

“Anything But God’s Children”:

The Nonviolent Resistance of Birmingham’s Child Crusaders

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HIST209S

DOGS AND HOSES REPULSE NEGROES AT BIRMINGHAM

3 Students Bitten in Second
Day of Demonstrations
Against Segregation

250 MARCHERS SEIZED

Robert Kennedy Fears Rise
in Turmoil—Dr. King Says
Protests Will Be Pressed

By FOSTER HAILEY

Special to The New York Times
BIRMINGHAM, Ala., May 3
—Fire hoses and police dogs
were used here today to dis-
perse Negro students protest-
ing racial segregation.

Three students were reported
to have been bitten and to
have required hospital treat-
ment. Two firemen and a news
photographer were injured by
bricks and broken bottles
thrown from the top of a
Negro office building near the
major encounter, at 17th
Street and Fifth Avenue North.

[In Washington, Attorney
General Robert F. Kennedy
warned that "increasing tur-
moil" would be made inevi-
table by a refusal to grant
equal rights to Negroes.
United Press International re-
ported that he questioned the

Violence Explodes at Racial Protests in Alabama



Associated Press Wirephoto
Police dog lunges at demonstrator during the protest against segregation in Birmingham

On May 4, 1963, the front page of the *New York Times* opened with a photograph of a German Shepherd lunging at the stomach of a Black teenager.¹ At the other end of its leash is a police officer, who is tightly gripping the front of the boy's shirt as his dog attacks. The boy's face is pained but resolute, as is the face of the older Black woman in the background who looks on to the scene. While the subject in the photo remains unnamed, later sources identify him as Walter Gadsden, a seventeen-year-old high school student.² Following him on the front page of the *Times* were two other similarly violent depictions of police abuse. These three photos were

¹ Foster Hailey, "DOGS AND HOSES REPULSE NEGROES AT BIRMINGHAM: 3 Students Bitten in Second Day of Demonstrations Against Segregation," *New York Times*, May 4, 1963, p. 1; Bill Hudson, photograph, *Associated Press* (Birmingham, Alabama, May 3, 1963).

² "Bill Hudson, a Photojournalist During the civil rights Era, Dies at 77," *New York Times*, June 25, 2010.

taken in Birmingham, Alabama, on May 3—the day after the start of what press and civil rights leaders would call the Children’s Crusade.

The dynamics captured in these photographs—Black teens brutalized by state-sanctioned violence—reflected what Black Birminghamians had been struggling against for nine years in a city often dubbed “the biggest and baddest” of the South.³ Birmingham, which was nearly forty percent Black, had no Black officers in its police force or fire department and few professional opportunities for Black people outside churches or low wage industrial jobs at the steel mills. Further, Birmingham’s powerful Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene “Bull” Connor, was an unapologetic Klu Klux Klan-enabler and unyielding segregationist. The city’s influential white leaders, otherwise tacitly sympathetic to the Black plight, were afraid of defying him.⁴

Moreover, for Martin Luther King, Jr., and indeed the entire Civil Rights Movement, there was even more at stake. The national struggle up until this point was nothing short of an unremarkable failure, just like the campaign in Albany abandoned only months before they came to Birmingham. The civil rights leadership was in urgent need of a win. Furthermore, after weeks of demonstrations and hundreds jailed, the Birmingham story made few ripples and fewer gains. By March, King was desperate, and in his desperation, he allowed Birmingham’s schoolchildren to join the protests. After weeks of recruitment and training, the kids entered the streets en masse on “D-Day,” May 2.⁵

Most civil rights historians view this moment as the turning point of the Birmingham Campaign: the 1963 Children’s Crusade—the participation of over three thousand elementary,

³ The HistoryMakers Video Oral History Interview with Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, June 24, 2010, transcript, The HistoryMakers, Chicago, Illinois, accessed at: <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/reverend-dr-wyatt-tee-walker>.

⁴ Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 103-104, 329-331; Vincent Harding, “A Beginning in Birmingham,” *Reporter*, June 6, 1963.

⁵ Eskew, p. 4.

high school, and college students in peaceful demonstrations from May 2 to May 7—was responsible for turning the tide in the failing Birmingham project and for propelling King and the Civil Rights Movement to international recognition.⁶ King only accomplished one of the Movement’s most decisive wins in Birmingham when he “discovered an untapped resource with potential to tip the scale on behalf of the movement,” a resource that was needed to stave off the “impending collapse of the Birmingham campaign”—the city’s youth. Historography thus commonly frames the children as “troops,” an “army,” or Birmingham’s “little catalysts”—essentially, the campaign’s eager foot soldiers carrying out the will of its leaders.⁷

The Crusade, in all its historical gravity, is effectively reduced to a tool, and to an extent, so too are its young participants. While there are books on the Birmingham Campaign and chapters on the springtime demonstrations, there are few passages—sentences, even—devoted to discussing the children themselves as agents in a shared struggle for civil rights and desegregation. Like Gadsden in the iconic *Times* photograph, the names of the children who played such an integral role are rarely known, much less their experiences and perspectives. This omission from the historical record does more than simply reduce key players to instrumentalized and indistinguishable hordes. Neglecting what the children thought, why and how they organized, and their experiences at the time paints an incomplete—even incorrect—picture of central elements of the Children’s Crusade, and by extension, of the Birmingham Campaign as a whole.

This analysis seeks to correct the historical record on three crucial components of the Children’s Crusade: why they joined, what they did, and the consequences of their actions for

⁶ David Halberstam, *The Children* (Random House, 1998), p. 441: “That which loomed as a major defeat for King had turned into a stunning victory.”

⁷ Andrew M. Manis, *A Fire You Can’t Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham’s Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (University of Alabama Press, 2001); David Halberstam, *The Children*, (Random House, 1998), p. 441; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (Simon and Schuster, 2007), p. 763.

Birmingham. The historiographical consensus on Birmingham frames the Crusade as a result of children following orders when they were needed, chalks up their contributions to a week of nonviolent marching, and identifies the Crusade as an uphill battle-turned-triumph credited solely to the organizing expertise of civil rights leadership. The children's perspectives, however, reveal that the genesis of the Crusade was a much more political process encouraged by their own experiences and philosophies; the marches for which the children are primarily remembered were only a part of their nonviolent resistance; and the outcome of the Campaign was more complicated than undisputed success. Reintroducing the children's voices both amends a faulty—but pervasive—historical argument and restores agency to heretofore nameless and voiceless props in civil rights memory.

My argument uses passages from a collection of written firsthand accounts alongside recently released interview recordings from Riverside Church's WRVR radio program on the Campaign. These WRVR broadcasts, which allow me to reconstruct the Crusade through the eyes and mouths of its young participants using largely unknown details and stories, were only released from the Riverside Church Archives and made available in May 2018. This paper will be the first academic work to utilize the interviews conducted in the program's fourth episode, "Back to School in Birmingham."⁸ Not only do these tapes provide remarkable contemporary perspectives unprecedented in the source base on the Crusade, but they also represent a necessary diversification of voices in civil rights scholarship, which has predominantly focused on men in pastoral and/or leadership positions. The voices of the children, which historical scholarship has largely neglected, are indispensable to an accurate retelling of Birmingham's

⁸ Only in May of 2018 did the Riverside Church Archives receive a grant from the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) to digitize, preserve, and make publicly accessible a collection of recordings from the public radio station WRVR. While Branch references two episodes in *Parting the Waters*, I believe these materials have been mostly unavailable to the scholastic community until their most recent release.

story, not only as a key victory in the legacy of American civil rights, but also as a foundational moment in young Black democracy-making in the modern era.

Justice, Responsibility, and Impatience

By the end of April 1963, historians retell, King and the other leaders of the Birmingham Campaign were faced with a dilemma. Birmingham's selective buying campaign was failing. The movement's money was all but tapped out. More than three hundred protesters had already faced arrest over the previous three weeks with no ground gained. Most significantly, coverage of the campaign upon which their strategy relied had remained abysmal. At this point, "[n]early everything pointed to another Albany, another failure," writes Glenn Eskew. "As interest in Birmingham waned, [civil rights leadership] struggled to keep the movement alive."⁹ The solution, posed by Reverend James Bevel, was Birmingham's Black schoolchildren, an inexhaustible flow of boots on the ground and an irresistible attraction to external press.¹⁰ To persuade King of this plan, Bevel and others argued the opportunity to skip school and participate in civil disobedience would teach the children something they yet lacked. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference's co-founder and executive director Wyatt Walker, for example, declared that the children "could get a better education in five days in this jail than five months in school."¹¹

⁹ Eskew, pp. 259-260.

¹⁰ This language of instrumentalization, ubiquitous throughout the civil rights scholastic canon, has also been adopted and reiterated in popular memory on this critical period of the Movement. For example, a web article from *Peoplesworld.com* on the Birmingham Campaign says of the formation of the Children's Crusade: "Although it met with limited support, Project C fell short of its primary goal. A month of daily marches and sit-ins had failed to generate support in the Black community or publicity in the national media. Sometime toward the end of April, King and Shuttlesworth recognized the need to change tactics and it was agreed that children would become the foot soldiers of the campaign. Thursday, May 2 was set as "D-Day" where children would demonstrate in violation of the injunction banning them." Fred Gaboury, "Eight Days in May: Birmingham and the Struggle for Civil Rights," *People's World*, May 4, 2017, <https://peoplesworld.org/article/eight-days-in-may-birmingham-and-the-struggle-for-civil-rights/>.

¹¹ Manis, p. 357.

The children's own stated reasons for participating, however, demonstrated that they had already been politicized and educated on racial issues and civil rights long before the campaign by their family's histories, their own experiences growing up in Birmingham, and their dreams for their futures and the future of the city. Their motivations were more sophisticated than even unconventional, children-centered works represent, like Ellen Levine's collection of firsthand accounts from children in the Movement, which frames their politics as "uncluttered by concerns of powers or fame," allowing "the simplest and clearest of political urges, the impulse for freedom."¹² Rather than reducible to virtues of innocence and purity and a simple "impulse for freedom," the three common motivations articulated by several young participants were far more politically developed: first, that they possessed moral compasses and imperatives toward justice for themselves and their community; second, that they felt an ownership over and responsibility toward "their city"; and third, that they believed it was the adults who were in need of *their* guidance.

Julia, a WRVR interviewee, described her political awakening emerging from the contradiction between what she was taught in school—where she learned "all men are created equal and they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights"—and what she observed in real life—"but that isn't true, and I believe if they teach us that, we should have it."¹³ The doctrine of equality, what Julia knew to be the promise of American democracy perverted and unfulfilled, motivated more than just her participation in the Children's Crusade. It also compelled her other organizing efforts toward ameliorating injustices she witnessed in her community, such as voter disenfranchisement:

¹² Ellen S. Levine, *Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories* (Penguin, 2000).

¹³ "Back to School in Birmingham; Birmingham: Testament of Nonviolence, Part 4," WRVR Radio, June 10, 1963, University of Maryland, American Archive of Public Broadcasting (WGBH and the Library of Congress), Boston, MA and Washington, DC, http://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip_500-jq0svz1h.

I believe we should incline our people to vote because the vote seems to be everything in Birmingham. People, if they have voting power, they can get somewhere. I mean, when I become twenty-one, I intend to go on my birthday and register. I have been in my community trying to help other older people who say they can't pass a test to go down to the meeting so that they can get prepared. If they try, they can vote, and if we vote we can get more of the things that we need.¹⁴

Other children were similarly inspired by a commitment to justice they had developed outside this campaign that also extended beyond it. Myrna Carter, for example, remembered, "It was like something drawing me from the inside. I was always the one for the underdog, and the problems that affected other people, affected me."¹⁵ Mary Gadson was also driven by an internal moral outrage informed by injustice she witnessed. Before the Crusade, she "was not what you call a hero." However, the arrest of her sister Claudette "had a lot to do" with her developing "a sense of doing right," and not only for herself: "I thought one day I want to have kids, and I don't want them to go through what I did."¹⁶

Each of these children had been educated and radicalized by growing up during the ongoing civil rights struggle in Birmingham. For some, they felt a responsible to join the campaign because Birmingham was "their city." Birmingham was home; they had a stake in its future, which afforded them an entitlement and insight distinct from those leaders who arrived in the city only months prior. Carter said so while speaking to what she believed was an unbelievable claim that the kids were anything but Birmingham locals:

There was one well-dressed old white lady who walked up to me. She said, "Why don't you n*ggers go back to the North. The n*ggers here are satisfied." I will never forget that. She didn't know who we were. You know, they called it "northern interference." They didn't have the sense to know that we were not from the North. We were from right here.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Levine, p. 148.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 145-146.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 150.

Carter's answer responds both to these ignorant white critics of the Campaign as well as to the notion that the marches' organizational energy and political persuasion was imported to Birmingham with the arrival of King. The children saw themselves as those ultimately responsible for Black Birmingham's future.

The Crusaders' sense of responsibility toward their city was perhaps related to the fact that they each grew up in a time of transformation and revolution in Birmingham and across the South. They had been born into a world regularly rocked by white supremacist violence and terrorism like dynamite bombings in their community beginning in 1946.¹⁸ Even for the oldest teenagers among the Crusaders, they were only seven or eight years old when Black activists in Birmingham began their desegregation campaign. By 1963, they were tired, antsy, and fed up, and for these reasons they took initiative on what seemed to them to be an endless project for justice that the leaders, pastors, or even their own parents failed to achieve for them. Bernita Roberson, for example, had "serious beliefs" going into the Crusade formulated long before she and her friends were recruited and more intimately than in a nonviolence workshop at church, by her family's struggle with racial inequality in Birmingham since before she was born. Roberson said of her politics, which were "more opinionated than others," that she "got it from" her father, "who saw oppression. He was so angry about it that he would never ride the buses. He could never participate because his anger was so violent. He couldn't do it, so I did it for him."¹⁹

Roberson's sentiment—"he couldn't do it, so I did it for him"—verbalized a frustration that many of the other children felt generally about the state of their city. Another teenager, Catherine, suggested that the children, rather than doing what they were told, felt that they themselves were pushing forward the cause out of impatience: "These kids weren't told that this

¹⁸ Eskew, p. 53.

¹⁹ Levine, pp. 143-144.

was something that they had to do. We presented them with facts, they realized the situation, what had to be done, and they plunged right with the Movement to get it done. Because they know that this is their town, they have to live here ... and it's not to be lingered on and on."²⁰ An unnamed child interviewed by WRVR also voiced that "the students feel that this should've taken place long time ago. And the kids want their kids now to have a better opportunity in life." Another WRVR interviewee, Mary, said the same, that she and others formed the Crusade "because most of the kids feel that the time is now. I mean, we waited too long already."²¹ The children's righteous restlessness suggests something very different from eager masses playing follow the leader; in a way, they were showing the adults the path forward.

These impetuses—justice, ethical duty, and in particular, impatience—are not distinctive to Birmingham's children, but are well established in analyses of youth and militancy in social change theory. Andrew Manis relies on this generational argument to understand the organizing style of the younger Black leadership in Birmingham, namely Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. Shuttlesworth had been leading Birmingham's struggle for desegregation since taking up a pastoral post at Bethel Baptist Church in 1953, and his religious and political impact, Manis argues, was very different than that of more mainstream movement heads as he "was part of a younger, less docile group of southern blacks who came of age in this climate of impending change." Others in Shuttlesworth's orbit like Lola Hendrix, says Manis, also understood themselves "as part of a younger adult cohort that, unlike their parents' generation, would accept segregation no longer." Hendrix reportedly commented, "We just did not want to think about our years [being] spent like our parents' had been spent, and it was time to do something about it."²² Hendrix's adolescent impatience is identical to that of Birmingham's Crusaders. If Shuttlesworth

²⁰ "Back to School in Birmingham."

²¹ Ibid.

²² Manis, pp. 77-78.

and Hendrix possessed a useful and unique perspective and veracity in their young age and their proximity to the issues at hand, even more so did the children, whose childhoods were punctuated by the struggle for school desegregation and whose educations and futures were on the line.

Jailhouse Freedom Fighters

On the morning of “D-Day,” May 2, over a thousand school children gathered not at homeroom but instead at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. From there, they left in groups of ten to fifty and marched toward City Hall in downtown Birmingham. “Singing freedom songs, parading with picket signs, kneeling in prayer,” the swarm of fresh faces approached police lines before they were apprehended and loaded onto paddy wagons.²³ Some five hundred were arrested over the span of several hours on this first day alone. “It was strictly a youth movement today,” reported the front page of *The New York Times* on May 3. “It was by far the largest series of demonstrations staged in Birmingham since a direct action campaign was begun here a month ago. The arrests made today will probably exceed the total for the four previous weeks.”²⁴

On the Crusade’s second day, Bull Connor authorized the use of force against the child protesters to halt the demonstrations. Police dogs mauled children and high-pressure fire hoses blasted them across pavement; journalists, firemen, and children were hospitalized in the chaos that ensued; and all the while, hundreds more youths were arrested and booked without resistance. Images and stories proliferated from newspapers like *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post* to *The South China Morning* and *The Korea Times*, which depicted and

²³ Eskew, p. 3.

²⁴ Foster Hailey, "500 ARE ARRESTED IN NEGRO PROPEST AT BIRMINGHAM: YOUNG MARCHERS CHEERED BY ELDERS IN BIGGEST SERIES OF DEMONSTRATIONS IN CITY," *New York Times*, May 03, 1963.

described the violence against peaceful child demonstrators. Television news outlets also broadcasted footage from the events to millions of viewers, triggering international outrage. What had been less than negligible media interest in the Campaign before Thursday had exploded across front pages and TV screens throughout the world by Saturday. Birmingham dominated the global news cycle for the next week, inspiring mass, equally global outrage.

Buried amid an avalanche of coverage to follow, a single paragraph in that first *New York Times* story on May 3 noted how a six year old girl “was seen being placed in a police wagon with other demonstrators. What happened to her was not known.”²⁵ The *Times* here unwittingly captured the indifference and ignorance with which the historiography to follow has regarded the children’s individual experiences at this moment. Their greatest contribution was their tireless and nonviolent marching, all agree, and the police brutality they endured during their mass arrest was the sacrifice that secured the movement’s strategic success. But what happened immediately after they were arrested, once the cameras stopped rolling, when they were hauled off to jail and booked? The Children’s Crusade generally refers only to a week of youth-dominated public demonstrations, but in reality, the children were responsible for much more behind the scenes. The young activists’ sacrifice, trauma, and resistance extended long past Birmingham’s streets into the jailyards and cells in which they were held for four, seven, or even ten days at a time.

For many of the children interviewed, their experiences marching were secondary in significance to what they underwent behind bars. The conditions in Birmingham’s jails were dismal. WRVR interviewee Catherine, for example, recalled that jailers stuffed her alongside twelve or more others in a solitary confinement cell designed for a single person, that “some girls had to crawl up on the bars to keep from stepping on someone,” and that they were forced to stay in this condition “for about five hours without food, water, or toilet facilities.” When these girls

²⁵ Hailey, *New York Times*.

were finally moved from solitary, they were transferred to a room already exceeding capacity. Catherine approximated that there were 182 other girls with her in total. The bunks in the cell were insufficient, so some had to sleep on the floor in newspapers. All this time, the officers took any opportunity to harass the children: “Every time we were marched in a line back up to the cell,” she recalled. “If you hesitated for a moment you were poked in the back and the side with clubs by the officers. They called us all kinds of names. They called us everything but children of God.” Almost as offensive as this mistreatment was the state of their meals—Catherine and several other children had been deprived of food for more than a day since they were first booked, and when they were finally served, “the food was so bad that girls got sick. . . . I actually lived off payday candy bars, tick tock coffee cakes, and water. Really. The only thing that was eatable in the whole place was apple sauce!”²⁶

Perhaps the most shocking abuse Catherine and others endured was that, at points throughout her five-day stay, she witnessed officers remove these young girls—“freedom fighters,” she called them—from their cell to be put in with the adult inmates, ostensibly so that they would be assaulted. “And you had all kind of people down there,” she exclaimed, “drunks, just everybody down there!” The girls remained safe and protected among the older inmates, however, who “told the policemen that they were hurting them, that they were beating them, but actually, they were very nice to them.” Nonetheless, they returned shaken up and afraid, and Catherine expressed fear about what could happen if she was brought back to jail due to complications with her bond: “My lawyer told me to expect to be picked up at any moment. And I hope to God they don’t put me in there with those inmates.”²⁷

²⁶ “Back to School in Birmingham.”

²⁷ Ibid.

Catherine's story, while extraordinarily disturbing, was unfortunately not unique. By her estimate alone, 182 other children underwent the same experience. Other interviewees detailed similar experiences in overcrowded and filthy facilities, subjected to cruelty untempered by the gaze of outside onlookers. Another boy on tape described the harsh conditions he faced beside some fifty other boys stuffed in one cell: "We was there [in jail] about two days before we could get anything to eat. And the first night we were there, they had the fan blowing [cold] air on us all night long. ... They treated us all rough like."²⁸ Incarceration even without the added dimensions of police cruelty, subpar facilities and conditions, and the threat of sexual and physical assault poses immense, unimaginable psychological and emotional toll, especially for children as young as six or seven who were held for days on end. Simply surviving this trauma thus constitutes an immeasurable victory and a shamefully unacknowledged contribution on the part of Birmingham's children. However, they didn't just survive. In their accounts of the days spent locked up, the children not only described their maltreatment, but also how they withstood it. The children persisted in their struggle even after they stopped marching in perhaps unconventional, but nonetheless political forms, like maintaining high spirits and community care, knowingly exercising their civil and legal rights, committing wholeheartedly to the Civil Rights Movement's "jail-no-bail" tactic, and collectively singing through the night.

Throughout her narrative, Catherine's dedication to nonviolent struggle often looked like humor and fun in the most abhorrent of conditions. In fact, at the outset of her interview, she introduced her story: "Oh, my experiences in jail were awful. I had an awful time. They pushed me around, and everything. But the kids there ... all of us, we just had a wonderful time. We

²⁸ Ibid.

were treated like animals, let's say."²⁹ Comically contradictory, this statement reveals that positivity was one of many ways the children remained devoted to their political objectives.

This surprisingly upbeat perspective considered alongside the details of Catherine's treatment in jail was made possible by the way the children comforted and protected each other, forming a buffer between themselves and their potentially traumatic experiences serving time. In several instances Catherine demonstrated how she had taken responsibility for looking out for the younger demonstrators. After the police initially apprehended them and brought them to jail, they were taken out of the wagons and locked up in the yard, where they were forced to wait for more than an hour before she approached an officer and inquired what their plans were for the younger children. "Now I had been instructed to protect the kids, and maybe I should say I am secretary for the Student Committee of Human Rights here in Birmingham," Catherine proudly announced. When the officer refused to answer her, she told the younger kids, "Stop right here, you won't go anyplace, just wait until he tells you where you're going." Later, when a group of them were separated from the others and placed in a holding cell, she recalled how it started raining with the younger children still stuck out in the yard. She and her cellmates began banging on the door:

[The officer] came in and told us ... we better stop doing that because he would beat us! He told us to go somewhere and sit down, called us n*ggers and things. So we told him, "If you don't get those kids out of the rain we're really going to tear the place up." He said, "I dare ya. If you bang on the doors once more I'll put you in solitary confinement."³⁰

With a laugh, however, Catherine said, "The minute he walked out of the door I grabbed another door and Mary grabbed a window and we started shaking the bars." This experience—isolated from all the others, called racial epithets, threatened with solitary confinement—could easily,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

justifiably have disturbed Catherine and her friends into silence. Her priority was advocating for the others. She was not alone. Julia shared how many other girls in her cell of three hundred had Catherine's value of "going the second mile" for each other, evident in the way several girls offered their beds or blankets to her when she arrived at night where others were already sleeping.³¹

Commitment to nonviolent resistance took more explicit forms as well. For example, when Catherine was brought into the jail building and questioned, she said, "I refused to comment other than my name and address and my age. After that, I asked the officer what was I being charged with—other than violation of Section 1159 of City Code—and he said 'no comment', you know, very frankly. He wouldn't even tell me why I was in there."³² Not only did she demonstrate the extent of her civic education on her rights and her city's code, but she also asserted these same rights by answering certain questions and refusing to answer others. In another example of active protest, Larry Russel described how he was firmly dedicated to the "jail-no-bail" strategy, a mainstay of King's nonviolence, during the entirety of his ten day stay in jail. "Matter of fact," he remembered, "with the one phone call they gave me, the first thing I did was to call my mother. 'Don't worry about me', I told her, 'I'll be okay. We've been arrested and I'm in the city jail. I'm doing fine. There are a bunch of us here. Whatever you do, don't come and get me out'."³³ In response to his mother's tearful concern on the other end of the line, he pleaded, "Please, this is what I want to do."³⁴

In a final example of jailhouse resistance, Catherine recounted her use of song to comfort other children in her cell as well as the boys sleeping outside of their window in the jail yard:

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Levine, p. 145.

³⁴ Ibid.

I took my Bible, and I would go around to the girls and we would get together and we would read and we would sing. And one night ... we were very depressed. We were told that they had put water on the boys. I know that the boys were sleeping outside because we could look out the window at night and see the boys outside. And we just started singing. And we sang all night and early in the morning we were still singing. And I was tired but I said I must keep going.³⁵

Catherine led this nighttime chorus to lift the spirits of both the younger children and those kids out in the cold. But she and the others were also partaking in a practice of Black song shared across the entire Civil Rights Movement from Selma to Montgomery and sustaining a long tradition of Black survival and resistance through music dating back before Baptist church gospels to the spirituals of their enslaved ancestors.

These details, extremely unsettling on the one hand and radically inspiring on the other, have never come to light in any substantial discussion of this historical moment. However, these inhumane conditions, outright violence, and the very fact the children nonetheless persevered nonviolently are just as stunning, if not more so, than the police-met marches in Birmingham's streets for which they are generally remembered. As demonstrated by the children's own accounts, their experiences in jail were far more extensive and significant to their own memory of their participation in the civil rights struggle. When unearthed, the jailhouse stories drastically shift the Children's Crusade's center of gravity from out in the streets, publicly consumed, to inside the jail, unacknowledged and incarcerated.

An Ambivalent Victory

By May 7, even people on the outside knew that the situation within Birmingham's jails, and in the city at large, were reaching a crisis point. The day before saw the largest mass arrest yet – about a thousand – and by the morning of the seventh, the city's penitentiary facilities were

³⁵ "Back to School in Birmingham."

so overcrowded that breakfast took four hours to serve.³⁶ Meanwhile, white business owners were becoming increasingly anxious over the continued protests and pleaded with the organizers for a truce. In Washington, President Kennedy had pressure from all sides to put an end to the madness in Birmingham. The children, on the other hand, showed no signs of stopping.³⁷

On May 8, after Attorney General Robert Kennedy's envoy Burke Marshall arrived in Birmingham to facilitate negotiations among the civil rights organizers and Birmingham's business class, the latter agreed to King's provisional demands in exchange for a moratorium on the protests before a final settlement was reached. On May 10, King and Shuttlesworth announced their ultimate compromise, which entailed some forms of desegregation and a promise of more to come. By the end of the Crusade, more than three thousand young protesters had been arrested and released and Bull Connor had been removed from office.³⁸

After all the dust settled, Birmingham appeared to be the monumental success King and the Movement needed. King became widely regarded as a hero with the Birmingham Campaign a shining emblem of his organizational efficacy. "Everybody, expert or naive, would agree that Birmingham was the chief watershed of the nonviolent Movement in America, and led directly to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which had an effect of desegregating America," Dr. Wyatt Walker claimed in his oral history on the Birmingham Campaign. "And I think that was my chief organizational accomplishment, the planning of Project C and executing it."³⁹ According to Walker and others, there would have been no Selma March, no march on Washington, and no

³⁶ "Birmingham Jail is so Crowded Breakfast Takes Four Hours," *New York Times*, May 08, 1963.

³⁷ "Birmingham Campaign," The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, May 30, 2019, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/birmingham-campaign>).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ "Reverend Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker's Biography," The History Makers, accessed March 7, 2020, <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/reverend-dr-wyatt-tee-walker>.

eventual legislative victories without Birmingham.⁴⁰ At the conclusion of Birmingham, King himself anticipated this future, saying, “Birmingham now stands on the threshold of becoming a great, enlightened symbol, shedding the radiance of its example throughout the entire nation.”⁴¹ And many historians in retrospect confirm that King’s premonition was correct.⁴²

However, this victory was in reality more ambivalent and requires more nuance than Walker and indeed much of the popular narrative provide. Some scholars have paid closer attention to the aftermath of the Campaign once King left the city. Vincent Harding cautioned in his reflection on the Campaign in June 1963: “But, this general hopefulness must be tempered by several disturbing possibilities. One of them may lurk within the business-industrial group itself, for these men could conceivably interpret the present agreement as the farthest they could possibly go, and would stop after these limited goals were reached.”⁴³ Historian Adam Fairclough shows how Harding’s fears were effectively realized as a result of King ultimately “settling for a lot less than even moderate demands.”⁴⁴ Fairclough points to the fact that by July, one of Shuttlesworth’s initial and core demands, the hiring of Black police officers and firefighters, had still not been met.⁴⁵

But what about the kids, who had been Birmingham’s key actors and had already felt the worst of the suffering because of it? While the children’s perspectives broadcasted over the radio

⁴⁰ Fernanda Santos, “Wyatt Tee Walker, Dr. King’s Strategist and a Harlem Leader, Dies at 88,” *New York Times*, January 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/23/obituaries/wyatt-tee-walker-dead.html>.

⁴¹ Vincent Harding, “A Beginning in Birmingham,” *Reporter*, June 6, 1963, p. 17.

⁴² Glenn Eskew, p. 299: “Just as the children’s crusade broke the stalemate in local race relations, so too it broke the stalemate on the national level as it forced the president and Congress to draft legislation that ended legal racial discrimination. Likewise, the Birmingham Campaign transformed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference into a successful organization with a powerful strategy for social change and an internationally renowned leader... Consequently, the victory in Birmingham evolved into the civil rights Act of 1964, which opened the system to African Americans even recalcitrant places such as steel city. The SCLC rode the wave of international outrage over Birmingham, increasing its revenues tenfold and honing a new strategy of nonviolent coercion. The March on Washington was simply a celebration of the victory in Birmingham.”

⁴³ Harding, p. 18.

⁴⁴ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.*, University of Georgia Press, 1987, p. 129.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133.

were largely positive and excited about the future, they were collected immediately after the Crusade's seeming success, so any punitive consequences they eventually faced were still unforeseen. However, at the very end of her WRVR interview, Mary paused shortly, then, laughing slightly, added, "I lost my job." She had worked at the hospital, but when she called in to report back, her boss who had known that she would be demonstrating informed Mary that returning wouldn't be necessary. "I took it very nicely," she emphasized, "I didn't argue or anything like that because I figured that God would make a way."⁴⁶ This one sole sour experience, however, foreshadowed the larger punitive consequences that would come a week after the children return to school, on May 20, when the Birmingham Board of Education ordered 1,081 Black students be suspended and/or expelled.

This outcome was no surprise and no secret. During the first few days of the Crusade, both Assistant School Superintendent Sellers Stough and R.C. Johnson, principal of the main Black high school, Parker High, went on the record warning that students found absent from classes faced automatic expulsion.⁴⁷ During this time, however, in a speech to a church full of concerned parents, King ended his address: "Now, finally, your children. Your daughters and sons are in jail, many of them, and I'm sure many of the parents are here tonight. ... Don't worry about them."⁴⁸

King's speech to parents the night following the expulsion order, however, was much less flippant about the severity of consequences befalling the children:

I want to assure you tonight that we are not going to sit idly by and accept this dastardly act without doing something about it. ... Now, we must study all of the ramifications of this thing and all of the implications. ... We are going to think

⁴⁶ "Back to School in Birmingham."

⁴⁷ Hailey, "DOGS AND HOSES REPULSE NEGROES AT BIRMINGHAM."

⁴⁸ Branch, p. 763.

through every move we make. We are going to study everything with reference to these expulsions.⁴⁹

Even with prior warning and his own firsthand knowledge of the city government's unforgiving brutality, King here and throughout this speech indicated that was not prepared for this outcome and had little to say on what he was going to do about it. The fight for civil rights in Birmingham was in large part about access to education, but King had written off the possibility that the children's education could be even more threatened by the Crusade until after the fact, when his supposed triumph was secured.

Others have voiced this opinion that King betrayed the children by settling with the city before their protection from punishment was secured. For example, Manis notes that "[m]ore militant activists, such as James Forman, believed that King had sold out the masses of young persons who had been the backbone of the Birmingham protests."⁵⁰ Shuttlesworth was likely anticipating this possibility of backlash against the kids even before the Campaign's end. When he heard of King's plans to compromise with the city behind his back while he was recovering from an injury obtained during the demonstrations, he reportedly told King, "You may be Mr. Big now, but if you call it off, you'll be Mr. Shit."⁵¹ The details of Shuttlesworth and King's feud over concerns that were eventually realized in the children's expulsion contextualizes the insult and injury of certain figures' betrayals of those who thrust the Campaign to victory, like Abernathy, who "criticized Shuttlesworth bitter anger and his view that the SCLC had taken the Movement away from him, adding that 'in reality, without us there would have been no Movement in Birmingham at all'."⁵²

⁴⁹ "Back to School in Birmingham."

⁵⁰ Manis, p. 385.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 383.

⁵² Ibid., p. 389.

Still, in the face of mass expulsion, the kids were again their own best advocates. The SCLC and NAACP challenged the School Board's order and successfully overturned it in the Court of Appeals, reinstating the schoolchildren. At one point during these court proceedings, a judge admonished teenage protester Grosbeck Preer Parham, emphasizing, "There is no freedom without restraint." Grosbeck responded, "You can say that about freedom because you've got your freedom. The constitution says we're all equal, but Negroes aren't equal." His mother added, "I know this, Judge—these younger people are not going to take what we took."⁵³

Conclusion

The project of reformulating Birmingham from the kids' perspectives—of repositioning the children at its center, rather than its periphery—shows that the core event of one of the largest civil rights victories was largely driven by the children of the Movement. This conclusion contributes two powerful interventions to the historical understanding of the Civil Rights Movement and to the politics of American resistance at large, of which that movement was but a formative moment.

First, the findings in this paper necessitate that historians on Birmingham reconsider commonly held and uncritically wielded assumptions about the national struggle for civil rights of the mid-twentieth century. The grassroots organizing that took place at the fringes of or altogether outside the civil rights leadership is just as or even more influential than organizations' formal scripted strategies. The emphasis placed on the leadership on the one hand and the omission of the children's oral histories on the other points to a larger problem in historical memory on the Civil Rights Movement. Because the historiography has relied foremost on traditional, physical material—meeting minutes, letters, published articles, and FBI

⁵³ Eskew, p. 290. This is the only paragraph I identified in any major scholarship that actually quoted from a child.

files—for its sources, it has become dominated by the voices of male pastors in leadership positions. The people involved in the informal history-making on the fringes, like women and children, have been politely erased from the story. There is an ongoing project toward rectifying this scholastic pattern, such as a new expanding interest in the life and work of Coretta Scott King.⁵⁴ The oral histories of Birmingham’s children contribute to this historiographical project by pointing out and filling in what’s missing in a narrative that should ultimately belong to them.

Second, while the actions of the Child Crusaders of Birmingham made demonstrable contributions to successes of the Movement in and beyond Birmingham, their political philosophy and urgent will also have implications in a broader political sense. Their objectives of enacting change for themselves and their communities and the immense sacrifice and suffering they endured doing so are emblematic of the struggle of Black youth in America that has persisted for the seven decades following the Birmingham Campaign. In *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics*, political scientist Cathy Cohen argues that because Black children occupy an “uncertain place ... in our political communities,” they are making and doing politics in all aspects of their lives.⁵⁵ Cohen’s analysis suggests that Black youth are living in a space of contradiction: that despite having the least to gain and the most to lose in American politics, registering a severe feeling of alienation due to the undeniable realities of structural racism in American society, Black youth still are the most visibly and vocally political agents in this country. The story of Birmingham embodies this contradiction of Black

⁵⁴ For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project Director Clayborne Carson’s research on Coretta Scott King has led to his conclusion that King’s wife, who herself became a prominent activist after her husband’s assassination, was responsible for, or at the very least, influential in the civil rights icon’s own political trajectory—especially in some of his most controversial political stances, like that on the Vietnam War (Niki Kottmann, “Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Scholar to Bring His Teachings to Cheyenne,” *Wyoming Tribune Eagle*, February 8, 2020, https://www.wyomingnews.com/features/todo/dr-martin-luther-king-jr-scholar-to-bring-his-teachings/article_2df62310-18af-5230-8a1d-5b914ae109dd.html).

⁵⁵ Cathy J Cohen, *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 8.

youth struggle, a contradiction that played out during the Crusade and the immediate aftermath and memory of the Campaign. By remembering and centering the Child Crusaders' frustration, nonviolence, sacrifice, hope, trauma, and victory, Birmingham becomes a part of a long and ongoing tradition of young Black revolution for democracy still unrealized, not just via tactical means but through simply surviving, singing, and laughing.

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