INTRODUCTION

The Madame Binh Graphics Collective (MBGC)—a women's poster, printmaking, and street art collective active in New York City from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s—was the "graphic arm" of the May 19th Communist organization, a Marxist-Leninist "cadre" organization that was based in New York City from 1977 to 1983.[1] May 19th was a small collective of white anti-imperialists that traced its lineage from the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the political tendency that emerged as the Weather Underground Organization (WUO)—a sector which has been ridiculed, sensationalized, and in recent years, both romanticized and feared.

The date May 19 marks the birthdays of both Ho Chi Minh and Malcolm X, as well as the anniversary of the death of Jose Martí, the "apostle and father" of Cuba's struggle for independence from Spain. The invocation of May 19th situated us as following the leadership of Third World national liberation struggles, both inside the borders of the US (the Black Liberation struggle, the Puerto Rican independence movement, the Mexicano/Chicano and Native American struggles for land, water rights, and sovereignty) and internationally. We named the graphics collective after Madame Nguyen Thi Bình, who led the delegation of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam at the Paris Peace Talks in the early 1970s.

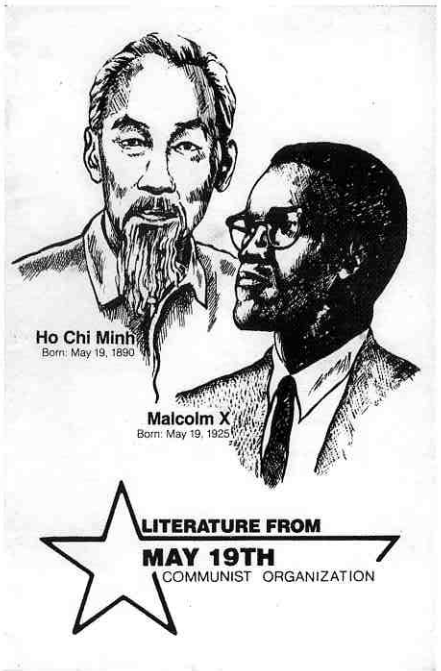
1 A self-defined "organization of revolutionaries," united in commitment, ideology, and practice, and dedicated to revolutionary change. The concept is rooted in revolutionary communist left ideology, although not exclusively used by these movements.

May 19th was resolutely not engaged in a party building process, so prevalent in the U.S. white left of the time, since we saw that as akin to declaring that white people in the U.S. could be part of a vanguard. We disapproved of "multinational" organizations where Black, white, Latino/a, Asian, and Native peoples worked together, because we believed that these mostly white-dominated forms continued the legacies of racism and white people's assumption of leadership. Our larger project of revolutionary "war in amerikkka" could not have been more ambitious, or more delusional. We were on the margin of the margins, the periphery of the periphery: far left, or "ultra left"—in our intensely florid and dramatic politics. Our goal was to forge ourselves into what we described as "100 communist soldiers," and nothing less… but I'm getting ahead of myself.

The title of this essay refers to the Zapatistas' phrase, "revolution is an eternal dream," to connote both the perpetual desire for, and possibility of, revolution, but also the frailty of such dreams.[2] At a time when many artist/activists and leftist theorists and historians are re-examining the "legacies of 1968" (the revolutionary upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s), I'm interested in unearthing some of the complexity and paradoxes of our enterprise. I'd like to re-examine the wealth of work produced, and ask: what do these pieces of agit-prop tell us about a small part of 1970s history in the U.S.? How does tracing the work of a tiny collective of talented artists—who existed for a very brief moment on the fringes of the art world and on the fringes of the left—provide a useful lens to approach perennial debates about art and solidarity, art and politics? How did our work reverberate to the beat of agit-prop of the time, as well as against, and in spite of it? How and where did practices of freedom thrive? When and why did they collapse, and what can we learn?

2 The phrase was also used by my best friend, Ferd Eggan, for an audio and video archive he worked on from 2005 until his death in 2007.

Above, ***Support Black Liberation/Free Assata Shakur/Free Sundiata Acoli,*** Madame Binh Graphics Collective (Mary Patten, lead designer), NYC, circa 1978–1979.



Above, ***Black Panthers from Sacramento, Free Huey Rally, Bobby Hutton Memorial Park, Oakland, California, Aug. 25, 1968.*** Photograph by Pirkle Jones. *Below,* ***May 19th Communist Organization pamphlet,*** NYC, circa 1979–1980. *Right,* ***Oui (usines occupées),*** street poster, Paris, 1968.

PREDECESSORS AND GRAPHIC MENTORS

The women artists who founded the Madame Binh Graphics Collective were shaped and influenced by the ferment of the anti-Vietnam war movement, the civil rights and Black Liberation movements, and the women's liberation movement. Many of us became politically conscious in 1967 and 1968, the days of "Transform the World! Poetry must be made at all costs!"[3] We were ignited and mobilized by the uprisings of Paris 1968, and by student movements and street activism everywhere. We were moved by, and participated in, the murals movement. We learned to make silk-screened posters, like students in revolt internationally. We identified with, borrowed, and proliferated the red fists of the new left and the women's liberation movement, Black Power salutes, and the rifles of the Panthers. We looked to mid-twentieth century revolutionary graphic artists, like John Heartfield, and even earlier, to the politically-charged subject matter of painters like Goya and Delacroix. We absorbed images from revolutionary anti-colonial and socialist struggles, like Chinese peasant paintings and other variants of social realism. Above all, we emulated the poster art coming out of the Cuban revolution.

The Cuban influence was, for the MBGC, a huge one. This was ideological, to be sure, as in Che's call to create "two, three, many Vietnams,"[4] the heroic image of the Third World freedom fighter struggling against the imperialist monster, and the primacy given to Africa and to the Black Liberation movement inside the U.S. Politically, we embraced "foco-ism" and "revolution within the revolution,"[5] the idea—however implausible in a late capitalist urban framework—of the revolutionary guerrilla as exemplar, motor, igniter, and trigger for a broader mass movement.

But like so many radicals of that time, we were enamored of the richness and inventiveness of style pouring out of the Cuban revolutionary imagination in the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly in graphic design and cinema. Cuban posters were a fusion of psychedelia and acid colors, a pop sensibility, strong typography, and internationalist, anti-imperialist politics. Here was our counterculture, re-cast as an instrument of powerful social transformation. We understood this stylistic breadth as emblematic of Fidel Castro's 1975 statement, "Within the revolution: everything … Outside it, nothing."[6]

3 The name of a groundbreaking exhibition curated by Pontus Hultén at Stockholm's Moderna Museet in 1969.

4 Che Guevara, "Message to the Tricontinental," written before he left Cuba for Bolivia in 1966. The message was addressed to the newly formed Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and published in their journal, *Tricontinental,* in April 1967.

5 See Regis Debray's 1967 book of the same name, which was hugely influenced by the Cuban revolution, and the ideas of Fidel Castro and Ernesto "Che" Guevara.

6 "Words to Intellectuals," Fidel Castro, Havana/National Cultural Council, June 30, 1961.

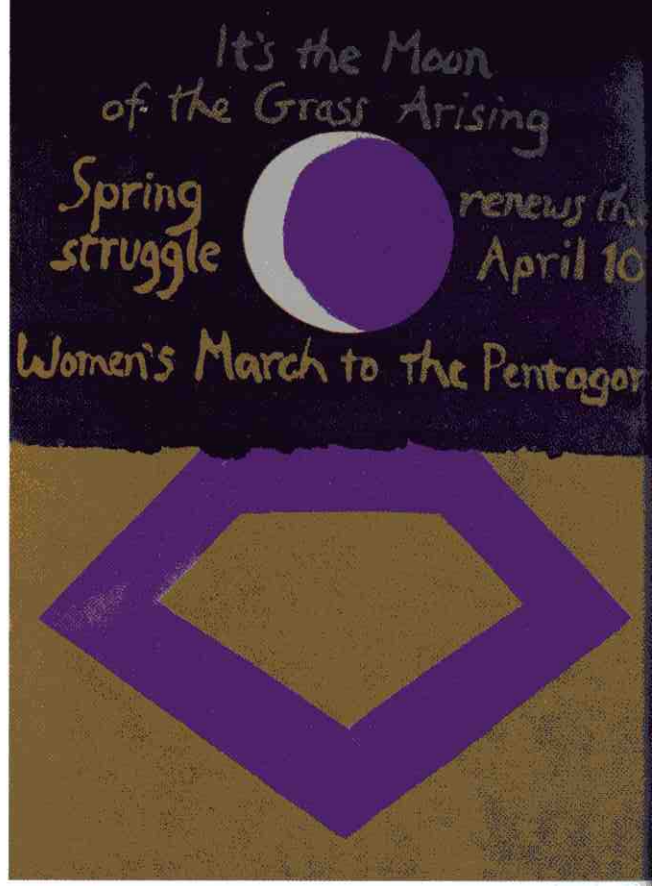
Like many other activist art collectives, the MBGC chose silkscreen as our primary medium because it was an affordable and flexible way to create multi-color multiples. It was conducive for posters, flyers, stickers, t-shirts, banners, and other forms of printed agit-prop for "the street," the public spaces we saw as our arena. Two of us brought these skills to the collective. Donna Borup had learned serigraphy and other forms of fine art printmaking at Cooper Union in New York City in the early 1970s. I had learned rough-and-ready silk-screening (paper stencils, mostly) during the student strikes in the spring of 1970.

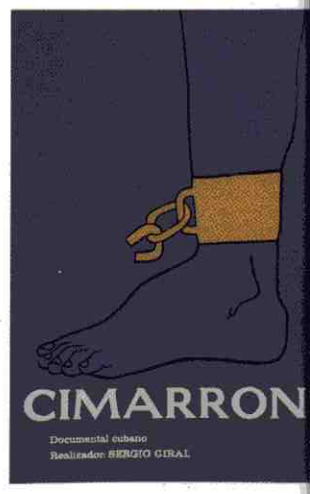
From 1970 to 1972, I was part of a loose-knit group of women art students at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). Most of us had transferred from liberal arts colleges where we had been active with local chapters of SDS. At RISD, we took over the moribund student newspaper, renamed it *The Rhode Island Red,* formed a chapter of WITCH (the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), and formed a graphics collective. We were radical feminists-in-process, some of us lesbian or bisexual, all of us anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist. We created posters through what in retrospect seems like a relatively painless group consensus. The group, which included Judith Rothchild, Nancy Cheser, Jamie Horwitz, Marcia Ancier, Ellen Tranes, and me, taught each other skills and made visual contributions to various anti-war mobilizations, including the first Women's March on the Pentagon in 1971. Unbeknownst to me at the time (one of the least politically experienced and ideologically "developed" participants, and certainly the most naïve), some of these actions and demonstrations were organized and led by activists with close links to the Weather Underground, later to become my political associates and comrades in New York City. As Nancy Cheser has written in her notes for various archives where our surviving posters are now stored, "…opposition to the war, an emphasis on women working together, and love of making art transformed the dorm room into a small production studio… poster designs were influenced by an interest in Native American culture, popular music, Cuban Revolutionary art, art history, and the Paris '68 student posters."[7] We had no name.

From 1973–1977, I worked with City Arts Workshop, the pivotal organization of the community murals movement in New York City. Here, I worked in a collective and collaborative process with artists, painters and designers—adults as well as teenagers—from various communities: Chinatown, the Lower East Side, and Brooklyn. The visual vocabularies we employed were drawn from various strains of socialist realism, as well as pop art. The imagery in several of these murals was suffused by socialist politics: red flags, productive, un-alienated workers, and empowered communities of color.

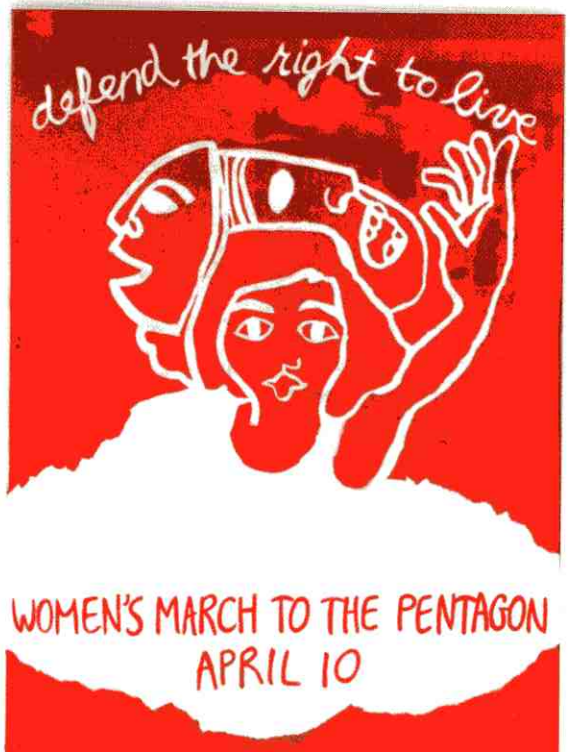
In the *Douglass Street Mural,* the design is a scheme of dualities: on the right, everything local and global that's oppressive: a slumlord, arson, poverty, a puppet figure of Uncle Sam in the clutches of the imperialist eagle, who wields a giant red crayon representing "red-lining" of the community. On the left, images of reconstruction, sunshine, a free and diverse community celebrating. The base of

7 Nan Cheser, archive notes for collections at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University, and the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College, 2003.





Above, ***Moon of the Grass Arising,*** Providence (R.I.) Women's Graphics Collective, 1971. *Left,* ***Day of the Heroic Guerrilla/Continental Che,*** Elena Serrano, OSPAAAL, Cuba, 1968. *Right,* ***Cimarron,*** Alfrédo Rostgaard, ICAIC, Cuba, 1967.



Above, ***Leave the Fear of Red to Horned Beasts,*** Dadi Wirz, Providence, 1970–1971. *Below,* ***Defend the Right to Live,*** Providence (R.I.) Women's Graphics Collective, 1971. *Right,* ***Douglass Street Mural*** (detail), Mary Patten and City Arts Workshop, 1976.

the entire mural is composed of three outstretched arms, wrapped in the flags of the three predominant nationalities of the community: Black, Haitian, and Puerto Rican, each carrying emblematic figures of resistance.

A later project that I directed, the *First Street Mural* in Park Slope, encountered organized opposition from a small, vocal and well-connected minority of homeowners, businesses, and real estate interests. They found the imagery—created by a group of predominantly Black and Puerto Rican teenagers reflecting their experiences growing up in a volatile and violent neighborhood—threatening and disturbing. They pushed for a radical revision innocuous pictures of flowers—and, failing that, lobbied for the mural's removal. It was soon defaced, and then, in an act that felt like an absolute betrayal, was whitewashed in the middle of the night by City Arts Workshop itself.

One of the earlier City Arts projects, the *Work, Education, and Struggle* mural, is still visible—although faded and peeling—on the corner of Forsyth and Delancey Streets. The mural, whose production had been led by mostly Asian-American artists (Allan Okada, Arlan Huang, and Tommy Kochiyama among them), has a strong Maoist sensibility, in the red flag signifying the unity of international proletarian struggles. The centrality of Vietnamin our radical imaginary is evident—not as a victimized, abject target of genocide, but a people, a country, a struggle embodying revolutionary aspirations everywhere—"dare to struggle, dare to win." This was 1975.

For generations who did not witness Vietnam burning a hole through their television screens in the late 1960s, films like *The Weather Underground* (which owes a huge debt to Emile d'Antonio's 1975 film, *Underground*) and Chris Marker's extraordinary *Le Fond de l'Air est Rouge/Grin without a Cat* provide some visceral sense of the slogan, "All for Vietnam!" Vietnam was "everything"—self-reliant, beholden to neither the Soviet Union nor China, creative (stories of turning downed American planes into bicycles and spoons were re-told again and again), patient, improvisatory, gentle, and ferocious, all at once. The Vietnamese people were masters at distinguishing between the U.S. government and U.S. people. The old left had been betrayed by Stalinism; the new left had a new hero(ine): a peasant woman, balancing a baby on one arm, a rifle on the other.

Above, ***El modelo y la vietnamita (The model and the woman from Vietnam),*** also known as ***Lipstick,*** Frémez (José Gómez Fresquet), lithograph, 1969, Cuba. Courtesy of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics. *Below,* ***Reproduction of a Cuban poster,*** Chicago Women's Graphics Collective, 1972.

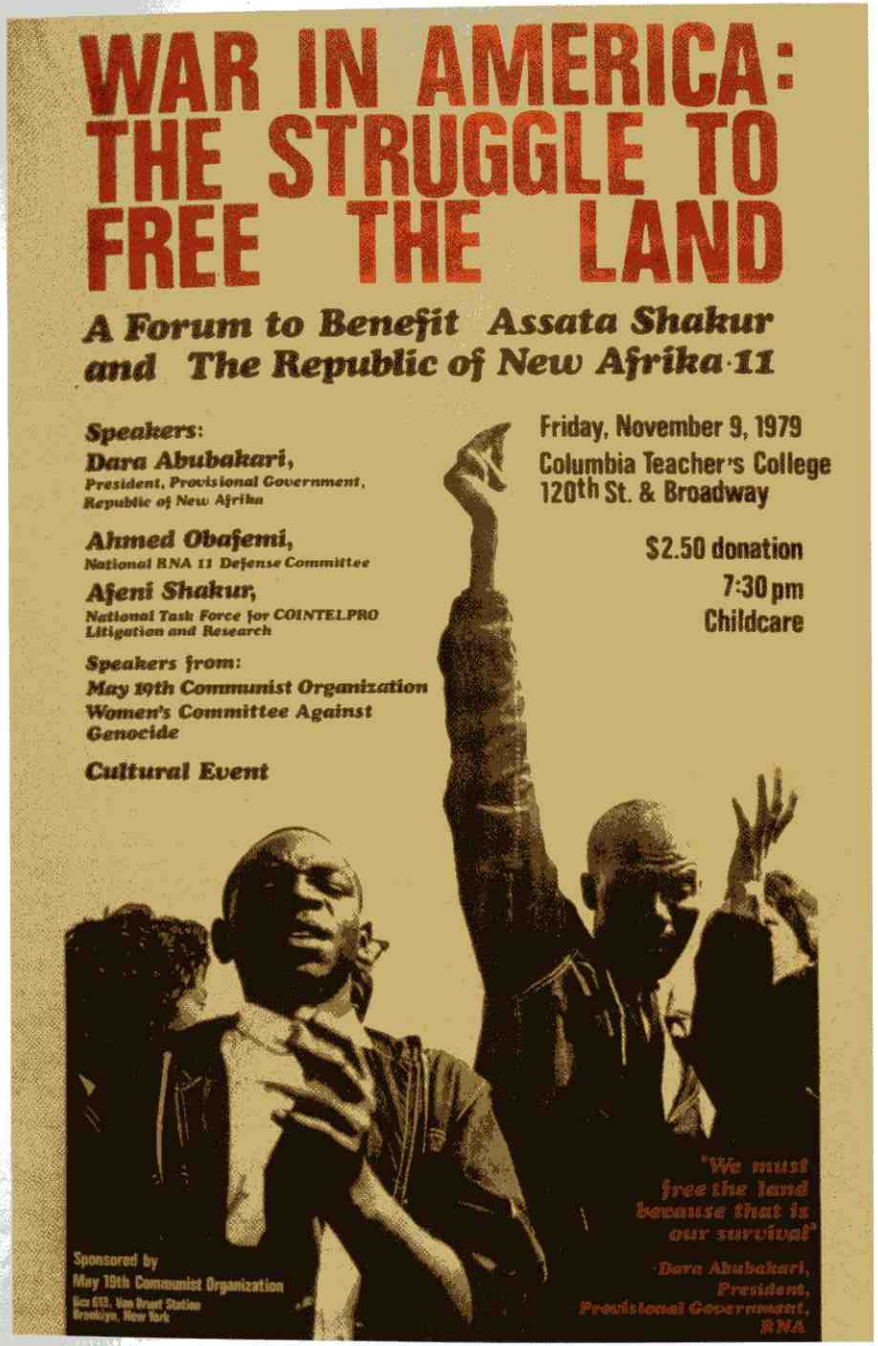
THE WORLD AS OUR ARCHIVE, OR: WHOSE APPROPRIATIONS?

In early May of 1975, I worked with Tomie Arai, a project director at City Arts Workshop, in designing and painting a three-part mural banner to celebrate the Vietnamese victory. Leftist artists freely borrowed from each other in those days, across cultures and languages, dipping into a shared vocabulary of fists, dragons, masses, AK-47s, and metaphors of social transformation, like the bleeding rose. Sometimes design ideas were lifted wholesale, as in our quoting a poster by Rene Mederos for the Vietnam banner, or the Chicago Women's Graphics Collective's remake of José Gomez Fresquet's *El modelo y La vietnamita (The model and the woman from Vietnam).* The Cubans themselves borrowed from North American advertising, pop art, and from revolutionary artists such as the Black Panther Party's Emory Douglas. None of this was seen as postmodern appropriation, or a subversion of intellectual property rights, but as solidarity: assumed collective ownership of revolutionary ideas and methodologies.

Other examples include a poster from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the 1967 Cuban poster *NOW!* (designed by Jesús Forjans), and May 19th's *War in America.* Later, the Cuban artist Alfrédo Rostgaard's *Hanoi Martes 13* inspired a 1980s update for an anti-U.S. intervention street visual. Art history is plundered too, as in a reworking of Goya's *3 de Mayo, 1808* for an anti-intervention/solidarity with Nicaragua and El Salvador demonstration in Chicago in 1985.

The early years of the MBGC were characterized by a relatively open and porous creative process. The artists who instigated the collective were motivated to make a special contribution, through our skills, to our shared political project. We were already designing fliers, small posters, and banners on an ad-hoc and individual basis, but wanted to make an argument for a more concentrated and sustained graphic practice. The MBGC functioned as another "cell" of the organization, where we used our process to consolidate our ideological positions and loyalties. But the collective was also, in those early years, somewhat autonomous from the organization. We came into being not at the behest of a "central committee," but on our own volition. Although none of us would ever overtly argue this, the MBGC promised us a relatively free and independent space where we could practice what we loved, limited only by our own energies and exhaustion.

The collective designed and created limited editions of complex multicolor serigraphs as a fundraising tool, to gather what we called "material aid" for campaigns to free political prisoners of the Black Liberation movement, the Puerto Rican nationalist prisoners, to commemorate the Attica rebellion, and project the New Afrikan freedom struggle, a political tendency of the Black revolutionary nationalist agenda and program. We designed and produced countless flyers, stickers, pamphlets, buttons, offset posters, T-shirts and other propaganda, which were wheat-pasted and distributed in New York City and other parts of the east coast.



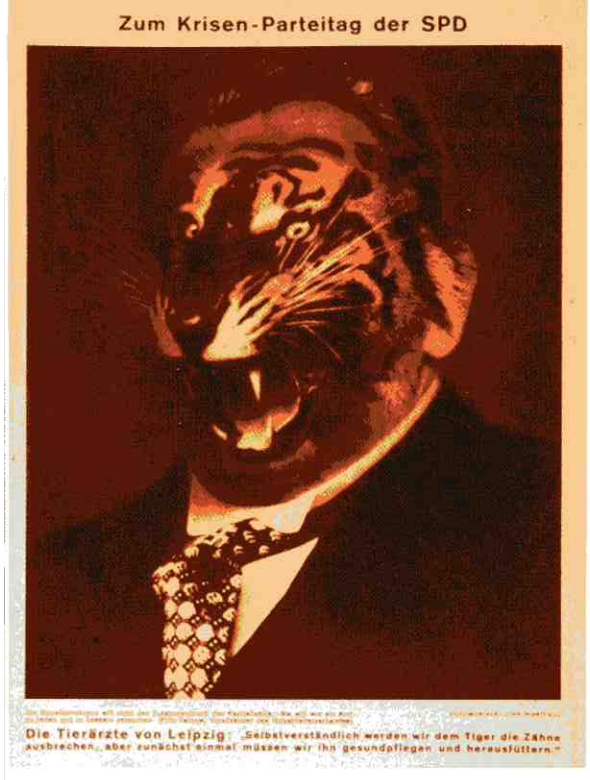
Above, ***War in America: the struggle to free the land,*** May 19th Communist Organization, NYC, 1979. *Right, above,* ***NOW!*** Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), U.S.A., 1960. *Right, below,* ***Thong Nhat/Reunification*** (tracing for three Vietnam banners), Tomie Arai and Mary Patten, NYC, 1975.

In all these projects, social realist influences loomed large in the quest for a "legible" style, which we defined as transparency, and skill in reproducing "reality." It helped that several of us had figurative painting and drawing backgrounds. But we were also interested in the excess and bounty of the Chinese peasant paintings from Huhsien County, in the psychedelia of Cuban posters, and in the figural monstrosities of John Heartfield.

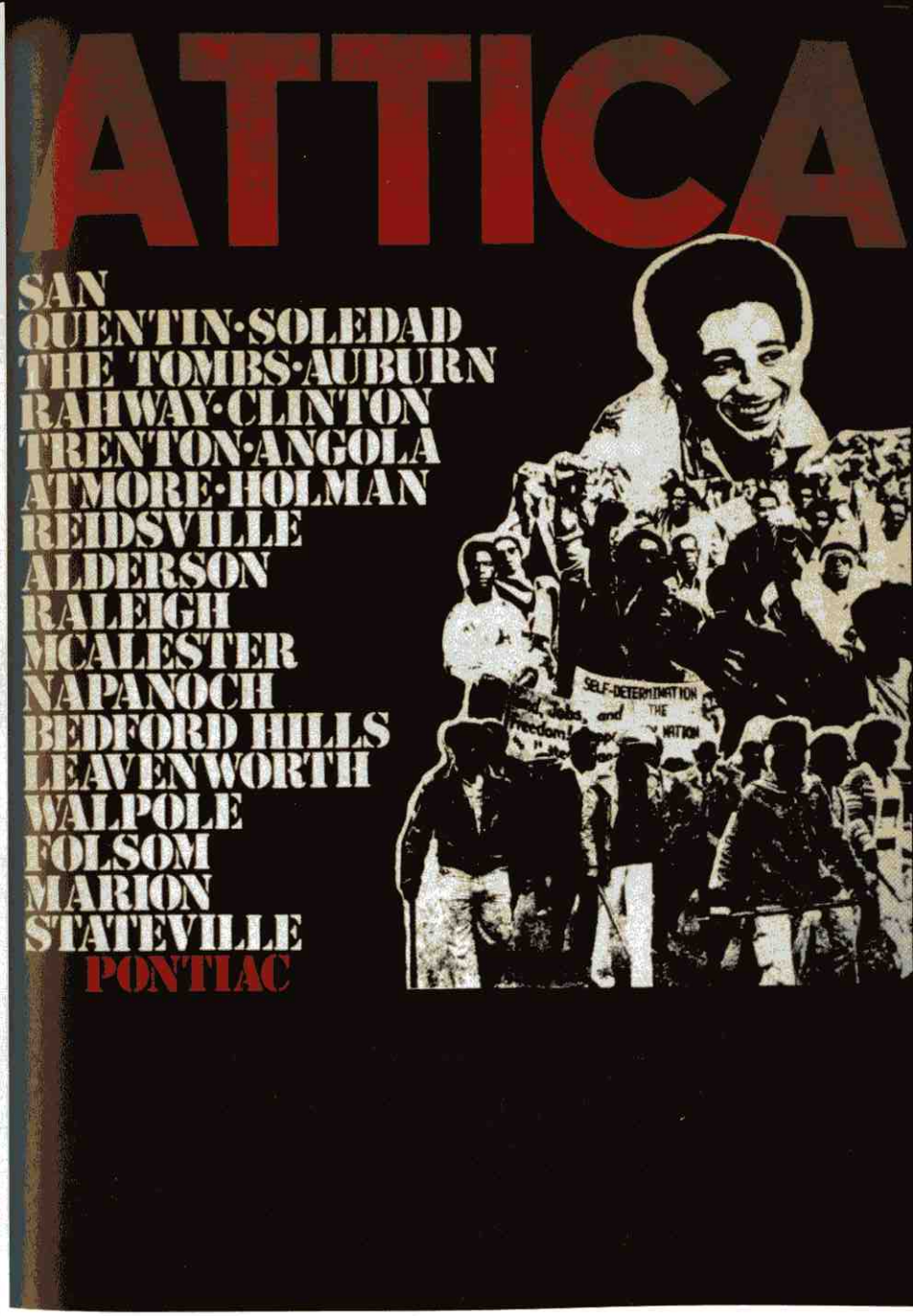
For a short while, our practice seemed to exemplify Mao Tse-tung's call to "…let a hundred flowers bloom…"[8] We did not have a signature collective style. We developed a methodology, particularly with the more complex prints, where individual members would propose an idea for a poster along with a rough design and aesthetic approach. Everyone would offer feedback and critique, but there was no attempt to impose stylistic restrictions. Each design, each print was an occasion for different experiments with authorship within a collaborative structure.

We also taught silk-screening classes and workshops in design, drawing, banner-making and propaganda to women and to members of anti-racist, anti-imperialist and national liberation groups. We began working out of a small loft space on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, where I had previously lived. When we lost our lease, we shifted production to a tiny apartment in Park Slope that Donna Borup and I shared. The bathroom doubled as a darkroom. When we were printing, we strung clotheslines throughout the space to hang prints, since we had no drying racks. I remember going to bed under rows of 18" x 24" posters, inhaling the fumes from drying mineral spirits/xylene as I dozed off. All our supplies were donated by the artists who worked with the collective—screens, squeegees, papers, inks, drawing and design materials, drafting tables, tabourets, flat files. Eventually our classes and fundraising events covered some of the cost of materials, but our labor was always donated. We didn't sleep much, worked crappy low-paying jobs to cover our rent and utilities, collected unemployment insurance when we inevitably got fired, and ate on the subway or in coffee shops. But for a time, we were in conversation and contact with many people who were not part of our internalized cadre life. Eventually this changed, as we cynically calculated every encounter as an organizing possibility, a chance to make another convert to our unique set of truths and beliefs.

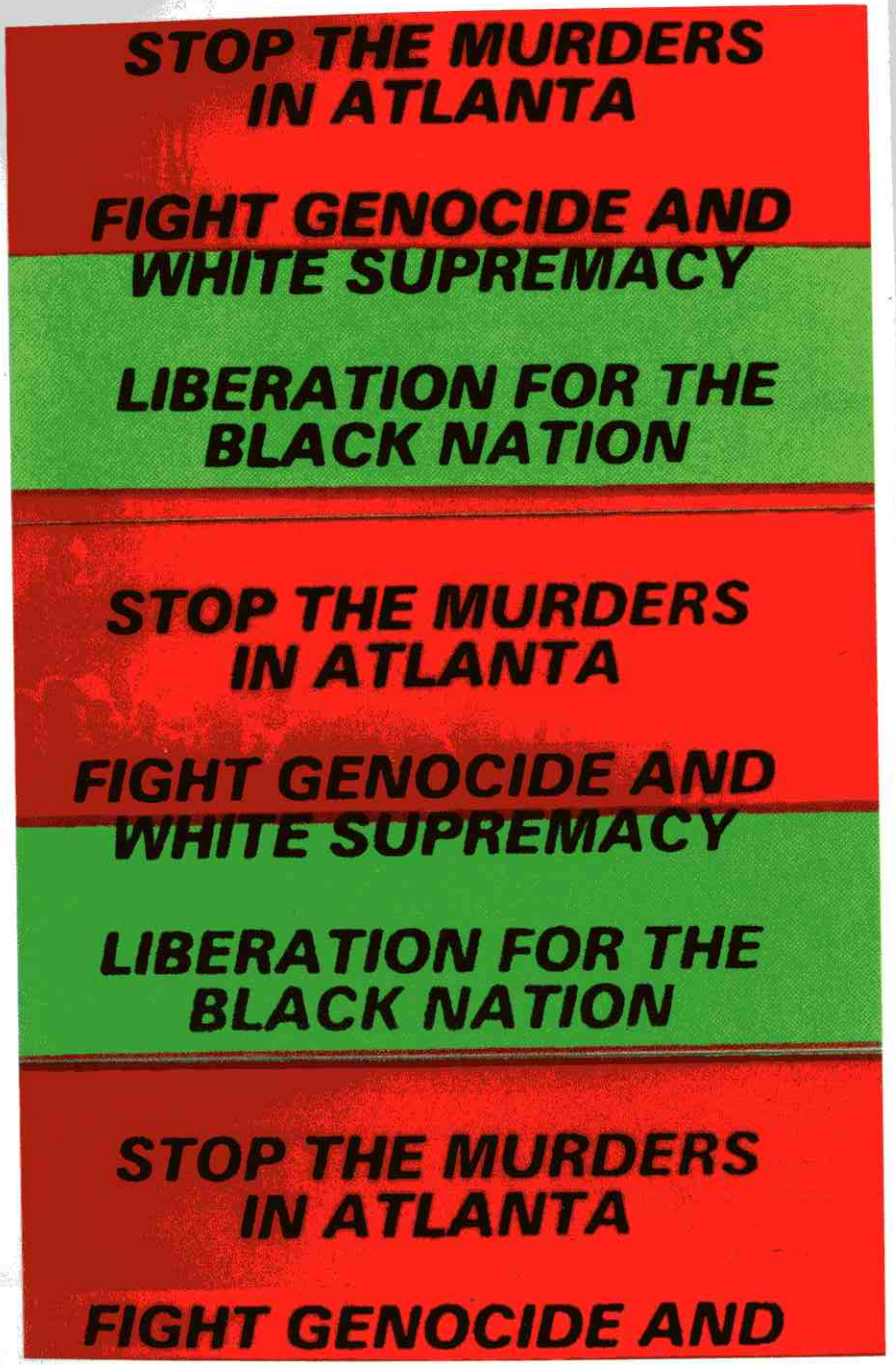
8 "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People," speech, 1957. In the mid-1950s, a kind of democracy of public political expression was encouraged by the Chinese Communist Party, which many assert was for cynical ends—to elicit dissent in order to identify, control, and squash it.



Left, above, ***Zum Krisen - Parteitag der SPD (On the Crisis - Party Congress of the German Social Democratic Party),*** photomontage, John Heartfield, 1931. *Left, below,* ***Commune Fish Pond,*** Tung Cheng-yi, Huhsien County, Peoples Republic of China, circa 1971–1972. *Above,* ***Women Plowing,*** René Mederos, Cuba, 1969, courtesy of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics.



Above, ***Viva Puerto Rico Libre!*** Madame Binh Graphics Collective (Donna Borup, lead designer), NYC, circa 1978–1979. *Right,* ***Attica: The Struggle Continues,*** Madame Binh Graphics Collective (Laura Whitehorn, lead designer), NYC, circa 1979–1980.



Above, ***Stop the Murders in Atlanta/Fight Genocide and White Supremacy,*** silkscreened stickers, Madame Binh Graphics Collective, 1981.

OUR POLITICS, OUR IMAGERY, OURSELVES

In the late 1970s, the MBGC participated in an upsurge of activism in New York's art world, which had been relatively quiet since the ferment of the U.S.-Vietnam war. Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, the Anti-imperialist Cultural Union, Art Workers' Coalition, and the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition were all part of the landscape. "Action Against Racism in the Arts," catalyzed by an infamous exhibition at Artists Space in 1978 called "The Nigger Drawings," was an important organizing focus in this period.[9]

Discussions and debates in the Coalition, which drew many notable artists and writers to its meetings—Adrian Piper, Cliff Joseph, David Hammons, Howardena Pindell, and Lucy Lippard among them—moved between proposals to target racism in art world institutions, and arguments to prioritize building anti-racist education and activism in U.S. society in general. During the mid-to-late 1970s, accelerating racist organizing and attacks by para-military white supremacist groups like the Nazis and KKK were on the rise, alarming and angering many Black and other Third World people and progressive whites.

In 1981, the MBGC was invited by Group Material to create a mixed-media installation for one of their early projects, the last one to take place in a Lower East Side storefront. "Atlanta: an emergency exhibition" was organized to protest the epidemic disappearance and murders of twenty-nine Black children and teenagers in Atlanta, Georgia between 1979 and 1981.[10]

Lucy Lippard described our piece in a review for the *Village Voice,* later reprinted in her book *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change*:

> The Madame Binh Graphics Collective's double piece is layered in space, on plastic sheets, juxtaposing genocide and white supremacy with African liberation movements, moving from an Assata Shakur quote ("We are not citizens of America... we need a nation") through the Atlanta parents and children and, up front, a Black solidarity march surging into the gallery, accompanied by a Malcolm X quote: "If a white man wants to be an

9 The show, a series of abstract charcoal drawings by Donald Newman (who at the time identified only as "Donald") was met with outraged, vocal protests. Newman, who appeared publicly with charcoal smeared on his face, cited Patti Smith as inspiration for his view of the "artist as nigger." Many believed that his provocation was purely cynical, and Lucy Lippard and Howardena Pindell called it an example of "esthetically motivated racism." See Jeff Chang's "On Multiculturalism," in the 2007 *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader.*

10 Most of the Atlanta child murders remain unsolved to this day. Wayne Williams, then 22 years old, was captured, convicted, and sentenced to life imprisonment for two of the killings in 1981. In May 2005, Police Chief Louis Graham of DeKalb County, Georgia, ordered that four of the murder cases be reopened, and possible links emerged between the killings and the Ku Klux Klan. A year later, the investigation was dropped, and most cases remain "closed." Despite this, widespread belief pesists that Williams was framed, having provided a convenient scapegoat for the authorities.

11 "A Child's Garden of Horrors," *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change,* p. 252, Dutton, NYC, 1984.

ally, ask him what does he think of John Brown. You know what John Brown did? He went to war.[11]

The second part of the piece was a large canvas that had been silk-screened with a repetitive grid of eye-popping day-glo red and green, inscribed with black text ("Stop the murders in Atlanta/Fight genocide and white supremacy..."), based on a sticker we'd designed which was intended to connote the red, black and green of the Black Liberation flag. Both the installation and the wall piece evidenced visual vernaculars that were in a conversation with artistic traditions and contemporary practices at the same time as transmitting didactic content.

The MBGC and our parent organization, May 19th, and the revolutionary Black nationalists whom we considered our leadership, advocated an armed struggle to free the land of five states in the southeastern U.S.—Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina—the historic "Black Belt."[12] Our concomitant call for whites to "...be like John Brown: he went to war" was the logical and "correct" response to the radical wing of the civil rights movement, and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee's demand that anti-racist whites take responsibility for organizing in our own communities.[13]

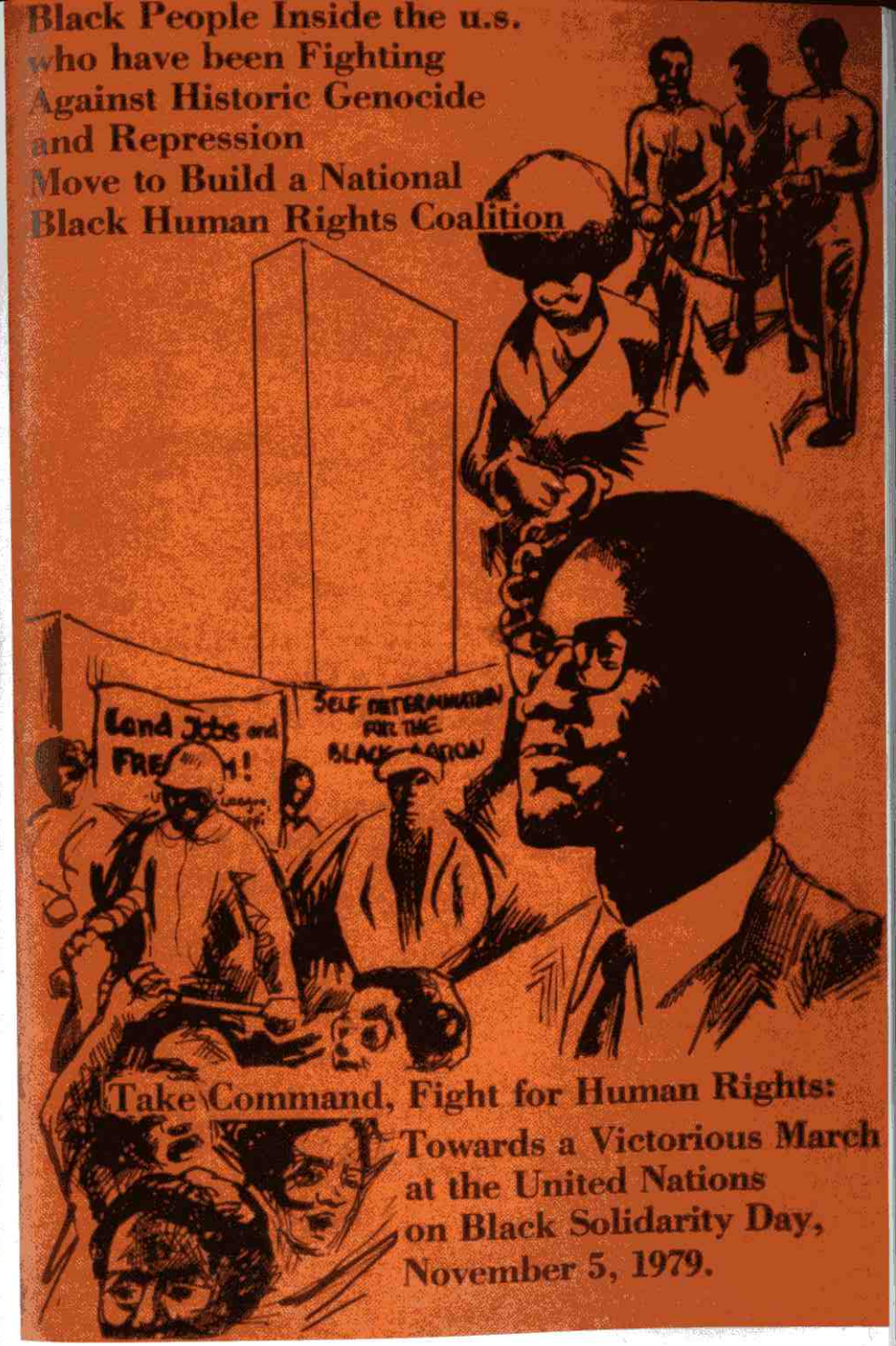
In May 19th and the MBGC, we were always imagining a cascading, ever-growing force of Black people whom we saw as central to the process of revolutionary change in the U.S.—seizing their own destinies and, in the process, rescuing us from ours. MBGC's stationery, letterhead, and fliers for our classes and workshops included drawings of Assata Shakur, Malcolm X, Ho Chi Minh, and Black Panther (and former political prisoner) Geronimo Pratt. We placed a priority on those struggles that we saw as pitted against white settler regimes: Zimbabwe, Namibia, Azania/South Africa, and Palestine.[14]

We had a very hard time representing white people in struggle, because our analysis dictated that whites were almost irredeemably tied to the imperialist system. We viewed every chapter of the white working class struggle in the U.S., from the white-dominated labor movement to the racist "anti-draft" riots of the Civil War and World War I, as defined by white supremacy and betrayal. We saw every expression of solidarity from the white-dominated left—from the CPUSA's (Communist Party, USA) short-lived support for self-determination for the Black nation in the 1930s, to our antecedents in Prairie Fire and the Weather Underground—as marred by racism. Just before the dissolution of the WUO, a superficially-conceived class politics manifested as the national Hard Times Conference in Chicago in 1976. This ideological shift was met with scathing criticism by Black and other Third World

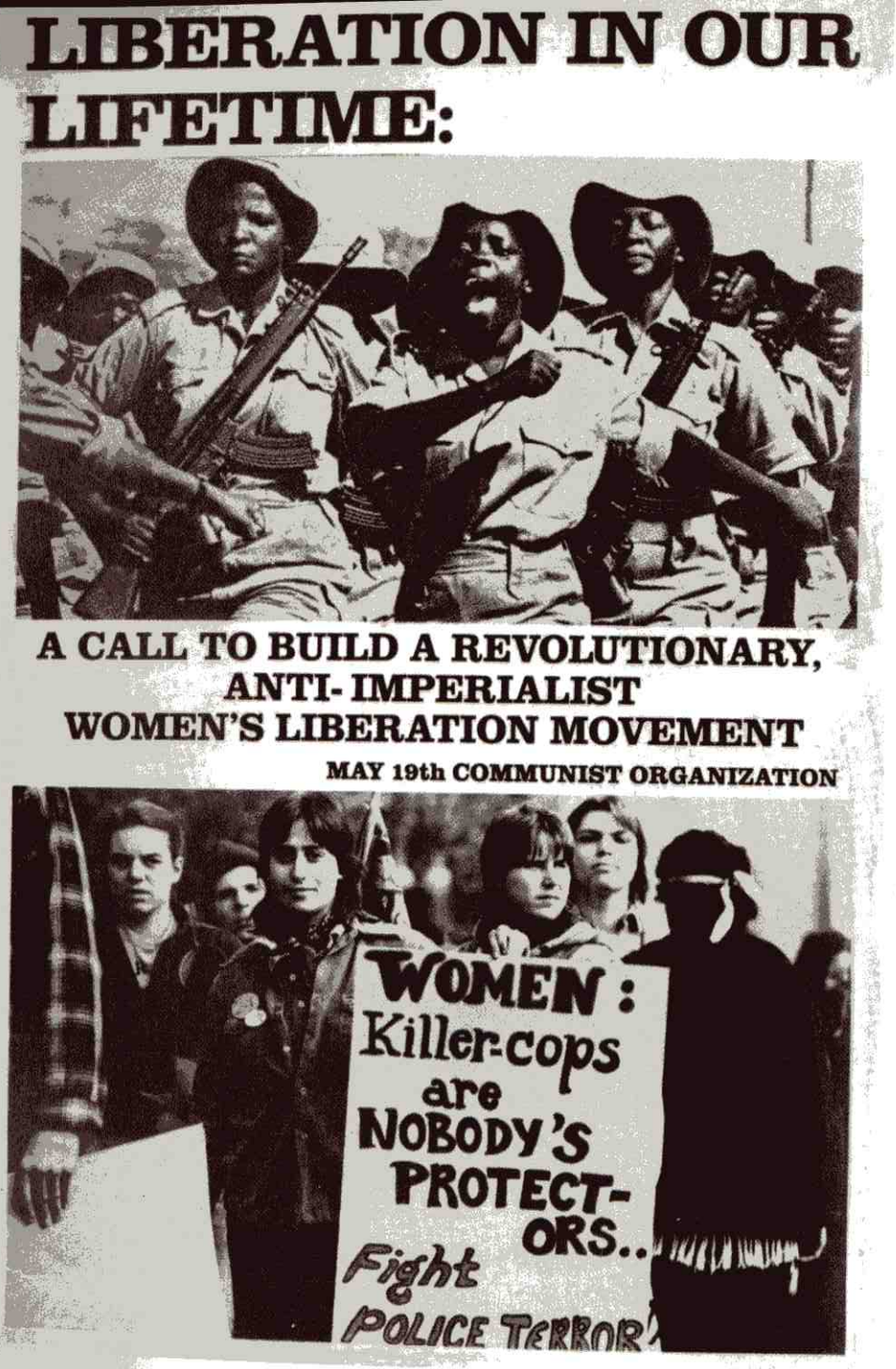
12 The Republic of New Afrika and the New Afrikan Peoples' Organization grew out of a larger militant Black Nationalist movement in the sixties and seventies that included not only the well-known and well-chronicled Black Panther Party, but also the Deacons for Defense, the Revolutionary Action Movement, DRUM (Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement), the National Black Human Rights Campaign, and others.

13 See James Forman's *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* for an indispensable account of SNCC. and the radicalization of the Black civil rights movement. See also *We Will Return in the Whirlwind* by Muhammad Ahmad, and prisoner-of-war Sundiata Acoli's accounts, posted online at: <http://www.thetalkingdrum.com/prison1.html>

14 We referred to South Africa as "Azania," taking our cue from the Pan-Africanist Congress, one of the revolutionary Black nationalist groups fighting against apartheid.

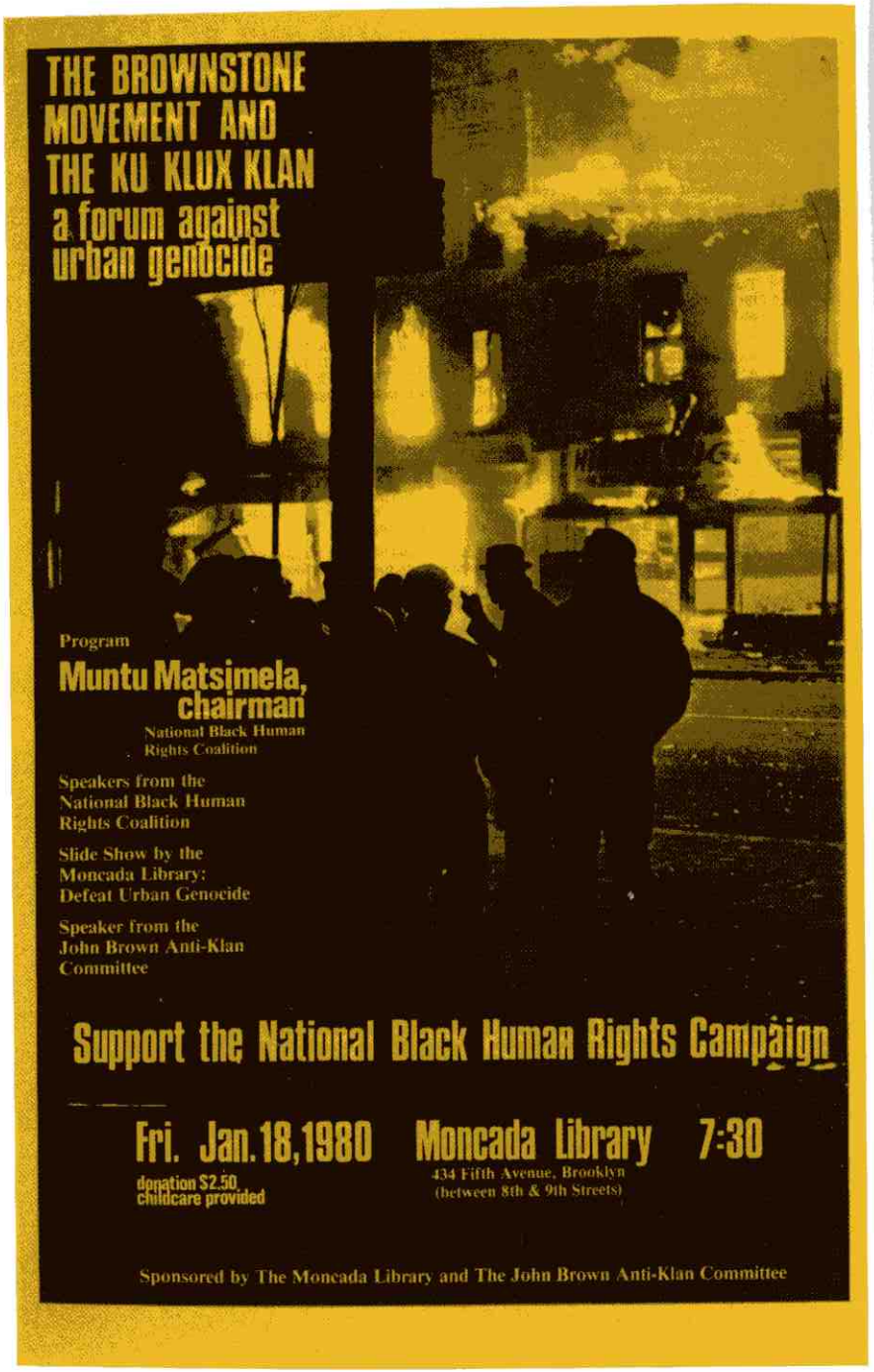


Above, ***National Black Human Rights Campaign brochure,*** Madame Binh Graphics Collective, NYC, 1979.



Above, ***Liberation in Our Lifetime pamphlet,*** May 19th Communist Organization, NYC, 1981.

participants as multi-nationalist, economist, and racist. Not everyone but ourselves, everyone *including* ourselves: a burden that could only be overcome by ascribing to and participating in our vision of "war in amerikka," the willingness to sacrifice *everything* to become revolutionary allies. We saw this as an application of Marx and Engels' idea of "class suicide," updated by Amilcar Cabral for the era of national liberation struggles. An exception is evidenced by this image of white women demonstrating against "killer cops." For a period, we believed that white women, especially white working class lesbians, were the "weak link" in the white oppressor nation, and thus the most likely to be allies of national liberation struggles. This was indicative of a short-lived perception that we needed to ground our politics in some sense of "self-interest" that had radical potential. It's also easy to see how the bifurcated top/bottom design exemplified a careful avoidance of any intimation of "parity" between ourselves and revolutionary Third world movements.



Above, ***The Brownstone Movement and the KKK,*** Moncada Library with MBGC, Brooklyn, 1980.

BOOKS AND CHANGE

These politics may seem strange to some today. But each of us previously had a world, and a world-view, that irrevocably changed. This wasn't an overnight process. It unfolded over, and across, time—but one remembers the abrupt, epiphanic shifts. For some of us, this had a lot to do with "subjective relationships"—close ties built with individual activists in the Black Liberation movement, through student activism and SDS, prison and solidarity work. For me, reading also played a huge role in radically de-centering my habitual, familiar cultural and class framework. I particularly remember a pre-May 19th study group in 1975–6 focusing on Africa, the slave trade, and white supremacy in the U.S. We read W.E.B. du Bois' *Black Reconstruction,* Angela Davis's *The Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves,* the speeches of Malcolm X, Aimé Césaire's *Return to My Native Land,* Gerda Lerner's *Black Women in White America,* Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, and Samir Amin.

People and books played a huge role, not so much in "raising consciousness," but in lifting it, moving it over, turning it inside-out. The title of Rodney's book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa,* and another by Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America,* spoke volumes: for the first time, understanding the relationship, the link, between the great wealth and privilege of Europe and the U.S.—the development of the "first world"—and the enslavement and impoverishment of the third. The "primitive accumulation of capital" in the West would not have been possible without the systematic plundering of Africa and the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Atlantic slave trade, the extermination of indigenous nations and the theft of their land. The extraction of super-profits from oppressed peoples created the conditions for capitalism to develop, and for an emerging bourgeoisie to exploit the labor of a Euro-American proletariat. The distortions of class structure that emerged from the differences between chattel slaves, indentured servants, and wage slaves cemented identifications between even the poorest of whites and their bosses. While not determining in any kind of absolute sense—the betrayal of black workers by white workers was not inevitable or etched in stone—neither did it guarantee any kind of cross-racial or cross-national solidarity. In the settler colonies, some of these same workers had the opportunity to escape their class status by becoming settlers themselves, and many were also recruited as active enforcers—as overseers of slaves, the cavalry of the western expansion, prison guards, and police. We believed that racism was not just an ideological construct, a veil of "bad ideas" that prevented poor and working class white people from joining with Black, Latino/a, and Native peoples against a "common enemy"—but the resilient mortar in a fortress binding whites in identification and common cause with their rulers—with capital, with the state—and against their own economic interests.

We believed that even those "interests," except for the poorest, most oppressed, and marginalized of white people, were distorted by privilege—real differences in wages, job security, access to the "good life." Lenin's conceptualization and updating of Friedrich Engels' idea of an "aristocracy of labor"[15] was our guide in analyzing the racism in U.S. labor history. We saw how necessary white supremacy was to

15 See V.I. Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism,* 1920

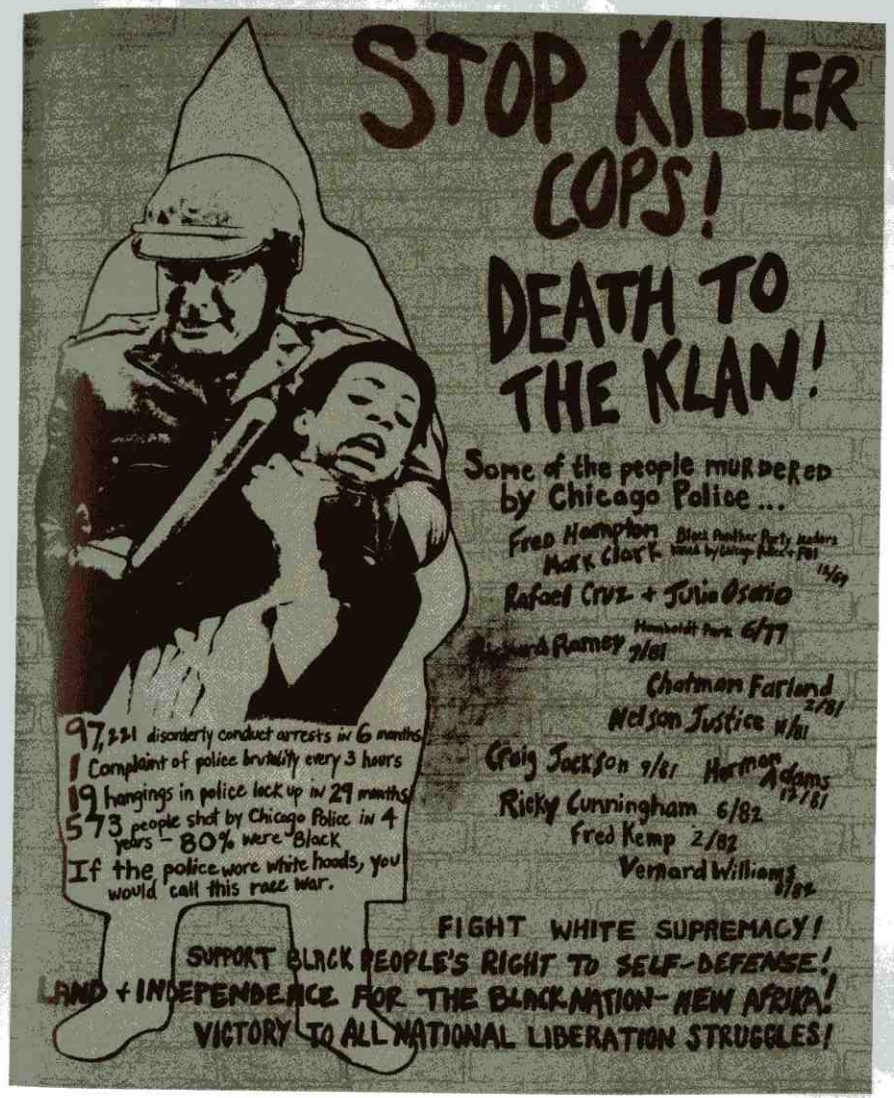
16 Audre Lorde, "Power," *The Black Unicorn,* W. W. Norton, 1978

imperialist and colonialist rule; how crucial, how central to any "victory" was the fight to overturn it.

This helps explain some of the logic behind the crazy slogan "Fight the people!" chanted by Weatherman in 1969; or by May 19th's analysis that placed white middle class privilege—for example, the ability and desire of white yuppies to buy and renovate housing stock in struggling communities—on a continuum with organized white supremacists. Picture a small cadre of community activists stationed outside the neighborhood food co-op, hawking tract-like leaflets with the message: "The brownstone movement and the Ku Klux Klan: fight urban genocide!" Moralism was our modus operandi, since "structural analysis" was clearly insufficient. We thought, perhaps, that we could shame people from becoming homeowners, constituting a necessary first step in their radicalization.

At the same time, the growing challenges of Black and other Third World feminisms were having a major, and often contradictory, impact. Some of us knew Audre Lorde, a visible and vocal figure in the New York poetry and political scenes in the mid-1970s. We were passionate and avid readers of her writing, and admired this powerful voice that lacerated the New York City police for their cold-blooded murder of a Black child, Clifford Glover.[16] We were excited by the work of Barbara Smith and Cherrie Moraga, who with Lorde and others co-founded Kitchen Table Press; and by the developing solidarities between these women and white radical feminist writers like Adrienne Rich. Lorde, along with Susan Sherman, Fay Chiang, Jan Clausen, Joan Larkin, Sandra Esteves, and Irena Klepfisz, participated in at least one poetry reading that I organized at the New York Women's School, a Park Slope-based project where many of the women who would later join May 19th worked in the early 1970s.

Black lesbians and feminists fought mightily and creatively against the racism of the white middle class-dominated feminist movement and the white left. I still vividly remember a rally at Judson Memorial Church to protest and organize against the racist "anti-busing" riots in Boston in the 1970s, where Lorde challenged the white people present to back up our convictions with action. But they also struggled bravely against the male supremacy of their "brothers," which was extremely uncomfortable and even threatening to many men. Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf,* and Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* both provoked huge controversies and even condemnation in the male-dominated circuits of the Black movement with whom we associated. There was a widespread belief that the critique of machismo and chauvinism emerging forcefully from Black women writers was divisive. Some men even argued that these were state-inspired attacks on Black revolutionary unity. For us, the critique of white feminism was one we readily embraced. But after a brief period, we did not engage in the struggles between and among Black feminists and Black nationalists, for fear of being "interventionist." Ultimately, we made peace with these conflicts, or rather repressed them, because our zealous hyper-vigilance of the "primary contradiction"—the decisive role of fighting white supremacy—tended to erase



Above, ***Stop Killer Cops,*** John Brown Anti-Klan Committee with MBGC, NYC, 1982.

and eclipse everything else. Perhaps that is why we were so drawn to a figure like Assata Shakur, whom we viewed as a strong, heroic woman who healed these contradictions by leading the nation-building process.