Historia oral del apartheid, la segregación y la integración, y la lucha contra el racismo. Parte 2

Oral History of Apartheid, Segregation, and Integration and the Struggle Against Racism. Part 2

CHAIR
Caren Fox (New Zealand)

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"Negotiating Extremes in the Deep South USA: Life Stories of America’s Southern Women"

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TABLE 90
Negotiating Extremes in the Deep South USA: Life Stories of America’s Southern Women.

Catherine Oglesby
(US):

Abstract: In keeping with one of the conference’s subthemes, “power in human relations,” I examine the life stories of three Georgia women against the backdrop of racialized violence prevalent in the early 20th century New South, or the southern U.S. from the era right after the Civil War through WWII. The Civil War’s momentum and aftermath spawned a “culture of violence” believed endemic to the region, and trusted by most whites as the only effective means of maintaining white supremacy. On the other hand, at the same time that violence pervaded the region, notions of gentility and hospitality that one finds romanticized in the novel and film, Gone with the Wind, persisted as the nationally accepted myth. The illusion hid a very inconvenient truth that few had the will, and fewer still, the power, to challenge. To demonstrate ways women might have negotiated such extremes, this paper borrows from the life stories of Mattie Ivy & Grace Johnson, two black women who grew up in stark poverty and became solid middle class, and Hettie Park, a white woman who grew up in landed wealth and became an entrepreneur. The incidents from their combined life stories include a rape, two murders, four vigilante lynchings, multiple terms in the infamous convict leasing system, and one account of arson. Their stories also show how everyday relationships, such as family, friends, work, and faith helped individuals cope with, and, to a remarkable extent, at least in their cases, reconcile the wide gulf between myth and reality, gentility and violence.
In keeping with one of the conference’s subthemes, “power in human relations,” I examine below the life stories of three Georgia women against the backdrop of racialized violence prevalent in the early 20th century New South. There, an elite minority carefully guarded power and controlled all human relations. Underneath a façade of racial etiquette, familial class relations, and sexual propriety, there existed a readiness to use violence in whatever form necessary to sustain the status quo. Violence in the South, one historian wrote, has been “so pervasive that it compels the attention of anyone interested in understanding” the region.1 Just as the institution of slavery pervaded life in the Old South, racialized violence associated with maintaining white supremacy, did the same in the New, or post-Civil War, South.2 Called a “reign of terror,” such violence was the legacy of two and a half centuries of enslavement, as well as a Civil War fought to end slavery.3 Momentum from the carnage of the war itself did not stop when the war ended in 1865.4 Appomattox, to use historian Jackson Lears’ metaphor, cast a very long shadow. The war’s momentum and aftermath spawned a “culture of violence” believed endemic to the region, and trusted by most whites as the only effective means of maintaining power. On the other hand, at the same time that violence pervaded the region, notions of gentility and hospitality that one finds romanticized in the novel and film, Gone with the Wind, persisted as the nationally accepted myth. The illusion hid a very inconvenient truth that few had the will, and fewer still, the power, to challenge.

To demonstrate ways women might have negotiated such extremes in the early 20th century, this paper borrows from the life stories of three elderly Georgia women interviewed in 2011 & 2012: Mattie Ivy & Grace Johnson, two black women who grew up in stark poverty and became solid middle class, and Hettie Park, a white woman who grew up in landed wealth and became an entrepreneur. The incidents from their combined life stories include a rape, two murders, four vigilante lynchings, multiple terms in the infamous convict leasing system, and one account of arson. Their stories also show how everyday relationships, such as family, friends, work, and faith helped individuals cope with, and, to a remarkable extent, at least in their cases, reconcile the wide gulf between myth and reality, gentility and violence.

I am not offering these women as representative of the majority of women of their time and place, because in more ways than not, they are unconventional. They share a common legacy of finding meaning and identity in family, community connections, and their Christian faith. In two important ways, however, they are unlike their generational counterparts. First, at a time when 3-4 children per family was the norm, there was only one surviving child among the three women featured here.

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1 Sheldon Hackney, “Southern Violence,” American Historical Review, Vol. 74, #3 (Feb. 1969): 906-925; 906. Nor are the culture and legacy of violence confined to history. Current statistics show the region continues to report more crimes of violence than elsewhere.


4 Sheldon Hackney refers to Reconstruction as a “reign of terror” in a review of Gilles Vandal’s Rethinking Southern Violence: Homicides in Post-Civil War Louisiana, 1866-1894 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000).

5 Jackson Lears, Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920 (Harper, 2010).
That statistic explains in part a second way in which they are unrepresentative: the relative financial success and independence they each achieved. Unlike most of their contemporaries, black or white, all three women achieved an uncommon degree of independence for women of their time. Grace Johnson, Mattie Ivy, and Hettie Park all dealt with cultural challenges against them by finding satisfying work, no small accomplishment in their world.

After growing up in race-based poverty, Grace Johnson secured a position as a pharmaceutical inspector in Plainfield, New Jersey making wages well above her counterpart in the South, most of whom worked in a white man’s field, or in his kitchen. Her job then provided a retirement, after which she had the means and the time to study for and become an ordained minister, a lifetime ambition. Mattie Ivy, who also started life in similar poverty, found relative financial success, and even more reward and community prestige working nearly four decades as a hospital nurse in a white hospital long before that was the custom. Hettie Park defied gender expectations for women of her class and race, and insisted---overriding her husband’s judgment---on managing the bakery they bought together, which she did for 36 years.

The relative success of these three women can be understood and appreciated only when put in the context of the time and place where violence was random, ubiquitous, effective enough, and public enough, that a little often went a long way. Two forms of routine and institutionalized violence largely confined to the South, lynching and the convict leasing system, figure prominently in Georgia history. There is not time enough for an adequate summary of either brutal form of control. Suffice it to say, lynching was extra-legal acts of vigilante justice, and what we would today call terrorism. Lynchings often involved publicly witnessed and sanctioned acts of torture, and were extra-legal. The convict leasing system was a form of violence unwittingly made legal by the 13th amendment to the constitution [which reads: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”] For those who study southern history, the prevalence and gruesome nature of lynching are twice-told tales, and the disturbing nature of the convict leasing system are becoming well-known. For others, awareness can help understand what made progress for African-Americans so slow after emancipation and the Civil War, what kept them from being able to overcome the crippling intellectual and psychological legacy of slavery, a legacy that still haunts the nation. In effect, it suggests that the “clock must be reset,” that progress is better measured from the legal changes begun in the 1940s than from those enacted in the 1860s.

An infamous lynching in 1930 marked the life of Mattie Ivy, a black hospital nurse born in 1903, aged 109 at the time I interviewed her. [Parenthetically, Mattie, who died at 110, a year after I interviewed her, was among a decreasing number of people just one generation removed from slavery.] From the time of the

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2 Blackmon, 402.

3 Mattie Prater Wilcox Ivy was born January 14, 1903 in Crawford County, Georgia to John Prater (@1850-1924) and Elberta Worsham Marshall Prater (1864-1939). John Prater was a sharecropper and wage hand. Elberta Worsham Prater was a domestic. At the time Elberta married John Prater (@1901), she had five children from her first marriage. Mattie was the only child born to John and Elberta. Mattie attended school at Holt and Ocilla in Irwin County. Mattie married Esop Wilcox (1900-1971) from Ben Hill County in 1928. She taught her first few years of full-time working and then went into nursing shortly before her marriage to Wilcox. She worked as a nurse for Dr. Herman Dismuke (1908-1973) from 1928 until his death in 1973. She married Frederick Ivy in 1976 (d.1994) and moved from Ocilla to New Jersey where she remained until 2001 when she returned to Ocilla. Mattie gave birth to no children in either marriage. In 2011 she received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Ocilla-Irwin Chamber of Commerce. Mattie Prater Wilcox Ivy died May 7, 2013 in Ocilla, Georgia.

4 From census records, the evidence is not consistent on the age and birth year of Elberta Marshall, but they confirm the likelihood that she was born before emancipation. The 1920 census lists her as 67 years old, which would put her birth year at 1863. John Prater is listed in the 1901 census as 52 years old, putting his birth well before emancipation.
lyncing and for the next two and a half decades Mattie lived in what for her was an inordinate fear of whites. It left her acutely aware of the effects of white supremacy and disenfranchisement, something she had known vicariously from stories of others, but, after this lynching, came to know viscerally, on her own. For the first time in her life, she felt a vulnerability that neither the “politics of respectability” [adopting of white middle-class norms], nor the protection of influential white friends, could mitigate.

The fear was inordinate for Mattie because her childhood and early adulthood, in her memory, were free from fear, and characterized by what she recalled as harmonious race relations. The lynching was definitely a momentous event, providing an unmistakable “before-and-after” sense. Eventually she managed, after years of very hard, committed work as a hospital nurse to recover a voice, a degree of autonomy, prestige and financial security that most African-Americans in her community envied.

The pivotal event in Mattie’s life, for the purposes of this paper, occurred on the evening of Saturday, February 1, 1930. That night A.T. Fuller, a white friend of Mattie and Esop Wilcox showed up at their home in Ocilla, Georgia visibly shaken about something. When Mattie answered the door, Fuller asked anxiously, “Where’s Esop”? He was disturbed and concerned about the man he called his “second daddy,” and to whom he remained affectionately attached throughout Esop’s life. Esop and his first wife (then deceased) had often taken care of Fuller and his two sisters when they were children. When Mattie told Fuller that Esop was driving to the nearby Lax community, Fuller left saying he would try to find Esop and make sure he got home safely. If Esop should make it home before their paths crossed, Fuller instructed Mattie to tell him to stay there until things settled down. Then he told Mattie why he was concerned. Not far from where Esop was headed, Mattie recalled Fuller saying, “The Ku Klux’s done got a colored man,” and they are “hanging him up there on side the road.” A lynching, in other words, was in progress.

Details of the event followed in local, state, and regional newspapers, but Mattie got a first-hand account from Esop, who, on his way home from Lax, witnessed the mob of close to a 1,000, and, from a distance, the charred body of James Irwin, hanging from a tree. James Irwin suffered “protracted tortures” for up to two hours, including castration before being burned alive. These were carried out by select members of the mob, including the family of the murdered girl for whom the lynching was intended as retribution. Irwin’s lynching, the first recorded in Georgia in the previous three years, was especially brutal though not uncharacteristic of “spectacle Lynchings” common from the turn of the century into the 1930s.

James Irwin was suspected of rape, stabbing, and the murder on January 31, 1930 of a 16 year old white girl. His alleged guilt was based on a reported confession and the fact that he had been in the vicinity where the girl’s body was found. Weekly newspapers across the state lamented the lynching as a “deplorable” necessity, but as was characteristic in the South of the previous half century, most of them condoned the lynching as punishment that fit the crime.

Mattie recalled the events much differently from the details reported at the time, as well as those written since. Most contemporary sources sensationalized events, which was standard coverage; a few regretted the embarrassing barbarity, but very few, if any, publicly expressed any doubt about the guilt of the lynched victim.

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9 Raper, 143.
10 Raper, 142-45.
12 Ibid, 147.
13 Ibid, 141.
14 Ibid, 149.
Different accounts of the lynching no doubt circulated in the black community. Mattie remembers, “After they done burnt him up and everything, they found out this colored man didn’t do it.”15 In her story, no one in the black community believed James Irwin capable of cruelty.16 In Sociologist Arthur Raper’s account, even whites who knew Irwin, believed rape and murder to be out of character, though no one stepped forward to question the lynching.17 The cost of doing so could have been high. No matter what one believed, speaking out against lynching came with a price.18

Mattie’s memory of the incident carries both an explicit as well as implicit message that may have been commonly known in the black community though never considered by whites. Mattie did not recall that the girl whose purported defilement sparked the lynching had been murdered. She remembered only the commonly known in the black community though never considered by whites. Mattie did not recall that the girl whose purported defilement sparked the lynching had been murdered. She remembered only the alleged rape, and believed the girl accused the black man because she had been “caught . . . [having sexual relations] with a white man.” Whether the girl’s encounter with the white man was consensual or whether it resulted in a pregnancy, Mattie did not elaborate.

She suggested that, to shift moral culpability away from herself, the girl blamed the “colored man because he was the one who come by.”19 Mattie, and perhaps the whole black community, believed the Klan responsible for lynching James Irwin because the person who presumably raped the 16 year old girl was Mattie recalled Fuller saying, a “Ku Klux.” The need to cover up the rape by one of their own would provide a motive, in the minds of the black community, for the Klan to Lynch Irwin. The minds and memories of at least some in the black community held the Klan responsible for both murders: the 16 year old girl and James Irwin.

Believing the Klan guilty served another purpose. Just as James Irwin could have been the scapegoat who enabled the Klan to shield one of their own, and just as using the Klan as the scapegoat allowed “respectable” whites to evade their own responsibility, and even allow the black community – including Mattie and Esop – to believe that “their own white folks,” would continue protecting them, so blaming the Klan allowed Irwin County whites to believe the myth that racial harmony was the rule and violent discord the exception. Whether Mattie actually believed the Klan responsible, or feared it might be something more random and unpredictable, she did not confide. Perhaps she herself did not know. She could and did attest to the acute fear and enduring mistrust that sensational lynching caused her.

Mattie Wilcox was 27 years old at the time of James Irwin’s lynching. For decades afterward she remained uncharacteristically, in her words, “scared of white folks.” Although Mattie always knew her “place” as

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15 See footnote four above. Research demonstrates the farcical nature of the charge of rape. For details on the political background and the intentional plan to sensationalize the “black beast rapist,” see Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore’s Gender and Jim Crow, especially chapter 4.
16 Raper, [find pages]
17 Raper, [find pages]
18 Edwin T. Arnold, What Virtue there is in Fire: Cultural Memory and the Lynching of Sam Hose (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009).
19 Andrew Stedd was one of those who suffered consequences for speaking out. Around the turn of the last century, Stedd was a popular and very well connected Latin professor at Emory College, forced to resign for questioning the South’s racial orthodoxy. Motivated by the nationally publicized lynching of Sam Hose in Newman, Georgia, in May, 1899, Stedd published an essay three years later in The Atlantic Monthly, “The Negro, Another View,” (June 1902, 70-71) in which he questioned the ways white southerners dehumanized black southerners, as exemplified by lynching. See also, Terry L. Matthews, The Voice of a Prophet: Andrew Stedd Revisited, “Journal of Southern Religion, Volume 6 (December 2003): 1-13. Stedd recognized, ahead of his time, cause and effect: if black southerners had failed to make progress or to achieve the same level of progress as whites, Stedd argued, the fail fault lay with whites for brutally suppressing their efforts to get ahead. Most incendiary of all, to whites in Georgia, Stedd claimed that, given the right environment, African-Americans could evolve over time out of their “inferior status” to equality with the white race. By today’s standards, Stedd’s claim that “the Negro belongs to an inferior race” hardly qualifies him as radical or even enlightened. By the standards of 1902, however, he was considered radical and, by southerners, dangerously so.

Neither the weight of Stedd’s family connections—–he was the son-in-law of Methodist Bishop Warren Candler, an influential force in Emory’s internal politics—nor his well-reasoned arguments, could withstand the counterforce of southern tradition, especially the pressure put upon the university’s administration by the outspoken activist, reformer, and ostensible lynching advocate, Rebecca Latimer Felton to get rid of him. He was fired from his position. The story of Andrew Stedd helps contextualize white attitudes toward lynching by noting what happened to one very well-connected professor who questioned current practice and social attitudes.

black in a white world, and was not one to push against the social order, she also knew that the relative
degree of protection she and Esop had from their white connections was a courtesy, not a guarantee.
Through both her family of origin and her life with Esop, she was among the few blacks in Irwin County at
the time who had, their "own white folks,"20 or people who protected them, the way A.T. Fuller did when he
showed up that evening to warn Esop. It was not the last time whites would extend a paternalistic hand to
Mattie and Esop, but it was a long time afterward before Mattie would again feel safe.

Such fear and mistrust cut both ways, as the case of Hettie Park, illustrates. Hettie was a white woman
from a plantation background, aged 106 at the time I interviewed her.21 A murder, kidnapping, and three
lynchings in 1906, all traceable indirectly to the brutal system of convict leasing, framed the life story of
Hettie Park. Though Hettie was only 18 months old at the time, too young to grasp the import of her
father’s murder, her presumed kidnapping, and the lynchings of the people believed guilty of her father’s
death, she heard the story repeatedly throughout her youth. It became family lore, as real to Hettie as any
memory from experience could be. As a white woman, Hettie experienced none of the racial constraints
Mattie experienced. Nor was there any recollection of a time when fear and suspicion did not govern her
attitude toward blacks. Her fear and mistrust seemed justified from her own personal experience, as well
as promoted by the hierarchy of white supremacy that survived and thrived on fear and mistrust between
the races. Although no less real, even if longer-lived, fear was less central in Hettie’s life than it was in
Mattie’s. But it highlights the role fear played in perpetuating racial division.

Years before the Irwin lynching, as Mattie Prater was nearing her fourth birthday, and Hettie was not yet
two, on November 3, 1906, roughly 70 miles southwest of where Mattie lived, 18 month old Hettie Akridge
was excited to be going for a ride in the wagon with her daddy. John Akridge was a prominent planter in
Mitchell County. According to the story she heard throughout her youth, that Saturday afternoon, John
Akridge, her father, made his routine weekend run into town to buy and then deliver groceries for some of
the families he employed.

"Everybody that lived on the place would give him their grocery list, and he would buy . . . groceries" and
deliver the groceries to their homes, Hettie’s daughter, Gwendolyn Kelly said, telling a secret well-known
and well-kept within the family circle. 22 Among his employees was a woman identified as Meta Hicks.
Akridge allowed Hicks to live and work in the community as a laundress while her husband, Jet Hicks, was
serving time on the "chain-gang," or in the convict leasing system.23

Henry, a trusted black employee who worked for the Akridge family, accompanied Akridge into town on the
evening of November 3, and then drove the horse and buggy on the round of deliveries that evening. Hettie
got to go along for the ride possibly because her mother had insisted – Margaret Akridge, pregnant with
her fourth child, likely needed relief from an active toddler. Although Hettie never recalled from personal
memory any of the events of the day, oral tradition insured that she would never forget them. According to
family convention, 18 month old Hettie was at the center of a story of murder, kidnapping, and a double,
possibly, triple lynching.

While Henry drove, John Akridge hand-delivered the groceries from buggy to house. As they approached
the house of Meta Hicks, Jet Hicks—the convict who, the family was later told, had "escaped from the
chain gang"—was hiding inside. Mistaking Akridge for the sheriff, Jet Hicks stepped outside as Akridge
approached, and shot him, at point-blank range, with a shotgun. Akridge died immediately. The story

20 Quoted excerpt comes from Arthur Raper, The Tragedy of Lynching (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933); see Chapter
IX, “Lynched After an All Night Man-Hunt, Ocilla, Irwin County, Georgia,” 141-172, 165.
21 Hettie Akridge Park (Caucasian) was born April 18, 1905, in Mitchell County, Georgia, to John Abel Akridge (1872-1906) and Margaret
O’Zennie Akridge (1879-1920). John Akridge and Margaret O’Zennie Akridge were planters. Hettie had five siblings, four sisters and one
brother. After John Akridge’s death, in 1906, Margaret O’Zennie Akridge married Albert Akridge, John’s brother. Albert Akridge died in
1917. Hettie Akridge married Thomas Morgan Park (1895-1983) on October 19, 1927. Hettie and Thomas had one daughter, Gwendolyn,
born October 28, 1928. Hettie owned and managed a bakery in Thomasville, Georgia, until she retired at the age of 69.
22 Gwendolyn Kelly was more than a mouthpiece for her mother; the interview was a joint interview of both women.
23 The names of neither Meta Hicks nor Jet Hicks were known to the family.
Hettie heard all her life was, “[W]hen he opened the gate, the man thought it was the sheriff coming after
him and shot him, and he was terribly upset. He didn’t mean to kill [granddaddy],” Gwen, Hettie’s
daughter, said and then reiterated, “It was just a big, sordid thing.” Hicks’ desperation, his willingness to
shoot to kill, presumably the sheriff, risking almost certain lynching, to avoid being returned to prison,
speaks to the brutal nature of the convict leasing system.

According to the family telling of the story, the “escaped” convict’s wife grabbed Hettie and ran,
“kidnapped” her, presumably to use as a ransom to try and save her husband from a nearly guaranteed
lynching. “Her idea,” Gwen guessed, “was to bargain Mother [Hettie] for the husband.” According to the
story, for reasons they cannot explain, the woman on the run dropped Hettie. The family story includes
very little about the fate of the presumed kidnapper. “They may have shot her,” Gwen speculated. “I don’t
know.”

Characteristic of the time, local and distant newspapers reported contradictory details, times, and places,
as well as inconsistent spelling of names. By the third day of reporting, the sources agreed on these few
details: that a former or escaped convict named Jet Hicks shot and killed prominent planter, J.A. Akridge,
around midnight Saturday, 3 November, 1906; that Hicks fled the scene and was found by a posse near
Vienna, Georgia, on the 8th; and that Hicks was taken on the 9th to a nearby jail [in Sale City] about 65 miles
south of where the posse found him. Local officials notified the Governor [Terrell] of plans by a “mob”
rapidly gathering to lynch Hicks. The governor dispatched troops, who arrived too late to stop the mob
from lynching the prisoner. Hicks was lynched on 9 November, 1906, six days after the murder of Akridge.

Other details surrounding the incident are less clear. Several of the papers suggested that Hicks fled
the scene right after he murdered Akridge. However, The Savannah Morning News reported that he had
trailed a bit, and characterized him as cavalierly hanging around after the murder. He “sat down on the
porch, changed his socks and conducted himself as indifferently as though nothing had happened.” They
also reported that Mrs. Akridge “hurried to the scene, to find her husband dead and the murderer sitting
quietly near his victim.”

Reports on Meta Hicks are equally as conflicted and inconsistent. None of them mentions a kidnapping.
The Tifton Gazette and the Atlanta Constitution disagree on the place of Meta Hicks’ death and the number
of gun-shot wounds she suffered. The Tifton paper reported a third, related lynching. According to the
Gazette the wife of Hicks “was found dead in her home” November 6, having been killed by unknown
parties. Some time during the night she was shot with over twenty bullets. On the same farm and not far
away, a negro who, it is claimed, helped Hicks to escape [sic]. He also had been shot several times.

The Atlanta Constitution reported, however, “Meta Hicks, the reputed wife of Jett Hicks, was found dead in
a field belonging to Mr. Akridge since Hicks committed the murder. On her body were two bullet
wounds.” The Valdosta Daily Times published a different name for Hicks’ wife: “Amelia Ricks . . . died
mysteriously,” the VDT reported. “It is said that the woman assisted her husband in the murder of Akridge
and a lynching is believed to be behind her death.”

At 106, Hettie did not seem much bothered by any of her memories, even that of her “kidnapping” by Meta
Hicks. However, she did insinuate that the incident probably explained why she was “basically afraid of

24 The Americus Times Recorder, 9 November 1906. The Atlanta Journal, 5, 8, 9 November 1906; The Atlanta Constitution 8, 9 November
1906; The Camilla Enterprise 9 November 1906; The Gainesville [Florida] Daily Sun 11 November 1906; The Savannah Morning News, 9
November 1906; The Tifton Gazette 9 November 1906; The Valdosta Daily Times 6, 7, 9 November 1906; The Washington Post, 9
November 1906.
25 Although Brundage’s history of lynching in Georgia is considered fairly exhaustive, he missed the lynching of Jet Hicks on 9 November,
1906.
26 The Savannah Morning News, 9 November 1906.
27 The Tifton Gazette, 9 November 1906.
28 The Atlanta Constitution, 9 November 1906. The case shows up in Kerry Segrave, Lynchings of Women in the United States: the
29 The Valdosta Daily Times, 7 November 1906.
black people,” all of her life. That story—with its murders, kidnapping, and lynching—justified, to the Akridge family, their pervasive fear of black people. Perhaps similar stories in other families explained and justified why fear of black people continued to survive. That fear marked Hettie more deeply than the positive experiences she recalls as a child, such as being allowed to “play under the tree” with black children who lived on the property. While Mattie Prater recalled positively mixing with white children in her youth, Hettie remembered the caution when she and her siblings mixed with black children who worked for her family. 32 “[W]e couldn’t go just anywhere and play with them,” she recalled. “But if they, came we could take them out there and entertain them.” Hettie and her siblings might play with black children, and they “were always … taught to be nice to them,” Hettie recalled. They were not, however, “allowed to be social.” That was “basically . . . it . . . .” Gwen explained. They were taught a measure of what Jennifer Ritterhouse identifies as “decency” that befit the elite classes. 31

The murder of Ackridge and the resulting lynchings of the Hicks’ couple in 1906, and murder of the unnamed young woman and lynching of James Irwin in Ocilla in 1930, suggest a common mark of violence on their time and place. Namely, that was to instill fear and mistrust across the race line. Separated in distance by only two counties and in age by just over two years, it is unlikely that the paths of Mattie Prater Ivy and Hettie Akridge Park ever crossed. They grew up on opposite sides of a racially divided society that shaped everyone living in it, black and white. Mattie and Hettie shared the legacy of that divided society. Each woman personally felt a fear and suspicion of the others’ race. Each one, at different periods of her life, felt directly marked by the violence inherent in a society that condoned vigilante justice. Whether or not Hettie Akridge actually remembers events that took place when she was not quite two, she heard about that racially charged episode often enough to imprint a deep-seated fear of people of color. Since there is no corroborating evidence that the reputed kidnapping occurred—no supporting evidence that Mrs. Hicks attempted or intended a kidnapping—the purpose of the story in family history is unclear. Whatever the reason for the story, it insured that Hettie would fear blacks for the rest of her life, as Mattie feared whites for much of her life.

Last of the three women, Grace Johnson, had a very different experience that resulted from a violent incident early in her life. 32 The accidental death by shotgun, which she witnessed, of her four year old brother in 1936, her courtroom testimony as an eight year old that followed, and a revenge arson attack a year later, inform the story of Grace Johnson, a black interdenominational minister, aged 84 at the time of her interview. Unlike Mattie and Hettie, Grace claims to have lived a fearless life. Like Hettie, she grew up hearing a story that strongly affected her identity, except in Grace’s case, the effect was validating.

On September 17, 1928, Minnie Lee Johnson, a 30 year old black mother, gave birth to Grace, the third of six surviving children. The midwife showed unusual interest in this baby, born “behind a veil.” Midwives commonly attached a mystical interpretation to babies born “in the caul,” or with the amniotic sac still intact around the face and head. They claimed such births to be rare and believed babies so born were commonly attached a mystical interpretation to babies born “in the caul,” or with the amniotic sac still intact around the face and head. They claimed such births to be rare and believed babies so born were gifted with a sixth sense, with heightened intuitive abilities. 33 To add impetus to such an auspicious beginning, Minnie decided to name her baby girl Grace.

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32 This is the opposite of the experience Jennifer Ritterhouse reports from her reading of autobiographies by blacks and whites. Ritterhouse, 145.
33 Reference Jennifer Ritterhouse’s explanation of the gradations of race consciousness from “decency” to “anti-racist” thinking (64)
34 Grace M. Johnson Hughes (African-American) was born September 17, 1928, in Groveland, Liberty County, Georgia to Simon Johnson (1896–1970) and Minnie Lee Lanier Johnson (1898–1987). Simon Johnson was a sharecropper and Minnie Lee worked as a domestic. Grace married Frederick Hughes in 1975; they divorced at an undisclosed date in the early 1980s; Frederick Hughes died in the middle 1980s. Grace had no biological children who survived infancy. She lived in New Jersey for a year in the middle 1940s, then again for several decades from 1962 until she returned to Valdosta in 1991. She was educated at segregated schools in Liberty County, and she completed advanced degrees in theology in the early 2000s at American Bible College in Pineland, Florida. She published a book titled The Work and Ministry of the Holy Spirit in 2005. When she lived in New Jersey, Grace worked in the medical and pharmaceutical industries. She preached and taught as an interdenominational minister for the three decades prior to her interview on February 19 and 20, 2012.
Minnie needed divine blessing in her life. She was a hard-working domestic and the wife of an alcoholic husband who hardly worked at all; when Simon did work, it was to sharecrop for planters, which meant constant debt and a struggle for even the essentials of life. The family was desperately poor, Grace recalled. "We didn’t have anything," she said, "We were poor. I mean dirt poor. Never enough food. Never any clothes to wear.” Grace’s mother, Minnie hoped the difference the midwife promised somehow included relief from this grinding poverty. Maybe this baby would be special, Minnie hoped. The theme of being special, set apart, and unique, pervades and energizes Grace’s life story.

A story that, in the telling, started with family tragedy. In December of 1936, Grace’s baby brother, Sampson, playing at her feet, was shot and killed. On December 7, a young white man dropped by the Johnson home, as he often did, to enjoy some of Minnie Lee’s, homemade biscuits. Grace and her siblings were playing outside. In Grace’s memory, she was about five years old, and Sampson, barely a toddler. On this morning, the white visitor was on his way to a routine hunting excursion. He propped his gun against the side of the building, and walked upstairs to the Johnsons’ second-floor apartment. Somehow, while upstairs visiting with Minnie and Simon, the young man’s propped gun fell, fired, shot and killed young Sampson Johnson.

Sampson’s death, the events that followed, and her role in them, all shaped Grace’s identity and, she would argue, her destiny. As Grace recalled the events, the prosecutor, a “Lawyer Darsey,” called her, although black and a child, to testify against the young white man, who, based on her testimony, was convicted and sentenced to a year in prison. He served the prison term, was released, and, in retaliation, those in the black community believed, burned down the Old Jerusalem Church that Grace’s family attended.

In Grace’s telling, the prosecutor relied on her testimony for conviction, and she did not let him down. As important to her as the role she played in the trial is the guilt that consumed her until, years later, at the age of 18, she confessed to her mother that she had lied when answering the prosecutor’s pointed questions about the day of her brother’s death.

Many of the details that Grace tells of Sampson’s death and the following trial cannot be verified;34 some are obviously misremembered (such as the ages of Sampson and herself). 35 What can be verified is that Sampson Johnson died of a gunshot wound, that there was a judicial hearing and, days later, there was an indictment. A miscellaneous clipping from an article in The Liberty County Herald found in the court records reported the death of the Johnson child, identifying him as four years old.36 The paper reported “negligence” resulting in “involuntary manslaughter” of a “four year old negro child” committed by a “white youth about 12 years” [C. A. Crosby] old “living near the Liberty-Evans County line.”37 The court

12% of births were caul. A random Google search brings numerous sites that list numbers of caul births to range anywhere from 1 in 1,000 births to 1 in 80,000. Dr. Rebecca Green of the Valdosta State University School of Nursing specializes in children’s health, vulnerable populations, and community health. Asked about the frequency of caul births today, Dr. Green says the question of the rate of occurrence of caul or en caul births is not tracked in western culture because there are no clinically significant findings associated with caul or en caul births. Most western hospital births involve artificial rupture of the amniotic sac if it does not rupture naturally, therefore the ability to track naturally occurring caul or en caul births would not be possible in current western clinical settings. Dr. Green notes an unfortunate result of the clinical insignificance of caul births, namely, as the occasion for such births declines to negligible numbers, the cultural meaning attached to them, such as that in Grace’s story, is lost.

34 Neither the Liberty nor adjacent Evans County newspapers exist for the years 1936 and 37.
35 According to Georgia Vital Records, only relatives might obtain a copy of the death certificate. Though they were unwilling to divulge the cause of death, they were willing to tell me by phone that the date of death was December 7, 1936.
36 The month and year are legible on the scanned copy of the newspaper article but the day is not.
37 The C.A. Crosby identified in a December 1936 Liberty County Herald article and then on the Liberty Superior Court’s Criminal Docket in February 1937 is very likely the Charlie Crosby found in Evans County census records for 1930 and 1940. Grace recalled Kicklighter, not Crosby, as the name of the person responsible for Sampson’s death. A likely explanation can be found in the census records that identify a Charlie Crosby’s mother, Eva’s, birth name was Kicklighter. According to the 1930 census, Eva lived with her children, including Charlie, eight years old at the time, in the home of her father, J.A. Kicklighter. In the 1940 census, she and her children, including Charlie, 18 years old at the time, lived in her brother, W.E. Kicklighter’s, household. If the C. A. Crosby identified in the Liberty County Herald and the Charlie Crosby identified in the two census reports are the same, the adolescent in question was 14 not 12 at the time of the death.
docket shows that the Grand Jury found enough evidence of murder to indict Crosby on February 16, 1937. The court claims there is no documentation of a trial in the court records, and research reveals no extant copies of The Liberty County Herald or the adjacent county’s newspapers during those years.38

Whether District Attorney Oliver Darsey actually called an eight year old, black child to testify against a white male adolescent in a trial that resulted in a conviction and a year’s imprisonment cannot be verified. Census records reveal the young man was actually 14, not 12, at the time of the accident. Whatever the discrepancies, what is clear is that the story aligns with Grace’s understanding of the central role that providence and religious conviction played in her interpretation of her life. Being called by the prosecutor was one of many signals to her that she was set apart to play a special role. She recalled hearing throughout her adolescence how her testimony alone led to the young man’s conviction. And, in her telling, she came full circle and found redemption when she admitted to fabricating a story, to satisfy the attorney and to get a degree of satisfaction for her family for the senseless death of her baby brother. And she remembered that her recognition and resulting confession came after she began reflecting on the moral and spiritual consequences of lying.

At no point since the age of five did Grace doubt the stories of a distinct birth. She grew into what she always perceived as a special destiny. From refusing to wear hand-me-downs as a small child; to fist-fighting for her dignity when, at age 15, a presumed white friend called her “nigger”; to contending with male religious leaders in her late 50s for the right of a woman to become an ordained minister, Grace portrays herself as one who would let nothing stand in the way of acquiring eventually what she considered the “best of everything,” no small aspiration for a person of color living during Grace’s lifetime in the U.S. South.

The best was hard to come by for blacks, however, in Georgia, a state in a region governed by the white supremacy of Grace’s youth. Refusing hand-me-downs set her apart from her contemporaries. More serious challenges in her adolescence required a different resolve, however. Defiance as a young teen led to a year’s exile with an aunt in New Jersey—to keep the whole family, in her father’s words, from being “lynched.” When, at the age of 15 a white girl threatened her dignity with open racism, Grace fought, literally. She could not explain what provoked the white girl whom she believed to be a friend, the daughter of a tobacco planter, to turn on her, but it was unforgiveable at the time. Whether the young white girl was jesting, pushing the envelope, trying to impress others, or mindlessly copying her father who was known to use the word liberally, did not matter to Grace. A line had been crossed. As she had done in the past and would do many times in the future, she “stood up” for herself. Although Grace’s parents understood implicitly that every human being has the right not to be addressed disgracefully, no matter what the reason, Simon and Minnie Lee, worried about the consequences and believed it best for everyone that Grace go to live with Minnie Lee’s sister in New Jersey, where she stayed during 1942 and ’43.

Grace returned to Georgia in her late teen years, and for the next two decades lived and worked mostly in Savannah. In 1962, hoping to find better employment opportunities and less race-based discrimination, she moved back to New Jersey. Disappointedly she found racism alive and well in New Jersey. But she did find more career opportunity in the pharmaceutical industry there than she would have found in Georgia.

Grace’s parents taught her two valuable lessons about being black in a white world. “Everything that I learned about prejudice,” she said, she learned from her father. Simon Johnson coped with his pervasive and often expressed fear of being lynched with alcohol and a resigned fated-ness which led him constantly to juxtapose the empowered white race against a powerless, destitute black race. Although for most of

38 Although Dinnette Williams on the staff of the Liberty Superior Court sent photocopies of the criminal docket for the February 1937 term and a photocopy of the referenced newspaper clipping, they claim there is no further information on a trial, and discouraged further attempts at ascertaining more. E-mail from Dinnette Williams, Liberty County Superior Court, August 23, 2013.
her life she distanced herself from her father’s addictions, fears, and fatal attitude, she admitted that his fears about white supremacy were not unfounded. And though Grace admired her mother and respected her work ethic and devotion to her children, Minnie Lee’s loyalty to the whites for whom she worked and from whom she took hand-me-downs, taught Grace never to be similarly dependent.

In conclusion I will try to bridge the distance between the three women and the bigger picture, a leap of faith, which I hope participants at an oral history conference will not find too far-fetched, one that requires shifting from micro to macro history.

In a study theorizing violence in western culture, an anthropologist wrote about “the effect of violence on what remains of a culture that is trying in vain to overcome violence with violence.” Bear with me as I call on an American icon much more eloquent than I, who reflected at length on the nation’s dilemma around the subject of violence as a means of control.

Thomas Jefferson——himself the incarnation of irony in American history; would be grieved, though not at all surprised, at the enduring legacy of violence embedded in the institution of slavery. Jefferson, the reserved Deist, nonetheless turned to a religious, retributive-justice, discourse when he reflected on what he believed were the inevitable consequences of slavery. Calling it a “great political and moral evil,” an “abomination,” he penned the words of a passage very familiar to students of American history, but one I will share for any not as familiar. In 1781 as the nation was struggling to survive its infancy Jefferson wrote:

Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever: that . . . a revolution of the wheel of fortune . . . may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can . . . side with us in such a contest.

Jefferson condemned the institution of slavery, predicted its eventual demise, and mourned the implications of its prolonged survival. Yet, ironically, he tolerated it in his own household, allowing it as well as inflicting abuse directly.

Nearly 30 years after he wrote the passage I just read, and four years before his death, Jefferson reflected sadly, but resignedly, on how and why such contradiction could coexist in himself, in his home state, and by implication, in his nation. Because, he wrote to a friend, while “Justice is in one scale,” with equal conviction, he followed, “self-preservation [is] in the other.” That Jefferson’s belief in justice and human liberty, so eloquently recorded in voluminous writings, was not finally stronger than the hold of self-preservation, says something about the complexity of moral convictions in a world in which justice and self-preservation have to be at odds.

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40 Comes from Rienhold Niebuhr, The Irony of American History (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952).
41 From Notes on the State of Virginia
42 TJ letter to John Holmes, April 22, 1820.
Women in the Anti-Racist Struggle.

Judith Garfield (UK):

Resumen: Londres contra el Racismo es un proyecto de historia oral acerca de las mujeres y los hombres que han estado combatiendo las actitudes y los comportamientos racistas en Londres. De lucha del Frente Nacional a lidiar con el acoso policial, estos activistas ayudan a construir el patrimonio rico y continuo de la capital de la justicia social. Con su historia de la inmigración, la privación y la capacidad de recuperación de fama mundial, Londres ha sido el hogar de algunos de los más intensos racista y anti-racista en el país.

Eastside Patrimonio de la Comunidad registró más de 30 entrevistas con activistas de todo tipo de grupos y campañas anti-racistas, para celebrar y preservar esta historia. Muchas de estas batallas y campañas tuvieron lugar en y alrededor de East London. Los londinenses del este han sido durante mucho tiempo en la primera línea de la lucha contra el racismo. Desde Brick Lane en Barking, las mujeres han desempeñado un papel crucial en esta vibrante y continuando el legado del activismo, sin embargo, la historia de las mujeres que luchan contra el racismo nunca se ha dicho.

En este trabajo se va a compartir las voces de seis mujeres que habían participado en la lucha contra el racismo en el este de Londres desde 1970 hasta nuestros días, de asistir a los mítines de la organización de apoyo legal, que trata de la policía, el diseño de material de campañas, las mujeres desempeñaron un papel fundamental, y no sólo a cuidadores de niños, o hacer el té, esta es su historia de las comunidades que luchan por equidad.

Eastside Patrimonio de la Comunidad es un centro de historia oral con sede en el este de Londres. Durante veinte años hemos estado recolectando y archivo de historias orales de los londinenses ordinarios y extraordinarios. Estas historias ocultas están disponibles en nuestro archivo, así como una serie de exposiciones, publicaciones, películas y mucho más. www.hidden-histories.org.uk

Abstract: London Against Racism is an oral history project about the women and men who have been fighting racist attitudes and behavior in London. From battling the National Front to dealing with police harassment, these activists help to build the capital’s rich and continuing heritage of social justice. With its history of immigration, deprivation and world-famous resilience, London has been home to some of the most intense racist and anti-racist action in the country.

Eastside Community Heritage has recorded over 30 interviews with activists from all kinds of anti-racist groups and campaigns, to celebrate and preserve this history. Many of these battles and campaigns took place in and around East London. East Londoners have long been on the frontline of the battle against racism. From Brick Lane to Barking, women have played a crucial role in this vibrant and continuing legacy of activism, however the story of the women fighting racism has never been told.

This paper will share the voices of six women who were involved in fighting racism in East London from the 1970s to the present day, from attending rallies to organising legal
support, dealing with the police, designing campaign literature women played a crucial role and not just a child minders, or making the tea, this is their story of communities fighting for equality.

Eastside Community Heritage is an oral history centre based in East London. For twenty years we have been collecting and archiving oral histories from ordinary and extraordinary Londoners. These hidden histories are available in our archive, as well as a range of exhibitions, publications, films, and more. Visit www.hidden-histories.org.uk
Eastside Community Heritage is an arts and heritage organisation operating throughout London and beyond. Eastside was founded in 1993 and over the last 20 years we have completed over 100 community arts and heritage projects. These projects have a primary focus on oral history and preserving the stories and history of “real people”. In 1999, Eastside established the East London People’s Archive. The archive now holds in excess of 2000 oral histories, 28000 photographs, and numerous items of memorabilia and film. All of this material is preserved for the benefit of future generations.

London Against Racism

This project began last year, during a reminiscence session people spoke passionately about their memories of racism in Waltham Forest, London. Realising the rich heritage of anti-racist activism, and the importance of preserving it, we launched a full oral history project. With its history of immigrant communities, deprivation and world-famous resilience, East London has been home to some of the most intense racist and anti-racist action in the country. Over the months we have spoken to activists from all kinds of anti-racist groups and campaigns and the project is ongoing.

This paper presents the stories of the women we have been speaking to for this project. This should not be understood as a definitive history of the area, nor an image of all women’s experiences. We are simply taking this opportunity to share the memories of these six women and consider their role in battling racism as we learnt that women faced their own set of challenges.

The six women are:

Carol Grimes: a Jazz singer and recording artist, born in Lewisham, as Carol puts it ‘at a time when bombs were falling from the skies: there were no Bananas, and radio was the music and the word’. Throughout her career, Carol has played concerts in support of political campaigns, including Rock Against Racism’s first concert at The Princess Alice Pub, in Romford, in 1976.

Liz Fekete has worked for The Institute of Race Relations for 29 years. In 1991 she wrote ‘Newham: The Forging of a Black Community’, in which local people told how fighting racial violence brought them together. Liz continues to write and speak on aspects of contemporary racism, refugee rights, far-right extremism and Islamophobia across Europe.

Jenny Bourne has worked for the Institute of Race Relations for 40 years. She manages the organisation’s fundraising, and their Black History Collection, and writes on aspects of British Racism. In 1983 she wrote ‘Towards an anti-racist feminism’: a pamphlet which looked at the parallels between racism and women’s oppression. Jenny was also a member of Women Against Racism and Fascism, and was present at The Battle of Lewisham in 1977.

Lucy Whitman created her own feminist and anti-fascist punk fanzine ‘JOLT’ whilst at University in 1977. She then wrote regularly for the pioneering feminist magazine ‘Spare Rib’ and for ‘Temporary Hoarding’ - the magazine of Rock Against Racism. Lucy has also taught in adult and further education in East London, and in 1990 co-wrote Language and Power, ‘a book of language awareness learning materials for the multi-ethnic classroom’. She later worked for many years at Amnesty International UK.

Julie Beg-gum has lived in Tower Hamlets for her entire life, working on a whole range of campaigns locally and nationally. Julie helped to set up Women Unite Against Racism in the 1990s, to address obstacles to women joining anti-racist campaigns. Julie has been involved in youth work, museums and community organising, and swears she will never leave East London.

Oul-rika Schmidt grew up in Luneberg, in Germany. She has been involved with Amnesty International for several decades, and has had a lifelong involvement in anti-fascist activity. She now works as a teacher, volunteers for Amnesty and lives in Waltham Forest.

This event is history as told by these women.
In the 1930s Oswald Mosley attempted to establish an organised Fascist presence in the UK, with his British Union of Fascists. The Union was led by aristocrats, and in an attempt to gain working class support they organised a march through Cable Street in London’s East End. They chose that area in particular because of the large migrant Jewish population, hoping to exploit racial resentments and prejudice. In fact, locals came out in force to block the road and successfully pushed the fascists back. October 4th became known for The Battle of Cable Street, an event which is still considered instrumental in determining the future of race relations in the East End in particular and the UK in general.

The anti-fascists who took to the streets in 1936 were a diverse crowd of anarchists, socialists, trade unionists, Jewish groups, and residents. We know that a sizable number of them were women - newsreel footage and eye-witness accounts attest to elderly women and girls as young as twelve on the street confronting the police. Women who lived on Cable Street also threw rubbish and rotten vegetables from their windows at the police. The following day, the Daily Mail’s outrage over the march focused on the involvement of women, with the striking headline ‘REDS ATTACK BLACKSHIRTS, GIRLS AMONG INJURED’. The Battle of Cable Street is crucial event for how East London has come to see itself. The subsequent century of anti-racist activism has shifted and adapted, but remained strong.

The Anti-Racist Movement

The 1960s - a combination of increased pressure on apartheid South Africa, a wave of student protests and a new generation of immigrants meant that a more organised movement of anti-racist activists could emerge. The 1970s saw the birth of such groups as the Anti-Nazi League, Campaign Against Racism and Fascism and East London Black Women’s Organisation. In East London in particular, this was an urgent response to a very real threat. Racial violence was so extreme that within the space of just a few years names like Altab Ali, the Toussaint brothers, Akhtar Ali Baig, Kennith Singh and the Virk brothers built a long list of victims of sometimes lethal attacks. As in the 1930s, this area was on the front line of racial struggles. Met with apathy or abuse from the police, it was left to communities to organise themselves.

Julie Begum, who grew up in Globetown, remembers the backlash against racism as a fierce but male-dominated world.

“it was mostly a male-dominated um experience, I think, in terms of the protests, demonstrations, activism- activism, so it wasn’t something that girls or women would have had much access to in lots of ways. And also, cos of the kind of, the volatility of, of er, the environment, you know, it was still an un- it was a threatening environment, still. So I suppose girls and women weren’t really encouraged to be active in that kind of um that movement or protest or demonstrations.”

Julie became involved after the Altab Ali murder.

“The ten thousand people were on a funeral march for Altab Ali, a 24-year-old machinist killed in a racist attack in Whitechapel in 1978. Local people walked with his coffin to Downing Street in outrage”.

Julie Begum

Grunwick (1976-78) and Greenham (1981)

The late seventies, a changing political landscape allowed political groups to organise in specific gender or sexual identities where they might have previously been sidelined. One important event was the Greenham Peace Camp of 1981, organised and populated almost exclusively by women. Just as important for Londoners, though, was the Grunwick Dispute of 1976, a strike in Willesden led by female immigrant workers. The dispute showed the power of women workers to defend their rights, and acted as a challenge to labour groups to show solidarity for non-white workers.
Jenny Bourne visited Grunwick to show solidarity and saw many other women doing the same.

“So the Grunwick dispute was quite important as a mobiliser of not just the left, but a whole lot of different sectors, including women.

Hmm

“And we used to have different days down at the picket. You know, sort of gays would go, women would go, this would go, that would go, it was all organised. And so I think a lot of women became involved in anti-racism through going down to support the Grunwick women, mainly women workers. And those same women then decided that they also wanted to oppose the fascists. And we went as a group, erm, in April 1977 to this Wood Green event, which... I mean it was also a sort of event which was being opposed then by the IMG, which was the fourth international group”

Hmm

And SWP. But a lot of independent anti-fascists came along”

The National Front

At that time organised fascism was making a return in the form of the far-right National Front. Throughout the seventies and early eighties, the NF were the most visible and immediate threat of racist violence in the country. Nationalist, racist and with links to Nazism, the NF aimed to radicalise the white working class. They targeted East London regularly, selling their newspaper on Brick Lane and even keeping headquarters on Great Eastern Street. Far more dangerous was their organised violence - just walking down the street was dangerous for non-white East Londoners.

Julie Begum again, whose parents settled in Tower Hamlets from Bangladesh.

“My dad came in 1962, then he returned to Bangladesh, and then married my mother. And then she came in 1966, and then I was born, like a couple of years later. Um so they came initially, and um because um it was difficult for people to come and go in terms of immigration and stuff - there was immigration laws being introduced that made it much more difficult for people just to come and go - men decided to bring their families over, you know, settle. Because um the prospect of having difficulties and stuff, or not being able to come back, or, or get out when you need to. So um I think the mass sort of Bangladeshi immigration sort of happened towards the eighties. But there were mostly single men who’d lived here until then, and had no sort of thoughts of settling. But once they realised they couldn’t just come and go, they decided to bring families over. So I think my mum was one of the first women that sort of, yeah, came over. There was very few women around”.

“There was my aunt, um but our neighbours were mixed um people. We lived in Chicksand Estate in er, in Tower Hamlets, and I remember our neighbours being South Asian, Caribbean, Irish, you know, it was a real mix of different migrant groups living together. And so...um, so they settled, and they started having a family” –

Julie Begum

Resistance to NF had to be organised and vigilant, and of course women were in the thick of those campaigns. Liz Fekete from the Institute of Race Relations recalls working in Anti-Fascist Action:

“I was a treasurer of Anti-Fascist Action, and I was one of the only women, really in a, quite a, a... a big role in, in Anti-Fascist Action. And yeah, they were individually sexist. Erm, and y'know, there were always calls to expel them, but you know, the same people who'd be calls to expel them, y'know, they were
marching down the road sort of, y’know, nice humanistic thing. They’d soon be, y’know, they’d soon be cleared off the street by the fascists”.

Wood Green

One main form of resistance against the National Front was street protests, whereby groups would come out in force to show their intolerance for racism. In 1977 Lucy Whitman was a punk and anti-racist campaigner who was at a blockade against the NF in Wood Green.

“Minority of punks actually... were wearing Nazi regalia, and mistook that for punk being erm, or punks being suggestive to racist ideas. Actually, you know, it was a very small minority. It wasn’t really punks, it was skinheads. Erm, and most punks, you know, if they, if they knew anything about erm, fascism or the Nazis, weren’t in the least um, sympathetic towards it cos it was all too authoritarian. And punk was all about, about being individual and rebelling, so there was no actual y’know, connection at all. But some, but some um, people on the far-right, you know, looked at those symbols and thought ‘oh yeah, you know, we could get in there’. But they didn’t make much progress actually”

The Battle of Lewisham

In May 1977, Lewisham police arrested 21 young black people in dawn raids. A protest in New Cross against police tactics was subsequently broken up by the National Front. Emboldened, the National Front planned a march of their own across the borough, from New Cross to Catford. Anti-racist groups, residents, unions and others organised to face the NF - on 13 August 1977 the Battle of Lewisham saw the National Front forced to flee, as protesters clashed with police. The Battle is still considered a decisive moment in anti-fascist campaigning.

Jenny Bourne was present at Lewisham, where she stewarded for WARF - Women Against Racism and Fascism. She tells us her story here.

“In Lewisham. I mean Lewisham was quite important because... we mobilised magnificently for Lewisham. I mean loads of women.

Yeah

Far more than was in Women against Racism and Fascism. Lewisham really got a hell of a lot of women out. And we were... we were very organised, and we were every obedient. So, in the sense, because we were so organised we also became, in the end, the ones that the police really beat up because,

Erm... The NF had sort of organised on this side street, and they were trying to walk down into the centre of Lewisham. And because we were an organised group, and because there was quite a lot of us... I can’t remember how many hundred... we were asked to block that... block their way, so we all sat down.

Erm... And the police on horseback had decided that they had to give the NF the right to march, and because we didn’t move we all got quite badly beaten. ‘Cos they just sort of beat a... a line through, through the group.

I didn’t get beat up at that point. I got beaten up later in that same day. Um, because we then... the NF went down into Lewisham. We followed... again I... I used to find it quite worrying, because um... when you’re in an area, and you don’t know the area, you don’t know the geography, it’s actually quite difficult when you’ve got a police force aswell that’s trying to make you go somewhere else.
So we all went down into Lewisham. By that time I’d got separated from my mates, or as I say, some had gone home. Yeah
And then we tried to hold the street against, I don’t know what, the National Front, but actually we didn’t know this but the National Front had been taken away by the police into some car park to hold their meeting, but we didn’t know that. And it ended up with the police absolutely out of control and terrified. I think the police were terrified. They just wanted to get us off the street.

And so they were just rushing everybody, and they closed the station so we couldn’t get away. I can remember we went into the hospital at one point because we wanted to phone someone. We had… I’d met some other people by then and we wanted to get a lift to get out of Lewisham, and that was guarded by police, so you couldn’t get into the hospital. And the police were just incredibly violent. So I… I was just standing there and they picked me up on a, on a riot shield and threw me across the road

Erm, and I landed on my back. Actually, I didn’t think much of it, but I’ve… I have got, I have got a severe back problem now from that”.

Rock Against Racism

As the anti-racist movement gathered momentum, real changes were gradually occurring. Alongside the battles on the streets and in the courts, a fight was going on for popular culture. Rock Against Racism was a movement that aimed to reclaim punk and rock music for the anti-fascists. The idea was that if the hatred of racism was exposed then it would become unfashionable.

RAR was set up by a small but dedicated group of artists, activists and writers. Here, Lucy Whitman talks about the relationship between sexism and racism.

“I was vehemently opposed to injustice and unfairness and inequality in whatever form it took. So for me it made total sense that if you were going to challenge sexism you would also be anti-racist and vice-versa. But I did discover that that connection wasn’t made by everybody. [LAUGHS] so the main… and thing is, it is… it’s hard to realise now but 1976, 1977 a lot of people didn’t understand what the word sexism meant. And I’m not joking. When Rock Against Sexism started up, er, various people said to me ‘well, what, what, what is that? Are you against sex?’ and er, it just wasn’t common currency, and so y’know, we may not have achieved everything, but we have achieved something. Because at least people now understand what you mean if you say the word sexism. So a lot of people on the traditional left, and within the anti-racist movement were very sexist, and they just hadn’t thought about it before. So one of the things within Rock Against Racism was that um, it was a big consciousness raising thing for everybody, because err, the kind of traditional lefties and anti-racists were trying to raise the consciousness of youth about racism and fascism, and then erm, feminists within Rock Against Racism were saying, were trying to raise everybody’s consciousness about, about sexism as well”

“So you would find that a particular RAR group in a place had booked a band who were actually very sexist. And the… this band would say ‘yeah, we’re all completely against racism’ but then they would be totally um, gormless about how sexist their act was. So then of course you had, particularly places like Brighton where there’s a strong feminist movement, you know. Feminists would come along to these Rock Against Racism gigs, and be absolutely horrified by, by the performers, and erm, big hu-ha. But that was good, because it just meant that people were talking about it, you know, and people had to really think about it. So then, erm, Rock Against Racism had to sort of draw up some kind of a contract you know, so local groups wouldn’t get themselves in a pickle like that, you know, so.

And I did go to a residential two or three days which was all about, I can’t remember what it was all called, whether it was called ‘multicultural education’ or something, but anyway it was all about erm, you know, creating education which was erm… which recognised the needs of London’s diverse population, let’s put it like that. I can’t remember what the terminology was in those days. But so many people who I met there, and they were all working in different erm, colleges and that, a lot of them had been involved in um, in the anti-fascist struggle. So this is about… I don’t know, about erm, four or five years later or something, and a
lot of the people who’d been kind of involved in... obviously in a voluntary capacity, in mobilising against the National Front. And the National Front really, really were completely smashed, but then we had Thatcher. Erm, so, but I noticed that an awful lot of the people who were working in further education, and who were, um, alert to issues of racism and diversity, you know, they’d all got that same history. They’d been in School Kids Against the Nazis, or Teacher’s Against The Nazis, or something. You know, they’d all been in, in one of those groups

Carol Grimes played Rock Against Racism’s first ever concert, at the Princess Alice pub in Romford in 1976. Here she remembers performing at the venue in East London:

Um, how can I put this? At that time, living where I did. The Grove area was rampant with bad drugs, and there were a lot of things going on that were getting quite scuzzy. I had a child. I came out one day from that flat to, to say, send him off to school, and there were police, and there’d been a stabbing, literally on my doorstep. I had a lot of things I was worried about... however, one of my memories... so, so it wasn’t you know, I’m thinking okay, well I’m doing that... but don’t forget this was new... we didn’t know how this was going to evolve. It was making a stand in an area which if I remember rightly at that time was pretty national front-ish, that part of London. In itself, the whole of the East End post-war years had had incredible poverty amongst the indigenous peoples. And a lot of homes demolished bombed, etcetera, etcetera. There was a lot of very muddled thinking, and people being blamed, namely if... if I’m gonna blame this black family cos they’ve nicked my home and my job, kind of attitude going on. And it wasn’t until we were on the way over there that Dee, who was my friend who cooked in the Mangrove said, hmm ‘I’m gonna stick by you tonight’. And I said ‘but you always do’ [LAUGHS]. Cos he was that kind of guy. And he said ‘No I’m, I’m a bit worried’. He was worried, as a black man, he was a bit worried going to an area which he had remembered as a pretty, pretty heavy duty working-class racist white area. He was concerned. I didn’t think about it, at all...

Was there any reaction at the time from the NF or

"Yeah, there was presence, but they had the Dockers there on the doors. Which was very comforting [LAUGHS] not to sound like a wuss or anything. But Dee saying that to me made me think hmm... because often friends of mine who weren’t in the music business would say ‘Carol, you do take risks, and you are a single parent with no back family, and a child’. And sometimes I used to think ‘hmm, yes’. So I didn’t take Sam with me. He often came to gigs, but I didn’t, to that one. I got little boy sitter in. Hate to say babysitter cos he was probably about eight at the time. Wasn’t a baby, but I didn’t take him on that gig. And I took him to a lot of gigs, particularly the benefits. But I didn’t take him there. So I think my feeling was that people had warned me that it might be not a good place to take a child, err... and there might be trouble. And Dee said he was going to shadow me that night, and he did”.

Carol Grimes had concerns that few women played or were involved in the Rock Against Racism (RAR)concerts.

"But also there would’ve been a lack of women on that bill again. If I hadn’t been there. If Polly hadn’t been there, there were very few women. And I, you know, I fight as much for, as I do for, um, rights for, for, for the oppressed or the dis-enfranchised, and women are in that, still. They still are... I know we are better off now than we were back in the sixties, seventies and even the early eighties, but there still is, when you look at erm, for instance just that event, how few women on that bill there were. And I really don’t think that’s right, because we were there. And you can so easily, when you’re not a celebrity, and you’re not a big international star, it’s very easy because you don’t have what I call a Barker. That’s somebody who represents you and does all your bad cop, while you can be the good cop in the corner. You can get written out of history so easily, and it has happened to me on many an occasion, because there’s no comeback for them to write it out. So you know, that’s, but the danger there is that one could become bitter, and I choose not to become bitter. There’s a difference between being bitter and being angry. That, I think, being angry occasionally is quite healthy [LAUGHS] being bitter is counter-productive".
Newham East London

The borough of Newham was hit by a particularly disturbing series of racist attacks, and as awareness of institutionalized racism grew, the police were considered by many residents to be a part of the problem. This created in turn a fiercely dedicated resistance, including such organizations as Newham Monitoring Project who were established in 1980 following the racist murder of Akhtar Ali Baig, and still operate today. NMP was created to defend and empower vulnerable people, along with other community groups such as Southall Black Sisters, established in 1979 to meet the needs of Asian and African-Caribbean women, and Newham Asian Women’s Project in 1987. Though one of the most volatile areas of London at the time, Newham was the home of the country’s first anti-racist strike by schoolchildren, and the first eviction of a racially abusive resident, Rosina McDonell, in 1984.

Liz Fekete worked with Newham Monitoring Project, and remembers demonstrating in support of the Newham 7, Asian youths who were arrested after being attacked.

"The thing for me is I don’t look like a sort of typical anti-fascist, so I can sometimes sort of get away with um… in fact when, when we were in anti-fascist action, Red Action always used to send me to sit in a pub where they’d be [LAUGHS] to find out what was going on, because y’know, I didn’t look like, y’know, this would happen quite often. I’d be the kind. I was sort of the respectable wing. I’d often be pushed to liaise with the police, or to sort of wonder into a pub, with a sort of gentleman who looked like my husband, to sit around while they were, were drinking cos I don’t look like your typical anti-fascist. I look a bit like a housewife I guess.”

"Racist violence was not acknowledged and not accepted. There were all sorts of theories, and the victim was often blamed. Not just directly, as in the case of the Virk brothers, but in a way that’s sort of parallel to the treatment of women in terms of sexual violence. Y’know, there’d be an aspect of ‘well you brought it upon yourself’, y’know. ‘Well, if all the Asians take over all the shops then you shouldn’t be surprised” … Those attitudes were very prevalent.”

The BNP

By the 1990s, the National Front had seemed to have disappeared. The success of the anti-racist campaigns in making racism unfashionable had forced the NF to attempt a move into mainstream politics. This was the beginning of the British National Party. In 1993 BNP Councillor Derek Beachon was elected in Millwall, winning by just seven votes. The following year’s election held an extraordinary threat for local women of colour, who were often excluded from activism by men. Their response was just as extraordinary. Here is some more from Julie Begum on how women in Tower Hamlets took action that year.

"I mean they’re just so tanked up, and they’re just so crazy, but I think the BNP and the fascist scene around that time, in a sense, funny thing to say, were more disciplined, more political, and therefore more dangerous, ultimately. So they were very serious about their organised violence, and there was a group called Combat 18, which was really, y’know they had all, they had sorts of links with err, Ulster Loyalists in Northern Ireland who had arms and weapons, you had the whole rock scene with Ian Stewart Donaldson and Screwdriver, and you had Combat 18 which was specifically set up to target people in the anti-fascist movement on the left, who were considered sort of, y’know, traitors. And y’know, they did serious damage to a lot of people, they really… I remember one incident very, very early on, probably slightly before the main period of anti-fascist action where there was a, a left wing book shop on upper street in Islington and they went in and they just assaulted the girl on the front with an iron bar and brain-damaged her. So you know, you really had to take secure-… you couldn’t just be naive and go into Canning Town without security. Now in those days, and I’m not sure what’s happened to them, you had an organisation called Red Action, and I think somebody’s written a history. I don’t know whether you’ve seen that… someone’s written a history recently… about the whole history of anti-fascist action"
Unite Against Fascism

In the early 2000s the broad anti-racist organisation of Anti-Nazi League resurfaced in the form of Unite Against Fascism, a group created for direction action against the far right. Waltham Forest resident Ulrike Schmidt first got involved with UAF in a blockade against a BNP festival in Codnor, Derbyshire, for which fascist leaders from around the world were in attendance. Ulrike described that event as...

“A lovely experience ....“ For six hours we were blocking that road and stopping the fascists from getting to their party, which was just absolutely fantastic...the most beautiful thing about it was that next day I heard that one of those fascist leaders had been complaining bitterly, saying that Nick Griffin can’t even organise a party. "

UAF continue to campaign, largely against the far-right organisation English Defence League, who target areas of high Muslim populations including Whitechapel and Walthamstow. Here is a film about Ulrike and her experiences fighting in fascism in England.

"I used to say to people when asked ‘are you a feminist?’ and I’d say ‘well I’d have to be stu... pretty stupid to not be a feminist’

Erm, yeah, one... one needs to stand up and be counted really. You need to take part. You need to fully be in life, and to not be afraid to say ‘hey, this is wrong’. Even if you risk somebody looking at you in the eye and telling you different. You need to be counted, I think. Otherwise, it’s a bit of a wuss of a life, isn’t it? Don’t you think?"

Carol Grimes

On 1st September last year the EDL announced a march through Walthamstow - the response of action groups and local residents was so strong that they were prevented from doing so. That day may well prove to be the last real attempt by the EDL to intimidate East London.

Over a very short amount of time, anti-racist campaigns in London have made huge gains. The dedication and creativity of local women has helped to make East London a more tolerant and safer place for future generations.
Destruction or Opportunity? Debating Fair Housing, Racial Justice, and Community in Pennsylvania.

Judith Ridner
(US):

Abstract: Like many postwar industrial cities of the northeast, Allentown, Pennsylvania launched two major urban “renewal” projects during the 1960s. The second of these projects, the so-called Little Lehigh Urban Renewal Program, targeted the city’s primary African-American neighborhood. This project, designed by the city’s office of urban redevelopment to combat “blight” and financed largely with federal dollars, called for the complete demolition, clearance, and rebuilding of a sizeable residential and commercial neighborhood located just south of the downtown.

Using oral history interviews conducted with Allentown residents as part of the Lehigh Valley Black African Heritage History Project, my paper explores how the Little Lehigh urban renewal project affected Allentown’s small but significant African-American community from the 1960s until the present. Specifically, I will discuss 1) how and why renewal divided the black community, 2) what role racial politics played in shaping the city’s plans, 2) how class influenced African-American reactions to what was happening to them, and 3) what the long-term consequences of this relocation were on the African-American community. In the end, by discussing how contentious a process urban renewal was within the city and its African-American community, I hope to demonstrate why Allentown’s experience is both representative and unique of its time and place.
“Allentown Housing Sting Shows Whites and Minorities Treated Differently,” proclaimed a 2012 headline in the Allentown, Pennsylvania newspaper, The Morning Call. In the article that followed, local officials detailed how, in a sting conducted the year before, real estate agents had treated white and minority homebuyers differently in seventy-three percent of the cases tested. In blatant violation of the federal Fair Housing Act, agents steered white buyers towards homes in the city’s suburbs or its more exclusive west end neighborhood, while they directed minority buyers with identical income and educational profiles towards the poorest, most densely populated, minority-dominated neighborhoods in the city. For officials of this economically struggling, post-industrial city in northeastern Pennsylvania, documentation of such discriminatory practices was particularly unwelcome news, as these illegal actions “could have damaged Allentown’s economic development for decades.” “Next time,” warned the city’s democratic mayor, “we’re not going to hold a press conference … we’re going to file federal charges.”

While city officials expressed both worry and outrage, Allentown’s African American residents likely had a far more poignant and personal reaction to this story. They, too, were surely outraged by the revelations of such blatant racial discrimination in their city. But such behavior was also hauntingly familiar, especially to those older members of the community who recalled what life in the city was like during the 1950s and 1960s. Housing discrimination, residential segregation, and the biased and discriminatory behavior of real estate agents, they recalled, were not new problems in Allentown. Rather, like most northern cities of postwar America, race divided Allentown both spatially and socially. Before the 1960s, the city’s small number of African American (and Latino) residents, found themselves segregated to life in the poorest and least desirable central neighborhood. Many were renters who were crowded into some of the oldest housing stock in the city. Others, however, were homeowners; they had education, ambition, and some economic resources. Yet, they, too, found themselves restricted to purchases in this single neighborhood because real estate agents would not show them homes elsewhere in the city. In these ways, news of discriminatory treatment in the housing market, even in 2012, was not especially novel—or surprising; African Americans had been treated unequally before in Allentown’s housing market.

With this 2012 report and the housing discrimination issues it raises as its launching point, this paper turns its attention backwards to the 1960s. Using oral history interviews conducted with Allentown residents as part of the Lehigh Valley Black African Heritage History Project (founded in 2001), it recalls in detail another, more pivotal time in Allentown’s history from 1964 to 1969 when controversies surrounding the second of the city’s two major urban renewal projects, this one targeting the city’s primary African American neighborhood for demolition, brought residential discrimination and housing justice to the forefront of city politics for the first time in the city’s history. At that time, local officials found themselves blindsided by those who opposed the project as “negro removal.” The city’s African American leaders, meanwhile, divided in response to this crisis. They agreed that housing justice and racial equality were top priorities for the community, but they differed on which means would be used to achieve these ends. Some community leaders argued that renewal was an opportunity to seize rather than to fight. As they reasoned it, destruction of their neighborhood would break residential segregation and open access to the city’s best, or at least better neighborhoods; achieving an integrated city was their measure of justice. Others, particularly black homeowners, opposed the project. With their homes slated for demolition, they faced destruction of their neighborhood and forced relocation from their homes. They also feared the loss of their economic investments from below-market buyouts. To them, housing justice meant either halting the project or, when that proved impossible, obtaining a just price for their homes. Urban renewal, and the housing justice issues it raised, thus proved a remarkably divisive issue in Allentown. This paper traces these divisions.

*** all of the oral history interviews cited here were conducted as part of the Lehigh Valley Black African Heritage History Project, a cooperative, community-based project founded in Allentown, PA in 2001. Audio, video, and typed transcriptions of these interviews are in the author’s possession.


To understand how and why urban renewal became such a contentious inter- as well as intra-racial issue in Allentown during the 1960s, it is helpful to have some background information about the city and its history. By all accounts, Allentown, like many American cities plagued by the “urban crises” of the time, was a place at a crossroads as the 1960s began. With a population of 108,000 people, it was Pennsylvania’s 5th largest city, but it was on the cusp of change. With manufacturing industries to attract workers, Allentown had grown dramatically during the late 19th century, and again in the 1940s (increasing just over 10% during that decade). By the 1950s, however, bucking nationwide trends, population growth stagnated (the city had only a 1.5% growth rate during the 1950s). Economically, too, Mack Trucks and Western Electric, two mainstays of the city’s mostly blue-collar economy, remained mostly strong; they employed many of the city’s newcomers, as did nearby Bethlehem Steel. But there were real signs of economic decline. The silk industry, a central component of the city’s economy since the 1880s, was gone with nothing comparable to take its place. Suburbanization was also reshaping the area’s residential and business landscapes. As population growth in the surrounding suburban areas of the county boomed, city businessmen grew increasingly concerned about the continued viability of the downtown business district, which was anchored by the flagship buildings of Hess’s and Leh’s department stores—both Allentown institutions. Their fears were not unfounded. Four years after the area’s first shopping mall broke ground in 1965, Allentown’s main street had 14 empty storefronts. Something had to be done to halt this decline; the downtown business district was vital to the city’s identity and interests. As a former redevelopment official summarized it, there was a sense at the time that “what’s good for Hess [Max Hess, owner of Hess’s department store] is good for the city.” The goal was “to make sure that people kept coming to Hess’s and everything else” downtown. Yet in retrospect, important class and racial considerations also informed their actions and reactions. One concern members of the business community had was that visitors making their way to downtown shop first had to drive through the city’s poorest and most crowded neighborhood, a section where, especially in the summer, African Americans tended to “hang out on their porches.” Neither such visible poverty nor the presence of African Americans made for especially positive first impressions; Allentown’s image, they held, had to be made more uniformly positive.

The answer to this crisis, so it seemed to city officials, real estate men, and local developers, was urban renewal, a federally-funded program to revitalize America’s cities by eliminating “blight” through the demolition, clearance, and rebuilding of neighborhoods. Renewal had great appeal in Allentown, as it did in so many cities in postwar America. Officials hoped optimistically to revitalize downtown business districts and boost tax revenue while improving the living conditions of the least advantaged. In the early 1960s, Allentown’s Redevelopment Authority (the ARA, founded in 1956) joined the fray of what one former redevelopment officer now calls the “blight removal business” with two major renewal projects. The first, begun in 1961, targeted the east side of downtown. After four years and the construction of a new city hall and courthouse, local officials declared this project a success and presented the city with a check from their budget surplus. By contrast, the second undertaking, the Little Lehigh Project, an ambitious

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43 Sugrue, Origins of the Urban Crisis.
47 Mike Rosenfeld interview, July 2009.
49 Rosenfeld, 2009.
51 Rosenfeld, 2009.
52 Morning Call, April 28, 1965, box 6, Philip L. and Muriel M. Berman Papers: Collection I, Special Collections Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA.
plan to completely remake the city’s African American neighborhood, proved far more problematic and time consuming. More significant to this paper, the considerable controversy surrounding this project positioned race and housing justice issues at the city’s political forefront.53

The Little Lehigh neighborhood, the section where virtually all of Allentown’s black residents lived during the 1960s, took its name from the creek that formed its southern border. It was an 83-acre mixed residential, commercial, and industrial area located on the southside of downtown. Redevelopment officials saw it as a slum and “a waste of prime land.” Structures were “dilapidated,” “obsolete,” and “cramped together with little breathing space.” It was, said one former official, “a very, very crowded” neighborhood characterized by its “terrible living conditions.” Yet, it was also home to 1251 families, and was the center of Allentown’s African-American community.54 Everyone interviewed for this project agrees that Little Lehigh was “where all the black people lived.” And they were there, concentrated within a small, 4-6 block radius, not by choice, but because “at that time, if you tried to go out of that area, you got 100% resistance.”55 Thus, in targeting an area plagued by what one city report described as “social and minority problems,” the demolition of Little Lehigh took on important racial meaning as a program of negro removal.56 The plan called for the destruction of Allentown’s most racially diverse community, a place where African-American narrators recall that they were “very comfortable,” “very tight knit,” and felt like “one big family.”57

More than just loss of community, the Little Lehigh Renewal Project threatened the financial investments made the city’s black homeowners. According to one narrator, over half of Little Lehigh’s residents, including her husband and herself, were stable, non-transient homeowners. Despite the segregation that held them to this one neighborhood, they had put down roots, invested in property, and fixed up their homes. They took great pride in what they had accomplished and were willing to fight to defend their investments.58 With so much at stake, the renewal project highlighted all of the problems with residential segregation and housing inequity that African Americans had long faced in the city.

The project, which was first announced publicly in 1964, thus served as a lightning rod for debates over housing justice and racial equality in the city.

Still, what makes the Little Lehigh Project so interesting in retrospect is that so few Allentonians—either White or Black—would have guessed in the early 1960s that renewal, and particularly this renewal project, would engender such debate. Although today, most narrators interviewed for this project—including former redevelopment officials who are white—agree that urban renewal was often destructive and had racially-motivated ends, that was not so at the time, even among members of the city’s black community. In short, as the 1960s got underway, few people in Allentown would have guessed that the city stood at a significant racial crossroads too. After all, Allentown remained in 1960, as it always had been, and overwhelmingly white city with less than 1% of the population (a paltry 847 people) identified as “non-white” on the 1960 census.59 Such stark lack of diversity led to false presumptions of racial consensus. White residents, in particular, were lulled into thinking, as one local historian writes, that national events like the Civil Rights Movement, “had little direct effect on life in Allentown.”60 Many African Americans, who felt the sting of discrimination firsthand, knew better. But as members of such a tiny minority in the city, their lack of power in numbers mostly held any public expressions of their dissatisfaction in check.

55 Sandy Owens Interview, March 10, 2008; Bernie Durant Interview, March 2004.
56 Neighborhood Analysis.
57 Sandy Owens, 2008; Donald Gunn Interview, October 10, 2002; Deloris Marshall Interview, August 17, 2009.
Other demographic factors also discouraged dissent. Many of Allentown’s African Americans were newcomers, having arrived from the South during the Second Great Migration of the 1940s and 1950s. They had fled the Jim Crow south in search of opportunity, most always economic opportunity, which they found in various jobs in the city. These jobs were often menial, non-unionized ones in the service and domestic sectors, but because they paid real wages those who held them agreed they were, as one narrator observed, “better than sharecropping in the South.”61 Another agreed; African Americans could find opportunity in the city. As he said: "I’m sure there was some racism. But it wasn’t to the extent that it was in the Deep South."62 Thus, because life in Allentown was better than what they had known in the South, they quietly accommodated the city’s segregation and discrimination. They did not protest, but they did act. They founded their own churches, social clubs, and an NAACP chapter; those who had the means to do also invested in homes in the Little Lehigh neighborhood, the only area where they could purchase property in the city. They lived, as one newspaper report characterized it, “[q]uietly, and almost in anonymity, ... winning respect for their ethics and strength of character.”63 A 1953 newspaper piece told of how one AME minister had “at times, many doors ... slammed in his face,” but who nonetheless “contributed a great deal to his [emphasis added] community work by working within his limitations.” This same article said of Allentown’s NAACP that it operates “[q]uietly, almost in anonymity, this minority group contributes to the life of the city, winning respect for their ethics and strength of character.” Although this piece confirmed that Blacks were “[h]uddled in a few tiny sections of the city,” and “wish[ed] Allentown would let them expand and live in decent homes according to their educational, cultural and economic standing,” it also asserted that “there is no great complaint.” Said one resident: “We try to be worthwhile citizens, living in peace among our neighbors, wishing we could contribute more by doing the best we can under existing circumstances.”64

Such accommodationist positions mostly held until the Little Lehigh Urban Renewal Project forced Allentown’s African-American community into motion, exposing the significant rifts that existed both between the black community and the city’s white majority, and within the black community. The city’s African-Americans, the stress of this project quickly demonstrated, were not as unified or as passive as they seemed to be. Racial consensus was an illusion. But at the same time, class divisions within the black community were among the first issues to come to light. Some African-Americans, particularly those with education, middle-class status, high individual and collective aspirations of racial uplift, and who did not reside in Little Lehigh, favored renewal. Rev. Horace Melton, the founding pastor of Allentown’s Black Baptist church, was the best known among them.

Horace Melton had migrated from Georgia to Philadelphia, said his son, in search of “jobs, opportunities, and such,” in the 1940s. He then moved to Allentown in 1946 because “he wanted to start his own church.”65 By the 1960s, his church was a center for the city’s African-American community, and he had won respect as a local social leader. One respondent called him “one of the greatest men in Allentown,” another described him as “the Martin Luther King of Allentown.”66 Yet during urban renewal, Melton also became a controversial figure in the black community because of his work for the Redevelopment Authority as the chief relocation officer of the Little Lehigh Project. As his son tells it, many African-Americans were unhappy about this project, because “they [meaning the ARA] were basically breaking up the black community.” Still, Rev. Melton persisted because he had a vision; he saw a “bigger picture” – one of racial uplift and improvement. The city’s African-Americans did not have to live in this one neighborhood; residential segregation was wrong. He believed that member of his community “should be able to live where we wanted to.” As his son said: “He wanted us to have dignity.”67 Much of that dignity focused on “uniting ... Negroes at all levels with the view of raising status and earning recognition through the following avenues: social, educational, and cultural,” but some of it was more practical, focusing

61 Pedro and Kathryn Boone Interview, April 9, 2003.
62 Byron Crudup Interview, February 27, 2003.
63 Call-Chronicle, February 12, 1953.
64 Morning Call, 1953.
65 Robert Melton Interview, June 26, 2008.
66 Sandy Owens, 2008; Mike Rosenfeld, 2009.
specifically on having the right to "live where we want to." To Melton, urban renewal offered that possibility. In destroying this neighborhood, it forced change. The city would have to find new and hopefully better housing for its black residents (and he would oversee the process), thereby ending residential segregation and finally integrating the city. Little Lehigh’s African-American residents, meanwhile, might learn to aspire to more. As his son summarized it, his father argued that "you can’t ask people to respect you if you’re not acting respectable." Residential integration, he believed, offered blacks potential access to a particular kind of middle-class, suburban respectability.

Melton was not alone in his position. He was joined by a recent arrival from Philadelphia, Bernie Durant. Durant, who was then a thirty-something, college-educated, upwardly mobile engineer with Western Electric, gained fame in the early 1960s as the first African American to integrate one of the city’s newest suburban neighborhoods. When transferred to Allentown, Durant had assumed that "he could move up here and live a normal life ... but that was not the case." Instead, he was shocked to find the city’s African-Americans segregated "in 4 block square" neighborhood near center city. This situation was unacceptable; he wanted a house in the suburbs, but builders would not sell to him and contractors would not build for him. His response was resistance. Vowing that he would "live where I want to live," he fought this segregation publicly in a series of legal moves. He finally got his home built in 1965, and this public victory earned him the status of hero in the black community. Still, there were costs for his actions. His white "neighbors out there," he recalled, "were brutal, really, really brutal." He felt simultaneously watched and shunned.

Despite, or perhaps because of, these negative experiences, Durant, who later elected president of Allentown’s NAACP [1968], spoke out publicly for urban renewal. And he, like Melton, took considerable heat from within the black community for his stance. As he recalled, at one meeting, someone got up and said: "Goddamit Durant, you’ve got a black body but a white head." Although he now acknowledges that urban renewal was negro removal, at the time Durant believed that his fellow African Americans in Allentown had to think positively and "take a chance." As he told them: "You’ve been bitching about this [being segregated in Little Lehigh] for years now. You can take the money [being offered by ARA] and get going." His mantra, like Melton’s, was "move forward." He, too, believed that renewal offered blacks a chance to break the long-standing pattern of racial segregation in the city and finally obtain the kind of housing equity due them.

But taking the money and leaving was not so simple, as those who owned homes in Little Lehigh discovered. As the Little Lehigh Project finally got underway in the mid-1960s, black homeowners initially cooperated with the Redevelopment Authority. But that changed for some after a local newspaper story included "pictures depicting an environment of people on the lowest level of existence physically and morally" insulted them. As Little Lehigh resident, homeowner, and soon-to-be leader of the opposition to this project, Deloris Marshall, noted, such newspaper coverage "failed to distinguish between the different subgroups in the community." Not every black family in Little Lehigh was poor and a renter; many had a respectable stake as homeowners in the city. More significant were how project delays and postponements affected the neighborhood and its perceived value. With the neighborhood slated for demolition, housing values fell. One man was offered $500 less than he paid for his home. As Marshall noted: "The social and physical deterioration of the Little Lehigh area caused the once proud and concerned homeowner to have feelings of utter hopelessness." This pushed the Little Lehigh community to action. The group protested at meetings that they needed representation on the Redevelopment Authority. Four hundred residents signed a petition to the Department of Justice protesting unfair treatment. Allentown’s NAACP initially supported their efforts; the NAACP regional office even called for

48 Morning Call, January 18, 1970; Robert Melton, 2008.
49 Robert Melton, 2008.
blocking the project; both entities backed off a year later, however, when other, more pressing issues claimed their attention.73

Neighborhood residents focused on a number of issues in their complaints to the Redevelopment Authority. Unlike whites, black homeowners were unable to buy in other areas of the city and could not get out quickly. Those who were left behind stopped investing in the upkeep of their properties, saving that money for another and likely more costly home elsewhere. As homeowners continued to protest and seek restitution, the Redevelopment Authority stalled the appraisal process for two years. Homes deteriorated from the owners’ disinvestment during this period. Slumlords were the only investors who were willing to take a chance on a dying neighborhood. Meanwhile, realtors working with the Redevelopment Authority ridiculed homeowners that their homes were over-improved for the “ghetto” where they lived.74

Tensions continued to rise, coming to a head at a heated city council hearing in 1967. At that meeting, black owners and renters complained that realtors blocked them from buying or renting in certain areas, that access to public housing was limited, and that city code enforcement was weak. City officials, especially representatives from the Redevelopment Authority, reminded residents that relocation was not a quick process and asked for patience; they also countered that new public housing project was stalled because of the protests.75 Little Lehigh owners responded that they were not getting fair prices for their houses and could not buy comparable properties in Allentown, plus they were being offered mortgages at higher rates than whites. Deloris Marshall and the issue of “decent affordable housing” was of little interest to the city. Both sides complained about a severe lack of communication.76

Pushed to the edge, Little Lehigh residents acted, forming a new interest group called the Little Lehigh Property Owners and Renters Association in 1968. Led by Deloris Marshall, they began a campaign to move their protest for justice and equity through governmental and legal channels. They contacted their U.S. senator and HUD, who redirected them to HUD’s Philadelphia office. HUD’s regional official assured them that they would receive temporary housing, that suitable permanent housing would be built for renters, and that a third, independent home appraisal would guarantee that homeowner’s were not cheated. Philadelphia’s HUD office hoped that this would “strengthen the relationship between the ARA and the neighborhood.” Deloris Marshall, president of the Association, thought HUD was merely placating property owners and renters. She and her group still believed that they were being denied fair treatment by self-interested realtor-appraisers. They wanted to hire their own appraisers. They wrote their senator again, noting they had received “reassurance from HUD officials that the Philadelphia office would send someone down here to meet with us to see if we couldn’t get some relief,” but “all we have is promises and broken ones from the city and ARA officials, who assured us time and again that we would get good prices for our houses.”77

In the midst of this stand off, Congress passed the Housing Act of 1968. It provided greater compensation to people dislocated by urban renewal projects. Title VIII of the act also prohibited discrimination in home sales.78 This federal law set precedents that gave Marshall and her group confidence to keep pushing. After a series of mostly supportive letters from Philadelphia’s HUD, Marshall and her group hired a law firm to support their cause and sued the city. These lawyers advised them to avoid signing agreements for the sale of their homes with the Redevelopment Authority until it gave them an appropriate housing payment that complied with HUD’s stipulations. Additionally, the homeowners were advised not to buy new homes without comparable agreements from sellers.79 In some ways, then, this legal action finally resolved the issue. Although they did not halt the renewal plan, homeowners such as the Marshalls finally

73 Morning Call, May 23, 1967.
74 Deloris Marshall loose papers, copies in author’s possession.
75 Allentown, PA City Council Minutes, June 14, 1967, typescript, Lehigh County Historical Society, Allentown, PA.
76 Deloris Marshall loose papers.
78 Thomas Sugrue, Sweet Land of Liberty (New York, 2008).
79 Need cite here.
sold their properties to the Redevelopment Authority, obtained a compensation that they saw as just, and moved to other areas of the city. And the renewal project finally proceeded—albeit slowly; other delays and shifting federal regulations ultimately stalled completion into the 1980s, more than two decades after its inception.

The short and long-term outcomes of this renewal project and the racial and housing justice issues it raised were mixed. The most economically privileged African-Americans from Little Lehigh did integrate into better housing in more desirable neighborhoods. They destroyed the segregation barriers that barred them from settling outside of Little Lehigh for so long. Many of them believed that relocation was the best thing that happened to them. Bernie Durant observed that some people later thanked him for pushing them on this issue, saying that moving was the “best decision I ever made.” Yet there were costs of integrating into white neighborhoods, especially in the city’s most exclusive West End. Rev. Melton’s son recalls asking his father, “why do we have to live all the way out here? Why am I the only black kid out here?” His father replied: “Because I want to live in a nice neighborhood, and I want you at a nice school. And this is where I want to live.” Individuals like Revd. Melton thus made progress, but there were trade-offs.

Others with fewer advantages and less savings bought comparable older properties throughout the city, but complained of a loss of community with the diaspora of their friends and neighbors. Deloris Marshall and her husband, for example, relocated to a mostly white, working-class neighborhood on Allentown’s more distant southside. They found a new life there, but like many of their former neighbors from Little Lehigh, retained a nostalgia for the old, the familiar, and the convenience of life lived downtown.

Renters fared the worst of all. Many of them, like Gerald Drayton, relocated to the city’s new public housing project, Cumberland Gardens. In contrast to their old neighborhood, it was much farther south and east of center city, in a remote corner near Bethlehem, and had no public transportation. The Allentown Housing Authority promoted it as “an asset to the city of Allentown; they planned it to be “a beautiful development that replaced an eyesore”—meaning the Little Lehigh neighborhood. Yet not all went as planned. From the start, Cumberland Gardens was an issue for the city and those who lived there. In 1972, the Redevelopment Authority thought they might get another $100,000 to $200,000 grant to fund transportation between Cumberland Gardens and the downtown YMCA, and perhaps to expand the kitchen of the Cumberland Gardens’ community building. These efforts were partly a response to the Cumberland Gardens Association (CGA), a resident association that had been using their own funds to transport women to shopping centers or the doctor. Clearly, the housing project did not have the same sense of community as the old neighborhood. Although interested renters had formed a group similar to Deloris Marshall’s Little Lehigh Property Owners and Renters Association, they did not have the power and dignity of home ownership. Their voices were thus more easily ignored or dismissed by city officials.

In this way then, by the 1970s, Allentown’s African-American community had come full circle. Some of its members had indeed found, or were on the way to finding, housing justice. Protest over housing issues mostly died as segregation moved to the historical background of the city’s daily life. Also significant, many segments of the community returned to a mostly quiet, but still sometimes uneasy co-existence with the white community. But all was not right either. Evidence suggests that the city, and particularly the Redevelopment Authority, retained a lingering sense of guilt over this negro removal and the racial injustice it represented. As token recognition of Little Lehigh’s former status as the city’s most diverse neighborhood, the city, in 1992, agreed to rename the main thoroughfare through the neighborhood Martin Luther King Junior Drive. Additionally, in 2010, more than forty years after the Little Lehigh renewal project launched, the city marked the Drive’s east side entrance with a privately funded statue of Martin

81 Robert Melton, 2008.
82 Morning Call, October 23, 1969.
83 Morning Call, March 17, 1972.
84 Morning Call, October 10 and 11, 1972.
Luther and Coretta Scott King. This statute stands as a memorial to those who once lived there, as well as as a gentle reminder of struggles for justice waged in the past.