

Chapter 3

Exposing the "Whole Segregation Myth": The Harlem Nine and New York City's School Desegregation Battles

Adina Back

Introduction:

"We will go to jail and rot there, if necessary, but our children will not go to Jr. High Schools 136, 139, or 120," asserted Mrs. Viola Waddy.¹ Mrs. Waddy was part of a group of African American mothers who had been keeping their children out of three Harlem junior high schools since the beginning of the 1958 school year. The black press dubbed the group the "Little Rock Nine of Harlem," an honorific title that favorably compared the women to the "Little Rock Nine" in Arkansas, the group of high school students whose integration efforts had made national headlines the prior year.² Harlem's "Nine" claimed that their sons and daughters were not receiving an equal education in these Northern segregated schools.

These boycotting parents were brought to court by the New York City Board of Education in December 1958. They were charged with illegally keeping their children out of school. Their cases were heard before two different judges who issued opposing verdicts: Four of the mothers were found guilty in Judge Nathaniel Kaplan's courtroom for violating New York State's law on compulsory education. Less than two weeks later, two other boycotting African American mothers were found innocent of similar charges in Judge Justine Polier's courtroom. In a landmark legal victory, Judge Polier charged the New York City Board of Education with offering inferior educations to the city's black children.

I vignette to
setup the
narrative
II Explain the
significance of
vignette

This essay tells the story of New York City's postwar school integration activists, focusing closely on the school boycott and legal battles of the "Harlem Nine." Their protests are linked to the Northern civil rights movement and the battles to desegregate the New York City schools. Two themes emerge from these intertwined stories of female and civil rights activism: First, this 1950s story reveals that the Northern struggles did not lag behind the Southern movement but happened concurrently. In other words, these school battles shift the traditional periodization of the Northern civil rights movement, which has generally focused on the 1960s and the Black Power movement.

A Popular and scholarly accounts of school integration battles have generally followed the federal legal and legislative battles that have assumed that de jure and de facto segregation were distinct systems requiring separate dismantling. Therefore, attention to Northern conflicts related to equal educational opportunities has often been linked to legal cases that explicitly ruled on de facto segregation in the early 1970s.³ In New York City specifically, the highly publicized confrontations of the late 1960s around the issue of decentralization and community control in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school district came to represent New York's civil rights movement.⁴ Yet for New York's black residents—those who had been in the North for generations as well as new migrants from the South—racial equality in the city's public schools was also a Northern issue that took on heightened urgency in the 1950s. When we tell the history from the experience of parents who were on the front lines in the North in the 1950s, how does our understanding of postwar civil rights struggles change?

B The prominence of women as parent activists in this period of supposed female passivity, the second theme, links the reperiodization of the Northern civil rights movement with the ongoing project of reinterpreting the history of women and gender in postwar America.⁵ The protesting African American mothers articulated their concerns through a variety of discourses that offer insights into women's political culture of the 1950s. While they often suggested that their demands were natural, emanating from nurturing maternal instincts, their assertions were not limited to a "motherist" rhetoric.⁶ Like women activists in the South, their claim to equal rights was also driven by a deep understanding of black women's social and economic status and their desire to see their children have other options. They were motivated by shared and individual histories of racial discrimination, gender inequality, and economic exploitation. And they demonstrated that "motherwork" in the black community bridged the boundaries between public and private and revealed that motherhood was hardly a monolithic identity.⁷ The mother activists expanded their arguments with references to the

broad contribution:
region - north
issue - education
period - 1950s

specific contribution
Region - north
city - NYC
period - 1950s

broad contri.
- gender
- women as parents
- discourses of women's political culture

III
Connect to Goals of essay!
Develop your main pts. in the Intro!

Specific contribution

Woodard, Komosi (Editor). Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South 1940-1980. Gordonsville, VA, USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. p. 66. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/wooster/Doc?id=10133676&pg=81>

national civil rights movement that was erupting around them and boldly asserted that they too deserved "a fair share of the pie."⁸

Judge Justine Polier's decision in favor of the boycotting parents explicitly linked the Northern and Southern struggles for civil rights. Polier's ruling, drawn extensively from the case built by Paul Zuber, the parents' attorney, was premised on precedent-setting civil rights cases. The paradox of her ruling, however, was that though she referenced legal cases that challenged de jure segregation in the South in order to prove that Harlem's black schoolchildren were not receiving an equal education, she did not indict the Board of Education with practicing de facto segregation. It was the parent activists who challenged the very definition of de facto segregation by exposing the ways in which de facto style segregation was protected and insured by the state.

New York City was a whirlpool of competing ideologies and political agendas in which race was only beginning to emerge as an important force. The varied responses of white parents, Board of Education administrators, leaders, teachers, and the mayor reveal the complicated nature of race relations in New York in the postwar decades. The city's white communities denounced any association with a blatantly racist South. Recalling the television coverage of Southern black students being attacked for attempting to integrate Central High, they were quick to assert that New York City was not Little Rock, Arkansas. White parents expressed concern that they not be seen as racist while laying claim to their neighborhoods and asserting their rights as citizens and taxpayers.

Black communities like Harlem were bubbling with political activity ranging from the Democratic Party-style politics of Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Manhattan Borough President Hulan Jack to the growing presence of the Nation of Islam and its nationalist orientation. Harlem intellectuals and artists were actively embracing anticolonial struggles in Africa and defining their struggles in relation to these international independence movements. And blacks throughout the city were reading Jackie Robinson's responses to civil rights struggles around the country in his *New York Amsterdam News* columns.⁹ Yet New York's blacks still wielded little economic and political clout when it came to the city's power base.

Mayor Robert F. Wagner, a Democrat, whose three terms in office spanned this period of school integration battles, paid limited attention to the concerns of New York's blacks. Borrowing the language of intergroup relations, with its emphasis on intergroup statesmanship that social scientists made popular during the war, he created a commission of religious and ethnic leaders who were mandated to resolve the city's racial and ethnic problems in the spirit of "unity."¹⁰ The Commission on Intergroup

Board of Ed.
as representative
of the State!

Overall
Significance
the role of the
state! Judiciary
De jure or
de facto segregation

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Gordonsville, VA, USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. p 67.
<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/wcoester/Doc?id=10135676&page=82>