



## “So why can’t they finance Black Power?” Howard Lamar Fuller’s Fight for Black Control of Black Housing in North Carolina, 1965-1969

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### Abstract

By 1965, as the traditional civil rights movement waned in North Carolina, Howard Lamar Fuller emerged as a key figure in the “War on Poverty”. Through his leadership of Operation Breakthrough from 1965 to 1967, Fuller helped bring about a shift in political control of Black Durham from white and Black elites to poor Black residents by taking on the challenges of Black housing. In 1965, when Fuller was hired as a community organizer, Operation Breakthrough was passive, small, and white. Within two years, Fuller had made it “tough, massive, and black” (James V. Cunningham 1967, 157). Among its achievements, Fuller was responsible for events that led to the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Thorpe v. Housing Authority of the City of Durham* (1967). This that ruled tenants in public housing could not be evicted without due process, and caused the federal agency of Housing and Urban Development to issue a circular, directing federally assisted housing projects to “inform their tenants of the reasons for a lease termination prior to the termination and to provide a method by which a tenant might reply and offer an explanation”. While white media at the time created binaries between “conservative” and “militant” Black leaders, Fuller’s activism exposes the inadequacies of this conceptual framework. Scholars have yet to recognize how Fuller was a forerunner of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s antipoverty campaign, an activist who blended King’s vision of fighting poverty with the militant overtones associated with Black power and Malcolm X.

**Keywords:** Black Power, Howard Fuller, Housing, Black Capitalism.

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## Introduction

During the late 1960s, the Piedmont region in North Carolina became one of the epicenters for the Black Power Movement in ways that still have not been adequately acknowledged, having to do with the confluence of economic resources, human capital and the vision of a key activist, Howard Lamar Fuller (1941-). Part of this transformation was the result of North Carolina's singular history. The state had more Black colleges and universities than any other state and had established one of the first independent anti-capitalist Black institutions of higher learning, Malcolm X Liberation University. The school was in Durham, which E. Franklin Frazier, an urban sociologist, dubbed in 1925 "the capital of the Black middle class" (Frazier 1968, 331).<sup>1</sup> Durham was also home to Floyd McKissick, a famed civil rights attorney and Director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), who received the largest federal grant ever awarded to a Black man to build the new, Black-run, Soul City. At the same time, there had been no Black elected officials in North Carolina for the nearly one hundred years following Reconstruction. Yet, Durham had a rich tradition of Black prosperity, and in the early 1960s, it experienced sit-in activism on a large scale. By 1965, as the traditional civil rights movement<sup>2</sup> waned in North Carolina, Fuller emerged as a key figure in the "War on Poverty" and shifted control of Black Durham to poor residents by taking on the challenges of Black housing such as white slumlords and enforcing violations of the inspections code.

While white progressives dispersed millions of dollars for the War on Poverty, in an effort to counter an emerging Black Power Movement, Black antipoverty organizers like Fuller sought to direct these same funds to empower poor residents to develop self-pride and exert control over their housing. Meanwhile, local white authorities, antipoverty boards of directors, and businessmen refused to comply with federal guidelines because including the poor worked against the economic interests of white landowners and slumlords. Fuller discovered that Black power was impossible without control of the political and economic processes, especially housing. These specific methods fractured white control over Black housing options. Consequently, Fuller empowered Black Durhamites to advance their own interests in four ways. First, Fuller demanded white officials adhere to the provision of the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) that required governing boards to maintain a "maximum feasible participation of the poor". Second, Fuller challenged the positions of white slumlords on antipoverty boards by staying focused on the critical question, how can the War on Poverty be won with an enemy of the program on the board? Third, Fuller set up stand-alone neighborhood councils that conducted rent strikes independent of government-funded antipoverty programs. Lastly, Fuller challenged the nation's "progressive smokescreen" in terms that were relatable to poor Blacks. North Carolina had long held a reputation as the South's most progressive state regarding racial and economic inclusion, but Fuller exposed North Carolina's racial progress as a myth. Altogether, Fuller recognized that achieving Black power, particularly in terms of housing, necessitated control over the political and economic mechanisms, starting with housing itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Durham contained a large Black middle-class. See Christina Greene (2005), who suggests that Black male business elites negotiated with white authorities on issues concerning Black masses. Glenda Gilmore (1996) documents how Black women established a long legacy of organizing in the absence of Black men as a result of disenfranchisement of Black men. Also see Leslie Brown (2008), who explores the legacy of Black businesses and Black middle-class families.

<sup>2</sup> The classical civil rights movement ranges between 1954 (Brown vs. Board) and 1968 (death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.). Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (2005) challenges these timelines with what she calls the "Long Civil Rights Movement", which extends the origins to the 1930s (the Great Depression).

## Howard Lamar Fuller and Housing Segregation in Durham, North Carolina, 1941-1964

Fuller's activism was rooted in his upbringing. Born in Shreveport, Louisiana, on January 14, 1941, Fuller was raised by his mother, Juanita Carter (later Juanita Smith), and his grandmother, Pearl Wagner, whom Fuller called the "baddest woman on earth". According to Fuller, his grandmother confronted racist police with a gun when they barged into her home and attacked Fuller's mother as they searched for a fugitive. Witnessing his grandmother's defiance of authority taught Fuller to fight corrupt power fearlessly. His mother, Juanita, was a washerwoman, cosmetologist, and union member. Fuller never knew his biological father, but Juanita married a man named John Smith when Fuller was five years old, and Smith became the only father Fuller ever knew. Growing up, Fuller excelled in academics and sports. As a standout athlete, he received a full scholarship to attend Carroll College in Waukesha, Wisconsin, where he earned a sociology degree. He then entered graduate school for a Master's in Social Work from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, graduating in 1964 (Fuller 2014, 16).

In early 1964, during his final year in graduate school, Fuller, inspired by his grandmother's defiance, joined the Cleveland chapter of the CORE. Fuller witnessed how white school officials in Cleveland's public school system mistreated and marginalized Black children. On February 4, 1964, he participated in his first mass demonstration, when Cleveland's CORE, led by 24-year-old Ruth Turner, staged a sit-in at the city's superintendent's office. After the group occupied the office, Fuller and concerned Black mothers from the Hazeldell Parents Association remained overnight until police officials violently removed them the following day. The experience resonated with Fuller because he struggled internally with how to respond to the prospect of violence. "They beat our ass", Fuller remembers, wondering how they could throw "unarmed women down the damn steps?" (Fuller 2014, 52).<sup>3</sup>

Two months later, on April 3, 1964, Fuller attended Malcolm X's iconic "Ballot or the Bullet" speech at an overcrowded Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland. Fuller stood on the balcony as he squeezed his tall and wiry frame through the swath of onlookers vying to see who some called the "anti-Christ" of the Civil Rights Movement. Malcolm X spoke in direct terms about white oppressors, whom he often referred to as "white devils". "The political philosophy of Black nationalism", Malcolm declared, "only means that the Black man should control the politics and the politicians in his community" (Malcolm X 1964). These words were exact: "ballot" meant freedom through the democratic process, and the "bullet" suggested violence if civil discourse failed to achieve Black liberation. Fuller left the speech feeling inspired and ready to act.

Four days later, on April 7, 1964, in Cleveland, Fuller witnessed a CORE leader, 27-year-old white Presbyterian minister the Rev. Bruce W. Klunder, bulldozed to death by a 33-year-old white operator named John White, who claimed it was an accident (Fuller 2014, 55). Fuller had volunteered to lie at the front of the bulldozer while Klunder remained at the back, in a technique designed to stop the construction of a segregated school site. Had the operator gone forward rather than backward, Fuller would have met the same demise. White lost several teeth as angry—once peaceful—protestors beat him until policemen intervened (*New York Times* 1964). Even so, Fuller remained optimistic about integration as a strategy and his political thinking overall remained non-violent. Nonetheless, the prospect of violence was ever present and shaped Fuller's clear-eyed perspective on activism (Fuller 2014, 57).

Within a month of Malcolm's speech and Klunder's death, Fuller moved from Ohio to pursue new ways to help Black people achieve human rights. Upon graduation from Case

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<sup>3</sup> Also see Nishani Frazier (2017). Interview with Howard Fuller by author (2018).

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Western Reserve in May 1964, Fuller married Viola Williams and moved to Chicago to work as an Employment and Guidance Specialist for the Chicago Urban League, earning an annual salary of \$6,000 (approximately \$50,000 in 2023 dollars). Fuller's salary was two-thirds of the national average but nearly double the national average salary for Blacks.<sup>4</sup> At first, Fuller was excited about life in the Windy City, but the glacial pace of change disillusioned him. Fuller sought new opportunities. He thought that the Urban League managed poverty rather than cured it. Serendipitously, two old friends, James McDonald, and Morris Cohen, contacted Fuller about a job opportunity as a Neighborhood Coordinator for a new antipoverty program in Durham, North Carolina (Fuller 2014, 58). The program was called Operation Breakthrough (OBT) and was partially sponsored by the multi-million-dollar innovative social justice philanthropy called the North Carolina Fund (NCF). Civil rights veterans, Floyd McKissick, CORE national chairman, and John Hervey Wheeler, president of the Black-owned Mechanics and Farmers Bank and the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs (DCNA), interviewed Fuller for his position with OBT. According to Fuller, "Wheeler and McKissick were the only reason I was hired. They were the most powerful Black men in North Carolina" (Fuller 2014, 61). Yet they were also acting as gatekeepers and to them, Fuller appeared to be a "safe negro" to head this antipoverty initiative—he was young, had attended white colleges, and was seemingly an integrationist. Official documents reveal the NCF "wanted a Black man with a masters in social work".<sup>5</sup> What they had not understood was that Fuller was exclusively interested in helping poor Black people, seeing community action and "maximum feasible participation" as opportunities to realize Malcolm X's "ballot or bullet" message. In short, Fuller was not interested in managing Black poverty but rather in eradicating it (Greta de Jong 2016).<sup>6</sup>

Historically, a model for America's War on Poverty was rooted in North Carolina's Civil Rights Movement (George Esser, Jr., with Rah Bickley 2007, 15). Just prior to Fuller's arrival in Durham, white constituents were urging North Carolina officials to "get them [student activists] out [of] the streets". In response, Governor Terry Sanford, once a segregationist, who had now turned moderate, used what he called "intelligible dialogue" to deter street demonstrations that threatened his state's progressive reputation.<sup>7</sup> Two years earlier, in May and early June of 1963, over 1400 students, partly led by Reverend Jesse Jackson, were jailed for attempting to integrate local theaters and cafeterias. James Farmer, director of CORE, believed that it was perhaps the "largest jail-in for civil rights activity in this country" (Farmer and Don E. Carleton 1998, 241). This student sit-in, combined with white pressure to prevent future sit-ins spurred efforts on the part of white officials (and local Black leaders) to find color-blind solutions for the racial conflict. Hence, several weeks later, on Tuesday, June 25, 1963 at the request of Sanford, several Black leaders convened at the state's capital. Among them were McKissick, Golden Frinks of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and Kelly Alexander, the state president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (Howard E. Covington Jr. and Marion A. Ellis 1999, 320).

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<sup>4</sup> The national average salary was \$9000 compared to \$3900 for Blacks (US Census Bureau 1962).

<sup>5</sup> Action for Durham Development proposal for OBT to NCF January 31, 1964, Folder 4488, NCF, SHC.

<sup>6</sup> White politicians who controlled federal funds often bypassed poor Blacks in selecting Black leaders, but so did Black gatekeepers. Wheeler and McKissick handpicked Fuller from a stack of worthy applicants who vied for a job to fight the War on Poverty.

<sup>7</sup> "North Carolina Intercollegiate Council for Human Rights, The North Carolina Fund, and Terry Sanford" in the Youth Educational Services, Inc., Records of the North Carolina Fund, Box #2, Folder 3807, Southern Historical Collection, Manuscripts Department, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter SHC).

As a result of these discussions, Governor Sanford established the NCF on July 18, 1963. The NCF was an innovative antipoverty initiative, which, on the surface, was designed to alleviate poverty for all people. Beginning with a \$20,000 seed grant from the Smith Richardson Foundation, the NCF eventually acquired a \$10 million operating fund, as donations came from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, and the Ford Foundation (Robert R. Korstad and James L. Leloudis 2010).<sup>8</sup> Over the next five years, the fund received an additional \$7 million in federal grants from Great Society programs such as the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) along with the Departments of Labor, Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Health, Education, and Welfare. The NCF became the first statewide antipoverty program in the nation (*ibid.*). Its director, George Esser, was a white liberal, a Virginia-born graduate of Harvard Law School, who joined the faculty at the Institute of Government at the University of North Carolina in 1948.

Esser emphasized community action to empower poor people, rather than providing a long-term crutch that perpetuated their dependence on government assistance. When Fuller joined OBT, which was partially funded by the NCF and OEO, Esser was already grappling with how the NCF could reorganize the power structure in North Carolina to bring about full participation of the poor (Korstad and Leloudis 2010, 177; Leloudis and Korstad 2020, 104).<sup>9</sup> Although Esser's approach focused on poverty, the NCF aligned with Governor Sanford's plan to combat racial unrest by using nonracial language. By contrast, Fuller's goals were race-specific. Fuller sought to solve an equally important question: How could he eradicate poverty and claim full community control for poor Blacks? Esser and Fuller shared the same aims, but Fuller's approach differed in that he wanted to empower poor Blacks to challenge the white power structure's control over Black housing.

Meanwhile, on a national level, President Lyndon B. Johnson searched for solutions to address the race problem in non-racially explicit ways. In his State of the Union address early in January 1964, he launched his "unconditional war on poverty". Johnson acknowledged that the country had failed to provide poor citizens a fair chance in education, medical care, and housing, but he avoided using race-specific language, never mentioning the words Black or African American throughout his speech even though racial disparities were well known.<sup>10</sup> Although 20 percent of Americans were poor, 30 percent of Blacks lived in poverty. Median household income for whites was \$5,600—only \$3,000 for Blacks. The median cost of a home in the United States in 1960 was \$10,300 (\$104,000 in 2023 dollars) (Christina Hughes Babb 2021). The average American spent half of their income to purchase a home. Blacks were, however, not average Americans. During this period, approximately 60-65 percent were renters, and 35 percent were homeowners. The proportion of homeowners was less than half of the households in the country. However, the homeownership rate among Black Americans during the 1960s was significantly lower compared to the overall population. It's estimated that only about 30-35 percent of Black households were homeowners during this period (Stateline

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<sup>8</sup> Before the NCF was established in 1963, North Carolina maintained a reputation as a quasi-progressive state, but later Black activists challenged white politicians' lip service to racial change. To some extent the NCF had a dual mission: eradicate poverty in North Carolina and remove Black protesters from the streets, while protecting its moderate reputation on racial issues.

<sup>9</sup> On August 20, 1964, President Johnson signed the EOA into law. That same month Durham's Action for Durham Development (ADD) created OBT to satisfy federal guidelines to include the poor. After Robert Foust, a young white former director of Durham Community Planning Council, was named executive director. In December 1964, the new OEO awarded \$181,000 to the Durham program. A few months later, the Fund recruited Black leader Howard Fuller as OBT's community organizer. See de Jong (2016), Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian (2011), and Jennifer Frost (not dated).

<sup>10</sup> Bernard L. Boutin Personal Papers. General Services Administration Files, 1961-1964. Brochures, 1961-1964. State of the Union Message, Lyndon B. Johnson, 8 January 1964. BLBPP-MF10-013. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

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2022). Homeownership was unaffordable and unattainable for most Black Americans since, in addition to low incomes, residential segregation laws restricted Black homeownership, especially in rural North Carolina (Herbers 1983).

The next month, on February 1, 1964, Johnson called Sargent Shriver, John F. Kennedy's brother-in-law and then director of the Peace Corps, to invite him to head his nearly billion-dollar War on Poverty program. Shriver reluctantly accepted the position under the condition that he would have autonomy from state bureaucracies. Shriver wanted to circumvent racist southern politicians who historically withheld federal funding from Black constituents. Shriver's demand that the new antipoverty initiative include the poor entered the language of the EOA, as a requirement for the "maximum feasible participation of the poor" (Sargent Shriver Peace Institute). Johnson signed the EOA on August 20, 1964, more than a year after the philanthropically-funded NCF had come into existence.

The EOA created the OEO to administer the antipoverty programs in two parts. About half of the EOA's funding went directly to federal organizations, such as Job Corps, Work-Study, and Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA). White politicians did not contest these programs. The other half went to the Community Action Program (CAP), which funded locally developed agencies (Community Action Agencies) and non-profit organizations, whose primary beneficiaries and constituents included Black communities (William F. Haddad 1965). The OEO attempted to ensure that CAP did not "degenerate into a series of uncoordinated and unrelated efforts". President Johnson's emphasis on "unrelated efforts" referred to Black community organizers like Fuller, who were partially paid by OEO funds, which they were using to achieve political gains for Black people specifically. In 1964, southern white officials—who were concerned about antipoverty programs landing in the wrong hands, that is, those of Black organizers—pressured Johnson. For instance, Georgia congressman Phil Landrum suggested ending community action programs. Stung by criticisms and never fully committed to the principles of CAP in the first place, by May 1964 Johnson would privately declare: "To hell with community action".<sup>11</sup>

Thus, when he arrived in Durham, Fuller faced extensive housing segregation that was rooted in racist policies that had been fostered both locally and nationally. Throughout the 1930s, racially restrictive covenants influenced federal mortgage lending practices, insurance policies, and guarantees by housing agencies (Thomas J. Sugrue 1996; Louis Lee Woods II 2018).<sup>12</sup> Black people were denied access to suitable housing even though they qualified under the income specifications of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) that was created in 1936 to provide housing for low-income families. In the South, however, because the execution of the federal program was left in the hands of local white politicians, the FHA excluded African Americans and developed additional discriminatory practices like "redlining" to ensure deserving Black families could not get loans to own a home (Richard Rothstein 2018).

Racial inequality was rooted in racist policies dating back as early as 1926, when a predominantly affluent white community in Durham, NC called Hope Valley, sought to exclude Blacks by its high prices. By 1940, white city councilmen planted trees in advance to raise the future property value of white neighborhoods but failed to plant trees in Black neighborhoods. This strategy resembled the unjust racial policies and legislation that, in the nineteenth

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<sup>11</sup> Ernest May and Timothy Naftali (2007), vol. 6, Johnson to Landrum, May 14, 1964.

<sup>12</sup> To make matters worse, Black housing conditions across the nation were deplorable. White slumlords, who refused to fix leaky roofs even as they increased rent prices, wielded unbridled power over Black communities. Poor Blacks organized to change policies as a result of these residential roadblocks, but FHA officials punished Black residents for organizing neighborhood councils that challenged unfair housing practices.

century, disqualified Blacks from voting.<sup>13</sup> White city councilmen used those same laws to justify urban renewal plans that displaced Durham's Black residents.

In the 1950s, HUD granted billions of dollars to cities across America to remove blight. Durham's urban renewal plan included a Durham freeway that destroyed the historically Black Hayti community. The plan promised major infrastructure improvements, new commercial development, and new housing for Black families.<sup>14</sup> In addition to white businessmen, the Black middle class and Black elites from the DCNA—the most influential Black organization in Durham—supported the policy. Unfortunately, it displaced poor and working-class Blacks and made them property-less renters. By 1960, 69 percent of Black housing was unsafe, while 71 percent of Black housing were rental units.<sup>15</sup> Urban renewal clearly had failed to deliver its promises to “renew” Black Durham. In the case of the expressway construction, Durham Housing Authority (DHA), with white directors, relocated poor Black residents to public housing units. The net effect of this public policy embedded economic discrimination for the next three decades by preventing Black families from building generational wealth in home equity while simultaneously incentivizing white homeownership with low interest rate loans and government subsidies.

By 1964, the same governmental organizations and Durham white businessmen who had pushed for urban renewal shifted their interests to antipoverty programs. The City Redevelopment Commission, the DHA, the Durham city council, City Mayor, and the board of realtors supported both urban renewal and OBT's antipoverty proposal. Although difficult to assess how each white businessmen and city leaders were to gain individually they benefited collectively. They supported an antipoverty program because it was economically expedient, thus their motives did not appear to be altruistic. Although there was value in identifying the problem as the federal government earmarked billions of dollars nationwide to redevelop urban areas, there was equal, if not more, power in managing the perceived cures (antipoverty and civil rights). However, these policies did not account for Howard Fuller, who within months disrupted white-Black housing dynamics.

### **The Activism of Howard Fuller: Anti-poverty and Black Power in North Carolina 1965-1967**

OBT divided Durham's territory into three areas: A, B, and C. Target Area A was the Black community; Area B included low-income whites; and Area C was on the outskirts of Durham County. OBT paid Fuller an annual salary of \$9,000 (\$85,000 in 2023 dollars) to fill the role as Neighborhood Center Coordinator of Target Area A, which included the poorest and Blackest census tracts (12A and 12B) in North Carolina. At least 66 percent of Durham's Black residents were impoverished, and the average Black resident in Target Area A had a 6<sup>th</sup>-grade education. Of the total population of 9,188 within Target Area A, which contained 2,011 families, approximately 68 percent earned \$3,000 (\$23,000 in 2023 dollars) or less per year. Target Area A included the neighborhoods that urban renewal most affected such as Hayti, Hillside Park, and McDougald Terrace, the oldest housing project development in Durham. Of the approximately 2,700 housing units, nearly 2,200 (88 percent) were considered

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<sup>13</sup> Katie Tan (2021). The Hope Valley promotional literature declared that each dwelling “so constructed shall cost no less than \$7500”, effectively disqualifying Blacks.

<sup>14</sup> Uneven Ground. Also see Tan (2021).

<sup>15</sup> Action for Durham Development proposal for OBT to NCF January 31, 1964, Folder 4488, NCF, SHC.

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substandard.<sup>16</sup> Target Area A, in addition to substandard housing, suffered from unpaved roads and inadequate governmental services.<sup>17</sup>

Fuller and his wife Viola arrived in Durham on May 5, 1965, making their home at 511 Lawson Street, which was in the heart of Black Durham's impoverished area. One week later, Fuller introduced himself to Durham residents as a neighbor first and antipoverty worker second. Although Fuller's salary and education placed him in the top percentile of Black Durham, he lived and connected with the people he served. As Fuller surveyed his neighborhood, he discovered that North Carolina's progressive image of Durham's bourgeoisie was a myth that did not match the reality of poor Blacks.

Fuller had known he would face a challenge, but it was far worse than he had imagined. He came equipped with "a little book sense, some big ideas, and a whole lot of hope", but nothing fully prepared him for the economic and political paradox that existed in the Tar Heel state (Fuller 2014, 59).<sup>18</sup> Governor Sanford acknowledged the racial disparities associated with North Carolina's poverty problem when he told *Look Magazine* in December 1964 that "in North Carolina, we know that we are 42nd on the list of states in per capita income because Negroes don't have adequate economic opportunities. If their income equaled that of white citizens, North Carolina would jump to 32nd, at least" (Sanford 1964). The Midwest Research Institute found North Carolina ranked 40th among all states in an index of social, economic, political, and environmental factors compiled from 100 statistical measurements. By 1973, the state's ranking had fallen to 46th and eighth among the eleven states of the Old Confederacy (*New York Times* 1978). Civil rights scholarship has described these disparities as features of North Carolina's political paradox.<sup>19</sup> Historian William Chafe for example called it a "progressive mystique". Simply put, by using "moderation" to approach segregation—which usually meant asking Black people to remain civil and wait patiently on freedom—North Carolina politicians promoted racial progress to the media while denying civil and human rights to Black citizens on the ground (Chafe 1981).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> An Experience in Community Organization Operation Breakthrough Target Area A Summer 1965, Folder 4422, Scan 5, NCF, SHC.

<sup>17</sup> Reports: A Brief Accounting of OBT, February 1966, Folder 4420, Scan 12, NCF, SHC.

<sup>18</sup> Also see, Paul Luebke (2000), 141.

<sup>19</sup> V.O. Key (1984). As early as the 1940s, Key, a political scientist, first called North Carolina a "Progressive Plutocracy". Key ventured to distinguish the difference in North Carolina political identities by regions throughout the state. For instance, western parts of the state were occupied by workers, and wealthy white landowners controlled the eastern part. Therefore, Key's difference between eastern and western regions of the state represented the political and economic disparity in North Carolina culture. However, Key's racial blind spot misrepresented the state's progressiveness as he failed to interrogate the racial wealth gap within North Carolina. In terms of race, Key wrote that "North Carolina ended up being much better for blacks than most of the South" (ibid., 107). Around 1900, North Carolina had an educational revival, including the founding of the HBCUs due to the Second Morrill Act, which permitted Blacks' education (Brandon C.M. Allen and Levon T. Esters 2018). Since the 1940s, several scholars have challenged Key's claim regarding North Carolina's progressivism. Historians Jack Bass and Walter De Vries called Key's assertion of racial progress in North Carolina a myth. According to them, North Carolina was "perhaps the least changed of the old Confederate states" (Bass and De Vries 1976, 2).

<sup>20</sup> Chafe first referred to North Carolina's seemingly progressive status as a paradox that he called the "progressive mystique". The "progressive mystique" was a paradox of white moderates that promoted racial progress to the nation but denied rights in practice to Black residents within the state. According to Chafe, North Carolina's "greatest social movement", the 1960 sit-ins, cracked the power of white supremacy. This article picks up where Chafe's work leaves off and examines the decline of anti-poverty programs and the evolution of the Black Power Movement in North Carolina. Also see, Luebke (2000), who described "traditionalist" ideology derived from the traditional cultures of small-town and rural areas in North Carolina that prided themselves on certain norms and customs in society such as Protestantism, domestic industries, racial separatism, and discrimination, and other traditional beliefs. Moreover, most traditionalists were working-class (blue-collar) subjects according to Key's



Fuller not only disrupted the relationships between Black elites and white authorities that operated under what he called a “smokescreen of progressiveness” (*Carolina Peacemaker* 1968), he also connected poor Blacks with upper-middle-class Black residents. Although white-Black economic disparities persisted, the intra-class disparity between “well-to-do” Blacks within the DCNA and poor Black people compounded the poverty problem. For example, in 1965, more than half of Black families in Durham lived on less than \$3,000 (\$28,000 in 2023) per year, well below the national average for Black Americans.<sup>21</sup> However, the wealthiest two percent of Blacks earned more than \$10,000 (\$100,000 in 2023) annually, with the highest-earning 27 percent representing more than half of the total Black income in Durham.

Consequently, middle-class Blacks dominated Black politics in Durham through the DCNA, but poor Blacks were marginalized and excluded from the political process. When questioned about the disparity of white and Black representation, white politicians responded with Black tokenism. Durham’s power structure encouraged secret meetings between Black and white elites that excluded poor Black residents. For example, in the summer of 1963, two years before Fuller came to Durham, the prominent Black banker and DCNA president Wheeler—the same man who approved Fuller’s hiring—contacted Robert Foust, head of the NCF’s Durham Community Planning Council (DCPC), about the direction of OBT. Wheeler was widely considered the most influential Black man in North Carolina and perhaps the nation. Wheeler, Foust, Durham mayor Wensell Grabarek, George Kirkland (County Commissioner Chairman), and president of the DCPC Paul Wright, Jr. recruited Durham’s elite white businessmen to develop a forty-seven member board (Korstad and Leloudis 2010, 83-85).<sup>22</sup> One of the most powerful white men in Durham, wealthy lawyer Victor Bryant, Jr., served as president. The board of directors included only one Black representative, and no one on the board was poor.<sup>23</sup> Wheeler served or chaired more than twenty boards for various organizations and companies, yet none contained an adequate representation of poor Blacks (Brandon Winford 2019). Although Wheeler helped Blacks in meaningful ways, white authorities relied too heavily on his reputation as a single Black leader.

Although Fuller respected Wheeler and other prominent Black leaders, he rebuked the NCF for its dearth of Black representation, demanding that poor Black residents be allowed to join OBT’s board of directors. In the interim, though, he used his budget to transform his staff from majority white to majority Black. Although Fuller’s position in OBT was mid-level, he quickly emerged as the most influential person in Black Durham. He also used his Community Development budget to hire Black students and poor Black residents to form neighborhood councils. He knocked on doors to survey poor Black residents on their day-to-day problems and recruited members for his neighborhood councils. As Fuller conducted these surveys, he noticed a plethora of homes were occupied by single Black mothers. Fuller’s observations reflected a larger trend nationwide. By 1965, nearly sixty percent of Black families were matrifocal. It is important to note that in some instances poverty benefits were contingent on whether or not Black males were present in the home. For instance, Alabama’s “substitute

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“progressive plutocracy”. In retrospect, the attitude of these conservative blue-collar workers of the mid-twentieth century resembled a mixture of Populist Party members and wealthy white supremacists from the Democratic Party of the late-nineteenth century. Also, see William Link (1992).

<sup>21</sup> Action for Durham Development proposal for OBT to NCF January 31, 1964, Folder 4488, NCF, SHC.

<sup>22</sup> Following the announcement of the NCF’s inception in July 1963, the Fund created eleven anti-poverty target projects throughout the state. Municipalities interested in receiving funding were encouraged to submit applications. In the fall of 1963, Durham’s Mayor Grabarek created his own anti-poverty group, ADD, a 47-member ad hoc committee which received a Fund award of \$11,000 in July 1964. By August 1964 ADD established its community action program, OBT.

<sup>23</sup> Process Analysis- Durham by Paige Young Folder 4432, NCF, SHC.

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father” provision disqualified 15,000 children from welfare benefits—97 percent of them Black—because mothers dated “able-bodied men” (de Jong 2005, 390). Within two months after Fuller arrived, most of OBT’s paid staff were single Black women.

On June 7, 1965, Fuller debuted a 17-week summer program to train college students to canvass the impoverished neighborhoods surrounding North Carolina College (NCC; now North Carolina Central University). Students and staffers alike were trained to suspend judgement of poor residents. Joyce Clayton, then an NCC student, worked with Fuller for four consecutive summers. According to Clayton, Fuller trained student organizers to see themselves as middle class because poor people “perceived [Clayton] as middle class because [she] was a student”. Understanding the perspective of poor people, Fuller’s trainings helped students like Joyce to respond with empathy.

But Clayton was not middle class. In fact, a family of sharecroppers raised her in the countryside, a few miles outside of Durham, in Rougemont near Bahama, and she needed money to pay for school. Fuller hired Clayton from the budget of the North Carolina Volunteers, a summer internship program which was partially sponsored by the NCF. Clayton entered homes with floors caved in where families shared dirty mattresses stained with urine by hungry toddlers. Clayton recalls that “the smell of poverty was something to see. I smelled urine before I entered the homes ... I was supposed to sit on this bed ... I knew I could not turn up my nose ... I had to accept that environment ... and win their trust ... to improve their [housing] condition”.<sup>24</sup>

When the students asked Durham residents a simple question crafted by Fuller, “What is your biggest need?”, the unanimous concern was housing. In lieu of long-term structural changes, Fuller offered immediate tangible improvements, which included neighborhood clean ups, childcare services, and house repairs. One example was the work conducted by Benjamin Ruffin, a young 23-year-old Durham native and a NCC graduate, later the first Black to serve as chairman of the UNC Board of Governors, who replaced OBT’s former adult education coordinator Vernon Winstead in the summer of 1965 (*Carolina Times* 1965). Ruffin was paid to develop a tutorial program for children and adolescents at the John Avery Boys Club, located in Durham’s Target Area A. The club met at the former home of NCC founder and president James E. Shepard; the building had also been a YWCA (*Carolina Times* 1967d). Ruffin also understood poverty. His mother raised him and his four siblings on less than \$20 per week. Ruffin transformed the tutorial program into a full scale stand-alone anti-poverty council by recruiting Black women.

During one of his door-to-door canvasses, in June of 1965, Fuller met his most committed volunteer, the thirty-year-old Ann Atwater, a hardworking, Black mother raising two daughters. She lived a few blocks from Fuller on Fowler Avenue, but dilapidated houses and urban blight surrounded her house. According to Atwater, her ex-husband had become abusive and had a drinking problem. The couple eventually divorced. Atwater survived on less than \$60 per month in public housing. When Fuller first knocked on Atwater’s half-exposed door, Atwater suspected his motives at first, but she was disarmed by his smile and invited him in. Outraged by Atwater’s living conditions, Fuller agreed to help her on the condition that she attend his OBT meeting the same night. The next day, Fuller had Atwater withhold her rent check, which she had intended to give to her white slumlord, so that he could negotiate on her behalf to have repairs made to her house. The slumlord complied. Impressed by the progress, Atwater became Fuller’s most dedicated antipoverty worker in Durham. “I hit the dirt running”, Atwater stated.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Joyce Clayton by Karen Raley, 15 November 1995. O-0008, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, SHC.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Ann Atwater by Jennifer Fiumara, 8 November 1995. O-0004, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, SHC.

Atwater, along with other single Black mothers, enrolled in Fuller's 17-week training program. It taught residents how to write proposals, sew and make clothes, conduct Roberts Rules of Order, type, write, and examine housing codes. Fuller did not represent the poor; he trained the poor to represent themselves. According to Elnora Chavis, a married mother of five, Fuller "came down and taught us how to do role-playing, how to meet the county governments—we were just country folks ... that were in the organization that worked with people of the community".<sup>26</sup> According to Atwater, Fuller also insisted on complete honesty and discouraged his staff from making promises that they could not deliver.<sup>27</sup> He believed that poor people suffered from dishonest and racist systems and that false hopes from rank-and-file community people would compound their distrust of his organizing efforts.

Atwater helped develop Fuller's first neighborhood council, the McDougald Terrace Mothers Club, which represented McDougald Terrace. Their first battle was with the DHA, which, under the directorship of Carvie S. Oldham, a segregationist and slumlord sympathizer, had recently increased the rent for public housing. Fuller rejected Oldham's position as a white director controlling public housing that was majority Black. "Why is there a white man over Black public housing?", Fuller asked his trainees rhetorically. Meanwhile, for months the single Black mothers living in McDougald Terrace submitted formal complaints about the rent increases to no avail.

Just two months after the start of Fuller's training program on August 10, 1965, the Mother's Club elected Joyce Thorpe, a single Black mother of three, as its first president. The next day, August 11, 1965, the same day as the beginning of the Watts uprisings in California in which thirty-four people died, received notice of eviction by the DHA. The next month, September 20 Thorpe sat at home armed with a shotgun threatening to shoot a sheriff that was ordered to evict her from the apartment (Greene 2005, 105). Thorpe's eviction enraged Fuller. The order was sent without justification. The reason was retaliation for her political affiliation with Fuller and the Mother's Club. Fuller felt a sense of responsibility because he had encouraged these impoverished Black mothers to organize against white supremacy; now Thorpe was homeless. Although Fuller took umbrage at Thorpe's eviction, he recognized progress. "We have their attention", Fuller expressed.<sup>28</sup>

After Thorpe's eviction Fuller enlisted McKissick to act for Thorpe. After McKissick exhausted the circuit courts, the US Supreme Court took up the case of *Thorpe v. Housing Authority of the City of Durham* (1967). McKissick argued that tenants could not be evicted without due process, and the court ruled Thorpe's eviction unconstitutional. As a result of the decision, HUD issued a circular which directed federally assisted housing projects to inform

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Elnora Chavis by Erika LeMay in Winton NC, August 19, 1996. R-0001, in the Southern Oral History Program, SHC.

<sup>27</sup> Duke University historian Robert Korstad conducted an extended oral history with Ann Atwater when he was researching the NCF for his 2010 book (Korstad and Leloudis 2010). This was obtained from the transcript found at <https://www.schoolforconversion.org/extended-interview-with-ann-atwater>.

<sup>28</sup> *Thorpe v. Housing Authority of Durham* (1967). Fuller asked the well-known attorney Floyd McKissick to defend Thorpe. McKissick argued that "tenants cannot be evicted without due process". The Supreme Court ruled Thorpe's eviction unconstitutional. As a result of the decision, the HUD issued a circular, which directed federally assisted housing projects to "inform their tenants of the reasons for a lease termination prior to the termination and to provide a method by which a tenant might reply and offer an explanation". See also Rhonda Y. Williams (2001; 2004). Williams explores public housing politics and how Black women in Baltimore fought poverty and slum living conditions. Likewise, Howard Fuller's partnership with Black women like Ann Atwater and Joyce Thorpe forced the Supreme Court to render protection for poor residents.

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tenants of their rights and their right to appeal evictions.<sup>29</sup> According to OBT reports, for the first time in its history, the DHA board and director met with tenants.<sup>30</sup>

The community training program ended on August 31, 1965, but the organizing continued. In January 1966, Fuller's organizing efforts expanded to other communities, which created neighborhood councils that later joined together and developed the United Organization of Community Improvement (UOCI), a federation of neighborhood councils that represented poor residents in Durham. It elected a Black mother named Ruby Gattis as its first president. At its peak, UOCI had 23 councils with 1,000 members, representing nearly 20,000 Durham residents (Greene 2005, 117). After only six months, Fuller achieved what OBT did not achieve in two years and what the state of North Carolina had never accomplished, creating five self-sustaining neighborhood councils for poor Black people, leading rent strikes, and empowering Black mothers to win a Supreme Court ruling. Fuller's ability to establish UOCI as a stand-alone organization demonstrated a clear path to "maximum feasible participation of the [Black] poor" using antipoverty funds.

### **The Case of Abe Greenberg: The Removal of a White Slumlord from OBT's Anti-Poverty Board**

As Fuller's neighborhood councils increased protests by using rent strikes, they exposed how white slumlords were closely allied to Durham's white political structure. The case of Abe Greenberg highlights how in this instance Fuller successfully disrupted that alliance. Greenberg was the largest landlord in all-Black segregated district of Edgemont—by September of 1965, he had acquired over 40 rental properties—and he was also typical: more than 70 percent of Black residents paid rent to white landlords,<sup>31</sup> many of whom, as Black newspaperman and founder of *Carolina Times*, Louis Austin, noted, were "just as guilty as Greenberg in the exploitation of their tenants" (*Carolina Times* 1966).

At the same time, Greenberg maintained a progressive reputation among Durham's Black elite despite his exploitive ownership of rental housing. In fact, just two years prior to Fuller's arrival, the Black press's *Carolina Times* praised Greenberg's efforts in constructing a Black bowling alley that operated inside the Plaza that Greenberg's construction company built and owned (*Carolina Times* 1962). Durham's wealthiest Black businessman, Asa T. Spaulding, commended Greenberg for his efforts in completing the project and was pictured cutting a ribbon in front of the alley (ibid.).

Thus, the removal of Greenberg from OBT'S Board was not simply an end in itself, but a means to bring to public view the paradox that whites who were claiming to remedy racial ills and promote racial progress personally profited from exploiting Black residents—in Greenberg's case by raising rents for substandard housing more than 50 percent while refusing to do essential repairs. Moreover, the process of exposing Greenberg's exploitation of Blacks had the secondary effect that once he was removed from the Board, there was an opportunity to replace him with a Black Board member. Finally, the rent protests were dramatic enough to capture the attention of the media, which Fuller skillfully used to shape public opinion. As one headline in the *The Daily Tarheel* read, "Greenberg Just Doesn't Give a Damn".<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Thorpe v. Housing Authority of Durham* (1967).

<sup>30</sup> United Organizations for Community Improvement: Black Political Power in Durham, by Bertie Howard and Steve Redburn, July 15, 1968 in the NCF Records #4710, SHC.

<sup>31</sup> 35 percent of Durham residents were Black; three-quarters of Durham's Black population was confined to less than 10 percent of the city's area, in land either owned by the government or private white landowners like Greenberg (US Census Bureau 1970).

<sup>32</sup> United Organizations for Community Improvement (UOCI) Greenberg Controversy, Folder 4585, Scan 6, NCF, SHC.

The conflict with Greenberg came to a head in September of 1965, when he arbitrarily increased weekly rent by 50 percent to \$16.50 (\$146 in 2023 dollars)—in some instances \$22.00 (\$195 in 2023 dollars) per week (*Carolina Times* 1966). June Ingram, Director of the Edgemont Neighborhood Council protested in a letter she sent Greenberg about raising her rent by more than \$5 per week.<sup>33</sup> Ingram's concerns went unanswered.

Meanwhile, Fuller's power and visibility continued to increase, to the chagrin of white conservatives. Durham city and school administrators, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Employment Security Commission endorsed OBT at its inception, but they were opposed to Fuller's hiring of Blacks to high-paying jobs within OBT as well as his efforts to raise the pay of the Neighborhood Youth Corp (NYC) to \$1.25 per hour because Fuller used NYC to mobilize poor Blacks and organize rent strikes. But rather than fire Fuller, Foust, OBT's white director, promoted him to Coordinator of Community Development in February 1966. Fuller's new role placed him in charge of the greater part of Durham proper and Durham County, and he continued to hire more Black staff. Fuller single handedly-changed the color of OBT's organization. John Artesani, OBT's Personnel Training Director, claimed that Fuller's white staffers quit because of racial conflict and resented that Fuller's programs were directed primarily for Black residents.<sup>34</sup> By March 1966, 81 percent of the office staff at OBT and 90 percent of the field staff were Black. Seventeen out of 25 organizers in Durham's poorest areas were Black and reported directly to Fuller. According to OBT documents, "some people feared that Howard Fuller was getting too much power and didn't know what he's likely to do with it".<sup>35</sup>

Fuller used his new role to apply more pressure on Greenberg by picketing the businesses and residences he owned. Fuller taught organizers to petition, cite housing codes, and engage in rent strikes as a last resort. At one meeting with 26 college students Fuller challenged a student, Joe, to explain his plan to confront slumlords. "First, I will ask the landlord to fix the house, if he doesn't, we'll send him a petition. And if that doesn't work, we'll see if the town has a building code", Joe explained. Fuller simply replied: "What if the building code does not require a landlord to make changes and says the hell with you, move out if you don't like it?" Joe replied: "Well, we can get as militant as he can ... we can get nasty". Fuller did not embarrass Joe in front of his peers but rather used the occasion as a teachable moment. Greenberg, he said, was "gonna slaughter you ... and if the people get slaughtered how long will it take to develop an issue on housing again?" Understanding the value of momentum, Fuller instructed Joe and other organizers to "always try to get a victory out of everything".<sup>36</sup>

By the early summer of 1966, Greenberg was promising to improve his housing standards, but, when he failed to follow through, more public demonstrations took place. Starting on June 15, 1966, Edgemont council members picketed Greenberg's businesses and residents at least 10 times. Greenberg responded by delaying repairs and negotiations until the press furor calmed down. Meanwhile, on Monday, June 20, 1966, Fuller organized over 400 supporters to meet at St. Joseph's A.M.E Church to increase pressure. At the meeting Wheeler advised Fuller that Greenberg "had a negro [David Wesley Stith] in his camp". Fuller's response: "then we have to get him too".<sup>37</sup> The next day, on June 21, 1966, Edgemont members disrupted a City Planning and Zoning Commission meeting that planned to approve zoning for Greenberg to build more residential properties (*Durham Morning Herald* 1966a).

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<sup>33</sup> United Organizations for Community Improvement (UOCI) Greenberg Controversy: Folder 4585, Scan 50, NCF, SHC.

<sup>34</sup> Process Analysis-Durham, by Paige Young, Folder 4432, NCF, SHC.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Howard Fuller, unprocessed personal papers, Marquette University.

<sup>37</sup> United Organizations for Community Improvement (UOCI) Greenberg Controversy: The "Greenberg Demonstrations" by Ron Semone, Folder 4585, Scan 10, NCF, SHC.

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Edgemont council members rose to their feet to speak to Greenberg to no avail. Greenberg told attendees he “was not interested in what these people had to say”. However, city Manager Harding Hughes told residents he would investigate substandard houses.

Later that night things continued to escalate when a car driven by Stith struck 17-year-old Johnnie Lee Garner in a picketing line that the Edgemont Council organized. Stith, a 36-year-old Black conservative, was president of the Southeastern Business College in Durham, and a longtime supporter of Greenberg. Fuller called Stith an “Uncle Tom” because he stalled repairs on behalf of white slumlords. Stith responded to the name-calling by claiming “if I am an Uncle Tom today that’s what I’ll be tomorrow ... I tried to help them negotiate” (*Durham Morning Herald* 1966b). “Why are you doing the white man’s bidding?” Fuller remembered asking.<sup>38</sup> Stith’s support for Greenberg stemmed from the latter’s high profile in Durham and Stith supported Greenberg against The Durham Business and Professional Chain, a Black business group led by McKissick who competed with Greenberg for constructing a College Plaza Shopping Center in a Black area (*Carolina Times* 1962). Even McKissick admitted that he “sold these [Black] businessmen on urban renewal” but regretted “their businesses may be at stake”. Stith consistently sided with Greenberg against Black interests. In exchange, Greenberg had funded Stith’s campaign for city council ward three, a seat occupied by Black city councilman John S. Stewart (*Durham Morning Herald* 1965).

Eventually, Greenberg resigned from OBT’s board but he never fixed his housing units. Poor Blacks thus had no recourse. Greenberg was cited for violations, but DHA claimed that they lacked the authority to enforce changes. Fuller realized that removing Greenberg did not eliminate white control. The Greenberg incident exposed OBT’s alliances with slumlords and created a split between white board members and Black staff. What started off as pressure to fire Fuller culminated in the firing of OBT’s white director, Foust, on June 25, 1966.

Two days later Greenberg met with Fuller, OBT representatives, and Edgemont members to negotiate terms. Greenberg requested a 90-day extension to repair houses, agreed not to increase rent “this year”, and agreed to supply 10 cans of paint for residents “to find 40 or 50 men to paint the houses”.<sup>39</sup> One glaring detail emerged from the meeting when Greenberg stated that he purchased the properties as “industrial properties for a future date”—Greenberg expected returns on his urban renewal investments. Lastly, Greenberg stated he was not contacted directly about repairs until the picketing.<sup>40</sup> However, Edgemont Council members had delivered several letters to Greenberg over nearly a year. It seems Greenberg wanted more time for poor tenants to paint and repair the houses he owned outright. As the dust settled on rent strikes, the Durham city council passed a 60-day notice for eight white slumlords to fix 43 houses or evict residents. A closer look at documents reveal Greenberg was connected to more than half of these properties through companies controlled by his family members (*Durham Morning Herald* 1966c).

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Howard Fuller by author (2018).

<sup>39</sup> United Organizations for Community Improvement (UOCI) Greenberg Controversy, Folder 4585, Scan 47, NCF, SHC.

<sup>40</sup> United Organizations for Community Improvement (UOCI) Greenberg Controversy, Folder 4585, Scan 83, NCF, SHC.

### Fuller Embraces Black Power, July-September 1966

A month later, on July 30, 1966, Fuller broke the cloak of respectability politics when he delivered an electrifying speech to 800 Blacks on a rainy day at the Poor People's Poverty Conference (PPPC) held at the National Guard Armory in Northampton County, about a hundred miles northeast of Durham.<sup>41</sup> Just a week earlier white director Fred Cooper of the Choanoke Area Development Association (CADA) and the NCF's Esser refused to fund the conference in fear of political backlash amid the attention surrounding Fuller and OEO-funded programs. Fuller's longtime friend Jim McDonald threatened to quit the NCF if he could not run the conference.<sup>42</sup> During his first year at OBT Fuller had avoided attracting public attention. This speech marked his first public exposé of North Carolina's white supremacy. The Rev. Melvin Creecy, PPPC president, presided. At least ten speakers preceded Fuller; he patiently waited his turn. After an older white, retired insurance executive, Fred Cooper, spoke, the NCF's George Esser shared a few words. Both Fuller and the audience soon grew impatient. Cooper served as chair and president of CADA, a community program that received a \$500,000 federal grant from OEO. Cooper stumbled over his words and appeared to know little about the Black community's perspective. When asked by an audience member if any poor people were involved in writing the \$500,000 proposal to OEO, Cooper responded vaguely. After another audience member asked Cooper how they could get more money, he responded, "I think the best thing all of you could do would be to go home after this meeting and sit down and write a letter to Sargent Shriver saying, 'Thank you for giving us that money'". At the end of his speech, Cooper used a white handkerchief to control the Black crowd. "When I throw this handkerchief up in the air, I want you to holler, and when it lands, I want you to stop", Cooper declared with a smile. To Fuller's chagrin, the majority-Black audience complied.

Fuller then approached the podium to a chorus of cheers. His message was blunt. "I am disgusted that in North Carolina, in the twentieth Century [a] white man would throw a handkerchief up in the air and tell Negroes to yell", he admonished the audience. As much as Fuller detested Cooper's speech, he was more disappointed that Black people acquiesced to Cooper's demand. "Why did you clap when he threw his handkerchief up into the air?" he asked. Cooper's actions served as a metonym for white liberal power. At any moment, white men could control Black people with small gestures such as antipoverty programs. Meanwhile, white liberals expected poor Blacks to be grateful for receiving these resources. Using Cooper's handkerchief performance to address a larger issue concerning the racial dynamics in North Carolina, Fuller exposed the historical control that white men held over Black people.

In his speech, Fuller criticized the efforts of Governor Sanford and Durham's mayor, Grabarek, to control mass demonstrations, while pointing out how white moderates who favored antipoverty programs shared similar goals. At the same time Fuller prevented a hostile takeover by the SCLC's Frinks who arrived with 50-60 Black supporters who were ready to seize the conference. Frinks was frustrated because Cooper ignored his previous attempts to include poor Blacks in CADA's grantwriting process. Fuller frequently acknowledged Frinks in his speech to calm the rage. "I can see 'em right now in Washington saying, 'What we gotta do to get them off the streets'", said Fuller, and, "somebody said, 'Let's have a poverty program'". Nonetheless, Fuller also realized that antipoverty programs could also promote Black leadership and autonomy. "Since I've been down here", he told the crowd, "all I hear is—'In order for us to do things about poverty, we've got to do it slow ... you shouldn't push so fast, take your time, give us a little chance ... don't mention Black Power. Well, I'm going

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<sup>41</sup> "North Carolina Fund Records, 1962-1971", text, accessed February 11, 2018, [http://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/04710/#folder\\_4422#1](http://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/04710/#folder_4422#1).

<sup>42</sup> People's Program on Poverty Inc. People's Conference on Poverty, July 30, 1966, Folder 4862, Scan 24, NCF, SHC.

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to talk about [Black Power]”.<sup>43</sup> Fuller then explained how his work with OBT and the neighborhood councils was causing the federal government itself to take a role in “financing Black Power”.

At the same time, Fuller described a double standard. “Every dime that has gone into Mississippi, North Carolina, Alabama, Chicago”, he said, financed white power, “so why can’t they finance [Black] Power for a little while?”<sup>44</sup> Word of Fuller’s speech spread across the state as local newspapers labeled him a Black Power advocate. The white media in Raleigh portrayed Fuller as a race-baiter. They warned readers of the dangers of men like Fuller receiving tax dollars. Conservative white broadcaster W.B. Debnam, who worked for Greenville’s WITN, described Fuller’s “racist, hate-the-white-man speech”, as “disturbing” and considered it a “threat” to “peace” in general.<sup>45</sup>

Fuller’s speech attracted national media attention and aligned with the national discourse—the Black Power slogan had been announced less than 45 days prior to Fuller’s speech. *Newsweek* correspondent Theresa Sayne, who was in attendance, likened Fuller to Stokely Carmichael and McKissick, one of the few older Black leaders who publicly supported “Black Power”. Sayne described the SCLC’s Martin Luther King, Jr., and the NAACP’s Roy Wilkins as members of the old guard who adopted non-violence and counterposed them against a budding group of young Black militants like Carmichael and Fuller. Black Power exposed King’s weaknesses, wedged as he was between militant Black youth and white racists. By 1966, two-thirds of Americans held an unfavorable opinion of King (Jeffrey M. Jones 2011). The day after Fuller’s Northampton speech, King delivered a “peace” speech at Reynolds Coliseum in Raleigh, two hours south of Northampton, calling advocates of Black Power like Fuller “tragic” and “Black supremacists” and suggested those who adopted the term were as bad as white supremacists (*Raleigh News and Observer* 1966b).

Although Fuller’s militant rhetoric appealed to Black students, who were often impatient and uninspired by non-violent messages, he and King agreed on goals. Just a month before Fuller’s speech, King felt helpless after he visited Marks, Mississippi, a town located in Quitman County, the poorest US county. More broadly, King asked “why are 40 million people poor?”. Fuller found an answer in his experience in Durham. White officials wanted to talk about change rather than make a change. The status quo was profitable for landlords. The poorest people paid rent.

Fuller did more than talk about Black Power: for a year, he leveraged OEO’s VISTA volunteers, Neighborhood Youth Corps, NC Fund’s Youth Educational Services interns (NCF sponsored tutor program), neighborhood councils, single Black mothers, and his paid position as a neighborhood coordinator to promote Black pride, remove white slumlords from poverty boards, and restore Black empowerment and community control in housing. As a rhetorical, theoretical, and practical tool for empowerment, Fuller was attracted to antipoverty programs’ ability to fund Black Power, and this is the message he promoted during the PPPC. The crowd, responding enthusiastically, gave Fuller a standing ovation (*Raleigh News and Observer* 1966a). For the first time, in July 1966, a Black man publicly exposed what I simply refer to as the Black power paradox in North Carolina, by using the white “progressive smokescreen” to protect a Black agenda.

On Tuesday September 27, 1966, a group of Duke students and organizations invited Fuller—“the moderate militant”, as he was dubbed by the *Duke Chronicle*—to campus to speak on his interpretation of Black Power. They thought they were inviting a “moderate

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<sup>43</sup> People’s Program on Poverty Inc. People’s Conference on Poverty, July 30, 1966, Folder 4932, Scan 21, NCF, SHC.

<sup>44</sup> People’s Program on Poverty Inc. People’s Conference on Poverty, July 30 1966, Folder 4932, Scan 25, NCF, SHC.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*



militant” who still believed in integration, but what they heard that night was a Black separatist. Fuller was clear: “Integration could not be the answer when all the power was in the hands of white people”. Black power required “better housing, better jobs, and democratic process of decision” for Black people by Black people (*Duke Chronicle* 1966a).

As late as December 1966, Durham’s city council was still refusing to enforce housing codes. According to city inspector John Parham and Public Works head E.H. Johnson, city officials had three options to force white slumlords to comply: fine owners \$50 per day after final notice, condemn houses, or fix houses by billing owners (*Durham Morning Herald* 1966c). City officials chose none of these alternatives. Once again city officials led by Mayor Grabarek sided with slumlords as they delayed actions. These legal loopholes and outright negligence of the law were precisely why Fuller opposed white slumlords sitting on antipoverty boards. “Why would Abe act against his own political and economic interest?”<sup>46</sup>

One white slumlord, named Mr. Murdock, who owned at least 10 dilapidated houses, testified at a council meeting on December 14, 1966, that he did not intend to fix his properties and requested that the city condemn his houses. To the chagrin of Fuller and his Black supporters, Mayor Grabarek thanked Murdock for “accommodating tenants during a housing shortage”. Rather than force slumlords to improve their housing, Grabarek expressed plans to develop public housing for poor Blacks who were dissatisfied with landlords. Fuller, in contrast, argued that “[p]ublic housing is nothing but brick concentration camps ... it’s nothing but an extension of the plantation system to put you under the white man again”. Councilman J. S. Stewart admitted the council was failing to follow the law and Fuller exhausted every possible legal recourse to no avail. Warning the council that a riot could break out in Durham, Fuller and 30 Black residents walked out of the council meeting (*Duke Chronicle* 1966b).

## Conclusion

Fuller left his position at OBT in April 1967 to become Director of community organizing at the NCF under the leadership of George Esser. Fuller left his former organization financially sound, having secured a \$79,000 grant for OBT’s UOCI, which became a self-sustaining organization under the able leadership of Ruby Gattis and Benjamin S. Ruffin. When Fuller had arrived at OBT in March 1965, the organization was passive, small, and white. By the time he left in 1967, OBT was “tough, massive, and black”, according to observer Professor James Cunningham of the University of Pittsburgh, who characterized OBT as the nation’s “most significant experiment in resident participation sparked by the antipoverty program” (Cunningham 1967, 157). Upon Fuller’s departure, half of OBT’s 32-member board of directors was Black and poor, and OBT staff accounted for approximately 194 budgeted positions, of which more than half were reserved for poor Black people.

Fuller officially began his new role at the NCF on May 1, with a salary of \$16,000 (*Carolina Times* 1967a), and continued organizing demonstrations. (Although Fuller was now working for NCF, OEO continued to pay a small percentage of his salary.) On Monday, July 17, 1967, Fuller led hundreds of marchers from UOCI into the streets to protest urban renewal policies and ongoing housing issues (*Carolina Times* 1967b). Even though the march started peacefully, Fuller was arrested on charges of inciting a riot and assaulting a police officer. The next day Fuller’s job and salary from OEO were suspended indefinitely. James Carson Gardner, Republican Congressman and gubernatorial candidate in 1968 (and majority shareholder of the renowned multi-million-dollar Hardees burger chain) requested that OEO fire Fuller, charging that the NCF had been “subverted” from within. Yet, according to wealthy white liberal Durhamite Watts Hill, Jr., who wrote in support of Fuller to Shriver, Fuller was the “single person responsible for there not being a riot” (*Durham Sun* 1967). *Carolina Times’s*

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Howard Fuller by author (2018).

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Black founder Louis Austin also noted that Fuller's presence staved off confrontation as Fuller spoke to the "streets and the back alleys, from the porches and pool rooms, yes, even from the gutter" (*Carolina Times* 1967c). Six months later, Fuller was absolved by the OEO of any wrongdoing, but by that time the damage was done (*Greensboro Daily News* 1968).

When it comes to assessing Fuller's impact, the biggest sign of his effectiveness was the extent to which he disrupted the white power structure. Starting in June 1967, Gardner and others submitted over 100 letters to Shriver also demanding that federal and local agencies fire Fuller. In response, Shriver regretted granting permission to OBT for the use of federal vehicles to "transport people to a meeting in a local church". In this instance Fuller repurposed federal vehicles to empower poor people by including them in political meetings. Mayor Grabarek lamented that Fuller had increased his troubles and was disappointed that the city's "best leaders [white business leaders and Black elites] were left off the board", and other white business leaders were also "irritated and dismayed ... for having gone too far and for having the board become predominantly Negro".<sup>47</sup>

In October 1967, Esser initiated an innovative program called the Foundation for Community Development (FCD) that was designed to replace the NCF. By 1968, Fuller joined FCD after political pressures to fire him from the NCF had succeeded. Esser was not under the auspices of Tar Heel politics so it seemed as if Fuller would be able to flourish without fear of white reprisals. Esser fundamentally agreed with Fuller's strategy of creating stand-alone organizations without formal ties to federally-funded programs, and he wanted to expand Fuller's organizing model of neighborhood councils statewide. Although self-sustaining groups led by poor people were a step removed from white control, Fuller still could not escape Tar Heel politics. Within months, Fuller was again under fire. Gardner urged the newly-elected Nixon administration to defund the FCD and remove Fuller, while other southern Republicans joined forces to pressure President Richard Nixon to cancel a \$960,000 grant designated to fund United Durham, Inc., a for-profit company owned by poor Black shareholders. North Carolina governor James Holshouser also joined the criticism, claiming that Fuller was a "troublemaker" (*Greensboro Daily News* 1969a).

Thus, Fuller faced yet another firing by an OEO-funded program. On Tuesday, July 22, 1969, FCD director Nathan Garrett announced that Fuller had taken an official leave of absence as of July 1, and although Garrett claimed Fuller's leave was unrelated to Republican pressure, Fuller later admitted that he had resigned to ensure poor Blacks were not punished for his activities.<sup>48</sup>

Ultimately, Fuller failed to alter the configuration of Black housing in Durham and only sporadically disrupted Durhams's white power structure. His hiring of Black people, while symbolically of great importance, did not rectify the massive unemployment rates, which for Fuller's target area was 30 percent, nearly ten times the national average. Although Blacks comprised approximately 30 percent of the population, they accounted for 57 percent of the unemployed.<sup>49</sup> Fuller was under no illusion—he was constantly exhorting OBT executives: "unless we find a way to bring about jobs, increase welfare allotments, and change rental structures in housing projects", then OBT's work was in vain.<sup>50</sup> Fuller warned that poor residents' morale was low and that they had taken the fight as far as they could go barring violence. For three years he trained organizers to follow steps: how to write a letter to the landlord, attend city council meetings, confront slumlords in public, contact the housing inspector, appeal to the mayor, deploy rent strikes, and transport voters to the polls. Even though the Supreme Court eventually changed federal public housing policies for evicting

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<sup>47</sup> OBT History and Description, Folder 4352, NCF, SHC.

<sup>48</sup> *Greensboro Daily News* 1969b; interview with Howard Fuller by author (2018).

<sup>49</sup> Action for Durham Development proposal for OBT, Folder 4488, NCF, SHC.

<sup>50</sup> Process Analysis-Durham, by Paige Young, Folder 4432, NCF, SHC.

tenants, local white politicians in Durham maintained the status quo. Poor Blacks faced battle fatigue. While white media juxtaposed binaries between “conservative” and “militant” Black leaders, I suggest Fuller manifested King’s antipoverty campaign. Fuller fulfilled in many ways what Dr. King died trying to accomplish for poor people. Fuller was not an antithesis to King, but, rather, merged King’s vision of fighting poverty with the militant overtones of Malcolm X’s ballot or the bullet. As Fuller faced his fourth firing in four years from government-sponsored organizations, Fuller surmised that Black independence required Black institutions as a step towards getting out of white control.

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