



Mae Mallory with her daughter, Patricia, in the late 1950s, when she helped lead one of New York City's first school desegregation battles.

# **Behind the Black Power Movement**

Ashley Farmer was exasperated. She was tired of reading historical accounts of the postwar black freedom struggle in America that cast black female activists only as helpmates to male leaders. Just as men had overshadowed women at the time, so had the popular narrative of the era ignored the contributions untold numbers of women made as strategists and theorists, thinkers and doers.

Steeping herself in the work of scholars who were reexamining the postwar black freedom struggle and beginning to bring women out of the shadows, Farmer was intrigued to find a couple of sentences about a Harlem activist named Mae Mallory in a biography of the black nationalist leader Robert F. Williams. Mallory and Williams were part of a nonviolent civil rights protest in Monroe, N.C., in August 1961 that culminated with an attack by an angry white mob.

“I was primed as a scholar of black women’s history to take those two sentences and pull them out,” says Farmer, a College of Arts & Sciences assistant professor of history

Ashley Farmer brings to light  
stories of unsung  
African American  
heroines

*By Sara Rimer*

and of African American studies. “I thought, there’s probably a whole book there. Someone just has to look.”

So Farmer looked. She has spent the past six years piecing together Mallory’s story and the stories of other largely unsung black radical and progressive women who helped shape the post-World War II battle against racial inequality. In her forthcoming first book, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era*, which will be published by University of North Carolina Press in spring 2018, Farmer reexamines the Black Power era through the intellectual history of those women, describing the things they achieved and the many things they put at risk: their jobs, their husband’s jobs, their families’ apartments, their reputations, and even their lives. In the 1950s and ’60s, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover oversaw a massive program of illegal secret surveillance of civil rights activists across the United States, and Farmer says that Mallory and other female activists were closely watched.

Because Mallory, like other black female activists, has been all but overlooked by most historians, Farmer had to figure out where and how to look for clues. “We assume that black women don’t have ideas,” she says. “That’s one of the reasons we don’t know more about them.”

She scoured media archives and historical accounts of the era for what she calls “the chance encounter” with these women—their names mentioned in passing, a reference to a speech they gave on a street corner that someone may have written down, a meeting among activists that someone may remember. She asked around among other scholars about available oral histories and about people who might have known Mallory and where she could find

**For her forthcoming book, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era*, Ashley Farmer spent years piecing together the stories of some of the remarkable but largely unsung black radical and progressive female activists who helped shape the post-World War II battle against racial inequality.**

them. She searched archives of local black newspapers and dug through grassroots organizing pamphlets and FBI records.

Farmer is a model of scholarly determination. She grew up in Nashville in the 1980s, in a family that prized education and medicine—and “women with strong minds and strong personalities,” says Farmer’s older sister, Sylvia Wright, an Atlanta dermatologist. The family counts four generations of physicians, going back to Farmer’s great-grandfather. The men and women graduated from historically black colleges—from Fisk

University, Howard University, and Morehouse College.

Farmer’s father is a psychologist. Her mother, who died when Farmer was 16, earned an undergraduate degree in history from Fisk. At age 36, she enrolled in Meharry Medical College, graduated four years later—the year her younger daughter was born—and became a psychiatrist. When she was growing up, Farmer says, some of her friends also had mothers who were doctors. “Some of them would tell me to call them by their first names,” she recalls, “but my mother would say, ‘Don’t ever let me



hear you call them anything but doctor.' She would say that they worked hard for that and that I should show them respect."

Mae Mallory and the other black female activists who have long been overshadowed by the male leaders of their era are owed that same respect, Farmer says. "I think that I walk around with an understanding of my place in the world—my place in society's race, class, and gender construction—in large part because they thought about this and developed a set of writings that expressed this and that got absorbed in the public sphere and in academia," she says.

Farmer graduated from Spelman College with a bachelor's degree in French and went on to Harvard University to earn a master's in history and a PhD in African American studies. As part of her research for a paper on the Third World Women's Alliance, she interviewed female black activists from the 1960s and '70s, including Frances Beal and Gwendolyn Patton. "They emphasized their intellectual influences and they said that if I was going to tell the story of the Third World Women's Alliance, I had to look back further," Farmer says. "There was a cauldron of ideas and black women were adding their voices to it."

In December 2016, Farmer told the story of Mallory's fight for school desegregation in 1950s New York City during a panel discussion on black women radicals at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in Harlem. Many of the older people in the audience had known Mallory. They nodded in approval as Farmer talked about her role in the early school desegregation battle. When the panelists took questions from the audience later in the evening, a 60ish woman in a black coat took the microphone at the back of the auditorium. "I'm Mae Mallory's daughter,

Patricia Mallory," she said in a soft voice. She was grateful to Farmer, she said, for honoring her mother by telling her story. From the stage, Farmer thanked Patricia Mallory. And she thanked her good fortune. She had been trying for years to track Patricia down.

### **IT STARTS WITH SCHOOLING**

With Mae Mallory, Farmer uncovered the story of a courageous, radical-minded activist who spent decades fighting for black liberation. As a grassroots leader of one of the first school desegregation battles in New York City, in the late 1950s, Mallory was one of a group of Harlem mothers hailed as heroines by the black media. They were seen as Northern sisters to Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Daisy Bates in Little Rock, and other Southern black women fighting against the racial caste system.

Mallory was born in 1927 in Macon, Ga., and with her mother, she joined the Great Migration north, arriving in Harlem in the late 1930s. She worked in a factory as a teenager, and then, like the majority of black women at the time, she became a domestic worker, cleaning the homes of white families for minimal wages. As a divorced single mother, she raised a son and a daughter. She plunged into grassroots organizing when she joined the fight for equal rights for blacks working in factories in the 1950s.

In January 1957—three years after the US Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that separate schools for black children were inherently unequal—she made national headlines when she stood up at a New York City Board of Education public hearing and declared that Harlem's overwhelmingly black and Puerto Rican public schools

were inferior, inadequate, and just "as Jim Crow" as the elementary school she'd attended back in Macon. It was a bold truth for a black woman to assert in 1957, in New York City, given that school officials preferred to believe that racism and segregation were uniquely Southern afflictions.

Mallory led the way as she and eight other Harlem mothers tried, unsuccessfully, to enroll their children in white junior high schools on the nearby Upper East Side that had better facilities, more rigorous academics, and more experienced teachers.

In 1958, after petitions, letters, and protest marches had brought little improvement to Harlem public education, Mallory and the other mothers kept their children home from three junior high schools for 156 days. They would rather go to jail, the mothers said, than subject their children to "educational abuse."

Quoting Mallory, Farmer says the mothers' battle for their children to attend white schools "had nothing to do with sitting next to white folks." For Mallory and the other mothers, school integration was a vehicle for black self-determination, pride, and economic empowerment.

In the 1950s, Farmer says, about half of all black women held the lowest paid factory jobs or did domestic work. In New York City, the only affordable apartments available to black women like Mallory were in Harlem or other minority neighborhoods. That housing, in partnership with the school system's zoning policies, kept their children trapped in inferior, segregated neighborhood schools—schools where guidance counselors curtailed the aspirations of black female students by steering them toward futures as beauticians or nurse's aides instead of to college.

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black media—failed to enroll their children in white schools, they scored a major victory when a New York City judge ruled that their children were being provided with “inferior educational opportunities by reason of racial discrimination.” The judge also ruled that while the city’s schools were not segregated by government action, as in the South, they were, nonetheless, de facto segregated. The Harlem Nine laid the groundwork for future desegregation battles in New York and other Northern cities.

“Mallory refused to adjust to the status quo of racism and patriarchy,” says Farmer. “She developed a radical political practice that was at odds with the dominant cultural expectations of African American women. She was an organic intellectual and activist who shaped the modern black freedom movement.”

In August 1961, Mallory traveled to Monroe, N.C., to help Williams, president of the Monroe NAACP chapter in the 1950s and early ’60s, host a visit from the Freedom Riders, the nonviolent civil rights activists who rode interstate buses to protest Southern resistance to integration. A white mob attacked the Freedom Riders there, setting off a wave of racial violence. With the Ku Klux Klan threatening Williams’ life, and the FBI posting a warrant for his arrest on false charges of kidnapping a white couple, Williams fled to Cuba. Facing the same charges, Mallory landed in a jail in Cleveland—where she had gone underground—and spent several years fighting extradition to Monroe. In a series of letters written to her supporters from the Cleveland jail, Mallory explored her views on black liberation, drawing on her experience cleaning the homes of white families in New York City apartment buildings, where signs at the front entrances warned, “No Dogs or Negroes allowed,” she wrote.



**In 1964, a jury in Monroe, N.C., convicted Mallory (pictured here in an archival photo) of kidnapping. The verdict was overturned because of the exclusion of African Americans from the jury.**

“...Most Negroes do not choose to lead a dog’s life—whether it is a lap dog, hunting dog, or one from the kennel,” Mallory wrote. “They do not want scraps from the master’s table, neither crumbs; neither do we choose to be masters—only masters of our fates.”

With her supporters rallying around the cry of “Free Mae from the KKK,” Mallory became for a time an international figure in the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS’55, Hon.’59) called for her freedom.

In 1964, an all-white jury in Monroe convicted Mallory in less than 30 minutes and sentenced her to 16 to 20 years in prison. She was exonerated in 1965, when a judge overturned her verdict because of the exclusion of African Americans from the jury. Shortly afterward, Mallory went on a speaking tour with Malcolm X. Through the 1960s and ’70s, she fought for the freedom of other black activists who had been wrongfully imprisoned. She continued her fight for racial equality well into her old age.

“There’s a term that historians use—*long-distance runner*—for an activist who shapes a large

amount of time,” says Farmer. “I see Mallory as a long-distance runner. She wasn’t just a flash in the pan.”

Mae Mallory was one of many. There were untold numbers of like-minded women who helped define what Farmer calls the Black Power era in post-World War II America. “By Black Power, I mean a political outlook that asserts that black people have the right to self-defense, self-determination, and control over their bodies, lives, and communities,” she says. “This is sometimes manifested in the right to bear arms, but this was only one of many manifestations of Black Power. A lot of these women were saying, ‘I’m not out to hurt anybody, but you’re not going to keep doing this to me without any fear of repercussion.’”

#### **EXPANDING THE BLACK POWER ERA**

The Black Power movement has traditionally been seen as catalyzed by a chain of events—the June 1964 murders by the Ku Klux Klan of three civil rights workers who were attempting to

register black voters in Mississippi; the riots in Los Angeles' Watts neighborhood in August 1965; and the moment, in June 1966, when Stokely Carmichael marched into Greenwood, Miss., declaring, "We've been saying freedom for six years. What we're going to start saying now is black power." Farmer is one of several historians who have been reframing the movement as part of the larger Black Power era, one that began in the mid-1940s and ran through the late 1970s.

Many female activists of the 1940s, '50s, and '60s Farmer has studied—the list includes Claudia Jones, Alice Childress, and Audley Moore—worked as domestic help to support their families. "That they were domestic workers was not their be-all and end-all," says Farmer. "I'm less interested in that part of their lives. There's a way in which we only humanize black women by proving that they did the same things other people do in their daily lives. I'm interested in them as theorists and thinkers. Many people have started to recognize that these women were fearless and brave activists, but few scholars take them seriously as theorists."

Nancy F. Cott, Harvard University's Jonathan Trumbull Professor of American History and one of Farmer's advisers, says that Farmer has "broadened the scope of examining Black Power and she has found women, starting with earlier generations—with Audley Moore—who were articulating ideas that were core Black Power ideas combined with a women-forward approach.

"She's found lots of very important women whose voices she's now brought out, whose take on Black Power she's illuminated," says Cott.

Like other scholars of black women's history, Farmer wants to help revise the conventional historical framework: "that

men theorized, while the women organized."

The women did plenty of theorizing and strategizing, she says. They wrote articles for black newspapers and gave speeches on street corners in Harlem and at Pan-African conferences in Tanzania. And, she adds, while they didn't fully succeed in overcoming the well-documented misogyny of much of the black male leadership, they earned the respect of many men, who argued for the liberation of black women.

In the 1940s and '50s, black female domestic workers were expected to be compliant and uncomplaining. It was an act of resistance, Farmer says, when in 1950 Alice Childress began to frame domestic workers as radical political actors by chronicling the life of a witty, outspoken, fictional Harlem domestic worker named Mildred Johnson in a series of columns in the black radical newspaper *Freedom*. Mildred Johnson validated and emboldened a generation of black female *Freedom* readers who were domestic workers, says Farmer.

In her book, she cites a Childress column from April 1952, where Mildred tells her friend and fellow domestic worker, Marge, that her white employer, Mrs. C, had informed a recent houseguest that she "just loved" Mildred and that Mildred was "just like one of the family." After the houseguest had left, Mildred tells Marge, she set her employer straight: "Mrs. C, you are a pretty nice person to work for, but I wish you could please stop talking about me like I was a cocker spaniel or a poll parrot or a kitten...you don't love me, you may be fond of me, but that is all. I am not just like one of the family at all. Your family eats in the dining room, I eat in the kitchen."

In the following decades, as Farmer documents in her book, a lot of other women refused to

acquiesce in all sorts of ways. She notes that veteran female activists Claudia Jones, Vicki Garvin, and Moore mentored Malcolm X in the 1950s and '60s. She writes about Frances Beal, a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Third World Women's Alliance, and her seminal 1970 essay, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." Beal's essay, Farmer writes, "has become critical to our understanding of how race, gender, and class work together to oppress people of color."

She examines the ways these women defied both white and black male expectations of what a black woman should be through what she and other scholars term the "gendered imaginary," or how men and women imagine themselves in the world. During an era when oppression subverted and crushed the fantasies of generations of black women, she says, Mallory and others dared to imagine themselves in what Farmer describes as a series of archetypal roles: "the militant black domestic worker," "the black revolutionary woman," "the Pan-African woman," and the "Third World woman." For these women, she says, the struggle wasn't simply about race. It was also about gender and class equality.

"They were challenging white perceptions of womanhood," Farmer says. "The militant domestic worker was not the 'docile mammy' that is supposed to love serving whites. In the '60s, the expectations were that you should be a good housewife, or you should take a back seat to men. The idea was that white womanhood is everybody's model, supposedly. But black women were never going to be allowed access to that model.

"This is about black women defining, sometimes in idealistic terms, what womanhood means for themselves," Farmer says.

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