“Next thing you know, you got Invaders everywhere”¹: An Organizational Analysis of the Invaders, 1967-1970

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Memphis, Tennessee was built and continues to operate upon the systematic subjugation and exploitation of people of color, predominately black folks. Memphis came to the fore economically via its vast cotton industry; indeed, its strategic location on the Mississippi River allowed Memphis to claim its title as “the home of the largest cotton warehouses in the world, the largest inland cotton market in the world, [and] the largest producer of cottonseed products in the world.”² It goes without saying that this industry could not have been possible without the unfathomable crime of slavery and later sharecropping. Though Memphis was left relatively unscathed — at least in terms of casualties — by the Civil War, the Yellow Fever epidemic of the 1870’s took a massive toll on the Memphis population, in particular among black communities. As has been repeated numerous times throughout Memphis’ history, affluent white folks fled the city limits in hopes of evading the epidemic, in turn shifting the city from one with a 17% black minority into one with a two-thirds black majority.³ Though during the epidemic black folks maintained the administration of the city, when the end of the Yellow Fever finally came, white folks returned — bringing with them their familiar economic and political

¹ Minister Suhkara Abdul Yahweh, aka Lance “Sweet Willie Wine” Watson, interviewed by the author, Memphis, TN, July 9th, 2014.
² Wanda Rushing, Memphis and The Paradox of Place: Globalization in the American South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 12.
³ Ibid. 14
In a city whose history is rooted so deeply in racism, it is no surprise that this has been a location for numerous struggles for black liberation. These included the labor struggles of the predominantly black sharecroppers, black maids’ organizing against sexual harassment and assault, and the sit-in movements leading to the desegregation of public schools, buses, and other such facilities. Indeed, in her book Battling The Plantation Mentality, Laurie Green describes Memphis as “a crossroads for the civil rights movement.” But as every generation inherited the struggle of its predecessors, the strategy and tactics thereof would shift in order to adapt to the changing socio-political terrain. Indeed, the rise of student activism in the late 50’s and early 60’s produced a radical shift in methodology, most notably the rise of the sit-in movement. Energized by this newfound political empowerment, students and youth in the late sixties continued the struggle and again altered its trajectory from that of the previous generation. In response to the structural and everyday racism they faced, “students and youth grappled to define Black Power and make the ideology applicable to their local circumstances.”

Though there were many pockets of youth localizing Black Power ideology, the Invaders — an amalgam of students, veterans, life-long organizers, and others — became the most vocal and conspicuous bastion of Black Power in Memphis. Indeed, wherever there publicly appeared “Black Power elements” — meaning cultural or political manifestations of Black Power — in Memphis, they were almost invariably attributed to the Invaders. But it is misleading to

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4 Ibid. 14-17
6 Ibid., 253.
describe the Invaders as a monolithic entity and thus fallacious to attribute the Black Power
“elements” to such a neat conceptual construct. Rather, what has been referred to as “the
Invaders” is in reality a semi-permeable network of geographically-based associations as well as
a periphery of young folks who either self-identified or were externally identified as Invaders, in
turn artificially inflating the perceived size and threat of the Invaders. Moreover, what has been
referred to as “the Invaders” has very often omitted “the Invaderettes”; these women were not
only vital to the functionality of the Invaders as an organization, but moreover they challenged
the conceptual contours of the Invaders as an identity. Specifically, the Invaderettes wrestled
with the masculinist underpinnings of what it meant to be an Invader, in some cases pushing
these boundaries, and in others, reifying them. Nevertheless, the contemporaneous exaggerations
of the Invaders’ size and threat catalyzed aggressive surveillance and infiltration which, along
with a lack of organizational structure, led to the Invaders’ unraveling just two years after their
formation.

The Invaders — much like many Black Power organizations — grew out of, rather than
in opposition to, the Civil Rights struggles of the mid to late 50’s and early 60’s.9 Their
appearance in Memphis was not a spontaneous flare but rather the boiling over of frustrations
that had been simmering for decades. Their coming to the fore was largely dependent upon a
surge in student and youth activism following the desegregation campaigns conducted by black
leadership among groups such as the NAACP, the Binghampton Civic Club, and the Shelby
County Democratic Club. These groups, populated predominantly by older, well-educated black
men, attacked segregation through legal and political avenues.10 But to battle segregation in the

9 Peniel Joseph, Waiting ’Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America (New
10 Kinchen, 25-40.
courts was not only sluggish and drawn-out, but it was also a highly exclusionary process, one reserved for what Du Bois referred to as the “talented tenth.”\textsuperscript{11} Moreover, victories in court or in the halls of legislature failed to translate to the everyday experiences of racism and other forms of injustice, as they often lacked substantial provisions for enforcement.

Thus, frustrated by this inaccessible avenue of the civil rights movement, the younger generation claimed a stake in the struggle and sought to “destroy segregation — now.”\textsuperscript{12} They wanted tangible, immediate wins and they wanted involvement and control of such a process. Thus, in 1960 began a series of student-organized, student-conducted sit-ins in sites ranging from buses to lunch counters, public libraries to movie theaters.\textsuperscript{13} If white business owners and city officials refused to integrate, then black students would force it through disruptive sit-ins. The students’ energy and audacity helped spark an eighteen-month long “Freedom Movement” comprised of sit-ins, marches, boycotts, and more that ultimately forced “city government official [to end] segregationists’ practice ahead of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.”\textsuperscript{14} This movement resulted not just in access to public facilities for black folks, but moreover catalyzed and politicized much of the black youth in Memphis. Black youths began to steer the movement in their own direction, began to struggle on their own terms, all of which was underpinned by “a changed perception of oneself” in relation to both oppressive power structures and to the older generation of Civil Rights activist.\textsuperscript{15}

Coby Smith and Charles Cabbage, the eventual cofounders of the Invaders, came of age during the crest of this upsurge in black youth and student activism. Smith, who was born and

\textsuperscript{12} Green, 232.
\textsuperscript{13} Green, 232-240; Coby Smith, interviewed by the author, Memphis, TN, July 8th, 2014.
\textsuperscript{14} Kinchen, 39.
\textsuperscript{15} Green, 241.
still lives to this day in North Memphis, had long been active in community organizing, tracing his activism back to early adolescence. His parents were active in the community work of their church - Friendship Baptist Church - as well as with the Klondike Civic Club. Smith was engaged with the youth activities in these organizations and others, such as the Boy Scouts of America and the National Defense Cadet Corp. Smith’s leadership and organizing ability began to crystalize in his years at Manassas High, where he not only became the first African American Cadet to receive the Legion of Valor award, but too organized a mass walk-out at the request of the Civil Rights legend Jim Lawson. As such, Smith had long been seeding connections in the black communities of North Memphis, establishing himself as a prominent community organizer. On the other hand, Charles Cabbage, who grew up in South Memphis and attended Carver High School, had in his adolescence not been heavily involved in the practice of organizing. Of course, he had nevertheless established connections and trust with many South Memphians, which proved to be invaluable in his later work with the Invaders.

However, Smith and Cabbage had never been acquainted while growing up in Memphis, and would not do so until serendipitously connecting in Atlanta. Cabbage was in Atalanta attending Morehouse College wherein he eventually “began to flow in and out of different political circles, organizing anti-war protests on Morehouse’s campus, and soaking up knowledge from more experienced activists.” Smith, shortly after withdrawing from Southwestern College (now Rhodes College) for financial reasons, found himself in Atlanta on a

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16 Interview with Coby Smith, 7/8/14.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid; Kinchen, 45.
19 Kinchen, 43.
20 Ibid., 44.
job selling magazines. Smith would work selling magazine during the day, but at night he “would go down at work in the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] headquarters.” Smith had been acquainted with then-chariman of SNCC, Stokely Carmichael, during the Meredith March Against Fear. With SNCC, Coby’s “main thing that [he] was trying to get them to do what was to let [him] organize a concert tour to finance SNCC’s activities” through his connections with Memphis musicians such as James Brown.

One night, Smith, Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and Cleveland Sellers visited Morehouse, where Carmichael introduced Smith to Charles Cabbage on the basis of their both being from Memphis. Cabbage, however, had been working primarily with SCLC, but may have become acquainted with Carmichael though his campus anti-war organizing or simply from the close-knit Civil Rights organizing community in Atlanta. In addition to their both calling Memphis home, Cabbage and Smith connected due to the fact that their respective girlfriends at the time happened to be roommates. The two continued to develop their organizing skills in Atlanta, and though they had offers from SLCL and SNCC to organize in other cities, the two realized that given their deep connections and experiences, it would be most logical and effective to return to Memphis.

21 Interview with Coby Smith, 7/8/14.
22 Ibid.
23 Aram Goudsouzian, Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power and the Meredith March Against Fear (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 99-100. Indeed, Goudsouzian notes that “Smith’s role model... was Stokely Carmichael... Instead of sermonizing, Carmichael spoke in a fierce, entertaining style... Smith admired his deck overalls, sandals, and dark shades... Smith now considered the federal government an enemy rather than a reluctant ally.” Smith’s exposure to Carmichael and his Black Power ideology radicalized him much in the same way that the Invaders would later radicalize many black youths in Memphis.
24 Interview with Coby Smith 7/8/14. It does not appear, however, that this plan ever came to fruition.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid; Kinchen, 44.
27 Ibid.
28 Interview b/w Bill Thomas and Calvin Taylor, 1968; Kinchen, 49.
Once back in Memphis, Cabbage and Smith began organizing around “what people generally refer to as Black Power,” as Cabbage put it.\textsuperscript{29} However, the antecedent to that “what” is quite expansive. Though in its broadest sense, Black Power could be understood as black folks’ reclamation of psychological, social, cultural, and political power and control, the programmatic means to such an end varied greatly. Indeed, in his book \textit{A New Day In Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975}, William Van Deburg deftly dissects the myriad strains within what is otherwise monolithically referred to as “Black Power.” Van Deburg identifies two overarching approaches to garnering Black Power: Pluralism and Nationalism. Within the latter, Van Deburg identifies three subsidiary strains, namely Territorial Separatism, Revolutionary Nationalism, and Cultural Nationalism.\textsuperscript{30}

Likely from their exposure to Stokely Carmichael and SNCC, Charles Cabbage and Coby Smith predominately hovered between Territorial Separatism and Revolutionary Nationalism. The former informed their approach to “upgrade the black community” through community-controlled programs that could address the idiosyncratic needs of their constituents.\textsuperscript{31} Indeed, the Invaders consistently sought programs operated by black folks and for black folks in order to rid their communities of a sense of dependency on White America.\textsuperscript{32} The Invaders’ proximity to Revolutionary Nationalism derives from their anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism, which developed most visibly under the leadership of Lance “Sweet Willie Wine” Watson.\textsuperscript{33} Though

\textsuperscript{29} Kinchen, 7; Charles Cabbage, quoted in Kinchen page 7.
\textsuperscript{32} Kinchen, 119-144.
\textsuperscript{33} Lance “Sweet Willie Wine” Watson, interviewed by Charlie McElory and Pat Jones, \textit{The Sou’Wester}, September 25th, 1970; \textit{Centers of the Souther Struggle: FBI Files on Selma, Memphis, Montgomery, St. Augustine, and Albany}, accessed from the University of Memphis Microform Collection, Reel 20, slide 402.
members had long been studying Marxism and had been taking cues from Che Guevara’s liberation tactics in Cuba, Watson magnified their rhetoric of socialist revolution. Moreover, many of their members were veterans, and as such, made the connection between the war in Vietnam and American Imperialism.

However, the Invaders placed strong emphasis in garnering among black communities a sense of pride, respect, and reverence for blackness. Much of their programs “integrated elements of the emerging Black Arts Movement with practical ideals to restore race pride into the community.” Indeed, when they began their “Liberation Schools,” on the wall was a drawing of a black man standing tall, wearing a shirt adorned with “Black Pride,” as well as a black woman with the words “Black Is Beautiful” underneath her. Moreover, members wrote poetry, prose, and made illustrations that they would disseminate among other “Invader literature.” As such, it is clear Cabbage, Smith, and other were influenced strongly by the Cultural Nationalists, understanding that “picking up a gun without first reaffirming the beauty and uniqueness of black culture was the height of foolishness.” But ultimately, their stated purpose, messaging, and programmatic initiatives resembled organizations like SNCC and the BPP far more than those like US or The Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School.

Ready to take Black Power from the books to the streets of Memphis, Coby Smith made use of his connection with Rev. Jim Lawson to find organizing work for he and Cabbage. Lawson, recognizing Smith and Cabbage’s affinity for organizing black youth in North and South Memphis, hired the two as field workers for his federally-funded non-profit called MAP-

34 Interview with Minister Suhkara Abdul Yahweh, 7/9/2014; “Invader’s Obscene Comment Stirs Southwestern Campus,” Kay Pittman Black, Press-Scimitar, February 13th, 1969.
35 Kinchen, 120.
38 Van Deburg, 170.
South. John B. Smith, a longtime friend of Cabbage, was also hired as a field worker after his return from Vietnam. MAP-South’s stated mission was to break cycles of poverty through “individual case work and community organizing. Both thrusts are geared to a self-help concept.” MAP-South identified the paramount concerns of poverty as “health and the urgent need for emergency food provisions…along with substandard housing, incomes below the poverty line, environmental problems…nearly insurmountable obstacles to welfare ineligibility, and the lack of recreational facilities for youth.”

As field workers, Coby Smith, John B. Smith, and Cabbage would organize youth in the community to participate in community clean-ups as well as educational sessions on topics such as voting, job-training, and community organizing. They also conducted demographic surveys in the area, assessing family size, income, housing facilities, and the like. While working with MAP-South, Cabbage and Coby Smith began organizing to form the Invaders as well as the Black Organizing Project (BOP), which was to serve as an umbrella group under which any and all groups and organizations following espousing tenants of Black Power could coordinate. However, the origin of this planned traced back to Smith and Cabbage’s work in Atlanta, as Smith recalled that through working with Stokely Carmichael and SNCC, the two intended to return to Memphis “to organize a Black United Front.” This front would coalesce extant leaders and organizations to synergistically create a more capable political entity to lobby and fight for the interests of black communities.

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41 Coby Smith, interviewed by author, Memphis, TN, July 16th, 2014.
42 Kinchen, 62.
43 Interview with Coby Smith, 7/16/14.
However, due to accusations of their involvement with SNCC, Cabbage and Smith were eventually relieved of their positions at MAP-South. According to Washington Butler — then director of the War on Poverty Committee (WOPC), the source of MAP-South’s federal funding — “federal law precludes payments of WOPC funds to anyone belong to any organization advocating rioting ‘and there have been several rumors that these two men [Coby and Cabbage] are members of such an organization. Until such rumors are disproved, we are withholding funds.’”44 Despite Rev. Lawson’s insistence that “the best two people he ever had working for him were Coby Smith and Charles Cabbage,” the two were indeed fired, though they took with them a plethora of newfound connections and organizing skills.45

After their dismissal from MAP-South, the founders of the Invaders began to make use of the relationships they had built as field organizers to start building capacity for the Invaders as well as the BOP. Originally, the BOP included groups such as “the Black Student Alliance (BSA) at Memphis State University, the Intercollegiate Chapter of the NAACP at LeMoyne College, the African American Brotherhood at Owen College…the City Organizers, and the Invaders.”46 Organizationally, the Invaders were to fulfill a two-fold goal: to “[provide] opportunities for high school students to develop cultural awareness and knowledge of the political importance of youth” and to be “responsible for security…for putting out any and all sheets on guerrilla warfare, on training people in liberation tactics.”47

However, in actuality the Invaders took on a much broader organizational form that embodied the overarching purpose of the BOP, namely “to stimulate in young blacks a sense of

45 Interview b/w Bill Thomas and Calvin Taylor, 1968.
46 Kinchen, 63.
47 FBI Reel 21, slide 160; Interview b/w Bill Thomas and Calvin Taylor, 8/17/1968.
black identity, black pride, and black consciousness, to create in the blacks an independent spirit, to cease to be dependent upon and influenced by the white race.”

In origin, the BOP was “the parent company” within which all subsidiary organizations were housed. However, Calvin Taylor, a founder of the Invaders, pointed out that “the news media would not say ‘Black Organizing Project,’ the news media would say what? ‘Invaders.’ So now you got the Invaders responsible for everything…The Black Organizing Project could never become the Black Organizing Project because the public always heard ‘Invaders, Invaders.’”

Taylor also revealed that the media’s blurring of the organizational distinction between the BOP and the Invaders was reflected internally: “Since the Invaders is what’s known by everybody, everybody wants to be what? ‘I wanna be an Invader [laughs].’”

Consequently, even if not working on paramilitary development or youth organizing, “anyone who was a member of the Black Organizing Project…would automatically be an Invader…people just started calling everybody Invaders.”

The flexibility Invader identity also stems from the philosophy embedded in the name. *The Invaders* was a briefly popular television show that aired from 1968-1969, wherein aliens came to Earth, but took the form of humans, inhibiting their easily being identified. Drawing inspiration from the show, the Invaders (the organization) assumed a similar philosophy and tactic of infiltration; said Taylor, “if you saw [an Invader] downtown acting like any other shopper downtown then you wouldn’t know if [he] was really a black man getting ready to bomb your place, or a black man in the city.”

The adoption of this philosophy became a prerequisite to involvement in either the Invaders or the BOP at

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48 Kinchen, 66; Charles Cabbage quoted in Kinchen page 60.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Interview b/w Bill Thomas and Calvin Taylor, 8/17/1968.
54 Ibid.
large. Indeed, Taylor stated that “the other [BOP] people were Invaders because we all worked under that type of philosophy; if you watch the television show you will know what it is all about.” Eventually, for all practical purposes, “there was not really a distinction [between the Invaders and the BOP].”

Given that the founders of the Invaders were all Memphis natives and that they had done substantial field work as organizers with MAP-South, it was relatively easy to spread word of their newly organized Black Power group. Their recruitment pool were those pushed on the fringes of society: “the gang members, the dropouts, the hoodlums,” and high schoolers who were otherwise regarded as too immature to be politically involved. Much like the work of the Black Panther Party, the Invaders would attempt to radicalize these marginalized communities through exposure to political, cultural and aesthetic aspects of Black Power. In less than a year, the Invaders’ membership grew from 15 to what some estimates put near 2,000, a product both of the salience and resonance of the Invaders’ messaging, as well as an indicator of the mailability and diffuseness of membership. However, over the proceeding months — mid-1968 through early-1969 — the Invaders would metamorphose from a tight-knit cadre to a decentralized network of autonomous groups, loosely united under the auspices of “the Invaders.” This shift in structure was a result of two primary factors: on the one hand, the membership process was quasi-formal. The membership form was minimal, requiring only that one pledge to “hold up the standers of an Invader” and to “fight for the liberation of Black People.” Moreover, it does not appear there was ever a comprehensive membership list, nor did

54 Ibid.
55 Interview with Coby Smith, 7/16/2014.
56 Kinchen, 70.
57 FBI Reel 21, slide 315; Kinchen, 69.
58 FBI Reel 21, slide 160.
members have membership cards or other such paperwork.\textsuperscript{59} As Coby Smith recalls, “all you had to do was be in your late teens and early twenties, have a tiki on your neck, and have more hair than you should have from you last hair cut…anybody could be an Invader overnight.”\textsuperscript{60} As such, it was a “hell of a time trying to hold everybody in line.”\textsuperscript{61} On the other hand, Invader leadership was “highly fluid with a constant turnover,” as a result of deliberate decentralization, aggressive incarceration, as well as internal factionalism.\textsuperscript{62} And finally, given that organizing is facilitated with shared in-group experiential knowledge, different sects of the Invaders naturally coalesced as likes gravitated towards likes, manifesting primarily in terms of neighborhood, class, and gender.

**INVADERS BIFURCATE: COBY SMITH’S NORTH MEMPHIS CONTINGENT AND THE SOUTH MEMPHIS RIVERSIDE GROUP**

As the Invader membership expanded across Memphis, it became clear that they were evolving into “a dominant group” of organized black youth.\textsuperscript{63} The Invaders were more deeply connected with young black folks in Memphis than any other organization in town. Indeed, as Calvin Taylor recalled:

The black leadership was not talking to young black individuals. They were only talking to who? They were talking to the various church leaders who knew, of course, your church congregation isn’t going to do anything. We knew that. But you never talked to your church congregation’s children. We talked to them.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{59} Interview with Coby Smith, 7/8/2014
\textsuperscript{60} Coby Smith, quoted in Kinchen page 74.
\textsuperscript{61} Charles Cabbage, quoted in Kinchen page 146.
\textsuperscript{62} FBI Reel 20, slide 159.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., slide 512.
\textsuperscript{64} Calvin Taylor, interviewed in *The Invaders*. Directed by Prichard Smith. Memphis: 1310 Florida Street Productions, forthcoming.
Thus, ready to engage their burgeoning membership base, the Invaders reached out to mayoral candidate A.W. Willis — who aimed to be the first black mayor of Memphis — to offer work for his campaign, given that “in return… [he] work for black people.”65 If the Invaders could turn out enough black votes to push Willis into office, the hope was that “[he would] just remember who put [him] in office.”66 They would have successfully infiltrated arguably the most powerful position in the city in under a year of their existence. Unfortunately, Willis did not prevail, receiving only “12.3 percent of the total vote.”67 The loss occurred for two primary reasons: on the one hand, the Invaders lacked the structural capacity to effectively mobilize their base. Not only was their membership growing exponentially, but because Cabbage and John B. had taken on the vast majority of outreach, the membership wasn’t “quick to move for [Coby Smith and Calvin Taylor] as they would be for Cabbage [and John B. Smith].”68 Thus, there developed a massive base for such a small outreach cadre, rendering effective mobilization quite difficult. On the other hand, however, rumors spread that Henry Loeb had paid off Willis to split the black vote between he and incumbent William Ingram. Whatever veracity that rumor held, it certainly sowed distrust in the black community, indeed successfully splitting their votes between Ingram and Willis, ushering the segregationist candidate Henry Loeb into office.69

The loss brought about more than just a strike to the Invaders’ credibility; it, too, began to cause rifts in the organization. Given that the Invaders had no fiscal sponsors or external financiers, the onus was on individual members to fund the expenses (i.e., gas money, telephone,

65 Interview b/w Bill Thomas and Calvin Taylor, 8/17/1968
66 Ibid.
68 Interview b/w Bill Thomas and Calvin Taylor, 8/17/1968.
69 Ibid; Wright, 63. In fact, Willis came in fourth place behind three white candidates, namely Loeb (33 percent of the vote), Ingram (24.9 percent), and William N. Morris (21.3 percent).
typewriter, paper, etc). But the majority of this fiscal burden was taken on by Coby Smith, who
drew funds from his saved up tuition money.\textsuperscript{70} However, members had made an agreement that
“whatever Coby lost [from his tuition fund] he was to get back.”\textsuperscript{71} Willis had brought on
members of the Invaders as paid campaign works, but unfortunately “what the campaign workers
were to be paid was not enough to make up the remainder of Coby’s education money.”\textsuperscript{72} In
addition, it appeared to some members that Coby Smith “ain’t doing nothing anyway but making
speeches to the white folk,” despite the fact that Smith had founded and funded the Invaders.\textsuperscript{73}
Members stalled Smith’s request to be reimbursed and voted that the headquarters be moved
from Coby Smith’s house in North Memphis to John B. Smith and Cabbage’s apartment in South
Memphis. Calvin Taylor recalls, “as [Coby] waited [to be repaid], the re-organizing was steadily
taking place in the south [South Memphis] and Coby was steadily being outed so to speak.”\textsuperscript{74}

According to Taylor, in North Memphis there existed a social “pecking order”: “The
people who were the leaders in those areas — they and their families — were always going to be
leaders, and of course, the other people were going to be the followers or the supporters.”\textsuperscript{75} On
the other hand, South Memphis was more pliant, more easily organized, and was where the vast
majority of Invaders actually lived. As such, the Invaders’ “presence grew quicker and increased
more rapidly in South Memphis.”\textsuperscript{76} In turn, it appeared natural that the headquarters and focus of
organizing be shifted to South Memphis. Though Smith himself doesn’t recall “them putting

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.; Interview with Coby Smith, 7/8/2014
\textsuperscript{71} Interview b/w Bill Thomas and Calvin Taylor, 8/17/1968.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{76} Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
[him] out,” he did have the impression that others “felt [he] was too independent.”77 Thus began a mitosis of the Invaders, a semi-permeable fragmentation of operations housed under the overarching banner of ‘the Invaders.’ While John B. Smith, Cabbage, and Taylor focused organizing efforts in South Memphis, Smith organized in North Memphis virtually alone and autonomously, though still under the auspices of the Invaders; indeed, Calvin Taylor stated, “No one of us would leave South Memphis to go help Coby in North Memphis…you’d go from time to time but it wasn’t a concerted thing.”78 But it does not seem Smith ever requested assistance, as it was his position that in the Invaders, “everybody had to be their own man.”79 Smith had long been “more of an international type figure…he always wants to straighten out what is going on locally but he never loses focus of the larger scale.”80 Thus, his work primarily involved making use of his many connections and relationships to build networks with other community leaders and national/international organizations. Indeed, in the summer of 1968, Smith played a pivotal role in securing funds for and operating the Neighborhood Organizing Project (NOP). Though a somewhat declawed instantiation of the Community Unification Project, the NOP, operating out of locations on Florida and Thomas St., developed Liberation Schools that focused primarily on teaching Black History, “[giving students] a background on culture,” and “[giving] them self-identity — who they are, what they are, and where they’re going.”81 Staff at the NOP also took students on field-trips, hoping to expose them to a broader spectrum of Memphis culture than was otherwise feasible for ghetto-confined youth.82 Moreover, the NOP operated a

77 Coby Smith, interviewed by the author, Memphis, TN, July 19th, 2014.
78 Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
79 Interview with Coby Smith, 7/19/2014.
80 Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014
82 Kinchen, 131.
program called “Let’s Go” which taught youth how to effectively use public transportation.\textsuperscript{83} However, the NOP was short-lived, terminating prematurely due to a substantial lack of funds and because much of its staff — most of whom were members of the Invaders — became the center of controversies ranging from inciting a riot at Carver to the ambush of a police squad car.\textsuperscript{84}

The Invaders came to the fore of public attention with the onset of the Sanitation Workers’ strike in early 1968. The community organizing for solidarity with strikers was lead by Community On The Move for Equality (COME) with the leadership of Rev. James Lawson. However, the Invaders’ (predominately those in South Memphis) primary role was to engage high schoolers and other youth, recruiting from schools such as Carver and Hamilton High. The strike came to a crescendo when Dr. Martin Luther King, at the request of Rev. James Lawson, came to Memphis to lead a massive march in downtown Memphis. By this point the strike had evolved from a labor struggle to a full-blown civil rights struggle, becoming a microcosm for the plight of poor black communities throughout Memphis. However, the Invaders had long cautioned against Dr. King’s arrival, as they knew there existed far too much pent-up frustration and dissatisfaction among black youth to successfully lead a non-violent march.\textsuperscript{85} Nevertheless, they were ousted from strategy meetings, and their admonitions were dismissed. To the dismay of the pastors and to the sullying of Dr. King’s reputation, the march indeed spiraled out of control. A handful of youth, some of whom were sporting Invader jackets, broke a few windows,

\textsuperscript{83} Kinchen, 132-133. This program, however, was criticized for it relevancy, given that many NOP participants already relied of public transportation, and thus, likely already knew how to navigate the system.


\textsuperscript{85} Interview b/w Calvin Taylor and Bill Thomas, 8/17/1968.
and the police — likely in expectation, if not hope, of disruption — converged from all sides, aggravating and escalating the chaos with tear gas and brutal assaults.\(^{86}\)

Though the Invaders had decided that their organization would not be present in the march, and though they had anticipated and warned leaders of COME of the “restlessness” amongst the youth, they nevertheless incurred total blame for the riot.\(^{87}\) Indeed, in a press conference following the riot, Frank C. Holloman, then director of Police and Fire, stated: “We know that a group of young people have been threatening to take a riot action for some time and we have been on top of that situation, we know who these individuals were.”\(^{88}\) Despite the fact that Dr. King said in clear terms that the “problem was a breakdown in communication between them [the Invaders] and the leadership of the campaign,” John B. Smith recalled that “When I got back to the crib [from the riot], we turned on the TV and every news station was saying the same thing: ‘the Invaders had caused the riot, the Invaders were nothing but gangsters and young hoodlums and thugs looking for trouble.’”\(^{89}\)

Calvin Taylor was both an Invader and a reporter with the *Commercial Appeal*, a prominent Memphis newspaper. As such, he was well aware that “if the media is going to portray us [the Invaders] this way, we have go to offset that. People have a tendency to go with what they read.”\(^{90}\) But unfortunately, the Invaders did not have substantial control of or influence over the media surrounding them. Though the two black newspapers in town — *The Memphis World* and the *Tri-State Defender* — were generally friendly towards the Invaders\(^{91}\), the

\(^{86}\) Ibid.
\(^{87}\) Ibid.
\(^{88}\) *The Invaders*, forthcoming.
\(^{89}\) Ibid. The FBI, too, had informants that testified the Invaders had nothing to do with the march’s outcome (FBI Reel 21, slide 321).
\(^{90}\) Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
\(^{91}\) For example, see: “A Point of View,” Nat D. Williams, *Tri-State Defender*, February 1st, 1969.
overwhelming hegemony of white-controlled media monochromatically painted the Invaders as a group of reckless, mindless violence. And it would appear the white news outlets received “encouragement” from the FBI to do so, as one of their primary counterintelligence tactics was “exposure of the [Invaders] in the press…that alerts the entire community, including potential financial supporters, to the extremist nature of this group.”\(^{92}\) Indeed, the “cooperative reporters on the *Commercial Appeal*…and the *Press-Scimitar*” did well to not only falsely ascribe blame of Dr. King’s failed march, and to some degree his assassination, to the Invaders, but in the following year, they would tenaciously cover the myriad arrests of members of the Invaders, often connecting false dots between their individual activity and the organizational activity of the Invaders.\(^ {93}\) Moreover, a substantial portion of these arrests were on nonviolent charges (i.e. disorderly conduct, possession of marijuana, carrying a weapon), many under the unconstitutional and catch-all “Nightrider Law” that stated it is a “misdemeanor to ‘prowl or travel or ride or walk through the country or towns’ to disturb the peace, alarm citizens, damage or destroy property or intimidate or terrorize.”\(^ {94}\)

**LANCÉ “SWEET WILLIE WINE WATSON” AND THE DOWNTOWN ASSOCIATION**

With the overwhelming negative press and heightened surveillance and infiltration from the federal and local intelligence bureaus, much of the Invader leadership was being systematically incarcerated, the biggest blows coming in the form of John B. Smith’s imprisonment for “inciting a riot at Carver” — despite substantial testimony that it was “a

\(^{92}\) FBI Reel 20, slide 307.
\(^{93}\) Ibid., slide 403.
\(^{94}\) “Nightrider Law Declared Unconstitutional In Part,” *Commercial Appeal* - 4/9/70
spontaneous protest against grievances, unprompted by outsiders⁹⁵ — and Charles Cabbage’s compounded sentencing of receiving stolen property, carrying a loaded pistol, and draft evasion.⁹⁶ Given that Cabbage and Smith held far more sway with the membership than did other leaders like Coby Smith or Calvin Taylor, their imprisonment left a gaping power vacuum. This was filled by Lance “Sweet Willie Wine” Watson, today known as Minister Suhkara Abdul Yahweh, who came on the scene just after Dr. King’s assassination. Watson, a native Memphian, had returned to Memphis following a stint in prison and thereafter in Gallatin, TN upon hearing news of the march turned riot. While in prison, Watson began to study the civil rights movement, as well as more radical topics such as socialism in Cuba and liberation warfare. He was determined to become involved with the movement following his release from prison, and upon arriving in Memphis, he quickly acquainted himself with the Invaders. Around the time Watson returned, the SCLC was moving forward with the Poor People’s Campaign and they requested assistance from the Invaders to help lead groups to Resurrection City in Washington, D.C.⁹⁷ Wanting to test his leadership abilities, Watson requested of John B. Smith: “Let me take this responsibility, let me be Prime Minister of the group as we [march to Resurrection City].”⁹⁸ Watson did well to establish himself as an able leader, eventually receiving recognition from the SCLC that the Invaders’ role “did do quite a bit to make the Poor People’s Campaign a success.”⁹⁹ Thus, with the conclusion of the Poor People’s Campaign and the eminent incarceration of Invader leadership, Sweet Willie Wine Watson took the reigns.

⁹⁷ Interview with Minister Suhkara Abdul Yahweh, 7/9/2014.
⁹⁸ Ibid.
⁹⁹ “SCLC to Fulfill MLK’s Promise,” Tri-State Defender, August 24th, 1968.
The South Memphis Invaders — what Coby Smith refers to as the Riverside Group of the Invaders\textsuperscript{100} — had been meeting at John B. Smith and Cabbage’s apartment and/or at an office on Florida and Trigg St., but after their incarceration and subsequent leadership of Watson, the headquarters relocated downtown at Clayborn Temple on Vance and Hernando St. It is an observable trend that the Invaders organize wherever they find themselves, and as Calvin Taylor elucidated, it was not so much that “[Watson] was organizing downtown,” but rather that “he was doing the same thing we all were doing: he way trying to organize all of Memphis.”\textsuperscript{101} By subsuming John B. Smith and Cabbage’s contingent, Watson “took in downtown and South Memphis,” though for practical reasons, the majority of organizing activity took place downtown.\textsuperscript{102} Thus, what Smith referred to as the Riverside Group became the Downtown Association.\textsuperscript{103} However, the fragmentation between Coby Smith’s work in the North and others’ work in the South persisted, as Minister Yahweh recalled that “Coby and I wasn’t together much, wasn’t around Coby much…we knew he was not with the [southern] segment of the Invaders.”\textsuperscript{104} During that time, Smith was devoting most of his energies towards finishing school at Southwestern (after reenrolling) and securing funding sources for the Invaders and BOP.

Smith solicited funds from the National Council of Churches (NCC) and had flown to Detroit to request the financial aid of the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizations (IFCC), much of which was geared towards his new plan for the Memphis Leadership Conference for Black and Poor People. The Leadership Conference was essentially an attempt to reincarnate the Community Unification Project, the purpose of which was to “establish within the participants

\textsuperscript{100} Interview with Coby Smith, 7/19/2014.
\textsuperscript{101} Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} Interview with Coby Smith, 7/19/2014.
\textsuperscript{104} Interview with Minister Suhkara Abdul Yahweh, 7/9/2014.
the ability to lead and organize within his own particular neighborhood around issues of Black Pride and Identification.”

The Board of Directors was to seat such figures as A.W. Willis, Maxine Smith, and other such Civil Rights leaders, but would be operationally managed by Coby Smith. But again funding fell through, due largely in part to funders’ hesitation towards being associated with Invaders.

On the other hand, under the leadership of Lance “Sweet Willie Wine” Watson, the Downtown Association of the Invaders was engaged in a myriad of solidarity work with local struggles for black liberation and also began instating some Invader-operated Survival Programs. When in autumn of 1968 students at LeMoyne-Owen college burst into protest against what they perceived as a lack of respect and agency in the campus decision-making process, the Invaders were quick to the scene to demonstrate solidarity and to potentially draw new recruits. The Invaders’ presence and rhetoric catalyzed the already-tense atmosphere, helping to escalate the students’ protest to a near 23-hour long occupation of the administrative building Brownlee Hall. Though the Invaders were not fully welcomed — eventually being asked to leave the campus by students — their presence nevertheless helped to legitimize and extend the students’ struggle as one connected to a broader fight for Black Power. Whether their involvement turned out to be tactically advantageous is disputable, as in the end, their relationship to students at LeMoyne-Owen was left, at best, shaky, not to mention there being a brief exchange of gunshots between a few students and Invaders.

Sweet Willie Wine Watson’s next move for his contingent of the Invaders came at the behest of Rev. Cato Brooks and Rev. James F. Cooley of Forest City, Arkansas. In reaction to

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105 FBI Reel 21, slide 300.
106 Kinchen, 186.
107 Ibid., 188.
108 Ibid., 187. Who began the brief shootout is not clear, though no one was injured.
the all-too familiar practices of racial discrimination vis-à-vis business owners, public facilities, and police harassment, the ministers had formed the “Committee for Peaceful Co-Existence.” They requested the assistance of Sweet Willie Wine and the Invaders to help organize their community against these manifestations of racial hatred. The Committee staged protests in front of infamously racist business, in front of city hall to protest the incarceration of a black man accused of inciting a riot, and in front of a pool in a predominately black neighborhood that the group alleged was chemically contaminated. Tensions rose between the protestors and white community members to the point that an all-white mob attacked Watson, leaving him “with facial lacerations and a broken elbow on his polio-withered left arm.” Moreover, a Forest Arkansas, all-white jury then found Watson guilt of disorderly conduct, after no more than thirty minutes of deliberation. Watson concluded his work in Forest City with a “March Against Fear” from Forest City to Little Rock before heading back to Memphis. Watson lead the march with relatively scant support, as not only did then-Governor Winthrop Rockefeller deny permission for the march, but moreover, many of the Invaders had long-since returned to Memphis. Nevertheless, Watson received substantial press coverage and returned to Memphis with what would be the last gasp of air for the Invaders.

The final operational days of the Invaders were marked by their organizing free breakfast and clothing programs, Operation Breakfast and Operation clothing, respectively, inspired by the

109 FBI Reel 20, slide 530-575.
110 Ibid.
111 “Beaten Black Militant Ruled ‘Disorderly.’” The Pittsburg Press, October 29th, 1969. Other Invaders including Gwendolyn White were in the fracas, though none but Watson appeared to sustain serious injury.
112 Ibid.
113 FBI Reel 20, slide 530-575.
Black Panthers Survival Programs.\textsuperscript{114} The programs were geared towards aiding the public housing projects near downtown, namely Foote and Cleaborn Homes.\textsuperscript{115} Nevertheless, by late 1969, the FBI ascertained that:

for all practical purposes the Invaders have ceased to exist, they have no meeting place, former members have dispersed, they have printed no literature in several months, they have no known connections with any outside groups, and they have no known arsenal of weapons…the Invaders have never been an effective group…the Invaders now exist in name only, a creature of the news media, which keeps their name alive by [indecipherable adverb] and patronizingly giving publicity to every utterance and action, no matter how fatuous or trivial, of Watson.\textsuperscript{116}

The collapse of the Invaders — for which there is no exact date, but which most interviewed members placed somewhere around late '69 and early '70\textsuperscript{117} — brought about the development of two short-lived Black Power organizations: We The People, led by Watson, and the People’s Revolutionary Party (later a chapter of the Black Panther Party), led by Maurice Lewis and Melvin Smith.\textsuperscript{118} The latter maintained a platform of Black Power and Revolutionoary Nationalism, continuing to operate various small-scale Survival Programs, whereas the former metamorphosed into a socialist, pluralistic, humanitarian group which spent much of its energies petitioning the city government.\textsuperscript{119} However, the split mirrored extant fragmentations in the Invaders before its collapse, with Watson’s downtown contingent becoming We The People, and

\textsuperscript{114} Interview with Mz. T, 6/26/2014.
\textsuperscript{116} FBI Reel 20, slide 729.
\textsuperscript{117} Interview with Coby Smith 7/8/2014; Interview with Minister Suhkara Abdul Yahweh, 7/9/2014; Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
\textsuperscript{118} FBI Reel 20, slide 1045.
those working more closely with Coby Smith — Melvin Smith and Maurice Lewis — forming the BPP chapter.120

**THE INVADERETTES**

The Invaders were by design not a monolithic entity. As Calvin Taylor recalls, “we had no necessarily ‘front office,’ and no front office was telling you what to do; then people would go and do the things they thought that they could do best, and they would organize that.”121 Their organizational structure was decentralized, allowing different pockets to localize the organizational identity of the Invaders where they saw fit. However, what has been omitted from histories of the Invaders is the story of how, as Rhonda Y. Williams observes in many Black Power organizations, “black women occupied leadership positions, ran community-based programs, contested misogyny, and accepted male dominance in the battle for liberation.”122

Without the work and contributions of women in the Invaders, the organization would have existed in name only. Not only did the women make up a substantial percentage of the membership — by some FBI counts nearly a quarter of the “hardcore members” and in Taylor’s

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120 Interview with Coby Smith, 7/16/2014.
121 Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
122 Rhonda Y. Williams, “Black Women and Black Power,” *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Black Power (July, 2008), 24. Though in her dissertation, Shirletta Kinchen discusses the masculinism of the Invaders and that the they “developed a sense of hyper masculinity in their quest to reclaim and prove their manhood, often time marginalizing women in the process,” she does not give a substantial account of the women’s activities within the organization nor how they negotiated the entrenched masculinism (Kinchen, 68). The same can be said of the forthcoming documentary *The Invaders* (dir. Prichard Smith), though the documentary altogether skirts a discussion of masculinism. Moreover, the Wiley Henry of the *Tri-State Defender* wrote an article titled “The Invaders — the women’s story,” published April 3rd, 2008, and though it provides unprecedented focus to women’s participation in the Invaders, it nonetheless merits further explication and discussion.
words “for every man there was a girlfriend” — but they, too, were responsible for the execution of many programs. In the words of Mz. T, a longtime Invaderette, “you [the men in the Invaders] think it up, the women gonna do the labor.” Indeed, the gendered division of labor within the Invaders reflected the social norms of the time, with men controlling the labor of strategy, leadership, and over-all decision making, and the women “did everything but do what? Talk. They did everything but do interviews about what the cause was, what the fight was. But they did everything else.” The highest leadership role occupied by a woman was Secretary, filled by Cacheatuh Smith from mid-1968 to late-1969 and then by Brenda Joyce Major until the dissolution of the Invaders. Otherwise, “there were a few women who got in on strategic planning. Not a great deal.”

The Invaders did not have a robust programmatic infrastructure. But of the programs they were able to regularly operate, the women fulfilled the majority of labor. For example, when the Downtown Association, under the leadership of Watson, enacted Operation Breakfast, Mz. T recalls that:

The [men in the] Invaders ain’t cooked nothing, the women in the Invaders — getting up at three o’clock in the morning, preparing breakfast. We started off with seventy-something people; next thing you know, we ain’t just cooking for the children, we cooking for families. There’s yo first free breakfast program. And they [the women] ain’t gonna get no credit for this, this stuff ain’t going down in history books, ain’t nobody busy telling this story. Edwina [J. Harrell], Cacheatuh Smith, Gwynn Donelson, and a two or three more that I don’t know their name — we worked like dogs in that kitchen. It’s a trip trying to get together 100 dozen eggs, 71 pounds of bacon, smoked sausage and all these things, trying

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123 FBI Reel 20, slide 161; Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014. Taylor clarified that “when I say girlfriend, I mean a friend who is a female, I don’t mean a romantic thing.”
124 Interview with Mz. T, 6/26/2014.
125 Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
126 FBI Reel 20, slide 1160.
127 Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
to feed these children before they get to school. And the men Invaders didn’t do that [laughs]. That’s something that the women Invaders did.\textsuperscript{128}

The same held true of Operation Clothing, operated in tandem to Operation Breakfast, as Mz. T stated: “Y’all [the men] come up with getting children some clean coats - you didn’t take ‘em to the cleaners, you didn’t pick ‘em up from the cleaners.”\textsuperscript{129} Moreover, when various Invaders would be incarcerated, the Invaderettes raised money for bail by selling “Invader literature” including poems, essays, and illustrations.\textsuperscript{130} Not surprisingly, the content was generated by the men in the Invaders, but the pamphlets themselves were constructed and sold by the women:

I [Mz. T] said “you need a title on this stuff,” and I said “this glue ain’t gonna work.” We bought some shoe laces and a hole puncher and…we come up with an assembly line. She [Cacheatuh Smith] print it, we punch it, we put the shoes strings in it, we get it ready to go sell…Cacheatuh said “What time you getting out of school?” I said “2:00.” She said, “Meet me at the corner of Goldsmiths [to sell the pamphlets].”\textsuperscript{131}

Without the labor of the Invaderettes, none of the programs could have been sustained, nor could many of the incarcerated members have made bail. Without acknowledging their vital contributions, one takes for granted the Invaders’ ability to remain operational, albeit for a relatively short period of time.

The Invaderettes were the backbone of the organizational structure of the Invaders. Many men in the Invaders recognized this. Calvin Taylor remarked that “the women were very much brilliant, the women were very much energetic, the women were very much committed…their contributions cannot be thanked enough.”\textsuperscript{132} Minister Yahweh was in accordance with Mz. T’s assertion that “they [the men] come up with the ideas, and we come up with how to make these

\textsuperscript{128} Interview with Mz. T, 6/26/2014.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{132} Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
ideas work.” However, acknowledging the necessity of their contributions and valuing said work as equal to that of the men are two very different things. As Mz. T stated, “I ain’t gonna say we was treated as equal, and whenever they had certain meetings, they value our opinion. Whether they put them to work or not remains to be seen.” Indeed, this corroborates with Calvin Taylors reflection that:

When it came to the Invaders…we were gonna be the men, so that the women who came to work in our organization…[would never] get out front. We wanted the White Man to know that this was a war of men about their society…It was sort of a conscious effort that the women would not be the ones who would be seen as the leaders or anything.

Minister Yahweh framed this differently, though he essentially was hitting the same point when he said “during that time, roles and responsibilities was those which went along with the natural order of thing. Wasn’t nothing that you had to assign to anybody; automatically, you do what you can do.” Though the “natural order of things” is a reification of societally-constructed gender roles, it nevertheless aligns with Taylor’s less opaque description that “if you had to have something typed or if you had to have something done, if you had to have someone picked up…those were the roles [of the women].” However, Taylor contrasts Minister Yahweh’s assertion that these roles were not consciously designated when he stated “that was something that we overtly did and talked about and something that I think most of the Invaders would be pleased with.”

When Calvin Taylor stated “they [the women] did everything but do interviews about what the cause was,” he reveals that there existed more than one totalizing, monolithic “cause”

133 Interview with Minister Suhkara Abdul Yahweh, 7/9/2014; Interview with Mz. T, 6/26/2014.
134 Interview with Mz. T, 6/26/2014.
135 Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
136 Interview with Minister Suhkara Abdul Yahweh, 7/9/2014.
137 Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
within the Invader. For many of the men in the Invaders the struggle for Black Liberation was at the same time a struggle to reclaim black manhood. Indeed, Aram Goudsouzian describes Coby Smith’s participation in the Meredith March Against Fear and subsequent Black Power radicalization as “a passage into manhood.”138 The necessity to reclaim black masculinity sources from the emasculation of white power structures, which Ogundele Iwafemi (also known as Melvin Taylor, Minister of Culture, who later formed the People’s Revolutionary Party) highlighted in stating: “Being a man is a continuing battle of ones [sic] life and ones [sic] loses a bit of manhood with every stale compromise to the authority of any power in which one does not share and believe.”139 Calvin Taylor further elaborates in saying:

He [the White Man] made us what he likes to refer to as a matriarchal society…all he ever tried to do was keep the men down, and cut the men’s nuts off, and make sure the man was never a man. Subsequently, women end up being stronger…but when it came to the Invaders, we were gonna be just the opposite.140

However, that the Invaders operated upon and advanced a masculinist ideology is not at all anomalous to Black Power organizing across the nation.141 In her essay, “‘No One Ever Asks, What a Man’s Place in the Revolution Is’: Gender and the Politics of The Black Panther Party 1966-1971,” Tracye Matthews asserts that “for the Panthers, as for many other Black groups in this period, the quest for liberation was directly linked to the ‘regaining’ of Black manhood.”142

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138 Goudsouzian, 99.
139 “A Short Message to the Invaders,” Ogundele Iwafemi from FBI reel 20, slide 186.
140 Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
141 I do not in any way want to suggest a causal relationship between blackness and masculinity/patriarchy; that we operate in a patriarchal society is systemic and insidious to all structures, regardless of their racial makeup. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will focus in on the particular manifestations of masculinism in Black Power organizing.
142 ‘Tracey Mathews, “‘No One Ever Asks, What a Man’s Place in the Revolution Is’: Gender and the Politics of The Black Panther Party 1966-1971,” from Charles E. Jones’ The Black Panther Party (reconsidered) (Baltimore: Black Classic, 2005), 278. It should be noted, however, that in 1970, the BPP altered its mass-line position to embrace and work in tandem with the Women’s Liberation Movement as
Mathews elaborates that reclaiming black manhood was/is a quest whose roots extend far before the rise of Black Power. She cites Huey P. Newton’s theorizing on the origins of black male emasculation, specifically that during slavery “[t]he master took the manhood from the slave because he stripped him of a mind…he psychologically wants to castrate the Black Man.”¹⁴³ The black man being rendered impotent thus led to the woman becoming “the better half in the black community,” and therefore to the creation of the “matriarchal society” in black communities.¹⁴⁴ The theory of black matriarchy was revitalized in 1965 with the Department of Labor’s publication of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s The New Negro Family: A Case for National Action. Moynihan argues that “three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American.”¹⁴⁵ One of the paramount distortions sources from “the Negro community [being] forced into a matriarchal structure which…seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.”¹⁴⁶ Echoes of The Moynihan Report and postulations like Newton’s vividly resonate in the rhetoric of the men in the Invaders.

Though the Invaders certainly operated on a masculinist platform, one which often subordinated women to domestic, secretarial, and otherwise supporting roles, the Invaderettes nonetheless advanced female-centric work and contested male superiority. An example of a uniquely Invaderette initiative — one which was operated by women for the express purpose of

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¹⁴³ Huey P. Newton, “Huey P. Newton Talks to the Movement” (Chicago, SDS, 1968), quoted in Mathews page 280.
¹⁴⁴ Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 29.
the betterment of other women — was the process of “blackenizing hoes and making them Invaderettes.”\textsuperscript{147} The Invaderettes would go out in groups of three or four and through discussions about Black Power would “steal their [the pimps’] hoes and make them Invaders.”\textsuperscript{148} Mz. T would tell black sex-workers such things as: “You ignorant. Sell your own body, you makin' this nigga rich…Next thing you know, Invaders. They’re not wearing wigs, they’re wearing afros. Them little short skirts would come off and they wearing jeans [laughs].”\textsuperscript{149} Interestingly, here the cocooning of an Invaderette is at the same time the reclamation of bodily autonomy and the adoption of a particular fashion, or at least, the rejection of one that adheres to white standards of beauty. However, the work of recruiting sex-workers was incredibly dangerous, as the Invaderettes “had a double threat. The pimps and the police wanted us.”\textsuperscript{150} Mz. T visualized this danger in recalling:

> We had a way of gettin’ their [the pimps’] girls. If they see us and we’re in a cluster - more than three of us - they finna hide them [the sex-workers] [laughs]. [The pimps would say,] “Here come them hoes, here come them revolutionary bitches. Get out of their way. I don’t want you to hear nothin' them bitches got to say, you need to stay away from them revolutionary hoes, they talkin' shit, they don’t mean shit.” And when you think that they [the pimps] could punch you upside yo head, that ain’t laughable. [The pimps would say,] “You hear me, bitch? Do you hear me? Better not fuck with my hoe.” [But we’d say,] “Where she at? Come here girl, got something to tell you” [laughs].\textsuperscript{151}

Despite the “double threat” of persecution from both pimps and police, the Invaderettes made a concerted effort to recruit more women into the movement, which stands in stark contrast to

\textsuperscript{147} *The Invaders*, forthcoming.\textsuperscript{148} Interview with Mz. T, 6/26/2014 \textsuperscript{149} Ibid. \textsuperscript{150} Ibid. \textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
narratives such as Minister Yahweh’s, specifically that “the question of whether we should start recruiting more women never came up.”

Perhaps an even more radical venture taken on by some of the Invaderettes was the informal (meaning without permission of leadership) distribution of birth control, specifically birth control pills. Mz. T recalled: “I’d go down there and put em’ on birth control. I had no problem! Cause we’d be on our way to the apartment and we’d say ‘let’s get us some pills.”

Mz. T vehemently refused the assignment of her — or any woman’s — role in the movement to that of sex and reproduction. She powerfully illustrates her demands for women’s bodily autonomy in the saying the following:

I didn’t want the girls to have revolutionary babies and these revolutionaries not being involved in these babies’ lives, and it got a little heated on one or two occasions. And then they [the men in the Invaders] started calling me a pill pusher. Cause I would talk about Planned Parenthood, and I’m still an ally of that, I still believe in what Planed Parenthood represents, and we shouldn’t just be havin’ a baby cause we irresponsible fuckin’…cause they [some of the men] felt like I should have been an oven for the revolutionary babies. I wasn’t with that, havin' these babies and givin' names like “Freedom” and “Trust.”… You ain’t gonna put no baby in my belly and get gone and I ain’t gonna call him “Revolution.” I’m gonna take a birth control pill, we’re gonna use a condom, we’re gonna protect me from this meanness and tragedy. We will not be having no freedom babies.

From this, one can see in Mz. T’s narrative the development of what Kimberly Springer referred to as “a black feminist presence,” namely “a vocal, explicit avocation of both race- and gender-related issues” (emphasis hers). However, this presence does not — and should not — assume

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152 Interview with Minister Suhkara Abdul Yahweh, 7/9/2014.
153 Interview with Minister Suhkara Abdul Yahweh 7/9/2014; Minister Yahweh claimed he knew nothing about this, and that it certainly would not have happened with his permission.
154 Interview with Mz. T, 6/26/2014.
155 Ibid.
the women self-identified as feminists. Indeed, as Tracyle Matthews elucidates “although women in the BPP [Blank Panther Party] generally chose not to work in female-only organizations, and most did not think of themselves as feminists, this did not necessarily mean that they accepted male chauvinism or sexism.”\textsuperscript{157} Whether consciously or not, Mz. T’s unwavering demand that black women embrace and protect their bodily autonomy — specifically their reproductive capacities\textsuperscript{158} — harkens almost verbatim writings such as Frances Beal’s “Double Jeopardy,” Toni Cade’s “The Pill: Liberation or Genocide?,” and many more from forerunners and trailblazers of Black Feminism.

However, in her recollections of her roles, responsibilities, and perceptions towards gender oppression thereof, there were certainly moments wherein Mz. T would reinforce a subsidiary position to black men, though not in an altogether disempowering manner.\textsuperscript{159} For example, she stated:

The black woman knows that no matter what goes down, I need to support my black man. Cause no matter what goes down, he’s my black man. I am his backbone, I am what make him stand tall, I am what make him bigger and better. I create my black man, I make my black man strong.\textsuperscript{160}

On the one hand, Mz. T places herself in a supporting, dependent role. Though she also raises the question of who is more dependent upon whom? She creates her black man, thus placing

\textsuperscript{157} Mathews, 275.
\textsuperscript{158} I do want to acknowledge here that, of course, not all people who identify as women have the biological capacity to reproduce and that some folks who identify as men do have the biological capacity to reproduce.
\textsuperscript{159} Mz. T was sadly the only Invaderette I was able to interview. Many have deceased, and others are either unknown or very hard to contact. There is certainly an immediacy to gather their stories, and I would hope this section may serve as impetus for others to carry on and deepen research regarding women’s roles in the Invaders, and more broadly in Black Power organizing here in Memphis. From my research, I found the following consistently active Invaderettes: Shirley Young, Marlene Taylor, Ethel Taylor (aka Staples), Cacheatuh Smith, Gwendolyn White, Melinda Taylor, Evelyn Turner, Carolyn Thomas, Brenda Joyce Major, Marlene Horron, Janice Payne, Edwina Harrell, and Juanita “Mule Train” Thornton.
\textsuperscript{160} Interview with Mz. T, 6/26/2014.
herself in a position of superiority, of a puppeteer pulling the strings behind what ostensibly appears to be a man’s world. In this way Mz. T engages with the Black Matriarchy theory/myth in such a way that on the one hand, she acknowledges the oppression of women (via sex-work, via reproductive coercion), but on the other claims a relational or interpersonal superiority of black women. Indeed, Mz. T also stated that “black women and white men: those are your only true people,” as the latter has control over sociopolitical forces, whereas the former can dominate any interpersonal engagement.161 Ultimately, it would be limiting and disrespectful to Mz. T’s narrative to attempt to neatly categorize her disposition towards gender oppression. The richness of her story resides in what may appear as contradiction. Indeed, as Tracye Mathews cautions, “the category of gender was not as fully politicized and theorized during the late 1960’s as it is today, thus one must resist the temptation to impose current standards to measure…feminist, nationalist, or revolutionary credentials…”162 Regardless, it is of vital importance to recognize that the Invaderettes were not passive agents in the Invaders; rather, like all other members, they engaged with the work from their own experiences, and would on occasion bring to the fore of their work as Black Power militants their particular experiences as women. Indeed, Mz. T posed and answered quite an apropos question: “You hate me why? You hate me because I got a blue jean jacket, and you hate me because it says “Invader,” you hate me because I’m a woman, you hate me because I’m black, you hate me because I’m poor….All this hate.”163

**THE YOUNG STOKELY’S: A BLESSING AND A CURSE**

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161 Ibid.
162 Mathews, 269.
163 Interview with Mz. T, 6/26/2014.
The final segment of the Invaders is also its most ephemeral, diffuse, and indiscrete sect. This is primarily because these individuals were generally not actual members of the Invaders. Because the Invaders were the most conspicuous and vocal epicenter of Black Power in Memphis, there developed a causal relationship — in the eyes of the media and law enforcement — between adopting Black Power ideology and being a member of the Invaders. Therefore, individuals who in any way engaged with Black Power were often identified by media outlets and law enforcement as members or affiliates of the Invaders. However, as William Van Deburg highlights in his book *New Day In Babylon*, Black Power is not merely a political program, but is, in fact, “best understood as a broad, adaptive, cultural term” and thus could be engaged with in a myriad of ways beyond political organizing, be they rhetorical, sartorial, linguistic, musical, or theological. Therefore, given the breadth of cultural engagement with Black Power, and the direct link constructed between it and the Invaders in Memphis, it is not surprising that estimates of the Invaders membership ranged from fifteen to nearly two thousand.

The means of being identified as an Invader were broad. According to Coby Smith, “If you said ‘Black Power,’ you were an immediate threat.” However, the most common means of identification were through what Van Deburg refers to as “soul style.” According to Van Deburg, “soul style was a type of in-group cultural cachet whose creators utilized clothing design, popular hair treatments, and even body language (stance, gait, method of greeting) as preferred mechanisms of authentication.” The Invaders localized soul style prominently through their handshakes, rhetoric, and “fashionable clothing and hairstyles.”

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164 Van Deburg, 10.
165 FBI Reel 21, 315; Kinchen, 69.
167 Van Deburg, 195.
168 Interview b/w Calvin Taylor and Bill Thomas, 8/17/1968; Kinchen, 69.
Yahweh recalled that “[if you were hanging out] there was a certain way you had to dress…if you wore khakis, you had to have them ironed and pressed. Your shoes…the stitches had to be cleaned and the shoes had to be shined.”\(^{169}\) Coby Smith corroborated this in saying “if you dressed the part, people would already assume you were in.”\(^{170}\) Indeed, this was not lost on the FBI, as they would often make preliminary assessments as to whether an individual should be monitored based on one’s choice of clothing.\(^{171}\)

However, the sartorial decision that would most immediately associate an individual with the Invaders was the adorning of a military jacket. According to Calvin Taylor, “[t]he military jacket just came from the fact that John [B. Smith] was in the army, and he had just gotten home.”\(^{172}\) Smith was a particularly gifted organizer with youth in the community; he was “a leader and had influence [and] was well known in the neighborhood, and people liked him.”\(^{173}\) Though upon his return to the States, Smith was a “gung-ho veteran of Vietnam,” after numerous heated debates with Cabbage, about “[him] not having rights, and the constitution doesn’t apply to [him], and [he] was a fool for going to Vietnam and fighting to defend a country that wouldn’t defend [him],” he eventually embraced Cabbage’s Black Power preachings.\(^{174}\) To symbolize his change of heart, Smith repurposed his military jacket by sewing on the back “INVADERS.” This caught on like wildfire among young folks. FBI agents took note of this, observing in one case that “John B Smith, along with there unidentified Negro teenagers who were with him, all wore Army field-type jackets with the word ‘Invaders’ on the back on the jackets.”\(^{175}\) However, as

\(^{169}\) Interview with Minister Suhkara Abdul Yahweh, 7/9/2014.
\(^{170}\) Interview with Coby Smith, 7/8/2014.
\(^{171}\) FBI Reel 20, slide 20.
\(^{172}\) Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
\(^{173}\) Ibid.
\(^{174}\) *The Invaders*, forthcoming.
\(^{175}\) FBI Reel 21, slide 350.
Taylor points out, “[n]obody got together and decided this is how we gonna dress,” rather it occurred naturally from Smith and others “exuding the cool that defined the aesthetic of the movement.”176 Those in and outside the organization began dressing similarly, and thus the perceived line between the two began to fade. As Taylor stated in an interview in 1968: “People who weren’t even members of the Invaders would put on a jacket and put Invaders on it because it made them big, somebody important. This is what the talk of the town was, the Black Power people are here: the Invaders.”177 In turn, demonstrating their constructed causality between emulating the sartorial qualities of the Invaders and one’s membership thereof, “the police and the press decided that if you were black, young, and had on a military jacket, you were a member of the Invaders.” Minister Yahweh reinforces this in recollecting that “some many people, based on what we were doing — younger people especially— wanted to be Invaders…the younger people would want to emanate it, so the next thing you know, you got Invaders everywhere.”178

This perceived diffuseness of members, though, was both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, there were immediate benefits to the Invaders appearing massive. It legitimized the organization and gave credence to their assertions of capacity and threats of retaliation. “We never objected to it. We wished everybody in the city would put a jacket on, so the city would have know just how big we were,” stated Taylor.179 Moreover, the uncertainty of who exactly was an Invader fulfilled the philosophical purpose of the Invaders, namely that “if you saw [an Invader] downtown acting like any other shopper downtown then you wouldn’t know if [he] was really a black man getting ready to bomb your place, or a black man in the city.”180 The threat of

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176 Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014; Kinchen, 69.
177 Interview b/w Calvin Taylor and Bill Thomas, 8/17/1968.
178 Interview with Minister Suhkara Abdul Yahweh, 7/9/2014.
179 Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
180 Interview b/w Calvin Taylor and Bill Thomas, 8/17/1968.
two thousand Invaders retaliating against an unfavorable action was very likely on the minds of local decision-makers. And indeed, it was this threat of chaos that Taylor claimed was the methodology of the Invaders’ over-arching purpose, namely “to enhance [non-violence’s] capabilities…to let white people know you have two ways. Now pick one.”181 In other words, the Invaders wanted to communicate that the black community was fed-up, that black folks would no longer accept being forced into abject poverty, being forced out of the political arena, and otherwise enduring dehumanization as normalcy. White folks could go Dr. King’s way or their way, but there would be no third option. Thus, from Taylor’s perspective, “[the young highscoolers] were the best thing that every happened to us.”182

But this sword was double-edged. As much as the peripheral “Young Stokely’s” aided the Invaders in looming large over the city, they equally inhibited the Invaders from maintaining control of their organizational image and operations.183 Though there was a membership application, there was no membership card, “no initiation, we didn’t have no fee, we didn’t have no ‘okay, you can come have yo jacket now.’”184 “The membership [was] highly fluid with a constant turnover,” and there did not seem to exist a comprehensive membership list.185 Coupled with decentralized leadership and fragmented pockets of organizers, when “people would go and do the things they thought that they could do best,” it often resulted in a disparate and unorganized assemblage of initiatives clumsily squeezed into a neat “Invader” catalogue.

Beyond mere incoherence, the relative autonomy of individual members dissolved a delineation

181 Ibid.; Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
182 Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
183 Interview b/w Calvin Taylor and Bill Thomas, 8/17/2014.
184 Interview with Coby Smith, 7/8/2104; Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/26/2014.
between that which individuals who happened to be Invaders participated in and what the
Invaders took on organizationally. In other words, if “somebody puts on a military jacket [and]
goes out and robs a bank…[w]ell everybody’s gonna equate that to who robbed the bank? The
Invaders robbed the bank. They may have been Invaders,” but it was not an organizational
operation. This, however, begs the question of if, as an organization, there has been a
deliberate decision to decentralize decision-making, is it not arbitrary to regard certain members’
actions as not legitimate Invader initiatives? Moreover, if one segment, say the Downtown
Association, engages in an action that Coby Smith and the North Memphis Invaders are opposed
to, can one discount the validity of the other? These conundrums afflicted the Invaders’ ability to
sustain a coherent, resonate message and left them vulnerable to misconstruction and distortion.

Moreover, the inflated size and threat of the Invaders also aggravated an extant White
Fear of Black Power. Though this is not a critique of the organization — in fact, how severely
White Fear is triggered could be perceived as an indicator of efficacy — it nevertheless resulted
in aggressive, incessant, and sophisticated infiltration of the Invaders. Indeed, the FBI had at
least twenty-one informants for their surveillance of the Invaders, which included at least one
“hardcore member,” namely Marrell McCollough. The FBI’s counterintelligence program,
COINTELPRO, established at the behest of J. Edgar Hoover to dismantle Black Power
organizations, exerted an unfathomable amount of time and resources to keep a watchful eye on
the activities of the Invaders. However, it is evident from FBI memos and interviews that the
Invaders never posed a substantial physical threat, or at least, not enough of one to merit such
paranoia. Coby Smith recalled that there never existed a well-organized “paramilitary cadre,”
and that any violent activity was spontaneous and of the autonomous volition of rank-and-file

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186 Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
187 FBI Reel 21, slide 323; FBI Reel 20, slide 676.
members.\textsuperscript{188} Moreover, the FBI recognized that the Invaders “[had] no known arsenal of weapons.”\textsuperscript{189} As such, a substantial portion of the declassified FBI memos are essentially slices-of-life of Invader members, many of which detail the quite mundane content of meetings, and some which even monitor the love-lives of members.\textsuperscript{190} Indeed, the most controversial moments were often rhetorical.

Nevertheless, the FBI’s fear that the Invaders “increasingly adopted a philosophy of hatred of the white race, hatred of the capitalistic system, and hatred of all constituted legal authority, particularly law enforcement” convinced them “of the need of developing further in-depth penetration of the Invaders by Bureau informants and every effort will be made in this regard.”\textsuperscript{191} Indeed, to combat this so-called “psychological warfare,” the FBI utilized phone taps, interviews with members/perceived members, coercion of media outlets, and planting informants; in other words fulfilling the order that “every opportunity should be taken to effect counterintelligence operations against the Invaders.”\textsuperscript{192} Ultimately, the FBI’s goal was to “discredit the Invaders in the community” through demonstrating the alleged “violence-prone nature of the Invaders [and] their vent toward engaging in criminal activities.”\textsuperscript{193} To this end, they were quite successful, as “over 25 [Invaders] have been convicted” of crimes ranging from disorderly conduct to assault with the intent to kill, with every conviction receiving extensive press from outlets like \textit{The Commercial Appeal} and the \textit{Press-Scimitar}.\textsuperscript{194} The coupled effect of the “stigma of the sanitation strike disturbance” and the overwhelming focus on individual’s

\textsuperscript{188} Interview with Coby Smith, 7/16/2014.
\textsuperscript{189} FBI Reel 20, slide 729.
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., slide 76 & 251.
\textsuperscript{191} FBI Reel 20, slide 402 & 1305.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., slide 30 & 1305-1306.
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., slide 403.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid.
criminal records indeed left the Invaders with scant community support.\textsuperscript{195} Without funding to maintain regular programs, nevertheless a permanent office, the Invaders organizational capacity dissolved.

The purpose of the Invaders was articulated in as many ways as there were identifiably discrete segments of the organization. Nevertheless, though phrased and contextualized differently, they all articulated a similar frustration with the then-present state of affairs and an immediacy with which change must occur. But despite the similar demand for work to “upgrade the black community,” the organizational structure of the Invaders did not share such coherence.\textsuperscript{196} Individuals brought into the work their own experiences, and subsequently organized around issues closest to home and did so by methods that were most familiar and accessible, resulting in pockets of like-minded organizers as varied and dispersed as the complexity and diversity of the members’ lived experiences. Moreover, the founders of the Invaders made a strategic decision to decentralize leadership so that even with the loss of a leader “the movement would go on because instead of focusing on a person they had to deal with the people who were in the movement.”\textsuperscript{197} Finally, the to be an Invader was much more than political organizing. It was not merely to participate in a march or action in one’s free time, but rather became a way of being in the world, “that you weren’t afraid to say what was on your mind to whomever it was, and it didn’t make a difference what color they were, what uniform they wore, or who they thought they were.”\textsuperscript{198}

Being an Invader became more than mere membership to an organization, it became a form of identity. However, this phenomenon is not unique to the Invaders, but is rather an

\textsuperscript{195} Kinchen, 145-149.
\textsuperscript{197} Interview with Calvin Taylor, 7/21/2014.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
indicator of when a campaign becomes a movement, which requires the intertwining of political organizing and cultural and aesthetic production. Indeed, William Van Deburg corroborates this in saying “[t]he Black Power movement was not exclusively cultural, but it was essentially cultural.” In order for one to devote their every waking moment to the advancement of a movement, the work must be rewarding beyond the political wins, as they are few and far between. Rather, the movement must generate cultural and aesthetic buy-in to sustain meaningful engagement on behalf of both the organizers and the broader public or target demographic. However, the latter’s engagement with the cultural and aesthetic production does not necessarily equate to their being actively involved in political organizing, as the Invaders experienced firsthand. Thus, present-day organizers and activists must learn from the Invaders how to better anticipate the effects of peripheral cultural engagement, and how to ensure that this bolsters rather than erodes organizational structure. Nevertheless, the Invaders embarked on an unprecedentedly grassroots movement, one which was acutely salient among those most directly affected by myriad forces of oppression, and thus have set a precedent and a very high bar for all radical activists and organizers who work in their wake.

199 Van Deburg, 9.
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