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## RESEARCH ESSAY

### “We are black folks first”: the black freedom struggle in Rochester, NY and the making of Malcolm X

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This paper illustrates the intersection of the Civil Rights Movement in Rochester, NY with Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. Drawing on newspapers, organizational records, and oral history interviews, I develop a community study that examines Malcolm X’s relationship to this small northern city, prior to its 1964 “race riot.” I argue three points: 1) Rochester had a significant impact on Malcolm’s evolving philosophy as it related to black unity; 2) national tensions between the Nation of Islam and civil rights organizations, while seen as irreconcilable in the dominant literature, were not necessarily reproduced at the local level; 3) the study of the black movement in smaller cities like Rochester tells a different story, and in so doing reshapes and transforms the larger national narratives. The Rochester case provides a more nuanced telling of Malcolm’s life and labors throughout the Sixties.

**Keywords:** Rochester, NY; Civil Rights Movement; Black Power; Malcolm X; Nation of Islam; NAACP; Walter Cooper; Franklin Florence; Mildred Johnson; Attica

Black Unity was punishable by banishment from middle class America. However, in the face of extinction, the most battered victims often find the courage and power to rise above the depths of despair and unite for survival. (Adolph Dupree, Rochester, NY, 1984)<sup>1</sup>

On February 17, 1963, longtime champion of the poor and dispossessed Mildred Johnson addressed a mostly black audience at a rally organized by the Rochester, New York branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). A crowd of 600–800 people, a huge turnout for the modestly sized city of Rochester, assembled in the auditorium of the Baden Street public housing project to protest several recent cases of police brutality, including one involving members of the Nation of Islam (NOI). Among those in attendance was Malcolm X. Although not scheduled to speak, Malcolm eventually took a turn at the podium. The speeches emphasized the need for black Rochesterians to unite across the lines of organizational affiliation, class and religion that might divide them in order to better face their common oppression, epitomized by police brutality.<sup>2</sup> Johnson, a prominent member of Rochester’s relatively small black middle class, defined the spirit of the meeting. Using fiery rhetoric not normally associated with members of her socio-economic class, she offered support to all the victims of police brutality, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and urged her listeners to do the same.<sup>3</sup> “We are black folks first!” Johnson thundered.<sup>4</sup>

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The Baden Street rally, which would become an iconic event locally, illustrates the intersection of the black freedom struggle in Rochester with Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, a nexus that is conspicuously absent in the scholarly literature on all three. Malcolm's presence at a meeting in Rochester – a place far removed spatially, demographically and politically from his NOI base in Harlem – was hardly happenstance. Malcolm had in fact made many trips to Rochester, a city he apparently came to admire greatly and which had an important place in both his political vision and maneuvering.

Malcolm's association with the movement for African American rights in Rochester would prove mutually beneficial. It was not, however, a fully equal exchange. Malcolm needed black Rochester more than black Rochester needed Malcolm. Indeed it was Malcolm, in his capacity as head of the NOI on the East Coast, who initiated the relationship in 1962. He came in search of allies in western New York, where the NOI was under severe attack, not just in Rochester but New York State and, crucially, at the state prison in nearby Attica. To gain meaningful support in these battles, he would have to look beyond the local NOI communities. Hence his presence at the Baden Street rally, with its strong NAACP input.

Attica state prison, which would gain national prominence after its 1971 inmate revolt, had special importance to Malcolm and the NOI. Prisons were a major recruiting ground for the NOI, as Malcolm's own evolution exemplified.<sup>5</sup> As Malcolm would also have known from personal experience, however, prison officials across the country generally loathed the NOI, refusing to acknowledge it as a religious organization. Consequently, imprisoned NOI members were denied the rights, considerations and privileges granted other inmates who professed a religious affiliation. NOI members at Attica boldly challenged the discrimination. They sued in federal court, seeking to have their organization recognized as a legitimate religious body. This suit, filed by Martin X Sostre, combined with others filed by NOI inmates throughout New York State, could have national implications.<sup>6</sup> If successful, they would open the door for imprisoned NOI members everywhere in the country to receive formal recognition of their faith. For Malcolm, Rochester was important in its own right as well because of its proximity to Attica. For members of the NOI, Rochester, Attica, and Buffalo, shared the same Black Muslim minister. For multiple reasons, therefore, an attack on Muslims in Rochester, which included the minister in question, the event responsible for Malcolm's presence at the Baden Street rally, also threatened the NOI in all of western New York.

Malcolm's message at Baden Street was the same as Mildred Johnson's: "We are black folks first." Far from introducing this message to the gathering, Malcolm found it in place on arrival in Rochester. Systemic racial discrimination, along with everyday experiences like police harassment, had instilled in African Americans in Rochester the imperative of putting aside their differences and uniting as one to improve their lot. Black Rochester, for its part, was glad to have Malcolm's support. His national prominence and his reputation for speaking truth to power would certainly command the attention of the city leaders, which could only benefit black Rochester. In any case, black people in Rochester had little to lose by consorting with Malcolm. It is noteworthy that Malcolm and the NOI met much less resistance from the entrenched civil rights leadership in Rochester than they did in many other cities, especially those with larger populations. In part, this is attributable to the rapid expansion of Rochester's black population between 1930 and Malcolm's arrival there in 1962. Despite the city's decline – Rochester lost 20,000 inhabitants in the preceding years, bringing its total to

318,000 – the black population witnessed a massive explosion in the same period. Between 1930 and 1960, African Americans increased their numbers by 780% from just 2679 in 1930 to 23,586 in 1960. As a result of this rapid demographic change, the political and social leadership of Rochester's African American community was in flux. Indeed, Rochester was one of the few urban centers where mainstream African American leaders, not the black nationalist or the radical element, openly embraced Malcolm, both before and after he left the NOI. Malcolm, for his part, seemed partial to Rochester, which he frequently visited. From all accounts, no other city of Rochester's size received as much of his affinity and attention. Malcolm would further mention Rochester in a famous assessment of the potential for black liberation in 1965, the year of his death. Significantly, he was in Rochester on February 16, 1965, just five days before he died, speaking at both Colgate Rochester Divinity School and Corn Hill Methodist Church. This trip to the Flower City, by which point Malcolm doubtless had invitations to larger and seemingly more important places, may well have been Malcolm's last visit outside of New York City.

This essay contends that black Rochester had a significant, although up to now unacknowledged, impact on Malcolm's evolving philosophy *and* practice of black unity, even while he was in the NOI. Three broad conclusions, all of them with important historiographic implications, follow from exploring the nexus of Rochester, Malcolm, and the NOI. First, both the popular and the dominant historical narratives of Malcolm suggest that his most significant ideological contributions to, and substantive involvement with, the Civil Rights Movement occurred after he left the NOI and made his pilgrimage to Mecca. While some recent scholarship qualifies this argument, suggesting that in the early 1960s Malcolm had engaged certain black leaders during mutually beneficial rallies "in well orchestrated displays of unity," there is little sustained attention to Malcolm's conscious development of a unity politics that embraced national or mainstream civil rights organizations.<sup>7</sup> Malcolm's relationship with black Rochester marks a deviation of chronology in his personal and political evolution. Rochester offered Malcolm, while still a leading NOI figure, a template for engaging in civil rights battles in concert with mainstream civil rights organizations, concretely demonstrating a model of black unity around local grievances that encompassed Muslims and non-Muslims. Malcolm learned such lessons as an NOI leader, in Rochester and other arenas of struggle, and he took them with him when he broke with Elijah Muhammad. As other scholars have recently argued, those lessons may even have reinforced Malcolm's growing dissatisfaction with the NOI, and helped to hasten his departure from it.<sup>8</sup>

Second, popular depictions of the civil rights–Black Power era note the existence of seemingly irreconcilable tensions between organizations such as the NOI and the NAACP.<sup>9</sup> Whatever the validity of this claim at the national level, those tensions did not automatically transfer to the local scene. In Rochester, for example, Malcolm and other local Muslims worked effectively with members of mainstream organizations, including the local NAACP. Finally, the scholarship on the civil rights–Black Power era has recently expanded to include cities in the North and West.<sup>10</sup> I build on this emerging body of literature, showing that a mid-sized city such as Rochester which gained most of its black population in the second wave of the Great Migration was still in formation when the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement erupted. My argument is that the study of the black movement then, in smaller, newly formed communities like that in Rochester, has the potential to tell a different black freedom struggle story, and in so doing help to reshape, and perhaps even transform, the larger national narrative(s).

### **“It went beyond the social condition of the individual”: black migration to Rochester**

The massive African American migration from the South in the twentieth century wrought multiple transformations, changing the landscape of the urban North and West, socially and physically, even as it laid the foundations for future political struggles.<sup>11</sup> The black migration, however, was uneven, with communities growing and evolving in myriad ways. Black migrants flocked to large urban centers during the first wave of the Great Migration that accompanied and followed World War I. Over time, that wave gave rise to a black middle class, which provided much of the leadership, political and otherwise, in many African American communities in the North and West. This black middle class had become well entrenched by the post-World War II era. Historian Allan Spear asserts with respect to Chicago: “On the South Side, beyond the black belt, communities of upper- and middle-class Negroes had emerged.”<sup>12</sup> Writing about Milwaukee, a city with a black population closer in size and character to Rochester than to Chicago, Joe Trotter explains, “Despite low-wages, poor working conditions, and inadequate housing the expanding Afro-American, urban-industrial working class constituted the demographic and financial foundation from which a larger and stronger, though still weak, black middle class emerged between 1915 and 1932.”<sup>13</sup>

Contrary to the pattern in Chicago, Milwaukee, and elsewhere, there was no significant influx of black migrants into Rochester during the World War I era. Instead, Rochester, like many second tier cities, experienced only the second wave of the Great Migration, the one that surrounded World War II.<sup>14</sup> Between 1950 and 1960 alone, Rochester’s black population increased by more than 300%.<sup>15</sup> Local historian Adolph Dupree states that “the invisibility of a handful of blacks had been a saving grace in earlier years” but that after World War II “the sudden influx of new blacks put them on public display.”<sup>16</sup>

There were two distinct groups of black migrants on display in Rochester. One group, the vast majority, got there circuitously. Few of these individuals boarded trains in the South and headed directly to Rochester, as those who went to places like Chicago, New York City and Los Angeles typically had done. Rather, most post-World War II black migrants to Rochester arrived from the surrounding rural areas. They were mostly seasonal migrant laborers from the South who previously worked in upstate New York’s many orchards and farms. At the end of the agricultural season, some of the farm workers left agricultural work altogether, making their way to Rochester and other urban centers, eventually settling there year round. The second group of black migrants to Rochester was much smaller in number, and much different in social standing, than the former farm workers. The members of the second group consisted of highly educated and technically skilled professionals who were drawn to Rochester from various Eastern cities – many from universities such as Howard and Heidelberg – by educational opportunities at the University of Rochester and Colgate Rochester Divinity School, as well as employment opportunities at Eastman Kodak and Strong Memorial Hospital. These individuals would become the core of the city’s new black middle class.

Despite the socio-economic differences among them in 1960, no sharp internal conflicts based on class had yet emerged among Rochester’s African Americans. The virtually undifferentiated racism affecting them helped see to that. Black Rochesterians, whatever their social class, suffered poor housing, segregated schooling, and police brutality. Indeed, the city had no middle class enclaves like Chicago’s

Bronzeville or Harlem's Strivers' Row. Discrimination in the housing market was so severe that even those blacks with the means to do so could not escape from the Flower City's version of the ghetto. And though many larger cities had fought redline housing battles with some success by this point, Rochester's weaker black middle class could boast no such achievement. A report by the statewide Human Relations Commission noted that "in 1958 ... Rochester had the most rigid barriers against the sale of houses in the suburbs to Negroes," even as the city's "economy was attracting a greater influx of non-whites, proportionately, than any city in the state."<sup>17</sup> That rigid redlining created ghetto conditions in the city's Seventh Ward, a black enclave. Longtime local historian Blake McKelvey wrote: "In the forties ... a new migration from the south had more than doubled the city's non-white population, with most of the newcomers settling in the Seventh Ward."<sup>18</sup> What he failed to note is that few options existed for blacks outside the Seventh Ward, whether in housing, schooling or recreation.

Shared misery in the same confined space produced a "race-first" consciousness among Rochester's blacks. These conditions, away from the workplace, had the effect of blunting socio-economic divisions among blacks, of decreasing class tensions, and of heightening racial consciousness, thereby fostering the notion that "we are Black folks first." Indeed, Dr. Walter Cooper, a young scientist and newcomer to the city, later recalled that in Rochester, African Americans' shared circumstances "went beyond the social condition of the individual."<sup>19</sup>

### **Police brutality in black Rochester**

Of all the inequities and persecutions that African Americans in Rochester suffered, none caused a more immediate, visceral and emotional response than police brutality. The police formed the vanguard of the state's repressive apparatus, enforcing racial discrimination under the guise of "law and order" and reacting to the symptoms of pervasive inequality. In early 1961, the local NAACP, unaccustomed to agitation, took tentative steps to publicly protest police brutality against black people.<sup>20</sup> Though addressing police brutality was a typical activity for many NAACP branches, confronting city hall on the matter had not yet become a common practice in Rochester. Walter Cooper remembered that some old-timers in the NAACP leadership shied away from openly attacking racism in the police department and elsewhere for fear of "embarrassing their friends downtown."<sup>21</sup> In Cooper's telling, pressure from the new migrants pushed the NAACP into taking a firmer stance. Journalist Desmond Stone seemed to agree, reporting the arrival in Rochester of a new breed of blacks. "One thing is certain," Stone wrote, "the disappearance of the old Negro docility and the emergence of new, fiercely aggressive attitude is bewildering to many police and citizens alike."<sup>22</sup> These new Negroes apparently were behind the NAACP's growing frustration with business as usual, evident in the attention it finally gave to the explosive issue of police brutality. The journey to Baden Street had begun.

Between 1962 and 1963, three cases of police brutality and harassment shook black Rochester. The first of these, the "Fairwell case," riled black Rochesterians partly because they considered the victim an upstanding and productive member of the community. On an August night in 1962, Rufus Fairwell completed his chores and got ready to close the service station where he worked. Fairwell's uniformed employment at the station was a source of pride for many in the community. Undoubtedly aware of this, two Rochester police officers pulled into the establishment and demanded to know what Fairwell was doing there.<sup>23</sup> Fairwell, clad in his uniform, replied that he

was securing the station and promptly produced a key to attest to his legitimacy. The officers responded, "What's a nigger like you doing with a key?" and proceeded to beat Fairwell severely. He suffered two broken vertebrae and was confined to a wheelchair.<sup>24</sup>

The second case of police brutality that infuriated black Rochester involved members of the Nation of Islam, which had been operating quietly in the city for some years. In January 1963, acting on an "anonymous tip," two officers forced their way into a temporary NOI mosque and disrupted a religious service allegedly in search of "a man with a gun."<sup>25</sup> Accompanied by police dogs, their frequent companions when patrolling the black community, the officers arrested two Muslim men on the spot. That was only the opening salvo in a larger campaign of repression against the NOI. Weeks later, a grand jury indicted an additional 17 male Muslims who were present at the disrupted religious service. The saga of the Rochester Seventeen, whose travails may be seen as a prelude to the famous case of the Wilmington Ten, had begun.<sup>26</sup> Those arrested in Rochester – both the initial two and the subsequent 17 – were well known and respected members of the black community. As a result, their African American non-Muslim neighbors rallied to their support. The attack on the Muslims would eventually bring Malcolm to Rochester, which was not his first trip to the Flower City, although this time his engagement with the larger black community would become deeper and more self-sustaining.<sup>27</sup>

The third, particularly severe case of police brutality came just weeks after the intrusion into the mosque. The incident left A.C. White, another black Rochesterian, hospitalized for 21 days. For many, it shattered any illusion that justice would be served in the black community.<sup>28</sup> Although White was not regarded as a model citizen, the community was furious about his case. White incurred the wrath of the police by moving a vehicle from one side of the street to another during a block party. Known for his hard work during the week and hard drinking on weekends, White was likely inebriated at the time.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, he successfully moved the car, and no-one at the festive community affair requested police intervention. The police arrested White, brutally beat him in front of the revelers, transferred him downtown, beat him some more, and then delivered his mangled body to the emergency room. White would live to tell the tale, but black Rochester was beside itself. Minister Franklin Florence, who cut his teeth politically on the White case, recalled: "It was as if the police were saying 'You don't have any control over your neighborhood'."<sup>30</sup>

The extent of Fairwell's and White's injuries and the violation of a religious space sparked both outrage and activism in black Rochester. A united action committee sprang up consisting of first-time activists as well as members of such groups as the NAACP, the Human Relations Commission, and the Federation of Churches.<sup>31</sup> The coalition's aims were three-fold: to raise money for Rufus Fairwell's legal and medical expenses, to pursue action against the arresting officers, and to end police brutality and harassment. The group soon commanded the attention of City Manager Porter Homer, who ultimately did little to alleviate the problems. Numerous meetings between Porter and representatives of the coalition over more than two months failed to resolve a total of nine high profile cases of police brutality. Eventually, the community activists turned to higher authorities, requesting an investigation of the Fairwell case by the federal Department of Justice.<sup>32</sup>

Black Rochesterians responded to overt repression by building coalitions around a single issue and emphasizing action over ideology. Historian Jeanne Theoharis argues the value of coalitions between diverse groups within the Civil Rights and Black

Power Movements. “Complicating the dichotomy between civil rights and Black Power, between the black poor and the middle class,” she writes of Los Angeles, “this history shows how people of varying ideological positions both came together and went in different directions to address the profound racial inequities.”<sup>33</sup> The same could be said of Rochester. In the Flower City, black activists largely circumvented the debilitating debates and territorialism that frequently crippled political groups in this period by forming coalitions centered on specific issues, most notably police brutality.<sup>34</sup> In Rochester, that kind of brutality, as exemplified by the three cases discussed above, was seared into the black collective consciousness.<sup>35</sup> It mattered little whether one was an upstanding or aspiring member of the middle class, if one was peacefully practicing one’s religion, or if one was celebrating with the community. Blacks in Rochester were subject to arbitrary harassment and violence from the forces of law and order, who faced no consequence for their misconduct. Here was the soil from which black unity in Rochester grew.

### **Malcolm, the nation, and the search for black unity**

Rochester was not the only place that Malcolm went in search of black unity. In the period leading up to his break with the Nation of Islam, he undertook many such missions across the country. However, he found more attentive ears in Rochester than in most other centers. Black Rochester was especially receptive to calls for racial unity precisely because it was so racially vulnerable. Rochester’s black community was still in formation, with a relatively weak middle class and an acute sense of being under siege. The NOI, too, was under siege, in Rochester and upstate New York more generally. The Muslims needed allies, and Malcolm, as their main spokesman and trouble-shooter, discovered that Rochester was one place where those allies could be readily found. Whatever his strategic motives in turning to Rochester, Malcolm was deeply affected by the resulting discussions and debates he had with non-Muslims both there and elsewhere in the United States. Ideologically, his slow trek away from the NOI had begun.

Many scholars offer a much more jagged account of Malcolm’s evolution. In a common narrative, Malcolm’s ideological turning came only with his formal departure from the NOI and his subsequent pilgrimage to the Muslim world. Upon breaking with Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm allegedly rejected the separatist stance of the NOI in favor of more mainstream civil rights activism. Describing Malcolm’s efforts to build coalitions with civil rights organizations, Lauren Larsen goes so far as to provide a specific date for this shift, asserting that, “On March 8, 1964, when Malcolm announced his split from the NOI, he also indicated his support for, and his willingness to be actively involved in, the civil rights struggle.”<sup>36</sup> The Black Theology luminary James Cone, who spent a formative portion of his career in Rochester, rightly challenges Larsen’s periodization, noting that Malcolm had issued calls for unity *prior* to his split from the Nation. Cone, however, takes Malcolm’s public rhetoric about black unity for an ironclad ideology based in a religious conception of group solidarity.<sup>37</sup> He argues that Malcolm’s “idea of unity was based on the African-American community’s acceptance of the Nation of Islam as the true religion of black people and Elijah Muhammad as their leader who was sent by Allah to save them from the imminent destruction of white America.” This argument neglects Malcolm’s increasing ability to separate his religion and his politics, already evident before his departure from the Nation.

Neither can Malcolm's attempts to build political unity be reduced to a ploy to recruit followers for Elijah Muhammad. As scholar Peniel Joseph has cogently argued, "barred by Elijah Muhammad from formal participation" in politics, there is evidence that Malcolm "lent measured support to southern civil rights struggles while scrupulously hewing to the Muslim policy of nonengagement." Joseph asserts further that "Malcolm juggled shifting personal loyalties and mounting professional responsibilities to the Nation of Islam with his own burning political ambitions."<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Malcolm indicated a sincere interest in improving the lives of black people, regardless of their religion. As Joseph has posited, many non-Muslim Rochesterians who developed close relationships with Malcolm confirmed that while clearly devoted to the Nation, the only proselytizing Malcolm did in Rochester was on behalf of a non-sectarian black unity. As a couple of Malcolm's non-Muslim interlocutors in Rochester recalled: "He talked about what he believed in, you know, and it was never about religion. That was the interesting thing. He never ... tried to convince us."<sup>39</sup> The political engagement that Malcolm sought – as exemplified by the Rochester case, and months later at a unity rally in Harlem – transcended a willingness to struggle alongside civil rights organizations and leaders. Malcolm and his closest confidants desired a political unity in which "members of CORE [Congress of Racial Equality], NAACP, Urban League and Black Muslims or SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] or SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]" came together "as black people – descendants of mother Africa."<sup>40</sup> Malcolm was learning to negotiate between a strict adherence to Elijah Muhammad's distaste for conventional politics and his own interest in a comprehensive black unity that transcended religious affiliation. Those negotiations would help to transform Malcolm.

More recent research likewise contests Cone's assertion that after Malcolm broke with Elijah Muhammad he "tried hard to develop a unity message that would enable him to be involved in civil rights activities which previously had been closed to him."<sup>41</sup> That unity message began before the break. Cone and Larsen, along with others, reproduce earlier interpretations of Malcolm's life, many of which drew on popular media characterizations of conflicts between black organizations. Both the national offices of the NAACP and the NOI trumpeted their differing platforms. However, in Rochester, as in other locations, adherents of each movement closer to the grass roots frequently minimized their ideological differences to pursue common goals. In this sense, the experience in Rochester is consistent with the recent research of Jeanne Theoharis and Mathew Countryman, which also challenges notions of irreconcilable divisions between various groups and movements, notably the NAACP and the NOI.<sup>42</sup> The Rochester case also demonstrates that Malcolm began his move towards civil rights coalitions well before his split with the Nation of Islam. After leaving the Nation, Malcolm remained in close contact with the black movement in Rochester, possibly feeling a debt of gratitude to it for putting into action a model of black unity he would come to advocate on either side of his NOI career.

As a representative of the NOI, Malcolm found the going much tougher in other locations.<sup>43</sup> The contrast between Rochester and Los Angeles, for example, where Malcolm also attempted to build a coalition with civil rights leaders and organizations rather than self-avowed black nationalists or radicals, is striking. In Los Angeles, as in Rochester, Malcolm came to the black community as the NOI's roving ambassador, seeking support in protesting police attacks on Muslims. After condemning the murder of unarmed Ronald Stokes by police officers, who also shot six other unarmed Muslims, Malcolm called for black leaders in Los Angeles to join the NOI in protesting

the police violence. The response was mixed. Some prominent members of the NAACP and at least two ministers agreed to support Malcolm's call.<sup>44</sup> The protestors, however, were upstaged by a group of black Christian clergymen, who rebuked Malcolm and the NOI for instigating an "anti-white movement using religion as [a] cloak to spread hate."<sup>45</sup> Such hostile pronouncements mirrored statements by the national NAACP, which also dreaded public association with the NOI, its separatist ideology, and its representatives. Althea Simmons, NAACP field secretary for the West Coast, reported to the national office: "I feel that the Muslim situation has almost gotten out of hand as far as NAACP is concerned . . . Appearances and statements to the press [about] the NAACP's participation has not been clearly confined to the issue of police brutality and therefore, we now have the Muslims embracing the NAACP and stating that NAACP supports the Muslims unqualifiedly."<sup>46</sup> Newspapers and government officials joined in, lauding the "responsible" leadership shown by the NAACP and the Christian ministers in publicly distancing themselves from the Nation of Islam.<sup>47</sup>

In contrast to black Los Angeles, black Rochester had less to fear in joining with Malcolm and the NOI. Malcolm's initial contact with the black movement in Rochester took place in 1962. It began in Attica, where five inmates desiring to become Muslims had sued the facility for abridging their religious freedom by denying their request for a Muslim minister to perform religious services. In filing their suit, the Attica inmates were aided by local NAACP attorneys, despite the attempts of the national NAACP to avoid being mixed up with the Muslims. This local relationship between the Nation of Islam and NAACP attorneys reflects Thomas Sugrue's assertion that "local chapters" tended to be "at times more militant than their parent organizations."<sup>48</sup> Malcolm's arrival in Buffalo to testify at the trial brought him into closer contact with the NOI groups and the NAACP in that city and in Rochester. The national news media reported widely on the Attica trial, and many across the country watched intently. The case brought by the Attica inmates was the most prominent of several such suits by imprisoned NOI members nationally. Eventually, the inmates won, with the courts determining that the Nation of Islam was indeed a religious group protected by the Constitution.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, as the cases wound their way through the legal system, Malcolm's involvement with black Rochester would widen and deepen, while repression of the NOI intensified.

### **Anti-Muslim hysteria in New York State**

1963 was not a good year for Malcolm X. In November, Elijah Muhammad would silence Malcolm, ostensibly for remarks (the much quoted chickens having come home to roost statement) concerning the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. It seems more likely that Muhammad, advised by an inner circle both jealous and fearful of Malcolm's prominence, had found an excuse to cut Malcolm down to size. As if to underline this point, Muhammad failed to reinstate Malcolm, as promised. Malcolm, refusing to stay silent, responded by cutting his ties with Muhammad. Before his silencing, however, Malcolm had spent much of 1963 combating anti-Muslim outbursts in various parts of the country, especially in his adopted home state of New York.

As an organization born and raised in adversity, state repression and hostile propaganda were nothing new for the NOI. Even so, the NOI had a hard time in New York State that year, where police, prosecutors and journalists seemed determined to crush it. With the Attica case still undecided, it was as if the anti-Muslim coalition wanted

to make a preemptive strike against the potential legitimization of the NOI in the prison system, a major source of recruits. Malcolm's attention came to center on Rochester because it was the latest scene of anti-Muslim repression, with high stakes for the NOI. The opponents of the Muslims seemed to strike especially hard in Rochester, for two reasons: the NOI branch there was the most vulnerable in the state and it was in close proximity to Attica. The Muslim community in Rochester, like the Flower City's larger black community, was still in formation, with the NOI branch far less strong than that in Buffalo. As the forces of repression likely saw it, a fatal or crippling blow to the Muslims in Rochester would have larger consequences, demoralizing the NOI statewide.

Given the close links between the NOI and the prison system, it was predictable that the campaign against the Muslims would be promoted as a war on crime. This is where the police and prosecutors needed the media most, and they found willing enablers in Rochester. It was not coincidence that on January 7, 1963 – a day after the police barged into the Rochester mosque – an article appeared in a longstanding, local, and politically contentious newsweekly conflating black migrants, the NOI, and crime:

It hasn't become the talk of the town yet, but in some sections of the city and, fortunately, among some high police officials, there are strong suspicions that the crime wave that hit Rochester the past year can be laid at the door of some Black Muslims ... The truth of the matter is that in the first nine months of 1962 Rochester experienced the greatest crime wave in its history. Most of them were committed by the riff raff of the Negro race. Migrants have been blamed for many of these crimes, but in recent months there has been a growing suspicion that the real cause for this big increase can be traced to the Black Muslims, whose membership is made up largely of convicts and ex-convicts. This reporter talked to a high-ranking police official two weeks ago and was told that there were strong reasons to suspect that Black Muslims are responsible for the record crime wave in the city ... It became known two weeks ago that the Black Muslims of Rochester have a temple or meeting place on North street, above Buddy's Casino. There they hold their meetings and sell copies of their official newspaper, published in Chicago.<sup>50</sup>

The Rochester Seventeen joined the two Muslims previously arrested in the dock. Precise numbers on the NOI presence in Rochester at this time are not available, but in all likelihood the 19 men in jail represented a substantial portion – possibly even a majority – of the male Muslims in Rochester. The attack on the mosque, one may surmise, was meant to decapitate the NOI in the Flower City.

Malcolm was determined that it would not succeed. He soon became a familiar presence in Rochester, traveling there more than eight times in 1963 – something the local police department, among others, did not welcome or appreciate.<sup>51</sup> Referring to the raid on the mosque, Malcolm opined that “a similar situation would not have occurred ‘if someone called and said there was somebody in another church with a gun’.”<sup>52</sup> Consequently, he formally lodged complaints with both the State Commission for Human Rights and with the Rochester Public Safety Commissioner.<sup>53</sup> Not to be outdone by the anti-Muslim forces, Malcolm launched his own propaganda offensive, predicting that Rochester “may be a precedent-setting city for police hostility towards Muslims,” and that it “will be better known than Oxford, Mississippi.”<sup>54</sup> By comparing Rochester to Oxford, a place notorious for its hostility to the Civil Rights Movement, Malcolm was directly connecting the struggles of the Muslims and those of black people in the South, politically and morally. The implications seemed clear enough: it was time for black folks, Muslims and non-Muslims, North and South, in and out of Rochester, to achieve greater unity. In Rochester, the city fathers took offense to the

comparison to Oxford. "Obviously he [Malcolm X] is a stranger to Rochester because he is not describing any condition that exists here," retorted Mayor Henry Gillette.<sup>55</sup>

Whatever the mayor's dismay, the repression of Rochester's Muslims was very real, in fact mirroring the abuses suffered by blacks in the South. Even the fire department joined the attack. Taking their cue from their counterparts in law enforcement, Rochester firemen, acting on the proverbial "anonymous tip," entered the mosque previously raided by the police. The building custodian, however, had reported no signs of fire. Fed the usual "tips" by the police department, the local papers continued to paint a picture of violent and crime-prone "Black Muslims." One paper denounced the "secret sect preaching black supremacy." Another daily informed readers that an iron pipe had been found in the hallway of the building where the NOI mosque was located, implying that the Muslims had sinister intentions to use the pipe as a weapon.

As usual, there was a direct connection between events in Rochester, Buffalo and Attica. Among the Rochester Seventeen was Minister Robert J.X. Williams, the Buffalo-based NOI clergyman who also served the Muslim community in Rochester.<sup>56</sup> Minister Robert X, as he was known in NOI circles, was also a central figure in the Attica suit, having been named in the court papers. Unlike Malcolm and so many others, Minister Robert X had not joined the NOI as a prisoner; actually, he had no criminal record. This point was important. The state of New York banned anyone with a criminal history from visiting or corresponding with prisoners, a rule that kept Malcolm out of Attica. (The same would have been true of Elijah Muhammad, who was imprisoned during World War II for anti-war activities.) Once indicted, Minister Robert X could no longer serve inmates at Attica. It is little wonder the grand jury had returned a sealed indictment against the Rochester Seventeen. An unsealed indictment may have revealed too much.<sup>57</sup>

Clearly, the campaign against the NOI was coordinated, a joint effort by state and local officials (possibly national ones too), with allies in the media. *Muhammad Speaks*, the NOI organ, reported on the connivance, singling out the situation in Rochester: "Political observers have linked both the police and fire department to a statewide attempt to create public hysteria against Muslims in New York State and to brand the followers of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad as 'subversive'."<sup>58</sup> On one of his visits to Rochester, Malcolm called attention to the role of the media in the campaign: "The racists ... use the press to get public opinion on their side. When they want to suppress and oppress the Black community, what do they do? They ... make it appear that the role of crime in the Black community is higher than it is anywhere else ... it makes it appear that anyone in the Black community is a criminal."<sup>59</sup>

The repression in Rochester demonstrated that the NOI could not exist as an isolated entity; its survival was bound up with that of the whole black community. Malcolm naturally realized this. He would also have realized that, ultimately, the same was true of the NOI everywhere in the country. As a national movement, the NOI could be no stronger than its weakest links. Muslims in Rochester needed non-Muslim allies much as they did throughout the United States. This was Malcolm's larger point in comparing Rochester to Oxford, Mississippi. His path to black unity began with concerns for the welfare of the Muslims, but he would have soon realized that it could not end there. A viable black united front would have to be non-sectarian. Such was the lesson taught by the Muslim ordeal in Rochester. It would be claiming too much to say that Malcolm first learned that lesson in Rochester. It is appropriate, however, to suggest that his experience in Rochester likely reinforced his sense of the necessity of a larger black alliance. Indeed, Rochester seemed to provide something of a model for such unity.

### Protesting repression, promoting unity, and protesting unity

In his search for black allies in Rochester, Malcolm cast a wide net, sometimes with surprising results. Loftus Carson was one of those surprises. An African American member of the statewide Human Rights Commission, some in black Rochester viewed Carson as an “Uncle Tom.”<sup>60</sup> Carson, needless to say, saw things differently. True to his self-perceived role as mediator, he arranged a meeting between Malcolm and the Rochester city leaders.<sup>61</sup> Malcolm emerged from the meeting on January 17, 1963 to announce that a better understanding had been reached and that the talks “had been very, very fruitful.”<sup>62</sup> However, the deliberations were not so fruitful as to persuade Malcolm to call off other forms of protest. As usual, he would pursue multiple tracks. On returning to New York City, he promptly organized a rally outside city hall that highlighted the anti-Muslim repression statewide, including in Rochester. Louis A. DeCaro, Jr. describes a flyer distributed at the rally: “The flier also referred to the disruption of Muslim services in the Rochester mosque as ‘gestapo-like,’ and bore in its challenge to black people Malcolm’s own inimitable signature: ‘We must let [the Rochester Muslims] know they are not alone. We must let them know that Harlem is with them. We must let them know that the whole Dark World is with them’.”<sup>63</sup> Another NOI rally in Times Square on February 13, similarly “protest[ed] the arrest and indictment of 19 persons who attended a Muslim meeting” in Rochester.<sup>64</sup> Protestors at this event carried signs declaring: “America is a Godless Government” and “We Demand Freedom of Religion.”<sup>65</sup>

Within days, Malcolm was back in Rochester, in time for the Baden Street rally. It was a formative event in the struggle for African American freedom in the Flower City, featuring a who’s who in black Rochester. The planners and attendees included clergy and members of the NAACP, CORE, the Monroe County Non-Partisan League, the Committee for Rufus Fairwell, and the Rochester Civil Rights Committee. Importantly, although organized by the NAACP, the rally was not held in a church or in an office downtown, as was generally the case in Rochester and across the nation with such NAACP events. The decision to meet at Baden Street, the site of a settlement house in the heart of the ghetto, seemed to signal a new dawn.

The Rochester NAACP worked hard to organize and advertise the Baden Street rally. Rozetta McDowell, the local NAACP secretary, informed the media that “she hoped a committee will evolve out of the meeting to unite local Negroes. ‘This is what we need and this is what we’re going to have’,” she confidently predicted. Graphically illustrating the kind of unity she had in mind, McDowell’s press release came with a picture of herself, Malcolm, the Rochester Seventeen and the other two Muslims facing prosecution.<sup>66</sup> As for the committee she hoped the rally would produce, McDowell noted: “It is quite possible that the Black Muslim nationalist movement will be represented on such a committee [as] ‘they do represent a segment of the Negro community here’.”<sup>67</sup> It made perfect sense that this should be so, since Muslims were also part of the planning committee and were among the official list of speakers. Malcolm may have been excluded from the list either because he was not expected to show up or because it was a Rochester event and the planners endeavored to feature local speakers. Still, after Mildred (“We Are Black Folks First”) Johnson and others had held forth, Malcolm was invited to the podium “amid shouts of ‘speech, speech’.”<sup>68</sup> He did not disappoint. The local press reported that he “took a swipe at unidentified Negro factions ‘too afraid of the white man to unite’.” Yet *Muhammad Speaks* would later report on the historic nature of the gathering:

“Observers called the rally the ‘most spectacular display of Negro unity ever witnessed in Rochester’.”<sup>69</sup>

The national NAACP was not impressed with the display of black unity in Rochester. Just two days after the Baden Street rally, Gloster Current, the NAACP Director of Branches, based in New York City, announced that there was a “problem” with the Rochester local. The problem, of course, was the Rochester branch’s seemingly cozy relationship with the NOI and Malcolm. “Our problem in Rochester,” Current informed Roy Wilkins, the longtime head of the national NAACP, “is how to protest police brutality and not appear to be supporting the Muslims on their program per se, a position into which Malcolm ‘X’ wants to push us.”<sup>70</sup> Fearing this problem might spread to other locales, Current issued a memorandum to all NAACP branches. Entitled “NAACP and the Muslims,” the memo provided strict instructions to govern future exchanges with the NOI. “If a community-wide mass protest meeting called by the NAACP involves other groups, avoid, if at all possible, having Muslim speakers at your rally,” Current commanded. “Public meetings are, of course, open and the possibility is that Muslims will attend, ask questions and seek to get their viewpoint across.”<sup>71</sup> In that case, “NAACP spokesmen should reiterate our policy, stating clearly that in fighting police brutality we are not supporting Muslims.” The Rochester folks had set a dangerous precedent, and the national NAACP strongly disapproved of the kind of unity advocated at the Baden Street rally. “Avoid at all costs any inference of a Unity Movement or that NAACP is calling for a ‘common front’,” Current’s directive to the branches concluded. “Point out clearly wherein our programs differ, although we uphold all citizens’ constitutional rights.”<sup>72</sup>

The Rochester branch, whose action had incurred Current’s wrath, did not respond accordingly. Wendell Phillips, president of the Rochester NAACP and a Baptist pastor, acknowledged ideological differences with the NOI, but he did not seem repentant about the Baden Street rally. “While we are in total disagreement with their separatist philosophy, we do, however, vigorously uphold their right as citizens to the enjoyment of all constitutional guarantees of protections from police brutality,” the reverend president said of the Muslims.<sup>73</sup> Eugene Newport, youth advisor for the Rochester NAACP and one of Malcolm’s hosts in the Flower City, was even less compliant. If anything, Newport rejected outright the directive from the national NAACP. He told the local press: “Ranting against the activities of these dissenting nationalistic groups are pointless ... The situation demands, without further delay, that this community recognize that our Negro citizens are entitled to all the rights and privileges of American citizenship. Failure to do this can only stimulate the growth of nationalistic organizations, and increase the vigor of their protest.”<sup>74</sup> Not surprisingly, upon forming the Organization of African American Unity, Malcolm asked Newport to work alongside him. Evidently, by 1963, instructions to stay clear of the Muslims were not being well received in Rochester, even among the NAACP leadership. Mildred Johnson’s “we are black folks first” message seemed to have greater appeal.

The city fathers appeared to take note. Increasingly, they became less resistant to the idea of a citizens’ police review board, a central demand of the newly energized black coalition, given Rochester’s history of police brutality. Pressure was mounting from various quarters. Days after the Baden Street rally, the local clergy, including the Black Rochester Area Ministers’ Conference, placed a full-page advertisement in the paper calling for the creation of a police review board. The declaration, signed by 100 clergy, announced: “We have investigated sufficiently to learn that there is a list of documented cases, gathered in a responsible fashion, which detail a story of difficult

and bitter experiences undergone by many Negro citizens.”<sup>75</sup> Immediately, the police chief took evasive action. He countered with an offer of a “police retraining program” aimed at producing kinder and gentler officers, meaning, in practice, kinder and gentler to black Rochesterians. The police chief was not the only one trying to blunt the black protest. So too were some of the newly converted supporters of a police review board, such as the Human Relations Committee of Monroe County, which includes Rochester. The committee hoped that the creation of a police review board would drain support from the emerging black coalition and drive Malcolm out of town. It backed “an independent citizens’ group to review complaints against police ... [and] also hailed the non-violent committee for ‘performing a valuable service by providing a focus for the concern of the entire community and an alternative to the leadership of Malcolm X and his movement’.”<sup>76</sup> Rochester City Council members apparently found this argument persuasive. In the face of strong and colorful opposition from the police department, they approved a police review board.<sup>77</sup> Rochester became the second city to have such a body after Philadelphia, which agreed to form one only months earlier. The police review board was one of the first concrete results of the new political momentum that originated at the Baden Street rally. Contrary to the wishes of the Monroe County Human Relations Committee, however, creation of the police board did not succeed in keeping Malcolm out of Rochester.

### **Farewell to the Flower City**

In the years leading up to his departure from the NOI, Malcolm honed his message of black unity everywhere he went. Drawing on common conditions of black oppression in any number of locales, he seized every opportunity to insert himself into struggles aimed at securing justice for African Americans. It was against this backdrop that he eventually traveled to Detroit to deliver his famous “Message to the Grassroots”:

What you and I need to do is learn to forget our differences. When we come together, we don’t come together as Baptists or Methodists. You don’t catch hell ‘cause you’re a Baptist, and you don’t catch hell ‘cause you’re a Methodist. You don’t catch hell ‘cause you’re a Methodist or Baptist. You don’t catch hell because you’re a Democrat or a Republican. You don’t catch hell because you’re a Mason or an Elk. And you sure don’t catch hell ‘cause you’re an American; ‘cause if you was an American, you wouldn’t catch no hell. You catch hell ‘cause you’re a black man. You catch hell, all of us catch hell, for the same reason.<sup>78</sup>

The speech was a distillation of wisdom acquired over many years in many battles and in many struggles, including that in Rochester.

As Malcolm crisscrossed the nation promoting a “we are black folks first” doctrine, the Rochester Seventeen were convicted of various charges, ranging from conspiracy to riot to assault. Many of the convicted men’s black non-Muslim neighbors had testified on their behalf, albeit in vain.<sup>79</sup> If the authorities in Rochester believed that conviction of the Rochester Seventeen would put an end to black agitation, they were mistaken. On July 24, 1964, black Rochester exploded in rebellion. Unsurprisingly, the immediate trigger of this explosion – though obviously not the root cause – was yet another case of police brutality. The police review board had not made Rochester’s finest any kinder or gentler.

The Rochester revolt was an event laden with historical significance, not just for the Flower City but the entire nation. It was the second of the so-called race riots that

would pockmark the decade, the first to occur in a town the size of Rochester, and the first in which the National Guard was called out. A few weeks earlier, Harlem had gone up in flames. In the frenzy to organize black Rochester in the rebellion's aftermath, Malcolm would make one last visit to the Flower City.

On the strength of his recent pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm was invited to participate in a forum on world religions at Rochester Colgate Divinity School.<sup>80</sup> (This institution would employ in this period both James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, soon to emerge as intellectual leaders of Black Theology, the Christian complement of Black Power.) The invitation was delivered through Minister Franklin Florence, perhaps Rochester's foremost exponent of Black Theology and a man who had struck up a friendship with Malcolm over the course of his many visits to the Flower City. Since his last visit to Rochester, there had been a sea change in Malcolm's life: he had broken with the Nation of Islam and was now living under a death threat from his erstwhile co-religionists.<sup>81</sup>

The appearance at Rochester Colgate Divinity School in February 1965 was not Malcolm's first speaking engagement at a white institution of higher learning in the Flower City. It had been almost two years exactly to the date since he spoke at the University of Rochester, an engagement organized by members of the local NAACP.<sup>82</sup> This event was long remembered by Constance Mitchell, the black county supervisor who, after his talk at the university, hosted Malcolm at her home late into the night, to the great delight of a multi-racial gathering that assembled on short notice to chat him up.<sup>83</sup>

Malcolm's presentation at the Rochester Colgate Divinity School was a more somber occasion. As a result of the many threats against him, Minister Florence recalled, Malcolm requested two things for his Rochester appearance: round-the-clock *black* police protection and an opportunity to address a forum in the African American community after speaking at the divinity school.<sup>84</sup> Malcolm's hosts readily agreed to both requests, although fulfilling the first one was not easy, given the relatively few black police officers in Rochester.<sup>85</sup> Malcolm's decision to go to Rochester demonstrated genuine commitment to, and affection for, that community. His home was bombed two days before his scheduled arrival in the Flower City, as a result of which he had begun "clearing his calendar of virtually everything not directly connected with his and his family's survival." He made an exception and kept his appointment in Rochester.<sup>86</sup>

Malcolm arrived in Rochester wearing a shirt that had been damaged from the bombing of his home. Having fulfilled his obligations to the divinity school, he retreated to a church for what would be his farewell to the Flower City. His address, entitled "Not Just an American Problem, But a World Problem," and delivered at Corn Hill Methodist Church, was a summation of his most recent speeches, but also of his life and labors. "In order for you and me to know the nature of the struggle that you and I are involved in, we have to know not only the various ingredients involved at the local level and national level, but also the ingredients that are involved at the international level," he told his listeners. "Otherwise you can't even follow the local issue, unless you know what part it plays in the entire international context. And when you look at it in that context, you see it in a different light, but you see it with more clarity."<sup>87</sup>

Subsequently, Malcolm, accompanied by representatives from every sector of Rochester's black community, retired to his hotel room to try to bring some clarity to the local organizing efforts. Malcolm's interlocutors that evening included Minister

Florence, NAACP youth leader Eugene Newport, and Freddie Thomas. The presence of Thomas, a scientist, was especially noteworthy. It was Thomas who, two years earlier, had taken County Supervisor Constance Mitchell to Rochester University to hear Malcolm speak. Thomas was close to the NOI; by some accounts he was actually a member, although he did not advertise it. It is further reported that, after Malcolm left the group, Thomas retained his loyalty to the NOI. Yet there he was, a devoted follower of Elijah Mohammed, commingling with Malcolm, now the NOI's enemy number one. Here appeared a case of "black folks first" in action.

Malcolm entered into sustained interaction with black Rochester at a critical point in his political evolution. The evidence strongly indicates that it was one of his most important political relationships. He would include Rochester in his autobiography as well as in one of his most notable political testaments and prognostications, "Prospects for Freedom in 1965."<sup>88</sup> Apparently, no place so small loomed so large in Malcolm's imagination. The Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), Malcolm's most ambitious attempt to enter organized activist politics, may have derived its name from the Organization of African Unity, the umbrella group of the newly independent African states. For a prototype of the OAAU, however, we have to look to places like Rochester. The black struggle in that city offered a model, even if only fleetingly and in miniature, of the kind of non-sectarian movement that Malcolm envisioned in forming the OAAU. Sadly, he would be assassinated within days of his last trip to the Flower City. Rochester, an old terminus of the Underground Railroad used by African American seekers of freedom in another era, played a role in the making of Malcolm X and in what he, in turn, helped make.

### Acknowledgement

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### Notes

1. Dupree, "Rochester Roots/Routes, Part V," 22.
2. See Memorandum from Gloster Current to Messrs. Wilkins, Morsell, Moon, and Odom, February 19, 1963, Papers of the NAACP, Part 29: Branch Department Files, Series B: 1966–1972; letter from Gloster Current to Rev. J. Oscar Lee, February 21, 1963, *ibid.*; letter from Gloster Current to co-workers in the local branches regarding NAACP and the Muslims, undated, *ibid.* While the NAACP microfilm series is dated 1966–1972, the material contained within does, in fact, cover materials dated 1962–1963.
3. Though Mildred Johnson belonged to the socio-economic middle class, her lifelong achievements suggest she consistently identified with those less fortunate, rejecting notions of cultural respectability that many of that class adopted.
4. "Negroes Call for Unity To Protest 'Abuses'," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, February 18, 1963, 15, Box 58, Folder 766, The Industrial Areas Foundation Papers, University of Illinois, Chicago, IL (IAF); "The Rochester Image Two-Faced? Angry Voices Raised by Opposing Groups," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, March 13, 1963, 6, *ibid.*
5. For a more complete examination of the Nation of Islam's formation and practices, see Lincoln, *The Black Muslims*; Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*; Marsh, *The Lost-Found Nation*; Walker, *Islam and the Search*; Ogbar, *Black Power*; Gomez, *Black Crescent*; Turner, *Islam in the African American Experience*; Clegge, *An Original Man*.

6. See United States Court of Appeals Second Circuit. – 334 F.2d 906 (1964); 379 U.S 892 (1964); Smith, “Black Muslims” Lawrence Okane, “Muslim Negroes Suing the State,” *New York Times*, March 19, 1961, 1. See also “Series II: Black Muslim Litigation, 1962–1970, SaMarion, Federal Case, 1961–1964,” Box 4/Folder 3, 21/F/231, Jacob D. Hyman Papers, 1956–1971, University Archives, The State University of New York at Buffalo. Jacob Hyman was one of several attorneys representing the inmates in their prolonged battle with New York State.
7. See, for example, Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 13–14.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Scholars have built upon the popular perceptions created by contemporary newspaper accounts which drew sweeping distinctions between the separatist platform of the Nation of Islam and the integrationist agenda of the NAACP and the non-violent strategies of the early CORE movement. For examples of this scholarship, see Lincoln, *The Black Muslims*, 141–5; Mumford, *Newark*, 81; Dillard, *Faith in the City*, 232–3; Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation*, 62; Cone, *Martin & Malcolm*, 200; Jeffries, *Black Power*, 3. For examples of popular reporting, see “Rise in Racial Extremism Worries Harlem Leaders: Racism Rise Worries Harlem,” *New York Times*, January 25, 1960, 1. For example, in 1960, NAACP president Roy Wilkins told reporters, “The Temple of Islam was no better in its racial creed than the Ku Klux Klan ... We also feel that any cult that seeks to make a minority believe that it can solve its problems through racial hatred is misleading the people and spreading destruction.” The same article included, “The NAACP and the Urban League are doing a good job, but are not emotionally satisfying ... When you’re angry, you want to hear angry words. The purveyors of angry words in Harlem are to be found mainly among followers of Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X.”
10. See Theoharis and Woodard, *Freedom North*; Joseph, *The Black Power Movement*; Williams, *Black Politics*; Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace*; Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*; Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing*; Self, *American Babylon*; Dillard, *Faith in the City*; Countryman, *Up South*; Jones, *The Selma of the North*.
11. See, for example, Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*; Grossman, *Land of Hope*; Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*; Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out*; De Jong, “Staying in Place” Marks, “Black Workers” Marks, *Farewell*.
12. Spear, *Black Chicago*, 12–14. See also Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*; Osofsky, *Harlem*; Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit*; Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape*.
13. Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 80.
14. Smallwood, *The Atlas*. Smallwood has two very important and insightful maps concerning the Great Migrations. Map #93, “The Black Exodus: The Great Migration of African Americans from the American South (1900–1929)” and Map #103, “The Second Great Migration: African Americans Moving North (1930–1980)” indicate the different paths Southern migrants took. Work on Rochester suggests that Prof. Smallwood was describing large cities when he suggested “the jobs created by the growing war industries fueled the second period of massive black migration north and west, from 1938–1950.”
15. The black population in 1950 was 7590. By 1960, it had increased to 23,586. During this same period, Rochester lost more than 4% of its overall population. See <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/july64/city.html>
16. Dupree, “Rochester Roots/Routes, Part III,” 21.
17. *Ibid.*, 22.
18. McKelvey, “Housing and Urban Renewal,” 19.
19. Walter Cooper, interview by Laura Warren Hill, May 21, 2008, transcript, Rochester Black Freedom Struggle Project, Department of Rare Books/Special Collections, University of Rochester River Campus Libraries, Rochester, NY. Also online at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?page=4495&Print=8>; herein referred to as Cooper Interview.
20. “As We See It: Community Leadership Needed to Stop Attacks on Police,” *Rochester Times Union*, August 22, 1961; “A Start Toward Better Relations,” *Rochester Times Union*, August 25, 1961; and “A Way to Improve Racial Problems,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, August 26, 1961.
21. Cooper Interview.
22. Desmond Stone, “The Tense, Sensitive No Man’s Land of Race Relations,” *Rochester Times Union*, February 19, 1963, “S.C.A.C” folder, Walter Cooper Papers. This set of papers was generously offered to the author for use. With Dr. Cooper’s permission they have

- since been deposited with the Department of Rare Books/Special Collections, University of Rochester River Campus Libraries, Rochester, NY. All references refer to their original organization in folders by Dr. Cooper and will not necessarily correspond with the archival system employed by the University of Rochester; herein referred to as Cooper Papers.
23. Cooper Interview; Franklin Florence, interview by Laura Warren Hill, September 19, 2008, transcript in author's personal collection; herein referred to as Florence Interview; and "2 Cops Hurt Subduing Man," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, August 23, 1962, "RVF Police Cases & Incidents 1959–1969" clipping file, Rochester Public Library, Rochester, NY; herein referred to as RPL. See also *The People of the State of New York vs. Rufus Fairwell Preliminary Hearing* transcript, Howard Coles Papers, Box 18, Folder 15, Rochester Museum and Science Center (RMSC), Rochester, NY; herein referred to as Coles Papers.
  24. "Detective Testifies on Fairwell," *Rochester Times Union*, May 19, 1964, "RVF Police Cases & Incidents 1959–1969" clipping file, RPL; and "U.S. Probing Fairwell Case, Rally Told," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, November 5, 1962, "RVF Police Cases & Incidents 1959–1969" clipping file, RPL.
  25. The "man with a gun" story was repeated so many times that it became rather a cliché throughout the city. See "Muslim Case Goes to Jury," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, March 25, 1964; "Muslim Trial Set Monday," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, February 27, 1964; "Officers' Injuries Told to Muslim Case Jury," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, March 14, 1964; and "Police Deny Watch on Muslim Hall," *Rochester Times Union*, May 17, 1963, "Black Muslims" clipping file, RPL.
  26. For more on the "Wilmington Ten" see Thomas, *The True Story*.
  27. Minister Franklin Florence indicated that he accompanied Malcolm X and Freddie Thomas to a meeting with the city leaders prior to the invasion of the mosque wherein Malcolm X provided them with information regarding the Nation of Islam in an effort to preempt any run-ins with the police. See Florence Interview.
  28. Statement of Mr. A.C. White, February 5, 1963, NAACP and Police Brutality folder, Cooper Papers. The statement indicates that it "was not signed by Mr. White, because of the extent of injuries of his arm and hands!!!" which included "a broken left arm, a shattered bone in the left wrist, a broken bone in the right hand, a broken finger on the right hand, ... a dislocated finger on the right hand, ribs and side ... bruised from the kicking, and sore until [he] could hardly breathe."
  29. Florence Interview.
  30. *Ibid.*
  31. McKelvey, "A History of the Police," 25.
  32. The investigation by the Justice Department would eventually be dropped without a conviction of the officers. In exchange, the city of Rochester paid a very handsome settlement to Rufus Fairwell for his injuries. See "Police, Firefighters Back Homer on Fairwell Case," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, November 23, 1962; "Indictments Hit by Police Group," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, nd; "City Agrees to Provide Results of Police-Abuse Probe to Group," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, February 21, 1963, NAACP and Police Brutality folder, Cooper Papers. See also "The United Appeal of the United Action Committee for Rufus Fairwell," Coles Papers, Box 18, Folder 15, RMSC; "U.S. Probing Fairwell Case Rally Told," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, November 5, 1962, "RVF Police Cases and Incidents, 1959–1969" clipping folder, RPL.
  33. Theoharis, "Alabama on Avalon," 34.
  34. Take for example a 1963 case in New Haven, Connecticut. Yohuru Williams notes that local NAACP president, John Barber, wrote a letter to the New Haven mayor wherein he framed his concerns, "Babylon of Black Togetherness." Williams suggests that Barber's letter lamented "the political infighting and disorganization that hampered black organizations in New Haven in the late 1950s and early 1960s." Williams, *Black Politics*, 21.
  35. During the course of conducting interviews for the Rochester Black Freedom Struggle Project, Department of Rare Books/Special Collections, University of Rochester River Campus Libraries, Rochester, NY, many current and former Rochester residents recalled these three cases together, without prompt.
  36. Jenkins and Tryman, *The Malcolm X Encyclopedia*.
  37. James Cone delivered his seminal *Black Theology and Black Power* as a set of lectures during his tenure as a Theological Fellow at Colgate Rochester Divinity School in Rochester, NY in the early 1960s. See Cone, *Black Theology*, xv.

38. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 76.
39. John and Constance Mitchell, interview by Laura Warren Hill, July 12, 2008, transcript, Rochester Black Freedom Struggle Project, Department of Rare Books/Special Collections, University of Rochester River Campus Libraries, Rochester, NY. Also online at: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?page=4495&Print=17>; herein referred to as Mitchell Interview.
40. In late July 1963, just months after the Baden Street rally where unity emerged as the rallying cry, Malcolm held a "Unity Rally" in Harlem, personally inviting Martin Luther King, Jr. and Roy Wilkins, Elijah Muhammad's namesake, Elijah Muhammad, Jr. and his youngest son Akbar, who was studying in Cairo, to attend and speak. Without notifying his father of his intentions, Akbar, who would later break from the elder Muhammad, called upon the various civil rights organizations to put aside their affiliations and unite as black men and women. See Leaks, "Urge Negroes to Unite!" 1, 3–4.
41. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm*, 200.
42. Theoharis argues, "Local chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Nation of Islam (NOI), among others, played prominent roles in that struggle – and people moved between organizations and worked in coalitions well before 1965," while Countryman notes that Philadelphia activist John Churchville organized a unity rally in Philadelphia "much like the one Churchville had helped Jeremiah X to organize in 1963." While Theoharis is more explicit in her argument, Countryman notes that personal relationships between local civil rights activists and members of the Nation of Islam played a significant role in shaping civil rights–Black Power activism. See Theoharis, "Alabama on Avalon," 27–53; Countryman, *Up South*, 198–9.
43. Further research needs to be done on the relationship between Malcolm X and self-identified local leaders of organizations such as the NAACP and CORE. While many have written about Malcolm's relationship with black leaders, particularly self-identified black nationalists and radicals – in a number of locations – there is very little scholarship on the ways he engaged the local branches of national organizations who professed to reject him and his philosophy. More recent work has focused on the development of relationships after his break with the Nation of Islam.
44. Theoharis, "Alabama on Avalon," 39.
45. "90 Negro Clergymen Denounce Muslim Cult: Anti-White Movement Using Religion as Cloak to Spread Hate, Meeting Told," *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 1962, Papers of the NAACP, Part 29: Branch Department Files, Series B: 1966–1972.
46. Letter from (Miss) Althea T.L. Simmons to Gloster B. Current, May 23, 1962, Papers of the NAACP, Part 29: Branch Department Files, Series B: 1966–1972.
47. "90 Negro Clergymen Denounce Muslim Cult: Anti-White Movement Using Religion as Cloak to Spread Hate, Meeting Told," *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 1962, Papers of the NAACP, Part 29: Branch Department Files, Series B: 1966–1972.
48. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, xix.
49. This constitutional protection meant members of the NOI had the right to hold religious services, the freedom from punishment because of religious faith, the right to possess and wear religious medals, limited right to proselytize, and the right to practice their religion in prison. See United States Court of Appeals Second Circuit. – 334 F.2d 906 (1964) and 379 U.S 892 (1964); Smith, "Black Muslims." See also "Series II: Black Muslim Litigation, 1962–1970, SaMarion, Federal Case, 1961–1964," Box 4/Folder 3, 21/F/231, Jacob D. Hyman Papers, 1956–1971, University Archives, The State University of New York at Buffalo.
50. *WE: Rochester's Only Newsmagazine* 19, no. 12 (January 7, 1963), Papers of the NAACP, Part 29: Branch Department, Series B: 1966–1972.
51. After one of the era's first race riots occurred in Rochester, NY between July 24 and 27, the local police reported in an internal memorandum that much of the responsibility for this event lay with Malcolm X and the Black Muslims: "The incident of January 6, 1963 involving a response by police officers to an emergency call at a location on North Street where there was found to be a meeting of Muslims and every indication that the call was a set-up on the part of some persons who desired to incite an incident and ferment unrest among the Negroes is another classic example. Following this, Malcolm X appeared in our community and preaching hate against the whites and supremacy for the Negroes [sic],

- literally frightened a large number of our residents. Threats were made of blood in our streets and rioting at that time which prompted many of our clergy into becoming more aggressive locally in the civil rights movement. The action of those clergymen involved in all faiths resulted in much unfavorable publicity against the police.” See Inter-Departmental Correspondence from W.M. Lombard, Chief of Police to Donald J. Corbett, Commissioner of Public Safety, Attention: Porter W. Homer, City Manager, September 29, 1964, Public Emergency, Riots folder, BIN 301, Box 4&5 combined, Rochester Municipal Archives and Record Center (RCA), Rochester, NY.
52. “‘Human Rights’ Violated, Muslims Say,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, January 8, 1963, 19. Interestingly, just weeks after Malcolm made this charge publicly, Rochester City police interrupted a protestant church in full garb with K9 units in tow. See Florence Interview. See also “Supervisors Get Report: Democrats Laud Anti-Bias Unit,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, October 12, 1962; “Supervisor Cites 1961 Record: City Cops Charged in 16 Complaints,” undated, NAACP and Police Brutality folder, Cooper Papers.
  53. Interestingly, Monroe County, with the city of Rochester at its heart, had both a county Human Rights Commission and an office of the State Human Rights Commission. In the first nine months of 1962 alone, the County Commission had investigated more than 750 cases, approximately 725 of them initiated by non-white persons. Of the 16 police brutality cases referred to this Commission, all were against the Rochester City police department.
  54. At this time, James Meredith had gained considerable national and international press attention in his fight to desegregate the University of Mississippi through a federal lawsuit. See “FBI papers NY 105-8999, D. Miscellaneous NOI Activity, 2. Rochester, New York, Incident,” <http://www.wonderwheel.net/work/foia/1963.html> (accessed April 14, 2010); and, “Jailed Muslims Fasting, or Dieting?” *Rochester Times Union*, February 15, 1963, 15.
  55. *Ibid.*
  56. “Black Muslims, Police Clash; 2 Arrested,” *Rochester Times Union*, January 7, 1963; Cliff Smith, “5 Muslims Deny Assault,” *Rochester Times Union*, May 16, 1963, RVF Black Muslims clipping folder, RPL.
  57. “12 Black Muslims Jailed: Riot Charge Based on Jan. 6 Meeting,” *Rochester Times Union*, February 9, 1963; “10 Black Muslims Arrested On Riot, Assault Charges,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, February 9, 1963, RVF Black Muslims clipping folder, RPL; and Cooper Interview.
  58. “Muslims Bar Firemen From Hall,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, January 14, 1963, “RVF Black Muslims” clipping folder, RPL; and “Rochester Negroes Unite For Freedom: Hit Muslims’ Persecution, Protest Police Brutality,” *Muhammad Speaks*, March 18, 1963, 11.
  59. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, 151–81.
  60. A hand-drawn flyer circulated throughout the black community in Rochester after the 1964 uprising listed Loftus Carson as a “Tom,” and therefore someone to be wary of. Cooper Papers.
  61. “Muslim Assails Police ‘Hostility’,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, February 15, 1963, Papers of the NAACP, Part 29: Branch Department Files, Series B: 1966–1972; “Muslim Head Pleased by Conference,” *Rochester Times Union*, January 18, 1963; and “Muslim Leader, Police Confer,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, January 18, 1963, Black Muslims folder, RPL.
  62. “Muslim Leader, Police Confer,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, January 18, 1963.
  63. DeCaro, *On the Side of My People*, 185.
  64. “Muslim March in N.Y. Protests Arrests Here,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, February 14, 1963, RVF Black Muslims clipping folder, RPL.
  65. “Rochester Negroes Unite for Freedom,” *Muhammad Speaks*, March 18, 1963, 11.
  66. “Black Muslims Released on \$500 Bail Each,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, undated, Papers of the NAACP, Part 29: Branch Department Files, Series B: 1966–1972.
  67. “Meeting Set At Settlement,” *Rochester Times Union*, February 16, 1963, Papers of the NAACP, Part 29: Branch Department Files, Series B: 1966–1972.
  68. “Negroes Call for Unity to Protest ‘Abuses’,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, February 18, 1963, Papers of the NAACP, Part 29: Branch Department Files, Series B: 1966–1972; author’s personal correspondence with Dr. Walter Cooper, July 21, 2008, in author’s possession.
  69. “Rochester Negroes Unite For Freedom: Hit Muslims’ Persecution, Protest Police Brutality,” *Muhammad Speaks*, March 18, 1963, 11.

70. Memorandum to Messrs. Wilkins, Morsell, Moon, and Odom from Gloster Current, RE: Rochester and the Muslims, February 19, 1963, Papers of the NAACP, Part 29: Branch Department Files, Series B: 1966–1972. All emphasis in Current’s statement is from the original.
71. NAACP and the Muslims letter from Gloster Current to NAACP branches, undated, Papers of the NAACP, Part 29: Branch Department Files, Series B: 1966–1972.
72. Ibid.
73. “NAACP Hits Separatists,” *Rochester Times Union*, January 17, 1963, Papers of the NAACP, Part 29: Branch Department Files, Series B: 1966–1972.
74. “Rise of Muslims Laid to Bias,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, January 31, 1963, Papers of the NAACP, Part 29: Branch Department Files, Series B: 1966–1972; Florence Interview.
75. Full page advertisement in local newspaper, February 22, 1963, NAACP and Police Brutality folder, Cooper Papers.
76. “City Agrees to Provide Results of Police-Abuse Probe to Group,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, February 21, 1963, NAACP and Police Brutality folder, Cooper Papers.
77. “Talks Continue into Late Hour on Police Acts,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, February 25, 1963; “Review Board Progress Cited,” *Rochester Times Union*, February 27, 1963; “Board May Be Month Away,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, February 28, 1963, NAACP and Police Brutality folder, Cooper Papers.
78. Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 4.
79. Mitchell Interview; Cooper Interview.
80. Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 325–70.
81. For Malcolm’s own telling of this split, see Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 20–22; Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 307–19.
82. His talk that evening was a variation of the commonly known “House Slave, Field Slave” speech. Charles Holcomb, “Muslim Tells of All-Negro Nation Goal,” *Rochester Times Union*, January 29, 1963, 22; “Muslim Urges Nation in U.S for Negroes,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, January 23, 1963, Papers of the NAACP, Part 29: Branch Department, Series B: 1966–1972.
83. Local interview with Constance Mitchell recorded as “Remembering Brother Malcolm: Thoughts on the Prophet, 40 Years after His Death,” *Rochester City Newspaper*, February 16, 2005, <http://www.rochestercitynewspaper.com/archives/2005/2/Remembering+Brother+Malcolm> (accessed April 14, 2010); Mitchell Interview.
84. Florence Interview; Charles and Pauline Price, interview with Laura Warren Hill, August 6, 2008, transcript, Rochester Black Freedom Struggle Project, Department of Rare Books/Special Collections, University of Rochester River Campus Libraries, Rochester NY. Also online at: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?page=4495&Print=23>; herein referred to as Price Interview.
85. Price Interview.
86. Goldman, *The Death and Life*; DeCaro, *On the Side of My People*, 265.
87. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, 151–81.
88. Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 155.

### Notes on contributor

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