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1941 – 1947**

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“Educating for Democratic Living”: The City-Wide Citizens’ Committee on Harlem (CWCCCH), 1941 – 1947

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Abstract

This historical case study focuses on the origins, educational goals, and school reform activities of the City-Wide Citizens’ Committee on Harlem (CWCCCH), a political action group in Harlem in the 1940s. An interracial and interfaith civil rights organization with a broad reform agenda, CWCCCH used democracy’s rhetoric as a vehicle for social change through an extensive public awareness campaign coupled with savvy organizing, ample organizational resources, and powerful political connections in both the White and African American communities. The article situates school reform work in Harlem during the 1940s in light of a larger citywide civil rights agenda and interracial activism.

Key words: Harlem, school, reform, community activism, civic unity committees



“Educar para la vida democrática”: el City-Wide Citizens’ Committee de Harlem (CWCCCH), 1941 – 1947

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Resumen

Este estudio de caso histórico se centra en los orígenes, objetivos educativos y actividades para la reforma escolar del City-Wide Citizens’ Committee de Harlem (CWCCCH), un grupo de acción política situado en Harlem de los años 40. CWCCCH fue una organización por los derechos civiles, interracial e interreligiosa, con un amplio programa de reformas. Este usó la retórica de la democracia como un vehículo para el cambio social, a través de una extensa campaña de sensibilización pública unida a una organización inteligente, amplios recursos organizacionales y poderosas conexiones políticas tanto en comunidades blancas como afroamericanas. El artículo sitúa el trabajo de reforma escolar en Harlem durante la década de los 40 teniendo en cuenta el programa de derechos civiles y activismo interracial que se daba en toda la ciudad.

Palabras clave: Harlem, escuela, reforma, activismo comunitario, comités de unidad cívica

By 1940 Harlem had become emblematic of the promise and peril that Northern cities offered their African American residents. As the largest urban Black community in the United States, this uptown New York City neighborhood was both a vibrant “Black Capital” of legendary intellectual and artistic influence as well as a community increasingly afflicted with a multitude of urban problems – high rents and absentee landlords, overcrowded and dilapidated schools, extensive unemployment, and the lack of adequate health care and social services. In 1940 Harlem’s population would reach 267,000, with 33,000 school-age children (Ment, 1983). While the majority migrated from the South, one quarter of Harlem’s residents were born abroad, immigrating from over 14 Caribbean nations. As Dr. Adam Clayton Powell Sr. noted, “Harlem became the symbol of liberty and the Promised Land to Negroes everywhere” (Osofsky, 1996, p. 128).

Although the Depression years had a negative impact on Harlem’s social conditions and standard of living, the adverse conditions also served to mobilize Harlem’s diverse political groups to focus on community control of its institutions and to seek fairer treatment. Mainstream groups such as the NAACP and the Urban League, nationalist groups like the African Patriotic League (ex-Garveyites), the Communist and Socialist parties, and broad-based community advocacy coalitions organized around employment discrimination, substandard housing, the lack of unionized labor, and school reform issues (Greenberg, 1991). During World War II Harlem also became a cause célèbre for progressive White New Yorkers who viewed the city’s institutionalized neglect of New York’s most famous Black community as symbolic of the fault lines in race relations and a failure of the democratic promise of America.

This article focuses on the origins, educational goals, and school reform activities of one of these local political action groups, the City-Wide Citizens’ Committee on Harlem (CWCCCH). An interracial and interfaith civil rights organization with a broad reform agenda, the City-Wide Citizens’ Committee on Harlem worked to arouse public sentiment, lobby public officials, eliminate racial discrimination in employment, health care, and housing, and improve the schools and recreational facilities in Harlem by “re-educate[ing]...the white population of the city in respect to the Negro and his rights, privileges, achievement, and background” (City-Wide Citizens’ Committee on Harlem, 1945b). On the cusp of the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement in New York City during World War II, the City-

Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem used democracy's rhetoric as a vehicle for social change by characterizing the "problems presented by America's Harlems" as a test against democracy, charging that "if we fail in (the) solution, we (will) fail to make democracy work" (City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem, n.d.a).



Image 1. Does this light reach Harlem? (City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem, n.d.a).

While civic unity committees would rise up in cities across the country during World War II (Jacobson, 1998), this New York City group proved unique in its membership of well-known progressive politicians, labor activists, artists, writers, religious leaders, educators, and well-heeled socialites who brought their political and social capital and leftist commitments to bear on the committee's reform agenda. Combining an extensive public awareness campaign with savvy organizing, ample organizational resources, and powerful political connections in both the White and African American communities, the City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem won civil rights victories in the fight against housing and employment discrimination over a decade before similar battles would be fought in the South. Educational projects included promoting intercultural education, advocating for school repairs and smaller classes in Harlem's schools, building new parks and recreational facilities, and launching an extensive public education campaign to improve race relations throughout

New York City. This article situates school reform work in Harlem during the 1940s in light of a larger citywide civil rights agenda and interracial activism.

Methodology and Data Sources

An historical case study approach was utilized to trace the origins, goals, and practices of this interracial social action committee during and immediately after World War II. Primary archival sources included the minutes of CWCCCH meetings, investigative reports, correspondence, transcripts of speeches and radio broadcasts, posters, brochures, and photographs which were located at the American Ethical Union archives, Columbia University, and the Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture. The New York City Board of Education's response to organizing efforts was analyzed through school board minutes, school district reports, and official correspondence, which were located in the Records of the New York City Board of Education, Municipal Archives of New York City. In addition, news articles were surveyed from the New York Times, the Amsterdam News, and left leaning newspapers such as PM. Oral histories and biographical material about the lives of CWCCCH activists including Algernon R. Black, L.D. Reddick, and Dorothy Norman were accessed through the Columbia Center for Oral History Archives, the Schomburg Center, and the Smithsonian Art Archives. Primary archival sources were contextualized by secondary sources on the history of Harlem, race relations in New York City during the Depression and World War II, and school reform efforts and civil rights organizing in Northern US cities in the 1940s.

Social Conditions in Harlem in the 1930s

The depression years had proved difficult for all New Yorkers, but particularly the residents of Harlem. At 60% (a conservative estimate), the unemployment rate for African Americans in Harlem during the 1930s was double that of Whites in other parts of the city, and almost half of the families in the neighborhood received government relief. The Depression adversely affected Harlem's Black middle class as well. While the number of Black professionals had risen in the 1920s, by 1940 over 25% of Black teachers and 18% of Black social workers were out looking for work (Greene, 1993).

Schools in Harlem during the 1930s were overcrowded, under resourced, and lacked the type of vocational education programs that might prepare Harlem's youth for skilled technical work rather than menial jobs. Most schools had a predominately White faculty, many of whom regarded assignment to the neighborhood as a "punishment." Only about 2 – 3 % of New York City teachers in the 1930s were African American, and most schools in Harlem included only a handful of Black teachers. Harlem's first African American female principal, Gertrude Ayer, was not appointed to her position at P.S. 24 until just before the Harlem Riot in February, 1935 (Johnson, 2004).

The "Harlem Riot"

On March 19, 1935, an incident in a store on 125th Street was the "spark that set aflame the smoldering resentments of the people of Harlem against racial discrimination and poverty in the midst of plenty" and brought local and national attention to bear on Harlem's economic and social problems (Riot Report Bared, 1936). Lino Rivera, a Black Puerto Rican teenager, was arrested for shoplifting from E. H. Kress, a white-owned store on 125th Street that had historically refused to hire African American employees. As the police hustled Rivera out the back entrance of the store, a rumor spread through the assembled crowd that the young man had been beaten and was near death. Efforts by shoppers to inquire about his condition were rebuffed by the police. In a spontaneous outpouring of anger and frustration at police brutality, worsening economic conditions, and on-going racial discrimination in Harlem, the majority of stores along 125th Street were looted that night, resulting in \$2,000,000 of property damage and three deaths, including an African American teenager who was shot by the police as he ran from a looted store (The Complete Report, 1969).

In response, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia created an interracial commission, headed by Dr. E. Franklin Frazier from Howard University, to study the conditions in Harlem that led to the "riot." In 25 community forums, a cross-section of Harlem residents aired their grievances about the lack of social services, employment discrimination, police brutality, and overcrowded, substandard schools (Riot Report Bared, 1936). The New York City teachers who testified at the Harlem Commission's hearings confirmed the existence of unsanitary and dilapidated school buildings, overcrowded classrooms on double and triple shifts, outdated curriculum materials, the lack of psychological and social work services, and the

prejudiced attitudes of many White teachers. The recommendations of this report would be referenced for years to come and fueled the organizing efforts of several New York City reform groups, including the City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem.

The Origins of the City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem (CWCCH)

Although the Mayor's Commission on Harlem received lip service from city officials, there was little movement to implement the reforms outlined in the report until the fall of 1941 during what the New York media characterized as a "juvenile crime wave" in Harlem ([Crime Outbreak in Harlem, 1941](#)). A series of muggings and purse snatchings by African American teenagers in the northern part of Central Park and lower Harlem in the fall of 1941 were heavily reported in the newspapers and played on White New Yorkers' racial fears. In November, 1941 Judge Anna Kross of the Magistrate's Court in Harlem and Dr. Robert Searle of the Protestant Council of New York called a meeting attended by over 200 leading Black and White citizens to discuss the situation of juvenile crime in Harlem and propose solutions. In his unpublished memoirs Algernon Black describes the tone of the meeting:

At a certain point one Black man got up and gave a strong emotional speech about [how the things that are happening] are due to [discrimination by] white people. The victims are reacting. "We are the victims." Then a white man [who owned a business in Harlem] got up and said, "It's people like you that make trouble." And from that [comment] a lot of people got to their feet. ([Black, 1978, p. 98](#)).

After a long and decidedly heated discussion, the assembled group agreed to form an interracial committee to address Harlem's problems. Algernon Black, a leader of the New York Ethical Culture Society, and Walter White, head of the NAACP, were approached by Judge Kross and Dr. Searle to head up the committee ([Searle, 1940](#)).

Algernon Black – Teacher, Broadcaster, Political Activist

In many respects, Algernon Black was a logical choice for co-leadership of an interracial committee dedicated to improving race relations. The Ethical Culture Society, a movement of nonsectarian humanists who believed in

studying the principles of ethics and expressing their religious consciences through moral and humane actions, had been active in the neighborhood settlement movement in New York City and their members were known for their progressive political stands on social issues. In the 1940s about 2/3 of the New York Ethical Culture Society were secular Jews, many of whom were involved in other social reform organizations. The private Ethical Culture schools had maintained a policy of racial integration from their inception in the early 1900s. Algernon Black, the only child of a single, working class Jewish immigrant mother who worked as a seamstress, had attended the New York Ethical Culture School on a scholarship throughout his childhood and adolescence. He went on to attend Harvard University on a scholarship where he majored in Economics and studied Marxism. After working briefly as a labor organizer, Black became the director of one of the Ethical Culture Society's settlement houses where he instituted a nursery, a dental clinic, and the first birth control clinic in the country housed in a settlement house. He subsequently became a popular Ethics teacher at the same school he had attended as a child. The children of several prominent African American leaders also attended the New York Ethical Culture School, including Paul Robeson's son and Walter White's two children. Walter White probably first met Algernon Black when his daughter Jane was a student in Black's ethics class (Bernstein, 1999).

Walter White declined leadership of the proposed organization, citing that it would be difficult to devote the time the position would require because of his national involvement in the NAACP (Black, 1978). Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, who was reportedly "above all factions in Harlem," agreed to be co-chair of the organization. Although Powell would remain the official co-chair of CWCCCH from 1941 to 1943, his leadership position was probably largely symbolic, as he attended the monthly meetings infrequently and Algernon Black conducted the day-to-day correspondence and business of the organization (City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem, 1941). In 1944 William T. Andrews, an African American lawyer and Assemblyman from Harlem, would assume the title of co-chair of the organization with Algernon Black.

From its inception the City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem was self-consciously interracial. Each of the six subcommittees, which included Employment, Housing, Health and Hospitals, Education and Recreation, Crime and Delinquency, and Consumers, had both African American and White co-chairs. For example, the Education and Recreation committee was

chaired by Dr. Lawrence Dunbar (L.D.) Reddick, curator of the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature at the New York City Public Library and Frank E. Karelsen Jr., a lawyer with a history of involvement in educational advocacy groups including the Child Study Association and the Public Education Association. Karelsen was also a longtime member of the New York Ethical Culture Society and most likely knew Algernon Black through this association ([New York Ethical Culture Society, 1939](#)). The City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem established a broad-based membership, with over 300 listed members and a prominent Board of Directors which included African American political and labor leaders such as Roy Wilkins, Walter White, A. Phillip Randolph, and Frank Crosswaith, and progressive White New Yorkers such as New York Post columnist and civil liberties advocate Dorothy Norman, socialite Mrs. Yorke Allen, author Fannie Hurst, Dr. Robert Searle, head of the Protestant Council, and Father George Ford, Catholic chaplain at Columbia University. Committee co-chairs made a point to rally an interracial assemblage of their members whenever they approached city officials to lobby about an issue.

In their efforts to bring together a spectrum of progressive leaders from both the African American and White communities, the CWCCH exemplified both the strengths (and tensions) of this approach. As a longtime vice president of the New York Chapter of the Child Study Association, Frank E. Karelsen Jr. was experienced in staging discussion groups and conferences about child development, promoting parental education, and advocating for summer recreational programs for “disadvantaged inner city youth.” Many of the White members of CWCCH (and some of the African American members as well) viewed the creation of recreational programs and additional guidance counselors and social workers in the schools as an important solution to the juvenile delinquency problem in Harlem. These efforts deemphasized the influence of institutionalized racism on Harlem's schools. Yet these members also had unique access to New York City's powerful business and political leaders through their churches and social networks and often used these connections to help advance the reform agenda, attempting to wrangle concessions out of New York City officials rather than engage in direct action protests. For instance, in her oral history CWCCH vice chairman Dorothy Norman recounts how in the mid 1940s she called New York Mayor William O'Dwyer every morning at his request to keep him abreast of progressive causes ([McNaught, 1979](#)).

L. D. Reddick – Historian, Race Relations Scholar, Civil Rights Activist

In contrast, some African American leaders of CWCCCH, such as Dr. L. D. Reddick, viewed the interracial committee as a useful platform to highlight African and African American history and culture and promote larger civil rights issues. A lecturer in African American history at City College and one of the first African American professors hired by the city university system, Reddick had graduated from Fisk University magna cum laude in 1932 and completed a Ph.D. in 1939 at the University of Chicago where he was a Julius Rosenwald Fund fellow. A close associate of Carter G. Woodson and his Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Reddick authored several influential studies on race relations in the 1940s. Upon arriving in New York City, he quickly established the Schomburg Collection at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library as an intellectual center of Harlem, with community forums on African American history, readings by prominent Black writers like Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, and political discussions on racism in the Armed Forces.



Image 2. Schomburg Library Director Lawrence D. Reddick discussing map of Africa with four visiting students, ca. 1940s. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

During Negro History week each year Reddick instituted the Schomburg's Honor Roll of Race Relations which profiled twelve African American individuals or organizations who had distinguished themselves during the past year and six Whites who had done the most to improve race relations. In 1943 the honorees included "Duke" Ellington, Dr. George Washington Carver, Paul Robeson, Franz Boas, and Lillian Smith, the editor of the *South Today* who was honored for "maintaining a consistent liberalism in a land where it takes courage to be a liberal" (Reddick, 1942). Reddick eventually expanded the scope of public lectures at the Schomburg to focus on city planning and better intergroup relations with a multicultural roster of speakers which included representatives from the Chinese Students Christian Association and the American Jewish Congress, Italian-American principal Leonard Covello from Benjamin Franklin High School, and Algernon Black of the New York Ethical Culture Society ([Library to Offer Racial Lectures](#), 1946).

The CWCCH reform agenda incorporated aspects of both these perspectives, emphasizing school building improvements, expanded

recreational facilities, reduced class size, additional guidance counselors, examination of textbooks for racial bias, teacher in-service courses on Black history and race relations, and the appointment of African Americans in policy making positions on the New York City Board of Education (*City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem, 1945a*).

Educating for Democratic Living: Propaganda to Change Race Relations

Adopting the stance that changing the racial views of White Americans was critical to their cause, the City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem set out to educate the citizens of New York for democratic living. In the process the committee carried on an extensive public education campaign aimed at promoting civil rights issues and reducing prejudice by utilizing the mass media to mold public opinion and publicize their reform platform. Several of the leaders of CWCCCH were particularly adept in their use of public lectures, radio broadcasts, and the news media to influence public sentiment about race relations. Algernon Black, the co-chair, was known as a charismatic speaker who gave weekly "platform talks," or inspirational lectures on philosophical and political issues at the Ethical Culture Society headquarters which were broadcast on Sunday mornings on WQXR, the New York Times radio station. He also hosted an "Ethics in the News" program for years on the same station (*Black, 1973*). In addition, Black was a frequent lecturer on race relations and intercultural education at local high schools and teacher in-service workshops offered as part of the New York Board of Education's "alertness" classes, a citywide staff development program for teachers (*Covello, 1945*).

Dr. L. D. Reddick, an Assistant Editor of the *Journal of Negro History*, combined his scholarship in Black History with political activism. If the spirited transcripts of his speeches are any indication of his appeal, he was an eloquent and moving orator at anti-lynching rallies and made frequent radio appearances where he discussed Black political and historical issues.



Image 3. Schomburg Library director, Lawrence D. Reddick, speaking at Madison Square Garden, New York City, at meeting sponsored by the National Council of American Soviet Friendship, December 2, 1946. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Reddick wrote a seminal article in the *Journal of Negro Education* on the influence of the media on race relations, one of the first examinations of the effects of racial stereotyping in education (Reddick, 1944).

In his role as co-chair of CWCCH's Education sub-committee, Reddick advocated a far-ranging public relations program of "propaganda to change racial attitudes" which aimed to change Harlem's conception of itself and other New Yorkers' views about Harlem. Reddick's suggestions to influence citywide perceptions included pressuring the daily press to run a series of stories on Black achievements, urging radio stations to air programs about African Americans in New York City, and writing a pamphlet on "What the Negro Has Done for New York" which would be distributed nationally.

To alter how Harlemites felt about their community, Dr. Reddick suggested screening special movie shorts in the theaters of Harlem on the lives of outstanding African Americans, to be followed by brief talks by Black leaders urging community pride and self improvement. He also

proposed implementing a large scale educational program of free courses in Black history and culture for teachers and community organizations and publishing articles in the Black press on “What Harlem Can Do About Itself” (*City-Wide Citizens’ Committee on Harlem, 1943*). Reddick’s influence on the committee would become apparent in the CWCCH’s development of radio programs that focused on Black history themes and the group’s close working relationship with NYPL librarians who developed booklists and displays on African American literature that were featured in branch libraries around the city (*New York Public Library, 1943*).

Dorothy Norman – Photographer, Writer, and Civil Liberties Advocate

Other key committee members used the newspapers and their ties with New York’s artistic community to promote social justice issues. CWCCH vice chairman Dorothy Norman was a writer and photographer who wrote a weekly column in the New York Post from 1942 to 1949 called *A World to Live In* that focused on civil rights issues and other progressive causes. As a young woman Norman had studied photography with Alfred Steiglitz, who became her longtime mentor until his death in 1946. She oversaw the operations at Steiglitz’s art gallery, was an active member of the American Civil Liberties Union, and served as chair of the Civil Liberties Committee of the Women’s City Club. Norman produced a unique literary journal entitled *Twice a Year*, published from 1939 to 1949, which combined her artistic interests with her political persuasions. It included photography, poetry, and short stories with anti-fascist articles and essays promoting civil rights by writers such as Richard Wright, Pauli Murray, and L.D. Reddick. Norman’s influence on the CWCCH’s reform agenda was evident in her promotion of “Harlem Week,” a yearly event developed by the committee to highlight Harlem’s intellectual, artistic, and political life while spotlighting its ongoing economic and social problems.

Harlem Week

In 1942, at the suggestion of public relations expert Edward Bernays, the CWCCH declared the last week in May as “Harlem Week” and kicked off a weeklong series of events with a formal dinner at one of their member’s lavish Greenwich Village home attended by luminaries such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Marion Anderson (*Black, 1978*). Each day of the week the CWCCH released one of their subcommittee reports full of the latest

statistics on the state of health care, housing, or education in Harlem to the press. Radio interviews on the day's topic with key committee members were scheduled to correspond with the release of each subcommittee report. In 1942 A. Philip Randolph chaired a panel on radio station WMCA entitled, "Democracy on Trial: The Color Issue" and Charles Abrams, former counsel of the New York City Housing Authority, led a discussion about "The Negro Housing Problem in New York City." On May 24, 1943 Algernon Black and Lester Granger, Executive Secretary of the National Urban League, presented a radio show entitled "Democracy and Racial Justice" ([City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem, 1943](#)).

Other artistic and literary activities were staged to coincide with Harlem Week, including an art exhibit on "The Negro in America Life" in 1943 and a yearly booklist featuring the latest titles on Black history and culture and race relations compiled by the staff of the New York Public Library ([City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem, 1944](#)). Several NYPL librarians met with Algernon Black on December 14, 1943 to form a Librarians' Section of CWCCCH to "further the committee's work and... to broaden their own interracial knowledge." This group took responsibility for compiling the booklist each year, and making personal recommendations of their favorite titles. The booklists produced by the City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem were not just annotated bibliographies of African American literature – they also included a description of living conditions in Harlem and appeals to White Americans to make America's democratic ideals a reality. As prime examples of the CWCCCH's "propaganda to change race relations," the message was clearly aimed at White New Yorkers, concluding that we will only have a democratic nation "when... the Negroes of the United States are treated with equal justice" ([City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem, 1946](#)).

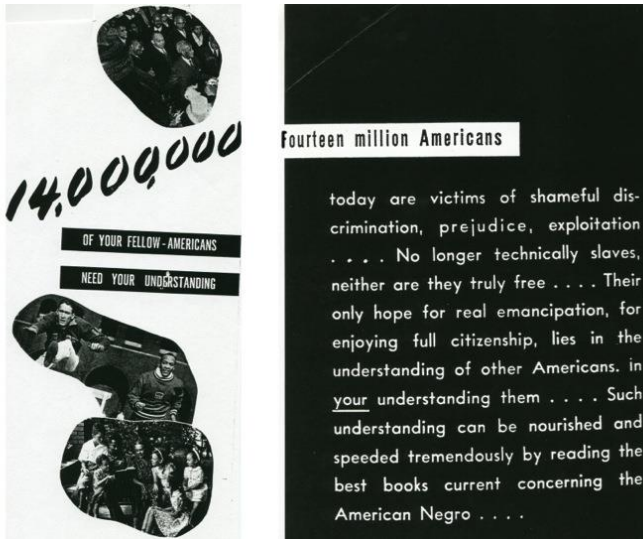


Image 4. 14,000,000 of Your Fellow-Americans Need Your Understanding book list (cover and inside) (City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem, 1946).

Branch libraries of the New York Public Library and several Manhattan bookstores agreed to provide displays of the featured books on Black history and race relations. These Harlem week celebrations showcased the CWCCCH's reform agenda and continued yearly under the chairmanship of Dorothy Norman until the organization disbanded in 1947.

Speeches, Forums, and Radio Broadcasts

The CWCCCH also sponsored nationally known speakers and staged public forums on race relations. On March 9, 1944 Carey McWilliams, a self-styled California radical and west coast editor of the Nation, spoke on "A Practical Program for the Solution of America's Race Problem" (*City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem, 1944*). On June 1, 1945 the CWCCCH sponsored a symposium on race relations in New York City with discussants on employment, housing, public attitudes, and human relations (*City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem, 1945a*).

For several weeks during 1944 and 1945 the Committee staged a radio series on the independent radio station WMCA that dramatized CWCCH member Roi Ottley's book *New World A'Coming* (1943). A former social worker in Harlem and nationally known writer and journalist during the 1940s, Ottley's writing focused on the economic and political plight of African Americans. This critically acclaimed radio series tackled such far-ranging issues as Black soldiers who returned from Europe to face Jim Crow treatment at home, the poll tax and other barriers to Black suffrage, the history of the Black church as a source of political self-sufficiency, and the African origins of Black music. Nathan Straus, the owner of WMCA and a progressive political activist in his own right, provided the funds to sponsor the broadcast. Dorothy Norman and other CWCCH members would periodically interrupt the broadcasts to announce that the radio series was designed to "help create a living democracy" and to "help the new world be born" (Savage, 1999).

**"The Road to Democracy in Education is Long and Hard,
But We Are On Our Way"**

From 1941 to 1945 the education subcommittee of the City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem sponsored intercultural education projects, worked to establish all-Neighborhood schools and nursery school programs, and agitated for additional recreational facilities and playgrounds for the children of Harlem. At P.S. 169, in a multiracial (largely Black and Jewish) area of Washington Heights, the Committee employed a Human Relations counselor who arranged fieldtrips for students and their parents to sites like the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature and the historical collection of the Jewish Theological Seminary. A trained social worker, she also visited children's homes and coordinated the involvement of social service agencies with the school. Labeled the "New York Plan" (in deference to the better known Springfield Plan for racial and religious tolerance), Frank E. Karelsen Jr. advocated that the Board of Education establish Human Relations counselors in every school in the city (New York City Board of Education, n.d.).

CWCCH also emphasized the development of additional recreational facilities and all-neighborhood schools that would be open in the evenings and provide educational and social services for the total family, much like the current "full-service" or community school concept. Their advocacy of additional Boy Scout troops sponsored by the churches of Harlem received a

lukewarm response from some CWCCH members. As Adam Clayton Powell Jr. commented, “Negro people in this community don’t think much of the scouting movement because of the jim-crow setup that used to exist and the treatment of Negro boys at international jamborees in the past year” (Powell, Jr., 1942). Linking recreational and education concerns followed in large measure from the settlement house background of some key committee members and the progressive era belief that juvenile crime could best be thwarted by providing Harlem’s youth with constructive recreational and social experiences.

The emphasis on addressing juvenile crime became highlighted by some members of the CWCCH after the second “Harlem Riot” in 1943. With racial uprisings in Detroit and Los Angeles in June and July that year, Mayor La Guardia took a proactive stance to maintain the peace in New York City. (Fight Racial Prejudice, 1943). At a public rally he implored all citizens to commit themselves to “A New Yorkers Pledge” which ran as a half page ad in the daily PM newspaper. Several thousand New Yorkers signed the following pledge and mailed it into city hall:

“I pledge my aid, as a New Yorker and an American.

I will under no circumstance allow myself to be provoked to disorder.

I will denounce and discredit all rumors that seek to divide and confuse the people of New York.

I will resist every attempt to set me against my fellow New Yorkers” (A New Yorker’s Pledge, 1943).

Yet in early August 1943 Harlem again experienced violence in response to the shooting of a Black soldier on leave by a white police officer at the Hotel Braddock when the soldier interceded during the arrest of a woman for disorderly conduct (Capeci Jr., 1977). A false rumor spread throughout Harlem that the police had killed a Black soldier in the presence of his mother. Over the course of the next two days, six people were killed, 400 were injured, and hundreds of stores were looted incurring an estimated \$5,000,000 worth of damages. Of the five hundred Harlemites who were arrested by the police, the majority were teenagers. Unlike the “Harlem Riot” of 1935, this time La Guardia was highly visible, interrupting programming on the major radio stations in the early morning hours to plead for calm, touring Harlem with Black leaders, and asking all New Yorkers to recommit themselves to a pledge of tolerance (One Killed, Scores Injured, 1943).

The response of African American and White activists in the CWCCCH to the uprising of 1943 illustrated the range of perspectives within the committee about the origins and solutions to Harlem's problems. Several African American leaders agreed that the disturbances were not "race riots but outbreaks of hoodlumism." CWCCCH member and Harlem journalist Roi Ottley concurred that the looting was "a protest against the flagrant Jim Crow policy of the U.S. army" (Ottley, 1943, p.9). Harlem author Richard Wright called it a "spontaneous outburst of anger stemming from the economic pinch" and suggested that "more Negro policemen" might help restore confidence (Schubart, 1943).

CWCCCH education co-chair Frank E. Karelson Jr., on the other hand, implied in an interview that it was the lack of playground and recreational facilities in Harlem that had contributed to the rise of juvenile delinquency in Harlem and the looting by teenagers during the riot. As part of their public education campaign, the City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem ran a half page ad in the New York Times calling for the immediate opening of playgrounds, recreational facilities, and summer schools in Harlem (Citizens of New York..., 1943). In fact, the lack of recreational outlets had remained a continuing problem in Harlem, where parks were few, playgrounds were closed during the war years due to lack of funding, and many schools had to rely on closing side streets during school hours in order to provide a play space for the students.

Noting that a number of the looted stores were grocery stores, the ad also urged the immediate enforcement of price ceilings in Harlem stores, citing price gouging and lax price-ceiling enforcement as a major community problem. The Consumer subcommittee of CWCCCH had been pressuring Mayor La Guardia to open a public market in Harlem and institute price controls. The day after the riot, in an apparent symbolic gesture, the New York City Council approved a resolution requesting that Mayor La Guardia and the Board of Education fund sufficient full-time playgrounds in Harlem, but failed to respond to the CWCCCH's call for the enforcement of price ceilings.

In response to both the Harlem riot and pressure from the CWCCCH, Mayor La Guardia also announced the appointment of the Mayor's Committee on Unity on February 28, 1944 to be chaired by Dr. Dan Dodson. When Algernon Black suggested to Dodson that now there was an official citywide race relations committee the CWCCCH could disband, Dodson urged Black to continue the committee, noting the advantages of an independent citizens' action group on race relations. In his words:

“We are an appointed committee. You are self-appointed. We will not be able to swing free and act on all things with quite the same freedom. You can be an invaluable supplement for thought and action... a gadfly to us as well as the city. You may be able to reach people who are beyond the reach of an official committee” (Black, 1973).

The CWCCH’s political independence and broad membership would ultimately prove to be a strength of the organization, providing a home for individuals from different political perspectives and the ability to respond quickly to a range of issues. When it came to school reform, however, the CWCCH soon discovered they were dealing with a deeply entrenched educational bureaucracy, which proved well-insulated from community pressure.

Harlem School Reform: Too Little, Too Late?

After four years of political pressure and meetings with New York City school officials, the CWCCH Education subcommittee could count the following achievements:

- 1) The Board had established a committee to examine stereotyped textbooks;
- 2) Two African American administrators were appointed at the Central Office (but the mayor had still failed to appoint a Black member of the Board of Education);
- 3) Sponsorship of an intercultural education inservice course for New York City teachers on “The Negro in the American Scene”;
- 4) Appointment of an Advisory Committee on Human Relations for the school system chaired by Frank E. Karelsen Jr.;
- 5) Development of an intercultural curriculum bulletin entitled *Unity Through Understanding* (New York City Board of Education Board of Superintendents, 1946).

By May of 1945, however, the slow and piecemeal response of the Board of Education and school district officials frustrated CWCCH activists who had gained quick political victories in employment discrimination, housing, and integration of the public hospitals in Harlem. In a radio broadcast during Harlem Week, Dr. L. D. Reddick characterized the New York City Board of

Education's response to racial and religious prejudice in the schools as "spotty, uncoordinated, and 'too little, too late,'" and he concluded that "only a fraction of the tremendous resources of the New York City public school system has been mobilized to educate against racism and for human democracy" (Reddick, 1945).

Frank E. Karelsen Jr. also became frustrated with the school district's lack of communication with the Advisory Committee on Human Relations that he chaired. Assembled by Superintendent Wade in September 1944, the Advisory Committee included representatives of the major educational advocacy groups in New York City, including the City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem, the Bureau for Intercultural Education, the NAACP, the American Jewish Congress, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and the Public Education Association. The group had met regularly for several months and developed a set of recommendations for school reform that mirrored many of the CWCCCH concerns. On October 17, 1945 Karelsen resigned in protest from the Advisory Committee to bring "public attention to... the chaotic and inexcusable conditions now and long prevailing in the public school system of New York." He cited a litany of problems – the lack of teachers to cover classes, lack of attendance officers, overcrowded classes in so-called tension areas, and failure to hire the human relations counselors promoted by the City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem. He noted that the Advisory Committee's press releases were often held up in the Board's public relations office, and accused the Superintendent of blocking the release of the Advisory Committee's curriculum bulletin *Unity Through Understanding* because of objections to the content. Karelsen claimed that the committee had "received neither action nor cooperation (from school district officials)—nothing but stalling... Our pleas have been met with nothing but statements of generalities and paper plans" (*School Conditions Called 'Chaotic', 1945*).

Karelsen's resignation triggered a larger effort to protest the N.Y.C Board of Education's intransigence on school reform measures. In what appears to have been an orchestrated effort, within days the majority of advisory committee members (28) resigned, including L. D. Reddick, Helen Trager of the Bureau of Intercultural Education, Walter White of the NAACP, and other well-known leaders of intercultural education in New York City (20 of *School Committee Resign, 1945*). Karelsen hastily reassembled members who had resigned to form an umbrella committee known as the Emergency Committee for Better Schools for New York's

Children and filed a complaint with the State Board of Regents requesting an investigation of the New York City schools.

Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia countered with his own investigation of the activities of the Advisory Committee on Human Relations, which became known as the Yavner Commission (Yavner, 1946). Weeks of hearings were held where former members were called to testify about the Advisory Committee's activities. The progressive press criticized these hearings as a "smear" campaign designed to discredit Karelsen and "whitewash" the conditions in the schools and several former members commented about Yavner's misrepresentation and distortions of their views (Education Group Assails, 1946).

While the Yavner Commission investigation dragged on, Superintendent Wade appointed Dean William Russell of Teachers College, Columbia University as the new chair of the Advisory Committee on Human Relations. Russell's efforts to persuade previous members like Walter White from the NAACP and Edward Lewis, the head of the Urban League, to return to the committee proved unsuccessful, and he had to recruit several new members. Instructed by Superintendent Wade to confine themselves to an advisory status and to stay away from contentious school reform issues, the committee adopted a less activist stance in the remaining two years of its existence, focusing largely on the development of neighborhood councils (Wade, 1945).

Conclusion: The Eclipse of Civic Unity, or a New Phase in Civil Rights?

In June of 1946 Algernon Black stepped down as co-chair of the CWCCH, citing that "five years is enough and the Committee should be able to find someone who can give it more time than I am now able to give." Dorothy Norman headed up a committee composed of Frank Karelson Jr., L. D. Reddick, and Edith Alexander to develop a budget, reorganize the CWCCH subcommittees, and appoint new officers of the organization (Black, 1946). However, the group publicly disbanded a few months later citing a lack of funds. In his unpublished memoirs Algernon Black privately acknowledged that the CWCCH lost focus after the end of World War II. He speculates on possible reasons why the group proved particularly successful during the war years, in part because "the country needed a focus on unity for the war effort." Black also noted how a labor shortage and the contradictions between fighting for democracy abroad and the lack of democracy for

African Americans at home helped to create employment opportunities and fuel the committee's reform efforts.

CWCCH's accomplishments included the passage of the first employment discrimination bill in New York State, a race discrimination amendment that denied city funding to segregated child care agencies, the establishment of an Advisory Committee on Human Relations at the Board of Education, and an extensive public education campaign to improve race relations in New York City (*City-Wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem, n.d.b*). As vice chairman Dorothy Norman noted, committee members strived to be ever vigilant towards racial injustice, with "one eye fixed firmly on our public officials and our public policy (and) the other eye on the citizens of New York City" (*Norman, 1945*). The CWCCH's commitment to transform both the political and social landscape of New York City as well as the views of individual New Yorkers bridged the psychologically-oriented prejudice reduction activities of the intercultural education movement of the 1940s with school desegregation protests in the 1950s. Dorothy Norman summed up the committee's double-pronged approach to social change – "we must mold public policy and we must live the policy we claim to favor" (*Norman, 1945*). Reflecting back on his involvement, Algernon Black glimpsed the historic role that interracial civic unity committees would play in laying the foundation for future civil rights efforts. In his words, "we were all part of something bigger than any of us, and I think it paid off – never enough or fast enough, but we were part of a movement that was being born, the Civil Rights Movement" (*Black, 1973*).

Although the CWCCH folded early in 1947, several of the Committee's activist leaders continued to pursue a civil rights agenda in new venues. Algernon Black expanded and championed the Encampment for Citizenship, an interracial experiment for citizenship education he began at the Ethical Culture Society's Fieldston School in 1946. The encampment involved youth (ages 17 – 24) from diverse religious, racial, social and national backgrounds in a summer camp experience where they "learned the principles and techniques of citizenship in a liberal democracy by living it." The program encouraged political activism and volunteerism, and sought to educate its participants about civic responsibility, participation in government, and tolerance of diversity (*Black, 1962*). After briefly being blacklisted by the Board of Directors of the New York Ethical Culture Society after he visited Russia in the 1950s, Algernon Black continued his work with civil rights groups in New York City and eventually rose to

become the principal leader of the New York Ethical Culture Society in the 1960s (Bernstein, 1999).

L. D. Reddick resigned as director of the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature in 1948, charging the city administration with “neglect” and citing his frustration with the lack of consistent support and funding to the organization. At the public ceremony that marked his resignation, Algernon Black praised Reddick as “a man who wants freedom so much he has been willing to struggle for it” (Reddick Resignation, 1948). Reddick took a position as professor of history and head of the library at Atlanta University. In 1956 he became chair of the History Department at Alabama State College in Montgomery, where he was dismissed from his position in 1960 by the Governor of Alabama for his support of student sit-ins. As the official archivist of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Dr. Reddick traveled with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the late 1950s and wrote the first biography of the civil rights leader (Reddick, 1959).

Dorothy Norman remained active in New York’s progressive artistic community, continuing her photographic career and writing a biography of her mentor Alfred Steiglitz. Norman also supported India’s independence, corresponding with Nehru and Indira Gandhi. She made several trips to the subcontinent in the 1950s, and channeled American resources to help improve social conditions in India (McNaught, 1979).

The demise of broad-based interracial coalitions like CWCCH also signaled a shift in school reform efforts in Harlem in the 1950s and 1960s (Biondi, 2003). African American parents and community activists would engage in school desegregation struggles in the 1950s (Back, 2003) and advocate for Black power and community control in the 1960s (Taylor, 2011). Increasingly they would find themselves at odds with progressive White New Yorkers (and moderate Blacks) who remained nostalgic for the 1940s when Black and White New Yorkers worked together to improve race relations.

In sum, the City-Wide Citizens’ Committee on Harlem seized the rising tide of interracial optimism during the war years, demonstrating that citizen action could make a difference in race relations and paving the way for future civil rights work in the 1950s and 1960s. The activists of the City-Wide Citizens’ Committee on Harlem may have misjudged their ability to enact far ranging reforms in New York City’s intransigent and bureaucratic school system, but they demonstrated how a citizens’ organization might hold America accountable to its democratic ideal and embrace the racial and cultural diversity of all New Yorkers as a community asset.

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