

Post-Black Power Era Inequalities and Strategies in Black American Urban Communities

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Traditionally dated from 1966 to 1975, the Black Power Movement refers to the era of Black American activism for equal rights, treatment, representation and citizenship in racialized postwar American society (Joseph, 2008, p. 8). It was marked by a wide range of actions—including public transit boycotts, organized protests, electoral victories, and political assassinations—that cumulatively influenced small- and large-scale institutions, from local trade unions to prisons to federal elections (Joseph, 2008, p. 8). In line with the goals of the movement, one American anthropologist during this time, Carol Stack, acknowledged anti-Black racism in academia and criticized the racist notion of *culture of poverty*—the idea that poverty persists due to the poor group’s personal behaviour or “social adaptations”—used to explain Black American poverty and disadvantage (Stack, 1974, p. 23). She, instead, addressed structural factors perpetuating Black American poverty in one urban community and the adaptive actions of community members (Stack, 1974, p. 23). Expanding on Carol’s argument and exploring the legacy of Black American activism against racism and inequality, I use this paper to present an in-depth case study of the experiences of marginalized Black Americans living in the post-Black Power era. Specifically, I explore the political-governmental, economic and social challenges as well as associated actions of poor and working-class Black Americans living in major northern American cities. In doing so, I essentially argue that *structural* political-governmental, economic and social inequalities persisted in northern urban Black American communities of the late 20th century, in response to which residents implemented *adaptive* community-building strategies.

Political-Governmental Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

Inadequate Political Representation

One such political-governmental inequality experienced by northern Black American

urbanites was a lack of informal and legislative political power, although this was subverted through creative critical discourse and participation in local White power systems. For example, in Washington, D.C., the District's predominately Black population faced this challenge due to their White-dominated federal government and powerful local political structures (Price, 1998, p. 305). Specifically, Washington's Congress, courts, museums, offices and locally powerful Board of Commissioners comprised White-dominated "White public spaces"—which promote "whiteness", or the social indicators of being a White American, while devaluing "blackness", or the social construction associated with Black Americans (Price, 1998, p. 305; Price, 1998, p. 329). In fact, anthropologist Tanya Price (1998) noted unequal informal power dynamics between the White-dominated federal agents and the locality's Black-dominated political entity, the D.C. Committee (p. 303); Library of Congress officials opened the 102nd Congress meeting with a series of jokes degrading the Committee, indicating the existence of an implicit and racialized culture of District degradation (Price, 1998, p. 307). Yet, Black District residents coped with this challenge through subversive communal conspiracy narratives about symbols of White political power. For example, among the District's Black population, organized narratives about the Washington Monument were circulated, which implicitly expressed critiques of the national political system and thereby allowed exertion of some measure of political control (Price, 1998, pp. 310-311). Another strategy implemented in response to this challenge included the formation of a political interest group representing the District's Black population, the Black Caucus, as it allowed for expansion of control over local institutes. For example, the Caucus saw to increased control over local prisons, educational institutions, hospitals, and election of judges (Price, 1998, p. 330). Thus, inadequate representation comprises one structural political-governmental inequality experienced and confronted by this group in the post-Black Power era.

Governmental Neglect

Another structural political-governmental inequality experienced by northern urban-dwelling Black Americans during this time was governmental neglect, in response to which adaptive strategic group protests and informal local mutual aid groups were established. For example, in Washington, D.C., racialized disparities in services managed by the municipal government were apparent. Specifically, anthropologist Price noted in 1998 that Washington had a largely completed “Red Line” metro train network for over a decade, which linked White-dominated city spaces to White-dominated suburbs, but an unfinished “Green Line” network, which served lower-income residents from the Black-dominated Prince Georges County suburbs (p. 314). Yet, the District’s disadvantaged Black population *strategically* contended this inequality, as more socially affluent urban professionals using the “Green Line” would lead the organized actions pressuring city government for infrastructural development (Price, 1998, pp. 314-315). Another example of such neglect and adaptive action comes from the ethnographic research of Jacqueline Mithun (1973), as she explored the degraded built environment of one unspecified Black-dominated urban space and its residents’ networking-based coping techniques. Here, municipal neglect was evidenced by the community’s broken infrastructure, littered streets, post-Black migration reduction in stores, and deserted housing—which largely encompassed ghetto-like wooden-framed units on 25-foot lots (Mithun, 1973, pp. 25-26). In this case, related community-based adaptive strategies included the formation of New Visions and neighbourhood-block clubs. New Visions, formed by a group of collaborating local gangs, became an informal communal vehicle for local governance and regulation, as it carried out municipal responsibilities like voter registration, anti-drug campaigns and clean-ups (Mithun, 1973, p. 30). Likewise, ad-hoc neighbourhood-block clubs allowed concerned neighbours to

come together to discuss local issues and independently implement solutions, or otherwise petition city hall for change (Mithun, 1973, p. 29). In short, this group continued to face and adaptively respond to the issue of inadequate governance in the post-Black Power era.

Racialized Law Enforcement

Racialized policing and incarceration of northern inner-city Black Americans also constituted post-Black Power era political-governmental inequality, but was adaptively countered through extended religious coalitions and kinship networks. For example, demonstrating racialized policing, Boston's Black-dominated Mission Hill inner-city neighbourhood was permanently assigned the Boston Police Department's special City Wide Anti-Crime Unit in 1988, which implemented aggressive policing tactics—like the *stop-and-frisk* policy (Winship & Berrien, 1999, p. 55). In fact, in 1989, when a Black man was claimed to be the murderer of a White woman, the Department aggressively searched Mission Hill residents, eliciting complaints from the Black community about police abuse and coercion (Winship & Berrien, 1999, p. 55). Yet, in 1992, Boston's religious community organized a community-based, inter-agency adaptive strategy to address issues of local crime and problematic policing: the Ten-Point Coalition (Winship & Berrien, 1999, p. 60). Specifically, comprised of 40 Black churches and notable local religious leaders, the Coalition advocated for Black youth in courts, criticized racialized police practices, and established the "Police Youth Leadership Awards" program—which honored exemplary officers to acknowledge and facilitate the Department's subsequent reform efforts (Winship & Berrien, 1999, p. 60). A second, related issue also faces this group: disproportionately greater incarceration, especially among fatherless Black American urbanites (Richardson, 2009, p. 1048). Yet, anthropologist Joseph Richardson (2009) noted an adaptive community-based strategy implemented in response to this issue: *surrogate* fathers (Richardson,

2009, p. 1049). Specifically, biological and fictive uncles were incorporated into the immediate family sphere to regulate the street interactions of Black American male youth, thereby providing informal policing as well as protection from criminal activities (Richardson, 2009, p. 1049). For example, one 13-year-old Black American male living in New York City was taught the code of the streets by his 38-year-old cousin Uncle Rocky, who warned him of gang activities and the racist practices of the New York Police Departments (Richardson, 2009, p. 1052). Thus, racialized law enforcement comprises another political-governmental inequality experienced but also adaptively responded to by northern inner-city Black Americans.

Economic Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

Multigenerational Poverty

In the post-Black Power era, this group also faced structural economic inequality in the form of multigenerational poverty, but managed it via adaptive community-based domestic strategies. For example, anthropologist Carol Stack (1974) explored an unspecified northern Black American urban community—dubbed The Flat—and found that many residents were second-generation public-welfare recipients without any surplus of resources (p. 27). This extreme generational poverty was perpetuated by the availability of largely low-paying, temporary work and racial discrimination in the American economy (Stack, 1974, pp. 24-25). Yet, the hardship of this structural economic inequality was counteracted through two communal adaptive mechanisms: an informal child-exchange system and extended domestic networks. Specifically, residents of The Flats circulated children among kin or the community members to decrease the load of parental responsibilities and signify social acceptance and respect (Stack, 1974, pp. 28-29). And by socially recognizing friends or non-immediate family members—such as a child’s father family—as “kin”, domestic circles in The Flats were expanded to include

enough people required for helpful and *stable* systems of reciprocal domestic obligations (Stack, 1974, pp. 29). Furthermore, as multiple households called for the help and held the loyalties of other households in the community, extended domestic networks overlapped between families, thereby creating a larger integrated web of helpful domestic connections for residents (Stack, 1974, p. 30). Thus, despite the challenge of multigenerational poverty, northern Black Americans urbanites resourcefully established adaptive child-exchange and reciprocal-obligation networks.

Racialized Stratification of the Urban American Economy

As briefly mentioned above, the group also experienced the structural economic challenge of socioeconomic limitations placed by a racially stratified American economy. Yet, they coped by using community art and media, kinship networks, and informal mutual aid organizations. For example, Price (1998) noted that majority of Black Americans in Washington, D.C worked in low-income jobs that performed “gatekeeping” functions for higher-ranking White-dominated positions (p. 316). And further demonstrating the racialized nature of the economy, numerous Black District resident additionally expressed feelings of *not belonging* in this latter set of jobs, which they described as “White public spaces” (Price, 1998, p. 316). These included jobs like Secretary, Receptionist, and Scheduler versus Administrative Assistant and Legislative Director (Price, 1998, p. 316). However, adaptive community-building strategies were apparently implemented; Price (1998) found that Black District residents exhibited the subversive phrase “chocolate city”—a reference to the idea of a Black-controlled community with low or no poverty—in songs and on bumper stickers (p. 317). Similarly, anthropologist Brett Williams (1988) undermines the erroneous representation of Washington as a rich political trailblazer by exploring the economic struggles and coping mechanisms of a Black American family living in District’s working-class Southeast sector (pp. 15-23). For example, he notes the

relatively low socioeconomic status of the family by describing family member Walter Harper's job as a security guard, his wife Darlene's job as a federal government clerk, and his sister Josephine's and sister-in-law Louise's jobs as domestic workers for white households (Williams, 1988, p. 17). Yet, related adaptive strategies are also described, including Walter's purchase of an inexpensive house in the District's higher-valued, White-dominated downtown locality and establishment of a post-divorce neighbourhood-based domestic network (Williams, 1988, p. 17). Race-based economic disparity and adaptive community-based strategies are additionally evidenced by the ethnographic findings of Mithun (1973): an unspecified northern urban Black American community consisted largely of only working-class people, but established numerous communal economic aid measures (p. 026). For example, informal neighbourhood-block clubs pooled together neighbours' contributions to paint, sweep, plant and clean poor neighbourhoods, and placed residents in need of emergency shelter with nearby families (Mithun, 1973, p. 028). Plus, voluntary social clubs organized fund-raising campaigns and provided residents in need with loans and savings (Mithun, 1973, p. 029). Thus, post-Black Power ethnographic research presents the economic challenge of racialized job markets experienced by northern Black American urbanites, but also multiple adaptive community-building strategies.

Loss of Urban Blue-Collar Jobs

A third structural economic inequality experienced by northern Black American urbanites in the late 20th century was job loss and unemployment, in response to which adaptive strategies like intra-city migration, inter-city relocation, and communal reference-based employment networks were implemented. Specifically, the American capitol reacted to late 20th century global economic pressures by reducing blue-collar production jobs, which as mentioned above were disproportionately occupied by Black Americans in the racially stratified American urban

economy (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1999, p. 620). Thus, job loss and employment presented *structural* economic issues that unduly impacted northern city-dwelling Black Americans. Yet, ethnographic research into the socio-geographic restructuring of urban localities in the aftermath of this crisis presents some insight into related adaptive community-based strategies adopted by this group. For example, Sánchez-Jankowski (1999) observed that to cope with the loss of manufacturing and related industry jobs, poor Black American urbanites relocated from other parts of a city to inexpensive but supportive poor and working-class neighbourhoods (p. 624). A case in point was 27-year-old Detroit citizen Jim, who relocated to a section of the city marked by residents living at or below the poverty following the loss of his job as a Ford autoworker (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1999, p. 625). Another adaptive strategy was family- or friend-suggested *intercity* relocation, when intra-city migration did not yield new employment opportunities (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1999, p. 627). This was the case for 34-year-old factory worker Dexter, who relocated from Detroit to the Phoenix residence of a former co-worker following a permanent lay-off and no stable job openings for 25 weeks thereafter (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1999, p. 627). Community-based coping mechanisms also included communal employment networks, whereby the growing urban poor population used the advice, connections, or positive references of their working-class contacts to secure new jobs (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1999, p. 632). Thus, while this group experienced structural economic inequality, in the form of reduction of low-rank Black-dominated urban jobs, they also adapted using creative community-building strategies.

Social Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

Stigmatization

As a result, northern inner-city Black Americans in the late 20th century also experienced social stigma due to disproportionately lower socioeconomic status and greater welfare use,

although responding adaptive strategies included prioritizing family relationships and addressing related national- or state-level political shortcomings. For example, Black American Chicago residents receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in the 1990s described being viewed as irresponsible, deviant parents (Jarret, 1996, p. 371). Yet, one such resident coped with the stigma by maintaining a kinship-based and companion-based network for her children to ensure their stable upbringing (Jarret, 1996, p. 371). As such, by investing into their roles as parents, such residents counterbalanced public social stigma by deriving positive recognition from the more immediate social sphere: their direct and extended family units. Some residents also described experiencing stigma and disrespect from professional sources that were supposed to help them, such as AFDC administrators and caseworkers (Jarret, 1996, p. 372). A case in point is the experience of LaWanda, who—despite having final exams at the time—was told that her welfare funds would be discontinued and reallocated elsewhere if she did not arrive at a welfare review meeting immediately (Jarret, 1996, p. 372). Yet, recipients like LaWanda adopted the adaptive community-building strategy of speaking out against the structural governmental and economic shortcomings of governments—such as lack of child-care accommodations and wages for single Black American mothers (Jarret, 1996, p. 373). Thus, by targeting the policies of particular political leaders, such as Governor Thompson and President Reagan, recipients advocated for the recognition of political failures to AFDC recipients rather than their supposed personal failures (Jarret, 1996, p. 373). In short, inner-city Black Americans coped with social stigma via communal networks and advocacy in the post-Black Power era.

Child Rearing and Supervision

Another social challenge included monitoring and providing resources for children within the context of urban isolation and impoverishment, although this was met through the adaptive

use of socioeconomically varied kinship and non-kinship community networks. For example, one single mother from a Black-dominated New York City community used an extended kinship network encompassing a male and cousin and three brothers to provide a stable and well-rounded social world for her three sons (Richardson, 2009, p. 1051). Specifically, in the absence of their father and a full-time working mother, the boys' uncles took on important child-rearing duties such as monitoring the boys' daily homework and interpersonal interactions with peers, as well as dispensing career and relationship advice (Richardson, 2009, pp. 1051-1052). Kinship networks were also used to *provide* resources for inner-city Black American children.

Impoverished Black Americans urbanites adaptively maintained ties and connected with their more affluent kin beyond the locality to access informational, institutional and economic capital (Jarett, 1997, p. 282). One such case was that of Brenda's, an inner-city Black American Chicago mother whose richer family members helped her with free baby-sitting and payments for rent, food, and clothing (Jarett, 1997, p. 282). In addition, parenting duties and resource provision was also performed by non-kin locals. In the case of one Black New York City community known for producing notorious drug gangs and famous basketball players, such non-kinship child-rearing systems mainly included basketball coaches. For example, coaches included basketball mentoring programs for older children, which instilled qualities like responsibility, trust and reciprocity (Richardson, 2012, p. 185). Coaches also took on duties deferred to them by players' parents, such as preparing meals and driving to basketball games (Richardson, 2012, p. 187). Furthermore, many of the coaches facilitated important childhood-enhancing programs for their players, including HIV/STI-prevention workshops, post-secondary school tours, SAT tutoring and homework help (Richardson, 2012, p. 178). Thus, kinship and non-kinship networks comprised adaptive community-based strategies against unstable childhoods.

Gang Violence

Such kinship and non-kinship networks, as well as adaptive strategies like re-establishing in communities elsewhere, were also implemented by inner-city Black Americans in the post-Black Power era to cope with the structural issue of rising gang violence. Specifically, northern American cities saw dramatic increases in the emergence of gangs and gang-led drug-dealing businesses since the 1970s, due to growing inner-city poverty following the government's reduction of blue-collar Black-dominated jobs (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1999, p. 633). One adaptive community-building strategy in response included relocating to more isolated and close-knit urban neighbourhoods. For example, poor Black American inner-city parents Bill and Gwen moved to a safer sidelined community after shootings in the park frequented by their sons significantly increased (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1999, p. 633). Different adaptive strategies also existed among those Black Americans urbanites who did not relocate. These included social distancing and creating distinct community networks within larger neighbourhoods based on perceptions of respectability versus deviance (Jarrett, 1997, p. 279). They also included hyper-surveillance via kinship networks. For example, an inner-city Black American uncle described a daily schedule that included chaperoning his nieces to school and arriving home in time for the end of their school day, in order to limit potential interactions with drug-users (Jarrett, 1997, p. 280). Non-kin community members also provided social insulation against gang recruitment and criminal activities for non-relocating citizens. For instance, basketball coaches taught players to avoid fights and drugs (Richardson, 2012, p. 183), and promoted basketball as an alternative lawful way to gain respect and power without resorting to gang membership (Richardson, 2012, p. 179). Thus, despite experiencing the structural social issue of disproportionately greater gang affiliations, the group coped with local networks or strategic changes in community membership.

Schooling and Educational Struggles

Another social challenge that northern urban-dwelling Black Americans faced in the post-Black Power era was unequal schooling due to *structural-cultural* factors, although this was met through adaptive community-based strategies like compensatory community resources and kinship networking. Specifically, while there was a widespread shortage of qualified teachers in the late 20th century due to market forces, schools in Black American urban neighbourhoods suffered their shortage disproportionately as inner-city schools in particular did not attract them (Miron & Lauria, 1995, p. 37). Black American inner-city students also experienced educational inequality due to stereotypes associated with their socioeconomic and racial identities (Miron & Lauria, 1995, p. 33). For example, a A-average female inner-city Black American student described the existence of a *hidden curriculum*, whereby high academic performance was celebrated for and expected from White students more than Black students (Miron & Lauria, 1995, p. 38). Yet, one related community-based adaptive strategy included seeking compensatory educational resources from inner-city community centers (Jarett, 1997, p. 281). Another was using the contacts of members in one's extended kinship networks to admit children into non-local, higher-quality institutions (Jarett, 1997, p. 282). For example, Jarett (1997) found that was common practice in Black American inner-city communities to send children to school in the neighbourhoods of geographically removed kinfolk (p. 282). Therefore, despite the structural-social challenge of lower-quality inner-city schooling, northern Black American urbanites coped by using available local resources as well as non-local community connections.

Thus, structural forms of political-governmental, economic and social inequalities indeed existed in the northern Black American urban communities of the post-Black Power era, which prompted various adaptive community-based strategies were employed. These political-

governmental inequalities included inadequate legislative and informal political representation, governmental neglect, as well as racialized policing and incarceration. Yet, associated community-based coping mechanisms encompassed imaginative subversive discourse, participation in White power structures, strategic group protests, informal mutual aid societies, religious coalitions, and extended kinship networks. A second class of inequalities—economic—encompassed multigenerational poverty, racialized stratification of the urban American economy, and the related loss of low-rank urban jobs in the late 20th century. However, in response, adaptive community-based strategies were utilised, which included localized informal child-exchange systems, extended domestic networks, subversive media and arts, kinship networks, informal mutual aid organizations, strategic relocations, and communal inter-class employment networks. By extension, related structural-social inequalities also persisted in the post-Black era for this group, such as stigmatization, isolated child-rearing of at-risk youth, gang violence and lower-quality schooling. Associated with these group of inequalities were adaptive strategies like focused motherhood, critical evaluations of state- and federal-level policies, socioeconomically varied communal networks, strategic relocations, and localized compensatory resource-seeking. Essentially, then, adaptive political activism and informal social agency was required and continued to be exerted in the post-Black Power era by northern Black American urbanites.

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