

"WHAT WE ARE PART OF"  
TEACHING AT CUNY: 1968-1974

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ADRIENNE RICH

PART II



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SERIES 4, NUMBER 3, PART 2, FALL 2013

# DISSIDENTS END LOCKOUT IN FACE OF COURT ORDER

## BHE Recommends Crackdown

By Ken Sasser

The Board of Higher Education last night approved a get-tough policy on campus disruptions, which recommended that college administrators refuse to negotiate with students who have seized buildings and refuse to grant amnesty to students who have been charged by civil authorities.

At the same time, in a move to expand "channels of communication," the Board approved "in principle" the creation of Councils of Overseers, consisting of faculty, students, administration, alumni, and members of the general public, at "various units" of the City University.

The Board's statement on campus disorders was not intended to refer to the situation of City College or any other specific college experiencing disruption, according to Porter Chandler, Chairman of the BHE.

The statement said: "The laws of this City, State, and Nation apply equally to all persons both on and off campus. Our campuses cannot constitute independent sovereignties beyond the reach of law.

"There is no right on the part of students or anyone else, at (Continued on Page 2)



PRESIDENT GALLAGHER speaking to newsmen yesterday afternoon said that he would risk jail before ordering police on campus. Labor that proved unnecessary.

## Further Disruptions Are Anticipated

By George Murrell and Jma Wyman

Fourteen days after it began, the occupation of the South Campus by Black and Puerto Rican students ended voluntarily last night.

A dignified, singing procession of over 200 male and female students marched through the 133 Street gate at 8:30, exactly two hours after delivery of a State Supreme Court stay order enjoining the students from continuing the occupation. The order was returnable Thursday.

Despite the withdrawal, which cleared the students of contempt of court charges they would have faced, there were indications that the students and white radicals allied with them, had not ended their fight for enactment of the five demands.

Leading the march out the gate, a Black student raised a red flag and facing the head of the parade, shouted, "The University of Harlem will return." Another student, asked if he thought the occupation was a failure, declared, "We didn't lose; we'll never lose."

About an hour before the walk-out, an assembly of the occupants convened in Fisher Grand. (Continued on Page 2)

# Quota Demand Stopped Talks

By Tom Ackerman

A deadlock over what percentage of incoming enrollees could be admitted to the College under open admissions criteria and along ethnic lines forced the Board of Higher Education to move into the dispute and order immediate reopening, it was learned yesterday.

Source close to the negotiations said that President Gallagher had acceded to the general position that the College reserve a much greater number of freshman places to those who could not meet prevailing academic average and competitive examination standards. But when the talks halted Sunday afternoon the two parties were still at odds over the exact distribution.

Even if the two sides had come to agreement on the percentages it was uncertain that the Board of Higher Education or the Faculty Senate would have approved the plan. According to Prof. Samuel Harrel, the College's ombudsman, who attended last Monday's BHE meeting, the 31-member body made clear that it would have been unwilling to endorse anything "predicated on a quota," by racial or ethnic grouping.

According to the sources, the Black and Puerto Rican Student Community negotiators put forward a formula calling for the admission of 80 per cent of next fall's entering class under considerations of academic potential similar to those of the SEEK program. The BHEC reasoned that under such an arrangement about 40 per cent of the total class would be accepted.

In addition they secured a letter from the Acting State Education Commissioner providing at least half the supplemental money to the University.

Assured of at least half that money, University Vice-Chancellor Robert Reinbois said Sunday that entry to about 500 more students into the University-wide SEEK program was now guaranteed.

Dr. Reinbois noted that the atmosphere in the State Legislature regarding the University was one of "total optimism."

He said that while the state of student occupations and occupations (Continued on Page 2)



Photo by Bruce Copeland  
 JOSEPH COPELAND

## Extra Funds For SEEK; Freshman Admissions Set

After three months of uncertainty, the City University last week mailed acceptance notices to 20,000 high school seniors who will comprise the University's largest entering class.

Each student, however, will be limited to a maximum load of 12 credits — the minimum number necessary to qualify as a full-time student.

The impetus of such a limit, officials at the Board of Higher Education noted, was necessitated by City cuts in the University budget.

University Chancellor Albert H. Bowker said after announcing the decision that, "The refusal of the City to spend the University the minimal budget needed to continue operating with an all-university basis required that the (Continued on Page 2)

The Campus, May 6, 1969. City College of New York Cohen Library Archives and Special Collections.

## "TREASURES THAT PREVAIL": ADRIENNE RICH, THE SEEK PROGRAM, AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AT THE CITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK, 1968-1972

IN AUTUMN 1968, thirty nine year-old poet Adrienne Cecile Rich began to teach writing in the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) Program at the City College of New York in Harlem. The inner-city free public college that Rich entered was indeed an unusual institution. The "citadel on a hill" had been, in the 1930s, a concentration of poor radical European immigrant students and teachers committed to anti-racism, anti-fascism, and thriving intellectual debate, as well as offering the first Black studies courses in New York's municipal colleges. Over time, campus life drifted from this radical milieu, even as its admissions practices continued to welcome predominantly poor white students. According to an article by Pete Hamill that Rich preserved in her archive, of the "40,000 students in the CUNY system, 80 per cent come from families where income is less than \$15,000 a year."<sup>1</sup> Rich's fellow SEEK educator Barbara Christian noted at the time, "There City College sits, smack dab in the middle of the largest Black community in the country, and only 9% of its daytime students are Black or Puerto Rican. And 5% of that 9% came through the SEEK program."<sup>2</sup>

SEEK's educational access pilot project—created at City College in 1965, and then extended through community pressure to all CUNY senior colleges in 1967<sup>3</sup>—aimed to prepare a cohort of Black

1 The original article appears to be from an unidentifiable newspaper column; Hamill makes the exact same statement in "The Revolt of the White Lower Middle Class." *New York Magazine* 14 April 1969.  
 2 Biondi, Martha. *The Black Revolution on Campus*, 124.  
 3 City University of New York. "SEEK & College Discovery: History & Mission."

and Puerto Rican high school students for college studies by providing non-credit preparatory courses, study stipends, and social work counseling, as well as support through their time in college.<sup>4</sup> Within a few turbulent years, SEEK would become a nucleus for counteracting the institutional inequalities entrenched in City College's admissions, curriculum, value systems, and relationship to the surrounding area. With Mina Shaughnessy named as program director in 1967, Rich joined such educators as Christian, June Jordan, Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, David Henderson, Addison Gayle, Raymond Patterson, Aijaz Ahmad, and others. This cohort worked in praxis with these previously excluded students to create a space for experimental collaboration—a localized, liberatory, pedagogical process that would eventually transform CUNY and have a profound impact on education across the country.

Before arriving at City College, Rich taught writing at a Young Men's/Young Women's Hebrew Association, Swarthmore College, and Columbia University. While at Columbia, she immersed herself in the feminist and anti-war movements on campus. Her poetry became more politically pronounced, as evident in the collection *Leaflets: Poems 1965–1968*. Rich's particular attention to the wave of events in 1968 is reflected in the collection—two-thirds of the forty-eight poems were written that year, seventeen of them penned in less than a month, right before she began to teach in the City College SEEK program. The sheer intensity of events during this period is reflected both in Rich's teaching materials and her poetry, as well as the political options and constraints faced by the CUNY activists she would soon encounter.

The first half of this tempestuous year flashed news of the My Lai Massacre by US soldiers in Vietnam, a week of Howard University building occupations, Martin Luther King's assassination and the

<sup>4</sup> Maher, Jane. *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work*, 89-90.

subsequent mass uprisings in more than a hundred US cities, Black Panther battles with Oakland police, the Columbia University strike and building occupations, the May general strikes in France, and the Catonsville 9 war draft document burnings. The second half of the year, leading well into 1969, featured the longest student-led strike in US history, at San Francisco State University, resulting in the creation of the first department of Black Studies, a sustained struggle that inspired those on the East Coast. The Fall 1968 United Federation of Teachers strike against broader community control of public schools in East Harlem, Ocean Hill-Brownsville, and the Lower East Side also sparked divisions and new governance models for how relevant education could be shaped by wider social participation, a democratizing process resisted by the teachers themselves. The roughly ten-year period framing the creation of SEEK in 1965 to the imposition of tuition at CUNY in 1976, can also be framed by the assassination of Malcolm X, just blocks from the City College campus, and the fall of Saigon in 1975, the final defeat of the US in Vietnam.

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For Rich as writer, reader, and teacher, literature was a necessary though insufficient record of lived experience. She identified with the liberatory possibility that language—if connected to action—could undo its own ideological fetters. Her work plumbed the depths between the concrete word and the fleeting human response to it. Her pre-City College poetry carefully weighed material constraints and subjective energies in considering “how we can use what we have / to invent what we need.”<sup>5</sup> She asserted an ethical critique of Ivy League faculty members' disregard for students as a form of pedagogical violence: “If the mind of the teacher is not in love with the mind of the student, / he is simply practicing rape, and deserves at best our

<sup>5</sup> Rich, Adrienne. *Leaflets: Poems, 1965-1968*, 56.

pity.”<sup>6</sup> Her work urged a dialogue with Black male writers whose revolutionary programs may have contained misogynist contours: “LeRoi! Eldridge! listen to us, we are ghosts / condemned to haunt the cities where you want to be at home.”<sup>7</sup> Attending to shifting momentums and affinities within this time of social tumult, Rich revised and re-envisioned both potential allies and enemies. She also notably warned of the *conservateur* who carried “illustrated catalogues of all that there is to lose,”<sup>8</sup> a prescient image of the harsh reactions to institutional change at City College that she and others in SEEK would endure within a few years.

What especially stands out in these 1965–1968 poems, though, is how Rich demands an active political use for literature that exceeds its value as a finished product—either as an inert cultural object to be revered, or hoisted like a too-tidy banner. She seeks to lay bare the stress lines and ardor of creation, circulation, and contact between real people through the written word. In a 1968 poem “To Frantz Fanon,” she writes that she doesn’t see the Martinican psychiatrist-turned-Algerian revolutionary “listening / to the throats of the torturers and the tortured,” or his fatigued eyes “deep in the blackness of your skull”:

What I see best is the length  
of your fingers  
pressing the pencil  
into the barred page

of the French child’s copybook  
with its Cartesian squares its grilled  
trap of holy geometry

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 61, 68.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 72.

where your night-sweats streamed out  
in language<sup>9</sup>

But beyond the struggle for articulation, there is the function of language in action, as she writes in the title poem:

I want to hand you this  
leaflet streaming with rain or tears  
but the words coming clear  
something you might find crushed into your hand  
after passing a barricade  
and stuff in your raincoat pocket.  
I want this to reach you<sup>10</sup>

Rich entered life at City College as it seethed with equal parts excitement, turmoil, and uncertainty. The Black and Puerto Rican student population, although tiny, was tremendously active: students invited revolutionaries to speak on campus, screened films like *The Battle of Algiers*, initiated radical clubs like the Onyx Society and Puerto Ricans Involved in Student Action (PRISA), published pamphlets and newspapers, and welcomed radical collaborations with faculty. In October 1968, Black Panther Minister of Justice H. Rap Brown, Olympic Project for Human Rights co-founder and sociologist Harry Edwards, and radical athlete John Carlos spoke at the school in defense of Carlos and Tommie Smith’s Black power fist salute at the Mexico City Olympics,<sup>11</sup> a gesture that had come in the wake of mass protests in Mexico City and the massacre of students at Tlatelolco. In

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 55-56.

<sup>11</sup> *Tech News*, 30 October, 1968.

November, anti-war students temporarily granted sanctuary to Bill Brakefield, an AWOL US soldier, at the campus's Finley Ballroom, an action for which one hundred seventy students and community members were arrested.<sup>12</sup> And in December, Black Panther Prime Minister Stokely Carmichael spoke at the Great Hall to a massive crowd from around CUNY and New York City on a "blueprint for armed struggle against American racism and capitalism."<sup>13</sup> In the political tradition of City College circa 1930s, these Black and Brown students, with white student comrades, created a radical intellectual milieu where people could relate experiential lessons from Algeria, Vietnam, and elsewhere around the world to their own local conditions and concerns. But for many in the SEEK program, these critical dialogues also took shape and flourished in their classrooms with a faculty roster of exceptional writers who were themselves active in cultural social justice movements.

The stakes of classroom dialogues, department politics, writing practices, and political engagement between a contradiction-laden campus and galvanized community were densely concentrated in this period's conditions of social tension and change. Fellow SEEK educator and poet David Henderson recalls his first introduction to SEEK and City College:

The first meeting I attended was just after, I mean literally, Langston Hughes's funeral that was amazingly just a few blocks away. That was the first time I was meeting all of the folks who would become the core of that SEEK/CCNY faculty group that came together to support the student demands and the

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<sup>12</sup> Dyer, Conrad. *Protest and the Politics of Open Admissions: The Impact of the Black and Puerto Rican Students' Community (of City College)*, 55.

<sup>13</sup> Opie, Frederick Douglass. "Developing Their Minds Without Losing Their Soul: Black and Latino Student Coalition-Building in New York, 1965-1969." *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*. July 2009.

overall reforms of the Strike. The people I first got together with were the African Americans and other Blacks and some Puerto Ricans. No one had been on the job that long because the University had literally just opened up to African Americans due to the pressure of the Civil Rights Movement in the south and especially in the north, where urban rioting was often becoming more and more the result of inequality and protest.

So we had to kind of get our ducks in a row, our signals in order. I immediately fell in with Barbara Christian who had taken on the role of explaining my poetry to the English department inquisitors after several requisite introductory readings. And then there were the students to deal with, and the immediate faculty that included those from the English department who acknowledged the long standing policy of consigning African American literature to second class status in the curriculums.<sup>14</sup>

Christian had been teaching in the SEEK program since it began in 1965, while studying for a doctorate at Columbia. She would go on to help establish African American Studies at UC Berkeley, and become the first tenured African American woman there. While at City College, though still not a full time member of the faculty, Christian proved instrumental in preparing the ground for the innovative teaching force that would characterize the SEEK Program by introducing the work of younger Black writers like Henderson to the faculty. As Henderson recalls, he first met Rich at City College:

That was where I began to directly encounter Adrienne. But remember, she was a Yale Younger Poet who was treated with a lot of respect in the almost old school tradition, while here we were coming in on a bum rush, so to speak. We were from

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<sup>14</sup> E-mail communication with Ammiel Alcalay, October 22, 2013.

different places. But she probably realized the contrast more than I and was therefore quite considerate, as I can see now, in retrospect. One thing I am sure of is that she had an enormous influence with the white faculty who, to our great surprise, came out in support of the strike at crucial moments.<sup>15</sup>

SEEK faculty practiced traversing differences of institutional and social standing in the program's experimental environment. Rich recalls that director Mina Shaughnessy welcomed the faculty to use "poetry, free association, music, politics, drama, fiction,"<sup>16</sup> any relevant materials to keep the students activated. In Henderson's 1968 Pre-Baccalaureate writing workshop, he never differentiated himself as instructor from the students, consistently referring to "our workshop," with assignments that included "interviewing our older relatives, our grandmothers and grandfathers, grand aunts and the like, so as to give us clues to the ways of our clan."<sup>17</sup> In addition, Henderson turned to a non-western literary source, *The Arabian Nights*, precisely in order to investigate the nature of storytelling and how students could find new tools to activate talk and speech into oratory and writing. For Rich, it was "both unnerving and seductive... [we] were working on new frontiers, trying new methods."<sup>18</sup> Their colleague, June Jordan, later recalled, "It was quite amazing. We didn't think of it as amazing. Everybody was just there and we thought that if we could make democracy come to City College that probably we could have an impact on the concept and perhaps even the practice of public

15 Ibid.

16 Rich, Adrienne. "Teaching Language in Open Admissions," *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*, 56.

17 "PRE-BACCALAUREATE PROGRAM CITY COLLEGE: Report on the Summer Seminar," 27, Folder 385, Carton 9, Adrienne Rich Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute (Cambridge, MA).

18 "SEEK NOTES," Folder 389, Carton 9, Rich Papers.

education through the country."<sup>19</sup> Rich explained the pedagogical horizons in SEEK that would come to establish ethnic and composition studies nationwide:

Some of the most rudimentary questions we confronted were: What are the arguments for and against 'Black English'? Is standard English simply a weapon of colonization?... We were dealing not simply with dialect and syntax but with the imagery of lives, the anger and flare of urban youth—how could this be *used*, strengthened, without the lies of artificial polish?<sup>20</sup>

SEEK's swift implementation of these new teaching and learning methods, diverse curricula, and holistic attention to students' scholastic and social development, provided a compelling model for institutional change in higher education. Curriculum generation was highly collaborative, Rich explained: "We poached off each others' booklists, methods, essay topics, grammar-teaching exercises."<sup>21</sup> Rich and her Black feminist colleagues were also attentive to the dearth of published Black women writers:

Ann Petry, Gwendolyn Brooks, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, I came to know and put on my reading lists or copied for classes; but the real crescendo of black women's writing was yet to come...integral to the struggle against racism in the literary canon there was another, as yet unarticulated, struggle, against the sexism of black and white male editors, anthologists, critics, publishers.<sup>22</sup>

Within a few years, SEEK faculty would begin to publish their own ground-breaking popular anthologies of poetry and prose—such as

19 Jordan, June, and Peter Erickson. "After Identity," *Transition*, 141.

20 Rich, "Teaching Language in Open Admissions," 56; emphasis in the original.

21 Ibid, 56-57.

22 Ibid, 16, 57.

Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman* and June Jordan's *soulscript*, featuring CUNY faculty and student writing—that circulated as open curricula for people to access nationwide in a democratizing exchange of educational resources. This Black feminist effort to slowly decolonize the publishing industry's materials was a complex process that sometimes also saw the elision of class distinctions across lines of race and gender, causing some writers who didn't fit the new paradigms to fall through the cracks. Rich's archived teaching materials demonstrate her own attention to balancing the works of Plato, Tolstoy, and Sartre with that of W.E. B. DuBois, Eldridge Cleaver, LeRoi Jones, and Frederick Douglass, as well as highlighting the work of her Black women colleagues.

SEEK students and teachers stimulated each other through reflexive learning that aimed to hold the socially marginalized in the center of the classroom's focus. As Rich wrote:

In this discovery of a previously submerged culture we were learning from and with our students as rarely happens in the university... we found ourselves reading almost any piece of Western literature through our students' eyes, to imagining how this voice, these assumptions, would sound to us if we were they.<sup>23</sup>

While some of this came as a revelation for Rich, it was already an assumed practice for others teaching in SEEK. In Toni Cade Bambara's description of her 1968 summer workshop, she shares the painful awareness of who her students are and where they stood:

What was most noticeable about this group, consisting of fairly radical third yearers, politicized second yearers, racialized first yearers, and stumbling in the dark first termers was their personal involvement and investment in the course. These were

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 16, 57.

not students boning up for some exam or other, or feverishly taking notes that would guarantee a spotlight in an upcoming course. These were not students approaching subject matter with a critical attitude equipped with Theme, Plot, Technique and other tools of the trade. These were students painfully aware of the gaps in their education, frantically alert to their need to establish a viable position, a stance in what is for them a daily toe to toe battle with the uglier elements of this country.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, Puerto Rican SEEK students lamented an absence in the otherwise ground-breaking program, as Eduardo Cruz reflects: "It was geared for Black students, not Puerto Rican students per se or Latinos. I know that I confronted the SEEK program in not having a Puerto Rican history class, leadership, or staff."<sup>25</sup> This process of diving into, excavating, and recognizing the omission of material in the classroom—critiquing the canon while producing a subterranean counter-canon—encouraged students to consider revolutionizing the entire college, and demand what they knew was missing.

As debates in classrooms, departments, and on campus began to gain more traction in late 1968 and early 1969 about the future of CUNY, Adrienne Rich's collection, *The Will to Change: Poems 1968–1970*, offers another record of her attempts to connect with students and her own self-identity through a communicative medium encumbered by power relations. Rich declares to her students, "this is the oppressor's language / yet I need it to talk to you," as she works to express a new self: "I need a language to hear myself with / to see myself in / a language like pigment released on the board /

<sup>24</sup> "PRE-BACCALAUREATE PROGRAM CITY COLLEGE: Report on the Summer Seminar," 10, Folder 389, Carton 9, Rich Papers.

<sup>25</sup> Jiménez, Lillian. "Puerto Ricans and Educational Civil Rights: A History of the 1969 City College Takeover (An Interview with Five Participants)," *Centro Journal*, Fall 2009, 165.

blood-black, sexual green, reds / veined with contradictions”<sup>26</sup> This linguistic traversal gestures at the metamorphosis of Rich’s politics, pedagogy, and sexual identity. The red, black, and green colors of the Black liberation flag—a ubiquitous protest staple at the time—here unfurls and becomes re-woven as a symbol of solidarity between a white feminist writing teacher undergoing a profound change in her own identity, and her Black and Puerto Rican students. Rich’s focus within the intersectional<sup>27</sup> space of her SEEK classroom is transmitted into the intimate space of a poetic and sexual awakening that then becomes publicly circulated in print.

At the start of the Spring 1969 semester, students and faculty began to propose structural changes in admissions, curricula, and campus participation, as they opposed the deep-seated intransigence of City College’s administration and reactionary faculty. The SEEK program served more acutely as a reciprocal incubator for student and faculty radicalization. In a February 1969 City College *Campus* student newspaper article entitled “Realizing the Dream of a Black University,” Bambara criticized that Spring’s course offerings: “A brief glance at the bulletin will reveal that the English Department is still dipping out of the old Anglo-Saxon bag... The infusion of one or two Black literature courses in their curricula does nothing at all to

26 Rich, Adrienne. *Collected Early Poems, 1950–1970*, 420.

27 While “intersectional” has come to be recognized more as an academic term in critical race theory, its usage and roots precede that; see Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?” (1851); Tillie Olsen, *Tell Me a Riddle* (1961); bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman?: Black women and feminism* (1981); Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982); Judy Grahn, *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds* (1984); Ricky Sherover-Marcuse’s writings and workshops; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990); and Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” (1989) and “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” (1993).

the deeply entrenched notion that Anglo-Saxon literature is THE LITERATURE.”<sup>28</sup>

On a wider scale, the Rockefeller state budget called for slashing the SEEK program’s funding, while imposing a 20 percent reduction of CUNY admissions. In response, Black and Puerto Rican students led a petition campaign to pressure City College president Buell Gallagher to implement changes in admissions, faculty hiring, and curricula, using the *Campus*, *Tech News*, and *Observation Post* student newspapers to publicly debate the issues. Students established five demands:

1. a separate school for Third World (Black, Puerto Rican, and Asian) Studies
2. a separate orientation program for Third World students
3. a voice for SEEK students in the setting of all guidelines for the SEEK program, including the hiring and firing of personnel
4. that the racial composition of all entering classes should reflect the Black, Puerto Rican, and Asian population of the New York City high schools
5. that Third World histories and Spanish-language proficiency should be a requirement for all education majors.

Gallagher tried to quell the increasing student mobilization on campus with a promise that he would resign in protest if the austere budget was passed. When it did, he kept his promise, and twenty-three of the twenty-seven City College department chairs also tendered their resignations. The future of City College was uncertain. But one April 1969 act of student, faculty, staff, and community composition would

28 Dyer, *Protest and the Politics of Open Admissions*, 98.

accelerate and expand SEEK's mission, and indelibly alter the course of CUNY and public higher education nationwide.

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No one was told of the date of the takeover until the night before. We were all called to a big meeting in the Bronx at the home of a Black professor. People were told to come to spend the night as a security measure. (Then) we came down in three groups. We came at 5a.m. . . . caught the guards with their pants down. It was raining bloody murder. We took seventeen buildings—the largest takeover in the history of American campus takeovers.<sup>29</sup>

The Spring 1969 escalation campaign to both defend and expand access to City College reached a tipping point on April 22, when a student-led campus occupation shut down official business, and simultaneously constructed Harlem University for two weeks. Neighborhood residents, students of all ages, and various speakers came to the "Opening House at the University of Harlem," including Betty Shabazz, Kathleen Cleaver, James Foreman, Emory Douglas, H. Rap Brown, and Adam Clayton Powell, who deemed the action "one of the greatest test events" in the history of Black education. This free college suddenly under neighborhood control hosted a walk-in clinic, tutorials, nightly community meetings, as well as a "free breakfast program for the children in the neighborhood, day care[, and] political education classes."<sup>30</sup> Campus buildings were renamed after Che Guevara, Malcolm X, Pedro Albizu Campos, Marcus Garvey,

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29 *Ibid.*, 1. Quotation by James Small. The number of buildings occupied ranges from seven to seventeen by various anecdotes and written accounts.

30 Dyer, *Protest and the Politics of Open Admissions*, and Jiménez, "Puerto Ricans and Educational Civil Rights," *Centro Journal*, Fall 2009, 171. Also see Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (2012).

Mao Tse-Tung, and Patrice Lumumba.<sup>31</sup> Puerto Rican City College SEEK students Henry Arce and Eduardo Cruz recall that twenty-five Harlemite parents brought "big pots of rice and beans and pork and *pasteles*," and the Lower East Side dispatched "a hundred parents to hold the gates."<sup>32</sup> While sustaining the campus takeover, participants drove around New York City to activate Bronx Community College, Brooklyn, Hunter, Manhattan Community College, and a range of community organizations.<sup>33</sup> The SEEK dormitories at Alamac Hotel on 71st Street and Broadway in Manhattan—which housed two to three hundred students from City College, Brooklyn, Hunter, Lehman, and other colleges—had been the site of PRISA's formation, and became a central organizing hub during the strike. Puerto Rican City College student Migdalia Pérez reflects on linking with efforts there:

We went to the Alamac to meet people who were involved in the takeover because we wanted to be involved. . . . That was a very crucial part in our lives, not only educationally but also personally in terms of developing an identity. I wanted to be part of something because it helped me to understand the world that I lived in. . . . living at that time you almost could not imagine being educated and not becoming part of a movement.<sup>34</sup>

But another account by SEEK educator Audre Lorde reveals her attempts to support a strike not altogether benevolent:

Yolanda and I would bring over soup and blankets and see Black women being fucked on tables and under desks. And we'd be trying to speak to them as women, all we'd hear is, "The

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31 Sasmor, Ken and Tom Fory, "It May Not Be the Place You Knew," *The Campus*, Tuesday, May 6, 1969.

32 Jiménez, "Puerto Ricans and Educational Civil Rights," *Centro Journal*, Fall 2009, 170.

33 *Ibid.*, 171.

34 *Ibid.*, 169-170.

revolution is here, right?" Seeing how Black women were being used and abused was painful—putting those things together.<sup>35</sup>

In her 1970 anthology, *Black Woman*, Toni Cade Bambara also chastised heady misogynist elements of student organizing at the time, and redefined the roles needed to engage in social change here at home:

Instant coffee is the hallmark of current rhetoric. But we do have time. We'd better take the time to fashion revolutionary selves, revolutionary lives, revolutionary relationships. Mouths don't win the war. It don't even win the people. Neither does haste, urgency, and stretch-out-now insistence. Not all speed is movement. Running off to mimeograph a fuck-whitey leaflet, leaving your mate to brood, is not revolutionary. Hopping a plane to rap to someone else's "community" while your son struggles alone with the Junior Scholastic assignment on "The Dark Continent" is not revolutionary. Sitting around murder-mouthing incorrect niggers while your father goes upside your mother's head is not revolutionary. Mapping out a building takeover when your term paper is overdue and your scholarship is under review is not revolutionary... If your house ain't in order, you ain't in order. It is so much easier to be out there than right here. The revolution ain't out there. Yet. But it is here. Should be. And arguing that instant-coffee-ten-minutes-to-midnight alibi to justify hasty-headed dealings with your mate is shit. Ain't no such animal as an instant guerrilla.<sup>36</sup>

These critical snapshots by Lorde and Bambara expose wider contradictions of the political period—exhortations of Black and Brown

35 Lorde, Audre, interview with Adrienne Rich. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 97.

36 Bambara, Toni Cade. "On the Issue of Roles," *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, 134-135.

Power at the expense of Women's Power, campus occupations that harbored heterogeneous (and even conflicting) intentions among its participants, dialogues on strategy and social change that at times only focused on reconstructing institutions without nurturing intercommunal respect in the long process. The SEEK faculty's valuable legacy also entails these efforts to encourage as well as incisively admonish the City College student movement during its uneven development. In the swift momentum of the campus's post-strike actions, it's unclear whether or how these concerns were addressed by SEEK faculty and students. This remains a crucial part of the strike's story to further uncover and evaluate, and highlights an enduring difficulty of archiving how radicalized communities in motion process such critiques both internally and publicly.

Altogether, the strike dramatically transformed student and faculty relations and collective identities, as well as the entire campus environment. During the occupation, faculty unanimously voted to approve the five student demands. Echoing David Henderson's comments on faculty support, Rich recounts that, during the negotiations of the demands, faculty expressed "surprised respect for the students' articulateness, reasoning power, and skill in handling statistics... we had known their strength all along: an impatient cutting through of the phony [and] a growing capacity for political analysis which helped counter the low expectations [and] their knowledge of the naked facts of society."<sup>37</sup>

Even though movement participants had a policy of keeping student and faculty coordinating meetings separate, the dialogues in classrooms, hallways, open assemblies, and student newspapers demonstrated an interactively engaged community that had together undergone a fiery baptism by creating education as a form of direct

37 Rich, "Teaching Language in Open Admissions," 58.

action.<sup>38</sup> June Jordan recalls, "In every sense, from faculty petitions to student manifestoes, to the atmosphere in the cafeteria and the bathrooms, City College signified a revolution in progress. Nobody was eating, sleeping, thinking, or moving around anything except the issues at stake."<sup>39</sup> Leonard Kriegel, a faculty member supportive of the strike, even referred to teaching at City College during this time as "surviving the apocalypse."<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, other faculty abhorred the prospect of more Black and Puerto Rican students being admitted to the school. Mina Shaughnessy recounts:

During the long debates that preceded Open Admissions, it was common to hear professors, administrators, and even students refer to the arrival of the new students in the metaphors of disease—of debility, decay, paralysis, contagion, even of mortality rates.<sup>41</sup>

In one instance, a professor even exclaimed to Shaughnessy, "You've brought the slums to my office."<sup>42</sup> For some professors and administrators who were previously accustomed to a college tranquility that belied major upheavals outside the campus gates, the Spring 1969 student rebellion rang like a tuning fork.

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The two most essential strike demands were the creation of a school of Third World Studies, and that the racial composition of incoming students reflect the city's high school Black, Puerto Rican, and

38 Henderson, David. Telephone Interview. May 21, 2012.

39 Jordan, June. "Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person," *Moving Towards Home: Political Essays*, 21.

40 Kriegel, Leonard. "Surviving the Apocalypse: Teaching at City College," *Working Through: A Teacher's Journey in the Urban University*. Saturday Review Press, 1972.

41 Maher, *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work*, 121.

42 *Ibid.*, 94.

Asian student population. Their divergent outcomes illustrate how the strike's efforts to change the curriculum and admissions policy came up against the administration's impetuous response to contain campus energies. Dr. Wilfred Cartey, a blind Trinidadian professor of comparative literature and Black studies brought to City College from Columbia University in early 1969, had served as a pivotal liaison between the students, faculty, and administration during the strike, and was hired to principally expand the Department of Urban and Ethnic Studies (which at the time only offered two courses). In conversation with Black and Puerto Rican students and faculty across various disciplines, and applying his own vast knowledge about African literature and history, in May 1969, Cartey proposed a distinct school of Third World Studies. Such a school would include courses on contemporary Black poetry, the relationship of Black music to the development of literature, comparative Black American and Puerto Rican migration studies, Puerto Rican literature in New York City, and post-revolution Cuban literature.<sup>43</sup> The proposal sought to fulfill the first strike demand, while implicitly expanding SEEK's curricular content, and more broadly, joining the 1969 wave of Black Studies programs created at San Francisco State University, UC Berkeley, and UC Santa Barbara.

To the shock of many students and colleagues, over the 1969 summer break, newly appointed City College president Joseph Copeland fired Cartey from his position.<sup>44</sup> The CUNY Board of Higher Education (BHE) had rejected Cartey's proposal, but his close involvement with the strike was presumably the underlying reason for his dismissal by Copeland, who on record called the professor

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43 "Scott Develops New Courses: Curriculum to be Expanded," *Tech News* 30 October, 1969.

44 Simms, Paul B. and Louis R. Rivera. "Volpe Throws Light on Cartey Mystery, Faculty Cited as the Deciding Factor," *Tech News* 25 September, 1969.

"too goddamn shiftless."<sup>45</sup> Copeland's replacement for department chairperson, Osborne E. Scott, had instructed US military personnel, but held no previous experience at a college or university.<sup>46</sup> At the start of the Fall 1969 semester, three City College faculty organizations—Black and Puerto Rican Faculty, Concerned SEEK Faculty, and Faculty for Action, with Milton Washington, Adrienne Rich, and Arnold Birenbaum as the respective signatories—wrote a letter to oppose Copeland's slanderous remarks and decision to terminate Carthey from a department whose emerging relevance he had worked to ensure. They wrote:

That Professor Carthey, a man of distinguished academic reputation, was replaced by a man with no scholarship in the field, impresses us with the tokenism and lack of seriousness with which President Copeland evidently regards the "School of Urban and Ethnic Studies." That in place of implementing Dr. Carthey's detailed and academically-demanding proposal for the School, President Copeland considers that the demand is satisfied by two courses, strikes us as the grossest educational cynicism.<sup>47</sup>

In an open letter to *The New York Times*, Carthey argued that the word "shiftless" was "conjured up from the cesspool psyche of plantation slave days," which indeed underscored a critical community need that Third World Studies could serve: "I'm not seeking an apology.

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45 Van Gelder, Lawrence. "A Negro Professor at C.C.N.Y. Charges Slander," *The New York Times* 20 September, 1969. Professor Wilfred Carthey File, 5, Folder 389, Carton 9, Rich Papers.

46 Rivera, L.R. "Student-Member of BHE Doubts Scott's Abilities," *Tech News* 7 October, 1969.

47 Professor Wilfred Carthey File, 3, Folder 389, Carton 9, Rich Papers.

I'm seeking redress for a group."<sup>48</sup> Carthey remained a leading professor at City College and in his field, but the dream for Third World Studies was deferred.

As the City College administration dragged its heels in order to slow down and derail this curricular demand, the Board of Higher Education, under the urging of Chancellor Albert Bowker, accelerated and expanded the fourth demand to increase Black and Puerto Rican student enrollment into the creation of "Open Admissions"—allowing every New York City high school graduate a place in one of CUNY's two- or four-year colleges by Fall 1970. This post-strike educational policy, long considered a hallmark of CUNY's radical successes, could also, arguably, be seen as a calculated form of institutional reform-as-sabotage. Conrad Dyer writes about how "striking was the abruptness of the change: no major university system had ever moved, almost overnight, from a rigorously selective admissions standard to a policy of guaranteed admission for all high school graduates."<sup>49</sup> Open Admissions had been a goal of the BHE to "project '100% enrollment' by 1975, [but] the BHE had overnight advanced this date by 5 years."<sup>50</sup> CUNY administrators, with city and state government support, decided to flood the campuses with new students (the 1970 CUNY freshman class was 75 percent larger than the preceding year);<sup>51</sup> refuse to increase resources; overwhelm students, faculty, and staff workers; and trouble the success of free substantive education for New Yorkers of all colors. Allen Ballard recounts, "by moving from a quota arrangement specifically designed to serve the needs of Black and Puerto Rican students to a position of

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48 Van Gelder, Lawrence. "A Negro Professor at C.C.N.Y. Charges Slander," *The New York Times* 20 September, 1969. Professor Wilfred Carthey File, 5, Folder 389, Carton 9, Rich Papers.

49 Dyer, *Protest and the Politics of Open Admissions*, 146.

50 Ibid, 8.

51 Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*, 134.

open admissions, the board both diverted the thrust of the Black and Puerto Rican demands and gained a white middle class constituency for the program.<sup>52</sup> Further research and analysis of archival materials remains to be done about this key transitional moment, from student press accounts, to interviews with CUNY administrators and city/state officials, budgetary records of the decision, and personal testimonies from CUNY students, faculty, and staff present at the time.

The creation of Open Admissions offered many more working-class ethnic white high school students a historic opportunity to go to college, but at the expense of meeting the 1969 strike's first demand to affirmatively welcome Black and Puerto Rican students who had long been excluded from the university. City College students savvily assessed how the administration was trying to sow divisions between students while hailing the admissions policy change as positive institutional reform. A March 1970 City College *Tech News* student newspaper editorial declared that "Open admissions is a necessity," while stressing that:

the plan the Board has developed has **built in failures** in not providing remedial assistance for these students, in housing them in lofts and garages and similar edifices not conducive to learning, in granting SEEK students a stipend and offering these new students nothing. And as if this was not enough, the Board has decided to cut the SEEK stipend by over 30% and increase the tuition of Evening Session by considerably more than that, thereby creating a feeling of negativity over the entire plan by both Black and white students... If the Board was really sincere, they would find another plan as well as another means of financing it.<sup>53</sup>

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52 Ibid.

53 Editorial. *Tech News* 5 March, 1970. Emphasis in the original.

The SEEK program became inundated, embattled, and under-resourced right at the point when it was providing an exceptional new model for what politically engaged writing composition in a nurturing, small-scale environment could look like. A review of some available SEEK student enrollment statistics since its inception demonstrates how quickly the program had to cope with the imposed expansion: in its inaugural year of 1965, SEEK enrolled 109 students; by 1967, the number grew to 600; and by Fall 1970, over 3,500 new students were brought into SEEK. During the summer of 1970 alone, Shaughnessy hired and trained more than forty new full- and part-time teachers to prepare for the deluge. Within one year, she would confide in a letter to a friend:

I am writing from under water—way down deep in a churning, murky, frenzied world full of sentence fragments, and sweet, betrayed students, and memos and suspicious colleagues... as you can see, I am going mad. I cannot imagine keeping up with the many demands this job makes and I am too busy to contemplate the outcome. Strange, but I simply cannot imagine what it would be now to not think every day about black and white<sup>54</sup>.

Rich also illustrated the frustrations that she, colleagues, and students endured as the CUNY administration tersely evaluated their "motivation" and "intellectual competency" on an "overcrowded campus where in winter there is often no place to sit between classes, with two inadequate bookstores largely filled with required texts... with the incessant pressure of time and money driving at them to rush, to get through, to amass the needed credits somehow, to drop out, to stay on with gritted teeth."<sup>55</sup>

This conflicted transition period for the SEEK program and the

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54 Maher, *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work*, 104-105.

55 Rich, "Teaching Language in Open Admissions," 60.

City College of New York offers a critical revision to the legacy of Open Admissions, as well as a lesson for people who advocate institutional change from below to be wary of unsustainable reforms from above. Nevertheless, the 1969 City College strike opened the doors of CUNY for many working-class students of all colors. This long political process had been built from nonviolent civil disobedience in the 1930s, and all too hidden '40s and '50s. It extended to the Freedom civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, worldwide decolonization struggles, and Third World studies demands that proliferated during the late 1960s. New York City-wide support for Open Admissions by community organizations and labor councils alike celebrated the vigorous blow dealt to longtime race and class barriers in public higher education. This groundbreaking policy would be replicated nationwide.

However, the concurrent emergence of a racialized discourse that Open Admissions only benefited poor Blacks and Puerto Ricans—the kind of language that had been used to slander Dr. Cartey's "shiftless" strike support and Third World Studies proposal at City College—coupled with the financial crisis in New York City and the cataclysmic domestic effects of the US defeat in Vietnam, set the conditions for the CUNY administration to impose tuition for all CUNY students in 1976. The aftermath of a defeat of imperialism in Vietnam radically altered the country, initiating an economic structural readjustment that would pave the way for a significant reversal of social conditions and aspirations. Tuition at CUNY, tied into New York City's fiscal crisis, became a national issue, as H. Bruce Franklin writes:

Speaking to the National Press Club in late 1975, President Ford explicitly declared that he would withhold federal aid from New York City, which was then in a severe financial crisis, until it eliminated the self-indulgent luxury of open admissions

and free tuition at City University. To be financially responsible, the president declared, New York must no longer be a city that "operates one of the largest universities in the world, free of tuition for any high school graduate, rich or poor, who wants to attend." Ford's press secretary, Ron Nessen, speaking in highly charged code language, explained the president's determination to block federal aid for New York City, which he compared to "a wayward daughter hooked on heroin": "You don't give her \$100 a day to support her habit. You make her go cold turkey to break her habit."

Finally, in 1976, the assault on public education succeeded in terminating City University's 129-year policy of not charging for tuition, thus wiping out the last stronghold of free public higher education in the United States. Simultaneously, the university fired hundreds of young faculty members who had been hired to implement the open admissions program...

From 1976, when free higher education was eradicated, until the end of the century, on average a new prison was constructed in America every week. The prison population ballooned from under 200,000 in 1971 to more than 2 million in 2000 as the United States became the prison capital of the world.<sup>56</sup>

The Open Admissions policy lasted in CUNY for thirty years until it was dismantled by the university's administration in 1999. Meanwhile, tuition fees have continued to escalate.

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<sup>56</sup> Franklin, H. Bruce. *Vietnam & Other American Fantasies*, University of Massachusetts Press, 2000, p. 127.

Adrienne Rich, radical feminist lesbian and innovative educator, passed away in her eighty-third year on March 27, 2012, as one of the most celebrated writers of her time. One of her poems lauded across scores of obituaries, "Diving into the Wreck," was written in 1972, while she was still at City College, although no contextual mention is made. The poem provides a subterranean view of Rich's life and work in her SEEK classrooms, hidden in plain sight. Here remains a document of the program's tenacious struggle to create liberatory education while "under water"—both by exploring the profound depths of the students' "previously submerged culture," as well as by learning to swim through the turbulent post-strike and Open Admissions conditions of City College life. By this time, four years into teaching there, Rich learned how to "turn my body without force / in the deep element," accompanied by "so many who have always / lived here / swaying their crenellated fans / between the reefs / and besides / you breathe differently down here."<sup>57</sup> Rich reveals:

I came to explore the wreck.  
The words are purposes.  
The words are maps.  
I came to see the damage that was done  
and the treasures that prevail.

Akin to Laura (Riding) Jackson's assertion that through poetry we can construct ourselves "out of the wreckage which is reality,"<sup>58</sup> Rich and her students refuse to leave their site of subaqueous duress, but to use what they have to invent what they need. The poem concludes:

we are the half-destroyed instruments  
that once held to a course

<sup>57</sup> Rich, Adrienne. "Diving Into the Wreck." *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, p. 66-67.

<sup>58</sup> Laura (Riding) Jackson, *Anarchism is Not Enough*, 114.

the water-eaten log  
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are  
by cowardice or courage  
the one who find our way  
back to this scene  
carrying a knife, a camera  
a book of myths  
in which  
our names do not appear.<sup>59</sup>

Rich's visionary collaborations with SEEK students—to critically delve into and write about western books that contained an abundance of myths—transformed language into new maps, purposes, and directions of cultural exhumation. Together—during this period of major institutional and social upheaval—they found and identified treasures that could otherwise have been left buried in the wreckage. At the same time, the profound socio-economic changes accompanying the end of the war in Vietnam allowed the prevailing powers (in the form of the CUNY administration, the New York State legislature, and the Federal government), to severely delimit the ambitious aims of the City College strike and the broader scope of radicalization.

Over forty years later, City College has once again become a potent epicenter of university and social struggles. Since the start of the Fall 2013 semester, campus and community members have confronted the administration's October 20 eviction of the Guillermo Morales/Assata Shakur Center—an educational organizing space won through a 1989 CUNY student strike against proposed tuition increases that had, until its seizure, served as a hub of activism,

<sup>59</sup> Rich, Adrienne. "Diving Into the Wreck." *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, p. 67-68.

resources, and historical continuity between CUNY struggles.<sup>60</sup> City College and CUNY members have contested the university's turn toward militarization, seen in the teaching appointment of General David Petraeus,<sup>61</sup> the return of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) since being forced off CUNY in 1971, and the appearance of weapons research and military studies.<sup>62</sup> In the aftermath of the surveillance of Arab and Muslim students and demonstrators from 2003 to 2006,<sup>63</sup> CUNY security and the NYPD have escalated repression with the arrests and suspension of student leaders and alumni involved in social justice. Meanwhile, the CUNY Board of Trustees' proposed "Policy on Expressive Conduct" aims to more broadly stifle free expression across the university.<sup>64</sup> The current scale and pace of CUNY movement work may soon match that of our forebearers, as, once again, a rare confluence of social, political, economic, and cultural forces signal an opportunity to fundamentally change our university's course and contents.

The vibrant legacies of SEEK's liberatory teaching methods and materials, educational direct actions, critical solidarities, and navigation through the start of Open Admissions—manifested from below by students, faculty, staff, and community members—continues to catalyze City College, CUNY, and public education nationwide. This archived period's tremendous confluence of ideas, relationships, and

60 Carrie, Shawn, and Isabelle Nastasia. "CUNY Dismantles Community Center, Students Fight Back." *The Nation* 25 October, 2013.

61 Rugh, Peter. "The CUNY Wars: How David Petraeus Turned America's Most Diverse University Into a War Zone." *AlterNet* 11 December, 2013.

62 Petersen, Glenn. "ROTC Revival at CUNY Requires Broad-Based Discussion." *The Clarion* September 2013.

63 Tarleton, John. "NYPD Spy Scandal Hits CUNY: Muslim Students Target of Profiling." *The Clarion* November 2011.

64 Kaminer, Ariel. "2 New York City Colleges Draft Rules That Restrict Protests." *New York Times* 10 December, 2013.



Representative Adam Clayton Powell facing students. *The Campus*, May 6, 1969, p. 5. City College of New York Cohen Library Archives and Special Collections.

practices both inside and outside the classroom reverberates in today's movements for radical ethnic and cultural studies, free tuition, and re-opening full access to socially engaged higher education. As in Adrienne Rich's own time, the chant "Free CUNY!" resounds as both a demand and a promise.

—Conor Tomás Reed

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