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'It Was Just the Club from Nowhere:' The Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Gastro-Politics of Black Domestic Women, and Liberation Theology Futures

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Abstract: This article posits Georgia Gilmore and the "Club to Nowhere"—a crucial fundraising arm of the Montgomery Bus Boycott—as a critical vector in a larger tradition in the U.S. In Black movements for Black liberation, food and food production are engaged as a communal pedagogy for constructing agency, behavioral reform, economic power, resistance, and sustainable social transformation. While Montgomery preachers made speeches, activists strategized, and male leaders debated the place of women in the Black liberation project, Gilmore and her cadre of Black women domestics secured thousands of dollars to fund the movement by selling soul food staples. Through their labor, "The From Nowhere" transformed the socio-political and epistemological positionality of Black domestic women into a valuable intellectual resource for generating a movement for social change. Consequently, Gilmore reminds contemporary and future liberation theologians that interrogating and re-envisioning our epistemologies is essential to sustainable revolutionary social praxes. Working at the juncture of history, ethics, and critical theory, I look to Gilmore and "The Club from Nowhere" for historical reflection on the intersections of food, race, gender, and the future of liberation theologies.

Keywords: epistemology; liberation; black feminism; ethics; economics; neoliberalism; racial capitalism; civil rights movement; self-definition

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1. Introduction

In March 2012, I was a rising college senior. Mentally and spiritually wrestling with post-graduation plans of seminary, law school, or a career in opera, a shaft of light appeared when the college president asked me to represent the institution at a week-long excursion that shaped the trajectory of my life.

The Congressional Civil Rights Pilgrimage, sponsored by the Washington D.C. nonprofit, The Faith and Politics Institute, was a week-long tour of significant civil rights movement sites in Georgia and Alabama. Various U.S. Congresspersons, stalwarts of the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movement, celebrities, and thought leaders led the tour. One afternoon, as our tour bus shuffled between sites in Montgomery, Alabama, I noticed a ranch brick home—453 Dericote Street—with an Alabama state historical marker in the front yard. It read, "*Georgia Gilmore. . . lived in this house during the days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. . . Gilmore was ardent in her efforts to raise funds for the Movement and organized 'Club from Nowhere' whose members baked pies and cakes for sale to both black and white customers*".

Until reading that sign, I had never heard of Georgia Gilmore or "The Club from Nowhere", which she had established as one of the principal fundraising arms of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. While Montgomery preachers made speeches, activists strategized, and male leaders debated the place of black women in the Black freedom struggle, Gilmore and her association of Black domestic women secured thousands of dollars in the mid-1950s to fund the movement by selling fried chicken sandwiches, fish, greens, pound cakes, and cobblers. I would later learn that my lack of knowledge was not entirely the result of voluntary ignorance; few histories of the Montgomery Bus Boycott mention Gilmore, and

only one book—a 10-page children's book—is written about her. Still, the distinct timbre of Gilmore's brand of social movement leadership left an imprint on my scholarly interests that has lasted to this day.

I posit Georgia Gilmore and the "Club to Nowhere" as a critical and distinct vector in a larger tradition in U.S. Black movements for social change in which communities access food and food production as a communal liberatory pedagogy for constructing self-determination, agency, behavioral reform, economic power, resistance, and sustainable social transformation. Though woefully less known than other examples of culinary activism in the Black freedom struggle, Gilmore's house restaurant is a tress in a multifaceted and complex Black liberation trajectory evident in the wide-ranging behavioral and eating practice reform aims of the Nation of Islam restaurants, the anti-racist integrationist vision of Father Divine and his "Holy Communion Banquets", and the Free Breakfast for Children Program of the Black Panther Party, to name a few (Dixon 2018; McCutcheon 2011; Potorti 2017). The "Club from Nowhere's" social activism complicates flat retellings of the liberation visions and leadership of the 1950s–1960s Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, exploring their entrepreneurship offers contemporary and future liberation theologians and practitioners fresh historical accounts of the intersections of gender, race, and class in the movements for Black liberation.

From the earliest days of slavery, Black domestic servants and workers, who were women, were integral to the social anatomy and lore of white Southern culture. Their cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing were foundational to maintaining the white Southern home and economy. Domestics possessed profound culinary knowledge and intimate insight into the habitus of Southern white folks. Yet, despite their extensive expertise and significance to the Southern social order, Black domestics were often the objects of stereotyping, degradation, and social scorn by whites and even some upper- and middle-class Blacks. Through the movement efforts of the "Club from Nowhere", Gilmore (herself a former domestic) transformed the socio-political and epistemological positionality of Black domestic women into a valuable intellectual resource for generating a movement for social change. Consequently, Gilmore serves as a reminder to contemporary movements for liberation that interrogating and re-envisioning what we think we know about how ideas are generated in our communities is an essential component of sustainable revolutionary social praxes.

By cooking and selling food to maintain the Montgomery Improvement Association and its boycott of the city buses, Gilmore first sought to alter the behavioral patterns of Black Montgomery residents by funding a massive, Black-operated system of carpools and ridesharing that provided bus riders an alternative means of transportation. Through her efforts, Black working-class bus riders could feasibly become boycotters. Second, by selling and serving dinners to both Blacks and whites in an era when Jim Crow laws regulated the dining politics of American citizens, Gilmore created a social laboratory for anti-racist resistance, democratic participation, and imagination. Third, she advanced the economic empowerment and self-determination of her local Black community by assembling a business venture that functioned as the financial bedrock of a local social movement for Black advancement, while also meeting the community's food needs. In a nation where the vast majority of foodways remain ideologically and geographically controlled by corporations removed from the realities and concerns of communities of color, Gilmore hewed a pathway for Black and justice-seeking white Montgomerians to be sure that their consumption and spending promoted food security, human dignity, and justice-seeking praxes. Furthermore, through the "Club from Nowhere", Gilmore elevated and harnessed Black domestic women's culinary and socio-political knowledge as a critical intellectual resource for assembling local social transformation. Working at the juncture of history, ethics, and critical theory, I look to Gilmore and the "Club from Nowhere" for historical reflection on the intersections of race, gender, and the future of liberation theologies.

2. The Sociohistorical Role of Black Women as Domestic Cooks

The history of Black women's relationship with cooking and domestic work is both painful and complex. As African American psychologist and social critic Marvalene H. Hughes argues, the role of Black women as cooks in their professional or private lives cannot be divorced from the fact that this positionality is a "historically acquired role" assigned by her enslaver or the patriarchal society in which she is socialized (Hughes 1997, p. 275). Furthermore, the "message that the Black cook receives is that it is her duty to nurture white Americans by cooking their meals, taking care of their children, cleaning their homes, and doing the laundry. The kitchen-bound/domestic-bound Black [woman's] economic plight is still destined for poverty" (Ibid., p. 275).

The history of Black women cooking what is known as "soul food"—especially fried chicken—is a particularly storied cultural motif with its genesis in the plantation agrarian economy. In the Southern plantation system, enslaved Black women typically bore primary responsibility for the raising and care of hens and chickens for two reasons. First, fowl were viewed as the weaker livestock easily cared for by the socially sanctioned "weaker sex". Second, because Black domestics were fundamentally responsible for cooking, close access to the meat and eggs produced by chickens was crucial (Williams-Forson 2013, pp. 109–10). As a result, the image of the Black domestic cook standing over a cast iron vat of fried chicken was a fixture of Southern mythology regularly printed in magazines, books, and marketing materials. It was a dangerous symbol of Black inferiority, a production of the white supremacist imagination regarding which many equality-seeking Black people felt they must contend for self-definition and freedom. For this reason, the image of the Black domestic cook was viewed by some as socially repugnant and a relic of American apartheid to be discarded in the name of hewing what philosopher Alaine Locke termed "the New Negro" (Sharpless 2013, pp. 173–82). African American food historian Psyche Williams-Forson asserts, "Black people are engaged in an ideological warfare between race, identity, and food. For example, stereotypes concerning Black peoples' consumption of fried chicken—stereotypes that have been around for centuries—still pervade the American psyche today" (Williams-Forson 2001). As a result, many people questioned the benefit and consequences of critical inquiries into the role of Black women as domestics and their culinary practices.

Though looking at Gilmore and the knowledge of Black domestics as intellectually generative can be complex and agonizing at points, it is a crucial component of the process Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins terms "self-definition". "Self-definition" is "challenging the political knowledge-validation processes that result in externally defined stereotypical images" (Collins 1986). Often these are "conscious and unconscious acts of resistance" (Collins 1986, p. 517). In this process of self-definition, marginalized persons and groups may identify, perform and redefine the stereotypes and symbols forced upon them by the dominant culture, and refuse to allow the power brokers to dictate what represents their culture and personhood (Williams-Forson 2013, p. 109). The process of self-definition is complicated. Sometimes it is successful, but often, it never achieves its aim of redefining the problematic stereotypes of Black people promulgated by the dominant culture (Williams-Forson 2013, p. 109). Exploring the history of these violent but formative cultural narratives and images is essential to contesting their cultural power and destructiveness.

When historically reflecting on the movement activities of Gilmore and her fellow Black domestics as intellectually generative, it is essential to avoid romanticizing the degrading history of white supremacist patriarchal violence that circumscribed Gilmore's gifts, choices, and even her destiny, and it is equally crucial not to silence the significance of her social action expressed even in the liminality of her socio-political position as a Black cook. Gilmore's social action should be read in the historical context of her particular time and social location. To do otherwise is to erase Gilmore's legacy, story, and personhood.

Undeniably, the relationship between Black domestic women and cooking is heavily stereotyped in U.S. cultural history. However, these stereotypes are the stories white people

tell *about* black people. They are reflections of the stigmatized dominant white gaze. What is needed to resist this distorting gaze is prolonged theological consideration of the stories Black people tell about their relationship to the foods they prepare. By exploring the historical narrative of the "Club from Nowhere," a group of Black women self-define and tell their own stories about their relationship to their work, aspirations, political action, and the foods they prepare. Exploration of Gilmore's biography and the beginnings of the "Club from Nowhere" is crucial for situating her liberation activity and sentiments within the broader scope of her life and sociopolitical context.

3. "Georgia Gilmore Didn't Take No Junk": The Genesis of the "Club to Nowhere"

Georgia Theresa Gilmore was born on 5 February 1920 on a small farm in Montgomery County, Alabama. As with the many Southern Blacks of her generation, little is known about Gilmore's early years. What is clear is that much of Gilmore's extensive culinary prowess and knowledge of Southern foodways were formed on that farm. By her teenage years, Gilmore's considerable physical strength and size opened up job opportunities outside the farm. A railroad company hired her to do the strenuous work of laying tracks and changing railroad ties. The birth of six children further complicated Gilmore's economic realities. As a Black single mother rearing children in the years before the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Gilmore was aware of the disparity in the education quality offered to white and Black children in segregated public schools. Consequently, she put all six of her children in Montgomery's integrated Catholic school system, which was a costly feat even by the standards of her day (Edge 2018, p. 20).

In 1955, Gilmore worked at the well-known National Lunch Company in downtown Montgomery. She was among the restaurant's most popular cooks, especially celebrated for her sweet potato pies and fried chicken. While Gilmore cooked and her sister Alice filled empty pans on the restaurant's steam line, city laws permitted only white women to wait the counters where white customers ate (Edge 2018, p. 20). Furthermore, as food historian John T. Edge explains, Montgomery city ordinances forbade race-mixing even in the dining space and required that "restaurants maintain separate entrances and erect seven-foot dining room partitions to prevent races from mixing" (Edge 2018, p. 20). National Lunch attracted Black and white patrons and fed them on their assigned sides of the literal and cultural wall that white supremacy had erected. The policies and practices of National Lunch were typical of most eateries in the Southern U.S. Some white-owned establishments did not permit Black patrons at all, while those who did subjected Blacks to a separate, often subpar, section of the restaurant. Black cooks such as Gilmore were embodied reminders of the absurdity of white supremacy and the Jim Crow system. Black hands had prepared and handled the foods and plates of white eaters in private, but they could not publicly wait their tables. Gilmore worked at National Lunch until the news of her involvement in the Montgomery Bus Boycott reached her employers (Edge 2018, p. 21).

The story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott is typically retold as the account of one woman's (Rosa Parks) mundane refusal to give up her seat in the colored section of a city bus and one man's (Martin Luther King, Jr.'s) harrowing leadership of a mass movement to end segregation. Gilmore's legacy serves as a correction for this grossly simplified popular rendering. Gilmore's historical memory insists that the Montgomery Bus Boycott was the 381-day culmination of years of highly strategized local grassroots efforts, involving a network of Montgomery's Black and progressive white residents to redress the ordinariness of racial violence against Blacks on Montgomery's city buses and public accommodations.[1] As the authors of "Respectability, Class and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement" suggest, the arrest of Rosa Parks—a trained political activist and highly regarded justice leader in Montgomery's Black community—on December 1, 1955 meant movement leaders finally had "the appropriate symbolic figures around which to build a mass movement that might transcend the city's class and gender divisions" (Chappell et al. 2018, p. 70). Similar to Jo Ann Robinson, Virginia Foster Durr, E.D. Nixon,

and King, Georgia Gilmore was among a community of critical resources that spurred the movement.

Gilmore learned about Parks' arrest via a bulletin on Montgomery's Black radio station. "Mrs. Parks was arrested and she being one of the senior citizens and a very nice person, they decided to get together because we had gotten tired of having so many things happen and nothing being done about it. So they got together and decided to have a mass meeting", she explained.[2] With little hesitation, Gilmore knew what her contribution to the movement would be. For the initial mass meeting on 5 December 1955, she spent fourteen dollars to purchase "chickens, lettuce, and white bread and packed a hamper full of fried chicken sandwiches" (Edge 2018, p. 16). For the duration of the 381-day boycott, Gilmore sold food at the Monday and Thursday night mass meetings, barber shops, beauty salons, laundries, cab stands, and doctor's offices. Eventually, the demand for Gilmore's food became so great that she organized several other Black women from the Montgomery community into the "Club from Nowhere". Most of these women were domestics, cooks, and day laborers, whose support could not be as overt as other boycott leaders. The "Club from Nowhere" offered these women the obscurity that enabled them to raise money to support the movement effectively and with a modicum of safety from white reprisal. According to Gilmore's sister, even the name "Club from Nowhere" was selected for its furtivity. When white employers and city officials would ask, "Where did this money come from" Gilmore and her team could cheekily retort, "It came from Nowhere" (Edge 2018, p. 18).

Gilmore clearly understood the importance of secrecy for her cooking partners' immediate physical well-being and economic sustenance. Her activism and knowledge of the regularity of anti-Black violence, especially on Montgomery city buses, was corroborated by personal experiences of abuse. In October 1954, Gilmore was verbally harangued by a white Montgomery bus driver for entering through the bus's front door. When she obeyed the driver's instructions and deboarded the bus to enter through the back door, the driver swiftly pulled away with her money. Gilmore vowed that day to never again ride a segregated transit (Edge 2018, p. 16; Miller 2019a).

In 1956, with the Montgomery Transit Authority (MTA) nearly bankrupt due to the boycott, Martin Luther King, Jr. and eighty-nine other members of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) were charged with conspiracy to ruin the MTA. Much of the defense's counter-testimony depended on Black domestic women's accounts of abuse on the buses. Black domestic women were among the bus company's most profitable demographics. Their money was the lifeblood of the MTA. Their gripping testimonials of abuse were at the core of its undoing. The boycott was not simply about seats on city buses; it was a mission to protect the Black bodies of the working-class women and men who occupied those seats. In court, Gilmore was called upon to testify against the driver who had abused her. "I don't know the driver's name. I would know him if I saw him. He is tall and has red hair and freckles, and wears glasses. He is a very nasty bus driver," she said (Edge 2018, p. 19). In our day of #MeToo movements and regular social media call-outs of abusers, the magnitude of Gilmore's public identification of her white male driver in an Alabama courtroom is easily lost. Edge's assessment regarding this is instructive:

> In its boldness, Gilmore's testimony compared to that of Mose Wright, the great-uncle of Emmett Till, who, six months earlier, testified against one of the white men who lynched his fourteen-year-old nephew. Standing tall in a Mississippi Delta courtroom, Wright dared to point at the white man and say "Dar he". Gilmore…showed the same courage when she turned to the judge and said, "When I paid my fare and they got the money, they don't know Negro money from white money" (Edge 2018, p. 19).

Moments such as these earned Gilmore a reputation as a woman whom people—Black or white—did not cross. As Rev. Al Dixon remembered, "Everybody could tell you Georgia Gilmore didn't take no junk. You pushed her too far, she would say a few bad words. You pushed her any further, she would hit you" (Godoy 2018).

As a heavyset, buxom, dark-skinned Black woman and master cook, Gilmore resonated with age-old Southern stereotypes and mythologies of the sassy Black woman cook—"mammy". Mammy is a figure commonly seen in literature and movies about white Southern life (e.g., Hattie McDaniel's "Mammy" in *Gone with the Wind*, Octavia Spencer's "Minnie" in *The Help*). In the white imagination, because of her wisdom, cooking skills, purity, nurturing character, entertainment value, and intimate interactions with her employers, Mammy earned a revered place in the white family structure. As a result, Mammy had a platform to, at times, disrupt the rigid lines of Southern decorum and speak a level of truth—"*sass*"—to white people that other Blacks only dreamed of. Through an intricate and complicated performance of this role assigned to her by white society, Gilmore was often able to transgress social boundaries that would have resulted in violent retaliation for other Blacks. In this sense, Gilmore's legacy is marked by a complicated dance with self-determination and "vestiges of power", performing symbolic cultural images, and the ways that, in her particular sociohistorical context, her actions were covertly and overtly subversive and agential (Collins 1986, p. 517).

"The Club from Nowhere" would collect five or six hundred dollars each week. All of the money collected went to paying for the insurance, gas money, and vehicle repairs for more than three hundred cars and forty-two stops that comprised the alternate transportation system that made the lengthy boycott possible for Black workers who had no other means of getting to and from their jobs (Miller 2019b).

Retaliation for her efforts eventually led to Gilmore's firing from the National Lunch Company in 1956. The termination of her employment was met with an uptick in her business during the remaining few months of the boycott. King regularly enjoyed Gilmore's cooking and encouraged her to start her own home restaurant. "All these years you've worked for somebody else, now it's time you worked for yourself", he said (Edge 2018, pp. 20–21). His advice was accompanied by a financial investment from the King family that helped Gilmore purchase kitchen equipment. On that day Gilmore's home restaurant was born. The home restaurant would raise money for the remaining days of the boycott and remained a prominent culinary haven until Gilmore died in 1990.

4. The Epistemology of Black Domestic Women as Subversive Praxis

Throughout the history of Black people in the Americas, food has been a crucial modality for constructing meaning, exercising power, and advancing Black racial uplift. Georgia Gilmore and the "Club from Nowhere" are a distinct fiber in a lively and diverse tradition of Black gastro-political social action. As such, the "Club from Nowhere" aligns with salient themes uniting various expressions of Black political activism: democratic participation, behavioral reform, and economic empowerment. Moreover, Gilmore's brand of culinary activism contributes to movements for social transformation as she posits the culinary knowledge of Black domestic women as an intellectual resource for critiquing and reimagining visions of liberation and justice. The "Club from Nowhere" created an ethical vision for democratic participation that ruptured white supremacy and transgressed the strictures of the Jim Crow system by selling food to Blacks and whites. As a result, she resisted the power of racial categorization and enabled progressive Montgomery whites to financially support the boycott under the guise of *simply* purchasing food.

Perhaps Gilmore's most distinct contribution to the lineage of Black gastro-political activism is her construction of Black domestic women's knowledge as an intellectual resource for social movements. Through the "Club from Nowhere", Gilmore asserted the value and political potency of cooks' knowledge of Southern white and Black foodways and translated it into political power. Furthermore, she offered Black domestics a method of sociopolitical activism that would not raise suspicions and invite reprisals from white employers, landlords, and law enforcement (Edge 2018, p. 17). As Edge poignantly describes:

> While some black women avoided Jim Crow indignities by avoiding whites, black cooks and maids didn't have that option. They lived in a white-dominant

> world. By cooking in their own homes, selling food to their neighbors, these black women won some independence (Edge 2018, p. 17).

In American popular culture, Black domestic cooks were depicted as trustworthy, pitiable, entertaining, sassy, the foundation of the white family, and even the redeemer of the white soul from the stain of racism (Williams-Forson 2006, p. 6). However, Black domestic women have rarely been positioned as generative of communal movements for social change. Gilmore and the "Club from Nowhere" is a contestation of pejorative renderings of Black domestic women as powerless and passive. In Gilmore and the "Club from Nowhere", Black domestics define themselves and shape their communities and destinies through their own knowledge and abilities. Centering their knowledge, Gilmore and her band of Black domestics assembled an ethics of resistance that disrupted an ideological cornerstone of the Southern white social structure that believed Black domestics could be trusted because they loved their white employers too much to betray them. Armed with their intimate and unique knowledge of Southern foodways and the ways of white folks, domestics were not passive protectors of white supremacy but subversive harbingers of social transformation and democratic hope.

5. Getting Somewhere from "Nowhere": Reimagining Liberation Theology Futures

The efforts of Georgia and the "Club from Nowhere" is partly the story of the sociopolitical role of food in communal moral formation and social movements. The "Club from Nowhere" story is also about how the agency, entrepreneurship, and epistemologies of Black domestic women—triply marginalized for their race, gender, and social status—interacted with the social ideology, spiritual vision, and structure of the Montgomery Bus Boycott as a theological construction and liberation movement. Uncovering the historical account of the "Club from Nowhere" highlights how the movement leadership of Black skilled women laborers created a space in which they embodied, interrogated, tested, and reimagined the aims of Black liberation. Consequently, there are several lessons that Georgia Gilmore and the "Club from Nowhere" offer to the imaginations of the future of liberation theologies.

First, the "Club from Nowhere" elevates the role of erased and unseen labor(ers) in formulating liberation theologies by positing the systemically marginalized labor and experiences of Black working-class women as a knowledge source for the development of social movements and thought. While liberation theology from its earliest written articulations has taken the experiences, religious ways of being and knowing of oppressed communities seriously as a discipline and field of study, it has had to do so within the confines of an academy marred by a white supremacist, and neoliberal impulses to hierarchize knowledge. The sweeping force of the colonial project has left all theological inquiry in the Western world haunted by "an ecclesial reality inside a white patriarchal domesticity, shaped by an overwhelming white masculinist presence that always aims to build a national and global future that we should all inhabit" (Jennings 2020, p. 82). A component of this epistemological building is the privileging of particular forms of knowledge and the simultaneous destruction and neglect of others. Womanist ethicist Emilie Townes describes the ethical danger of epistemological hierarchies by framing "knowing" as a political act with consequences for both individuals and communities because of how it frames social perception and methodologies for the collective construction of truth claims, norms, and values (Townes 2006, pp. 111–14).

One way to subvert the tendency to devalue the knowing of non-white, non-male, and non-elite persons in the Western theological academy is to interrogate and reorder those experiences and ways of knowing to which we grant primary authority. Positioning the labor, skills, and experiences of the "Club from Nowhere" as theologically and intellectually generative is an invitation for liberation theologians to rethink the interpretive authority and position traditionally granted the scholar as a knowledge producer and hew fresh communal approaches to knowledge generation. Thinkers must give to the relationship of liberation theologians to their communities of inquiry, and vice versa.

Second, the "Club from Nowhere" ruptures traditional constructions and narrativizing of Black liberation movement leadership by refocusing on activism outside of formal *platform* religious leadership. Generally, historical retellings of the Civil Rights Movement, especially the Montgomery Bus Boycott, have been marked by a hegemony of the Black Church and church leader's role. However, while some Black churches and Black church leaders played an undeniably fundamental role in the Civil Rights Movement, they were not the center of many people's movement activity or ideology. The "Club from Nowhere" was an opportunity for liberation theologies to consider a future in which those outside of recognized institutional religious leadership may be seriously engaged in liberating liberation theologies from notions of progress and monolithic understandings of leadership. The result is the reimagining of alternative models and modes of movement leadership that do not reinscribe the myopic centrality of religious institutions, authority, and leaders, while untethering Christian religious leaders and thinkers from distorted understandings of freedom that reduce liberation to mere inclusion and market participation.

The Civil Rights Movement and its connection to the historic Black Church tradition are regularly appropriated as a collective mythology and clarion call to concerned Black Church leaders to assume the mantel of social guidance as a sacred duty. Such uninterrogated elevation of the Civil Rights Movement-Black Church narrative has resulted in the perpetuation of the culture of genderism, respectability politics, sexual objectification, dictatorial leadership, and exploitation of the most vulnerable that is as much a part of the Black freedom struggle and Black Church's legacies as victories such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

On the contrary, the most crucial conversion contemporary Black Christian religious leaders may undergo is a turn towards shared models of leadership that reject the Western Christian aspiration to be at the forefront of every movement for human flourishing. Such a turn will require honest exploration and expansion of our definitions of spiritual leadership that transcend the established boundaries of orthopraxy (i.e., preaching, singing, and liturgy) and include activities such as food preparation, strategic planning, conflict management, childcare, and gathering. The "Club from Nowhere" connects spiritual leadership not just to the abstract articulation of ideas but also to those who assemble and handle the materials that facilitate communal theological and political construction.

Lastly, the "Club from Nowhere" summons liberation thinkers and movements to re-envision their relationship to labor, laborers, neoliberal markets, and the racial capitalist economic system, given the significant shifts and increasing diversity in the socioeconomic conditions of many U.S. Black people.[3] Undeniably, Black people continue to bear the brunt of the comprehensive devastation wrought by the neoliberal economic system. As Black feminist womanist ethicist Keri Day explains in her book *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism*, neoliberalism is the global financial system that "demands individuals relate to each other in instrumental ways" (Day 2016, p. 9). It is more than a set of economic policies; it is also a "cultural project" in which the protection of unregulated free markets and not the flourishing of the human community becomes the centerpiece of the nation-state (Day 2016, p. 4). The result is an economic system that is highly individualistic, rewards proximity and growing degrees of participation in the global market, and subsequently further alienates the poor and the marginalized, blaming the vulnerable and not inequitable social structures for their condition. Joshua Bartholomew describes this in his essay, "Race, Economics, and the Future of Blackness". He says, "The impact of capitalism for Black people can be seen as early as the enslavement of ethnic peoples from Africa for the purpose of forced labor in the Western world" (Bartholomew 2021, p. 186). This lineage of devastation continues today as Black people lag behind white people and other racial and ethnic demographics in several critical socioeconomic benchmarks. According to the Federal Reserve and U.S. Census Bureau, despite exponential growth in Black representation in high-level corporate jobs since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, there has been little improvement in pay and wages and a worsening racial wealth gap.[4] In 2019, nearly 30% of U.S. Black families lived at or below the poverty line (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1998).

Still, since the 1960s, when the first wave of Black liberation theology was being shaped and articulated in the academy, there have been significant shifts in national sociopolitical and economic policies and practices that opened new possibilities for the social mobility of Black people. While certainly not remotely equal to chances for social mobility accessible to white people, these changes in policy and social landscape continue to grant more Black people than ever greater proximity to high-level labor and access to market participation. Such shifts in Black market participation trouble myopic tropes that synonymize blackness and poverty *and* reduce the mobilizing potency of universal portrayals of collective Black suffering that have historically strengthened appeals to racial solidarity. According to a Brookings Institute report titled "Black Progress: how far we've come, and how far we have to go", in 1940, 60% of employed Black women worked as domestic servants. By 1998, only 2.2% worked in domestic capacities, while over 60% held "white-collar" jobs.

Similarly, 42% of Black people owned their homes, and 40% used the politically and racially charged term "middle-class" to describe themselves. In the late 1990s, nearly one-third of the U.S. Black population had grasped the milestone of American prosperity of living in suburbia (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1998). The U.S. Bureau reports that in 2019, the Black poverty rate was 18.8%, down by half from the mid-1960s. In the early 1960s, less than 5% of U.S. Black people had attended college, compared to 26% in 2019. Furthermore, in 1962, just seven years before the publication of James Cone's *Black Theology, Black Power,* the 87th U.S. Congress had only four Black Representatives and one Indigenous American Representative. In 2021, the 117th Congress had fifty-four Black Representatives, the highest number of any racial-ethnic minority group (Horton 2021).

The goal in highlighting these statistics is not to overstate the reality of Black advancement, as I am thoroughly suspicious of racial progress narratives. Still, the point is to highlight that Black socioeconomic conditions are not monolithic and, in fact, more multifaceted than ever. Consequently, in the future, liberation theologies must assemble critiques of neoliberal racial capitalism that are more precise and nuanced when discussing and defining the parameters and aims of liberation. While racial capitalism continues to limit the lifeworlds, options, and outcomes of U.S. Black people with totalizing force, irrespective of class, it is also imperative to acknowledge that the sociopolitical and economic advances experienced by some Black people require that the *liberation* in liberation theology be clarified and reimagined lest it quickly becomes an ambiguous term that everyone is using, but no one can define. As theologian Vincent Lloyd describes in his *Religion and the Field Negro*, "Unfortunately, we cannot just *do* black theology, understood as critiquing idolatry and holding up the wisdom of the oppressed…because black theology has been systematically distorted by black secularism" (Lloyd 2018, p. 9). Instead, in the face of increasing global diversity and economic crisis, liberation theologians must continue to create "discordance that potentially disrupts the complacencies of whiteness" (Ibid., p. 8). In the future, liberation theologians will need to imagine how we create more robust critiques of market power and injustice that recognize Black planetary injustice alongside increasing Black socioeconomic diversity, Black presence and leadership in politics and industry, and the continued suffering of the masses of Black people. How do we do the work our souls, planet, and communities so desperately need while being honest about the impact of neoliberal aspirations, desire for recognition, and competition in a narrowing global market on our theological imaginings of liberation?

6. Conclusions

The "Club from Nowhere" was a vital fundraising operation for the Montgomery Bus Boycott through which a group of Black domestic women entrepreneurs translated their knowledge of Southern foodways into political action and leadership. The women's cooking, expertise, and fundraising activities created a spiritual and political space for reform that was the very lifeblood of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. As such, the "Club from Nowhere" offers contemporary and future liberation theologians and movements insight into possibilities when we position marginalized laborers as knowledge sources, refocus

on Black activism and movement leadership that is spiritually rooted but not confined to platform religious performance, and dare to reimagine our conceptualizations of liberation considering increasing economic diversity among U.S. Black people.

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Notes

[1] For a more extensive history of the Montgomery Bus Boycott see (Ling and Monteith 2018; Jackson and Carson 2011; Robinson 1987).

[2] "Interview with Georgia Gilmore", Washington University in St. Louis, Feb. 17, 1986, http://repository.wustl.edu/concern/videos/8049g7144 (accessed on 30 March 2020).

[3] Racial capitalist refers to Cedric Robinson's notion of "racial capitalism" in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Robinson coined the term "racial capitalism" to describe how the "historical development of world capitalism was influenced in a most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism" (10). Consequently, in a global capitalist market, race and the accumulation and control of production become mutually reinforcing social forces.

[4] Reports included in Horton (2021), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52992795 (accessed on 13 January 2023).

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