup>441</sup> Wright, apparently read the announcement in the paper, and while he and Geary and the Young Patriots would once more resume the fight against the placement of the college, the Hank Williams Village was effectively dead.<sup>442</sup>

The first buildings of what became Harry S. Truman College were completed in Uptown in 1976, after countless and myriad delays. Geary and the Wrights succeeded in shrinking the footprint of the college, from its initial twenty-two acres to six, and waylaid construction for years at a stretch by filing lawsuits over everything from relocation funds to the lack of low-income participation in the decision-making process.<sup>443</sup> The college board made overtures to the community, promising a “skills” complex in order to make the school’s curriculum relevant to people in the Uptown community but this was pared down and then abandoned due to apparently prohibitive costs.<sup>444</sup> When the school eventually opened its doors, its success was quite muted and it failed to attract students. As Roger Guy writes, with enrollment flagging and resources dwindling, the school attempted to recoup tuition by capturing a low-income, “leftover” student population through the enclosure of neighborhood social programs, “canceling a number of vocational programs in operation in Uptown to re-establish them inside the new facility.” In

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<sup>440</sup> Robert Colvin, “Reactions Mixed Over Uptown Site for New College,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 8, 1970.

<sup>441</sup> “Uptown College Site Is Picked,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 4, 1970.

<sup>442</sup> Roger Guy, *When Architecture Meets Activism*, 176.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>444</sup> Intercommunal News Service, “Who Will the New Northeast Community College Serve?,” *Keep Strong*, July 1975, Vol. 1 No. 1 edition, 20.

one instance, he notes, “college officials tried to remove sewing machines from classes run by the Uptown Educational Program” but were resisted by the nuns who prevented their seizure.<sup>445</sup>

For the Young Patriots in 1970, however, the loss of the Hank Williams Village meant the loss of a political horizon. Among all the chaos and panic and resilience of those months, with Preacherman gone, Fred Hampton dead, the Rainbow Coalition drifting apart, and the paranoia seeping like cold through the walls, the Village was a fixed point gone. The Patriots would continue their work for several years, maintaining the survival programs until they faded away or outgrew the small group’s stewardship, lending their support to local protests and occupations, and always organizing their neighbors, but the end of the fight for the Village did spell the foreclosure of a path toward fixity and integration within Uptown. In finally consigning the Clifton-Racine area for demolition, the college backers succeeded in disrupting a vital center of working-class organization and activism. As that project advanced and property values rose, landowners moved to sell, capitalizing on land that had been locked in stasis for years by the presence of the poor. As new housing appeared with rents three and four times those paid in the dingy flats that had for so long defined Uptown, poor people left the neighborhood—some fled, some drifted, some were pushed—and the ground changed under the Patriots’ feet.<sup>446</sup>

The combination of political defeat, and the slow dwindling of their social base undid the Young Patriots Organization. That process was piecemeal and happened slowly, but it began in real after the defeat of the Village and was effectively complete by 1975.<sup>447</sup> Uptown slowly lost its southern character as the migrants and their children left; the hillbilly bars closed, markers to old struggles disappeared, *Time of the Phoenix* stopped publication, and Hy Thurman enrolled in college. Preacherman retreated to North Carolina, Youngblood and Carol Cronato moved to the suburbs for work, Bobby Joe McGinnis went underground to work on the Chicago Deep Tunnel, and Chuck Geary moved back to Kentucky.<sup>448</sup> They

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<sup>445</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>446</sup> Jesse Dukes, “Uptown’s Moment as a ‘Hillbilly Heaven,’” WBEZ Chicago, April 29, 2015, [https://www.wbez.org/stories/\\_/30865527-ab8a-4432-a637-14c4f614f424](https://www.wbez.org/stories/_/30865527-ab8a-4432-a637-14c4f614f424).

<sup>447</sup> Hy Thurman, interview with author, March 15, 2020.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

were survived by their memory, though it dipped below the surface of history. Their images were preserved on reels of film and in photographs of improbable solidarity and their words in underground newspapers and the pages of chapbooks and police reports, but the when the Young Patriots disappeared it marked the end of a long, strange, circuitous history of activism along the marginalizing edge of postwar America.

## Conclusion:

### Summer Is Upon Us Again

That's like that Fred Hampton shit: he'd be like, "white power to white people. Black power to black people."

What I think he meant is, "look: the problematic of coalition is that coalition isn't something that emerges so that you can come help me, a maneuver that always gets traced back to your own interests. The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly.

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten,  
*The Undercommons*, 2013

When Preacherman left Uptown for New York City at the end of 1969, he thought he was pushing past the localism of his old comrades in Uptown. During the summer and fall of that year, he and Bobby Lee had traveled together down the East Coast and back up again, stopping at colleges and community spaces to talk about the Rainbow Coalition and the coming revolution, and Preacherman had become convinced that poor whites throughout the country were "ready to move," that they were waiting on the movement, and that what they needed was a national organization. Most of the Young Patriots balked at the idea of pulling up stakes. They felt strongly that the Young Patriots belonged in Uptown where they had purchase in their own community, strong allies in others, and real work underway. But Preacherman was certain that the message of Uptown was ready to be received in every corner of the country, and that the Young Patriots were holding the movement back.

And so around November of 1969, he forced a split and broke away, along with his wife Darlene, Roger and Leonard Phillips (young charges of the Uptown activists), and a handful of other members, to form the Patriot Party, "a national white vanguard party for the people."<sup>449</sup> "We split from the Young

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<sup>449</sup> Amy Sonnie and James Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times* (Brooklyn, N.Y: Melville House, 2011), 88.; "Patriot Party Press Release," *The Patriot*



Patriot Organization because they were concerned with old friendships, individuals, rather than the masses of people in Uptown,” he wrote in *The Black Panther* in February of 1970. “They would rather be friends with a few people and indulge in drinking than listen to the community’s cry for help.” The timing of Preacherman’s defection, right at the opening of the health clinic, when Hank Williams Village finally seemed as if it might be realized, contradicts his charges of timidity and “extreme liberalism,” but his vision of the project had clearly become incompatible with that of the Uptown radicals who had welcomed him a year earlier. As he put it, the “Patriot Party is moving too fast to be concerned about those holding the people back from their freedom,” and so under his direction as the National Chairman of the new Patriot Party, the offshoot moved to New York. There they established a headquarters in a storefront in Yorktown, a dingy Manhattan neighborhood populated primarily by decedents of German and Irish—but also Czechoslovakian, Austrian, and Hungarian—immigrants that stretched between 86<sup>th</sup> and 96<sup>th</sup> streets, Lexington Avenue and the East River. As in Uptown, the Patriot Party’s new home was beset by development. Poor residents were being displaced by the northward advance of the Upper East Side and Preacherman sensed an opportunity for the Party to establish themselves.<sup>450</sup>

His aim was to quickly replicate the Uptown model while dramatically scaling up operations “with plans to move into the South and Midwest as soon as possible.” In late December 1969, the Patriot Party established a free vaccination program for children (measles, diphtheria, tetanus and tuberculosis), a free food and breakfast program, and “a campaign to improve sub-standard housing in the area,” placing ads in underground newspapers that encouraged “revolutionary carpenters, plumbers, electricians, house painters, plasterers, brick layers, oil burner repairers” to report to the Upper West Side and “Help the People of Yorkville live in decent at adequate housing.”<sup>451</sup> At the same time, Preacherman was overseeing

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Party, January 1970, GiNewsletter876000, Wisconsin Historical Society.

<http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15932coll8/id/49978/rec/1>

<sup>450</sup> Ray Schultz, “Patriots In Yorkville,” *The East Village Other*, February 11, 1970, Vol. 5, Issue 10, 12.

<sup>451</sup> “Patriots Bring Breakfast, Medical Care To Poor Whites In New York,” *Liberation News Service*, December 24, 1969; “Patriot Party Press Release” (The Patriot Party, January 1970), giNewsletter876000, Wisconsin Historical Society, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15932coll8/id/49978/rec/1>; “Radical Media Bulletin Board: From: Patriot Party,” *Liberation News Service*, January 21, 1970.

new chapters in cities around the country, including Portland, Oregon, Carbondale, Illinois, New Haven, Connecticut (“where people owed their souls to Yale”), and talking up a coming push into states in the South.<sup>452</sup>

But just as Preacherman had said, things were moving too fast. On the evening of February 22, 1970, police launched a raid of their Yorktown headquarters, arresting Preacherman alongside eleven other men and women, all of them in their “late teens or twenties,” who composed “the whole central committee of the Patriot party.” According to police reports, officers found several weapons, including a 12-gauge shotgun, three pistols, knives, a sword, and several hundred rounds of ammunition, as well as three cannisters of 35mm film, and stacks of party literature stating the following: “The Patriot Party just stands for the people—poor oppressed white people. That’s all. We say, we know the proletariat (the workers) are an essential part of any revolution, but so far, they haven’t done a damn thing.”<sup>453</sup> When the arrests and subsequent legal trouble effectively ended the Patriot Party’s work in New York, Preacherman attempted to sustain the movement himself, travelling between newly formed chapters and speaking at universities, until the truth became unavoidable: the Patriot Party was, and perhaps had always been, for its brief life, a movement without a base.<sup>454</sup> Shortly after the summer of 1970 Preacherman stopped and retired from revolutionary life, returning to North Carolina and cutting ties with radical politics.

On May 25, 1969, Roger Ebert reviewed Mike Gray’s *American Revolution 2*, the same film that the NYPD would one day find and confiscate at the Patriot Party’s Yorktown headquarters in their late

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<sup>452</sup> Schultz, “Patriots In Yorkville.”

<sup>453</sup> McCandish Phillips, “12 Arrested in Weapons Raid,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1970; Liberation News Service, “Patriots Busted,” *Alliance*, April 1970.

<sup>454</sup> Two features by Ray Schultz in *The East Village Other* paint a picture of an organization struggling to make inroads with the working-class white community in New York City. According to Schultz, the Patriot Party finds little purchase in the various the ethnic European pockets of Yorkville. “This might have been due to the fact that the Patriot leaders, who had done some very effective organizing last year in Hillbilly harlem in Chicago were poor Appalachians who wouldn’t have much in common culturally with poor Germans and Irish, but that’s only a guess.” Schultz reports the breakfast programs was feeding between ten and fifteen children a morning and notes that after the raid by police interest in the Patriots and their programs increased, but the implication is that by that point it was too late. Preacherman had attempted to move much too quickly and clearly outstripped the group’s capabilities. Schultz, “Patriots In Yorkville”; Ray Schultz, “The Patriots Bust: Abbie Hoffman Is a Pig,” *The East Village Other*, March 10, 1970.

night raid, for the Sunday edition of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. He opened with a meditation on film and historical memory:

The heads got beat last August during the Democratic National Convention. The events of that week seemed, at the time, to be a watershed. Nothing could ever be the same afterwards. The Daley machine had been mortally wounded. The police themselves, as the Walker Report put it, had been the rioters. And people had seen it all on TV.

Now summer is upon us again, and the question is; has anything really changed? The events of convention week, which will figure so sharply in history, already recede in our minds. Mayor Daley smiles again from the front pages. One battle does not make a revolution. Or does it?<sup>455</sup>

Later that summer, he praising Haskell Wexler's DNC riot film *Medium Cool* as the "most informal and direct of films," applauding its preservation of political reality in an era desperate to either strip out or control the social chaos that seemed to define it.<sup>456</sup> Both films and both reviews explored similar content and similar themes: of the historical moment in all its chaos and noise being fixed in time, memorialized, held up to scrutiny, only to disappear into the gulf of a strange social amnesia. Wexler's movie interwove a fictional story, a romance between a cynical television cameraman (Robert Forster) and a young mother from Uptown (Verna Bloom) searching for her son during convention week, into *vérité* footage of the protests he and his crew had captured in Chicago, to produce a fable about perils of fixity and the arrest of the moving image. Wexler set the riot right down in the middle of an American media apparatus attempting to contain the era with its TV specials celebrating the legacy of dissidents like Martin Luther King Jr. reimagined as allies of the state, letting the violence and vibrancy of protest overwhelm its own sanctification. Gray's documentary meanwhile found and captured, seemingly by some fluke or miracle of investigation, "in the midst of a city largely without a voice, (unless you're white, unless you're educated, unless you're affluent, unless you have clout), a community which found its voice and used it."<sup>457</sup>

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<sup>455</sup> Roger Ebert, "American Revolution Two," May 25, 1969, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/american-revolution-two-1969>.

<sup>456</sup> Roger Ebert, "Medium Cool," September 21, 1969, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/medium-cool-1969>.

<sup>457</sup> Ebert, "American Revolution Two."

Ebert loved both movies for the way they refused to mystify their subject, the way they maintained a connection between history and the real. He wrote of *American Revolution 2*: “The result is a film every Chicagoan should see. But that's a cliché. What I want to say is: If you were disturbed by what happened last August and if you wondered, however vaguely, how such a cataclysmic week should apparently have no aftermath, then you should see this film and see what has happened.” Despite the efforts of Mayor Daley, who purportedly pressured the projectionist union to prevent the screening of *American Revolution 2*, only to be routed by Hugh Hefner’s (presumably) non-union *Playboy Theater*, these films do allow us to see what happened. The clip from Gray’s documentary in which Bobby Lee arrives in Uptown to speak with a room full of southern migrants, moving among them and touching their shoulder, telling them carefully, “The Panthers are here for Uptown, for anyone who lives in Uptown, now circulates independently of the film itself like some fragment of another world.<sup>458</sup> I first saw it in a different documentary entirely, clipped out and spliced in to spread Lee’s message to new people all these years later.<sup>459</sup>

But just like the cameraman’s footage in *Medium Cool*, Gray’s film also found its way to the authorities. In the spring of 1969, a dozen members of Chicago Police Department’s Red Squad appeared in Gray’s office to watch *American Revolution 2* and spot “on-screen faces for their mental files.”<sup>460</sup> There is a very real possibility that Gray’s film both sustained the Young Patriots and helped destroy them. For the same reasons it was a powerful recruiting tool, and to this day a moving glimmer of a strange solidarity, the Chicago police understood it as a real threat. One member of the subversive unit wrote that the aim of the film was “to create sympathy for a hostile faction of society” but that watching it helped him understand “how to combat this kind of thinking.”<sup>461</sup> Police repression, urban renewal, internal pressures, and theoretical miscalculation all did their part to return the Patriots to obscurity and

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<sup>458</sup> Mike Gray, *American Revolution 2*, 1969, 2; Fred Moten, “Bobby Lee’s Hands,” in *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 280–83.

<sup>459</sup> Stanley Nelson, *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* (Firelight Films, Independent Television Service, 2015).

<sup>460</sup> Robert Cross, “Mike Gray: In A Hurricane, The Eye,” *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, July 12, 1970, 20.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*

ensure they had no aftermath. In a matter of years, the group had was gone as were their former allies in the Rainbow Coalition. The Illinois Black Panther Party disbanded in 1973, the same year the Young Lords leadership went underground.<sup>462</sup>

Two years after the Patriot Party collapsed, Bill Fesperman, the former National Chairman of the radical hillbilly organization, sent a poem to his now ex-wife Darlene. He no longer wrote as Preacherman, but as Bill, and it read like an epitaph not only for a political project, but for political possibility itself:

No note the piper made could rouse my ear  
For he was a mile away; I could not hear.

The distance made my yearning all the more remorse  
For I had need of song to bear my course.

I watched him in the sunset disappear  
For he was brave and I was full of fear.

Enveloped in nature's ancient way  
His tune came back to me to say:

"I am the piper of the dance you missed."  
And that was all he said, and that was what I risked.<sup>463</sup>

Fesperman's son Ethan shared this poem with me one morning in the coffee shop of the Vanderbilt Barnes and Noble bookstore during the summer of 2016. He told me that the violent end of the Patriots' project had driven Bill Fesperman into deep depression and seclusion and that he did not know a great deal about his father's life as a radical. He had been raised by his mother, Darlene, who, like many, had put her time with Patriots behind her and understandably so. Ethan and I sat together and tried to do the math to determine whether he, as a newborn, had been present while his mother and father were held at

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<sup>462</sup> Jon Rice, "The World of the Illinois Panthers," in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, ed. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, n.d.), 41–64; Michael Robert Gonzales, "Ruffians and Revolutionaries: The Development of the Young Lords Organization in Chicago" (M.A., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015), 75. Without Hampton, the Panthers succumbed to internal dissension and police pressure. The Young Lords, meanwhile, left Chicago and set up on a farm in Tomah, Wisconsin, where Cha Cha Jiménez oversaw the training of small cadres in Marxist-Leninist thought.

<sup>463</sup> "Untitled Poem," William Fesperman, 1972. Courtesy of the author's son.

gunpoint during the Yorktown Patriot Party raid. When I left he gave me a packet of photocopies from Patriot Party newsletters, some of the first fragments that would guide my writing.

Bill Fesperman passed away in 2011, in China Grove, North Carolina where he had been born and raised. This project began when I found his obituary and learned that Ethan worked at Vanderbilt. At the time, I knew very little about the Young Patriots aside what I had seen of Mike Gray's footage in Stanley Nelson's documentary, but the images had inhaled in my brain somehow, and the coincidence of his son and I working at the same university seemed too insistent to ignore. When I emailed Ethan he responded and said he looked forward to speaking. "Strangely," he wrote "I will be heading up to the south side of Chicago with my family in two weeks to spread some of my father's ashes." His knowledge was "piecemeal" he said, but he was happy to share.

Six months later, Donald Trump was elected to the presidency and the specter of the white worker and his politics captivated the mainstream of political discourse and reengaged the old debate about the role of race in the fate of the working-class. So-called "identitarians" and "class-reductionists" battled one another in the pages of the *New York Times* and prestige magazines, returning again and again to static categories of race and the working-class (almost always assumed to be white) and the seemingly intractable premises of their own questions.<sup>464</sup> Throughout all of this, the Patriots began to percolate up through the cracks of historical amnesia. "There's an old, grainy black-and-white video floating around YouTube that shows Black Panther Bobby Lee addressing a group of poor white migrants from the South and Appalachia," began an article in the *Washington Post*, a month after Trump's victory.<sup>465</sup> Other pieces appeared in magazines across the political spectrum, all genuinely curious, all suggesting—implicitly or explicitly—that these images of the Panthers and the Patriots might reveal the answer to all of this.

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<sup>464</sup> Mark Lilla, "The End of Identity Liberalism," *The New York Times*, November 18, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html>; Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The First White President," *The Atlantic*, October 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909/>.

<sup>465</sup> Tana Ganeva, "Resurrecting the Alliance of Black Revolutionaries and Southern Whites, Decades after a Government Crackdown," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-watch/wp/2016/12/09/resurrecting-the-alliance-of-black-revolutionaries-and-southern-whites-decades-after-a-government-crackdown/>.

When I began this project in earnest, it was motivated by similar questions. But what I learned was that the Young Patriots were not members of the American white working-class in the sense that we often mean it today. Nor was their story especially useful in thinking about electoral politics. They came from the margins of the very bottom of that white working-class, so far from the centers of production that the sense of class consciousness and the interracial solidarity they devised was different than the sort we often associate with organized labor. Instead, I found that the Young Patriots were an imaginative, brave, and perhaps prophetic response to the decomposition of the American working-class, and the social and political realities of structural unemployment, deindustrialization, and boundary struggles that would attend the ensuing decades. What's more, while the Patriots disappeared along with their hillbilly Harlems, the structural realities that had brought both into being proliferate grew and unfolded themselves from the margins and back into the center. In 1973, the same year William Stevens, the *New York Times* reporter in Detroit, declared that "the hillbillies for the most part have made it," real earnings in America went stagnant and then started to fall.<sup>466</sup> The postwar boom had busted, and in the decades that followed the pay and union assurances that had defined the once solid working-class were whittled away. Capital investment fled from production to finance and unions hemorrhaged membership while the state and corporations disinvested in social welfare, externalizing many of the costs once shouldered by employers.<sup>467</sup>

At the same time, capital fled from production to finance, executive compensation and pay for top earners rose at rates unseen in since the Gilded Age. Wealth outstripped general economic growth and wages in particular, and income inequality grew.<sup>468</sup> Many of Stevens' southern actually returned to Appalachia during coal's resurgence in the last half of the 1970s. During these years, coal exports

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<sup>466</sup> William K. Stevens, "Appalachia's Hillbillies Trek North for Jobs," *New York Times*, 1973; Jefferson R. Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>467</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism," in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 21–36.

<sup>468</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge Massachusetts: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2014).

doubled and employment rebounded, but when exports plummeted again in the early 1980s—dropping from 104 million tons in 1981 to 73 million tons in 1983—many of those who returned found the manufacturing and steel jobs they had left in the North and Midwest were gone and they were trapped once again.<sup>469</sup> As the seventies ended and the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began, the ambient and unorganized discontent of wageless Uptown was reflected everywhere. As Steve Earle put it on his 1986 debut album *Guitar Town*, “nowadays it just don’t pay to be a good ole boy.”<sup>470</sup>

Today, the politics of the Young Patriots come back to us in new forms. Some of them are overtly interracial and working-class, and some are focused on a sense of hillbilly militating, but they are all revolts against class contempt and expropriation define themselves in their response to rapidly shifting material conditions. Since the 2008 global economic collapse we have seen this spirit manifest in many movements: Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Redneck Revolt, student debt jubilees, Moms 4 Housing, the *gilets jaunes* in France, the Blackjewel Miners Blockade in Harlan, Kentucky. Like the Panthers and the Patriots, these dynamic, and at times quite inscrutable experiments in collective action operate outside the bounds of electoral politics or the labor movement. They seek to interrupt and dominate an already interrupted world of distributed capital and informal labor: these movements clog traffic circles and stop trains of coal, squat buildings to raise their children, demand wholesale transformation, and see this work as a politics of survival.

As I write this conclusion, we seem perched on the edge of what could be the second massive economic crisis in recent memory. Now summer is upon us again, as Ebert put it, and the question will be—as perhaps it has always been—how things have changed and if politics and critique will meet this new conjuncture. The story of the Young Patriots and their allies offers us a record of solidarity, revolt, potentials and pragmatics—a grammar of dissent and solidarity drawn out of marginal conditions that

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<sup>469</sup> Ronald D. Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia since 1945* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 210.

<sup>470</sup> Quoted in, Cowie, 311.



were only coming to define the post-industrial era. It is a view of the situation from beneath the tracks and a history that no longer exists, but may in the future.

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