# City of Islands

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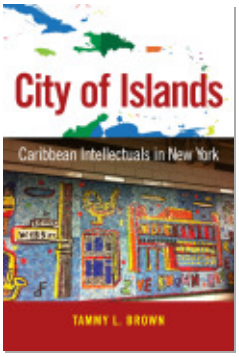


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## CHAPTER 5

# Shirley Chisholm and the Style of Multicultural Democracy

> I am not the candidate of black America, although I am black and proud. I am not the candidate of the women's movement, although I am a woman and I am equally proud of that. . . . I am the candidate of the *people of America*.[1]
>
> —SHIRLEY CHISHOLM

While Trinidadian-born choreographer and dancer Pearl Primus embraced dance as a "weapon for social change," Barbadian-American politician Shirley Chisholm used the arena of American electoral politics—including her position in the United States House of Representatives and her 1972 presidential candidacy, to advance the cause of civil rights and women's rights. Chisholm's personal identity, as a woman, as a black American, and as a descendent of immigrants, provides unique insights into the cultural and political landscape of late 1960s and early 1970s New York. At the height of the cultural wars, in a nation undergoing dramatic social and ideological transformations, Shirley Chisholm, the daughter of a mother from Barbados and a father born in British Guiana and raised in Cuba and Barbados, was a remarkable woman who occupied a unique historical moment. She claimed that her keen intellect and no-nonsense attitude were positive attributes of her Caribbean heritage, and she spoke with such boldness and persuasive power that a broad spectrum of progressive Americans supported her campaign to become the first black and the first female president of the United States.

In January 1972, Shirley Chisholm stood before a congregation of seven hundred supporters at the Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn and announced her bid to become the Democratic Party candidate for the presidency of the United States of America. "My presence before you now symbolizes a *new era* in American political history," Chisholm triumphantly declared, "Americans all over are demanding a new sensibility, a new philosophy."[2] Well aware that the majority of her constituents had reached a tipping point regarding

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the drawn-out war in Vietnam, President Lyndon B. Johnson's blind acceptance of counsel from foreign policy aides inherited from John F. Kennedy, and Richard Nixon's dishonesty in spreading the war to neutral Cambodia, Chisholm—a Brooklyn-born black woman with working-class and immigrant roots—presented a new face and a refreshingly candid voice in contrast to the well-heeled white men she was up against. As Chisholm addressed the crowd at Concord Baptist Church, her optimism and authoritative voice

met with great applause as she defined this new era in American politics as one of "freedom from violence and war at home and abroad"; "freedom from poverty"; and "medical care, employment, and decent housing" for all Americans. Drawing upon values of the antiwar movement and tenets of the Great Society, Chisholm proclaimed her commitment to rebuilding a "strong and just society."[3]

Chisholm had already made history in 1968 as the first black woman elected to Congress, representing the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn in the United States House of Representatives. Less than four years later, Chisholm continued to rock the proverbial boat by throwing her "hat, rather bonnet," as CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite put it, into the Democratic presidential race, thus becoming the first black person to run for "the highest office in the land." As is evident in Cronkite's self-correction and gendered language, a black woman's formidable presence in the United States political arena was so new that many contemporary commentators lacked the language to adequately discuss and make sense of the political phenomenon. Chisholm's political voice grew out of and represented broader contestations over gender roles within the private sphere as well as feminists' demands for women's equal representation in local and federal political institutions.

Chisholm's success in the political arena was a product of her adept ability to tap into the ethos of the time in which the personal was political and the political was personal. She leveraged her immigrant cultural identity in creative ways to effectively reconcile seemingly contradictory philosophies of racial, ethnic, and feminist pride with humanist and universalist ideals to win over a broad spectrum of voters. She also leveraged her identity as a woman, as a black American, and as a descendant of working-class immigrants to gain support from constituents with similar backgrounds, but she also made efforts to transcend these categories of race, class, and gender by emphasizing the common desire of *all* Americans to lead healthy and productive lives, equally protected by the laws of the land. Chisholm's simultaneous focus on the particular and the universal helped her galvanize support from women, antiwar advocates, young voters, and working-class citizens from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Chisholm's construction of her own selfhood was deliberate and complex.

## "Being Translocal"

Chisholm's articulation of her Caribbean cultural identity was a central part of her definition of selfhood. While most academic and journalistic

treatments of Chisholm's career have put her femaleness and blackness in the foreground, I want to broaden the discourse by highlighting her Caribbean immigrant identity and her family's working-class background to reveal the moral foundation that contributed to the efficacy of Chisholm's appeal to working-class citizens of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, who were often second-generation immigrants like herself. I also emphasize Brooklyn as a place unique in allowing Chisholm to use her transcultural status and dynamic personality to appeal to a broad constituency.

Shirley Chisholm, like many Caribbean New Yorkers, simultaneously held island-specific, regional, racial, and class identities. She privileged one identity over the others depending on the political context; this balancing of diverse thoughts and ideas constituted her "translocal consciousness." Chisholm inhabited a unique historical moment that motivated progressive citizens to embrace her "crossroads" status. Harnessing momentum from the civil rights movement, third-wave feminism, the peace movement, and the Great Society's push for a stronger welfare state, black Americans, immigrants and descendants of immigrants, young people, pacifists, and women of all races welcomed Chisholm's presence.

Chisholm's monumental 1972 presidential campaign provides an apt case study to better understand the dramatic transformations in black political leadership and the discourse over black identity from the 1920s through the 1970s. Even Chisholm's intellectual biography suggests the recursive nature of black identity politics, since her father was a dedicated Garveyite whose accounts of the "great Marcus Garvey of Jamaica"[4] and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt piqued young Shirley's interest in politics. Garvey promoted racial uplift through his ill-fated Black Star Steamship Lines, intended at least in theory to repatriate black Americans to West Africa, and Chisholm assumed steerage of the political machine in the Twelfth District of New York and within the US House of Representatives.

## Caribbean Heritage and Cultural Clashes

Shirley Anita St. Hill was born in Brooklyn on November 30, 1924. Her father, Charles St. Hill, was born in British Guiana but grew up in Cuba and Barbados. Her mother, Ruby Seale, was born and raised in Barbados and moved to New York as a teenager. Charles and Ruby met and married in Brooklyn. Ruby worked as a domestic and Charles worked as "a helper in a big cake bakery." Like Brooklyn-born Barbadian-American novelist Paule Marshall, Chisholm grew up in a predominantly Caribbean neighborhood. "There was

a large colony of Barbadians in Brooklyn," she recalled.[5] Like Silla Boyce and members of the Barbadian American Association in Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), Chisholm's parents strove to purchase a brownstone in Brooklyn. This part of their "American Dream" was actualized when the St. Hill family moved into a brownstone in 1935 and later relocated to a larger "solid three-story [brownstone] on Prospect Place" in 1945. Chisholm's father earned the $10,000 to purchase their new home from working at a bag factory. As an adult, Chisholm depicted her parents' home ownership as a shining example of an intensely immigrant work ethic and discipline as she called the real estate purchase a "really remarkable achievement for parents of four children, who started with nothing and lived through the depression on a laborer's and domestic's wages."[6]

Chisholm made numerous sojourns to her mother's birthplace throughout her youth, and she suggested that being raised by a strict grandmother in Barbados instilled in her an unshakable sense of self-esteem. Shirley was three years old when she and her siblings moved to Barbados, doing so because her mother Ruby preferred the British colonial model of education on the small island to New York public schools. For Barbadian immigrants of Ruby's generation, this pro-British sentiment was not uncommon. Chisholm described her mother as "thoroughly British in her ideas, her manners and her plans for her daughters." In her mother's opinion, Chisholm and her sisters "were to become young ladies—poised, modest, accomplished, educated, and graceful, prepared to take [their] places in the world."[7] These values also overlapped with the aspirations of American-born black intellectuals committed to the cause of racial uplift around the time that Chisholm was born. Still, as an immigrant from Barbados, Ruby's desire for a dignified and successful future for her daughters entailed an education that she deemed proper in the British Caribbean.

In this regard, comparable to Ethelred Brown's appeals for British financial aid for his Unitarian ministry in Jamaica, Chisholm's family also leveraged the British colonial connection to their advantage. Young Shirley and her siblings spent the next six years in Barbados and were reared by their maternal grandmother. Throughout her political career, Chisholm repeatedly attributed her success to her foundational development in the rigorous British-styled primary and secondary school that she attended during her formative years in Barbados. During her twilight years, Chisholm would later recall this experience in idyllic terms. She stated:

> Oh, my childhood, I can remember it. It was a sight! We lived on a great big farm, and we had to take care of all of the animals on the farm—the chickens, the goats,

> the sheep. . . . I grew up with my maternal grandmother, and my maternal aunt, and my maternal uncle. Yes, I went there at the age of three and I went to the elementary schools in the islands. I did not return to the United States until nine years of age. That's six years of upbringing in the island of Barbados. . . . I'm the oldest of four girls, and all of us received our elementary school [education] in the islands… [T]here of us got scholarships because we were so bright; we had very high IQ's. And that is attributable to my rearing in the British West Indies. . . . The school system was fantastic—really fantastic.[8]

Chisholm's sister, Muriel Forde, echoed this point. Muriel would later recall, "When you started school in Barbados, you went right into reading, writing, and arithmetic. There was no such thing as kindergarten and playing around with paper. You came to learn how to read and write and 'do sums' as they said."[9] Muriel's description of their primary school education suggests an environment of seriousness and keen discipline in which studies were undertaken in Barbados. Chisholm also would later state, "Years later I would know what an important gift my parents had given me by seeing to it that I had my early education in the strict, traditional, British-style schools. If I speak and write easily now, that early education is the main reason."[10]

Trinidadian-born Black Power political activist Stokely Carmichael also noted stark differences in the quality of primary and secondary education in the English-speaking Caribbean compared to New York. When he started school at PS 39 on Longwood Avenue, the same elementary school that Jamaican-American politician Colin Powell attended, young Stokely was most surprised by the lack of decorum in the classroom as well as the facility in which he breezed through the curriculum. In his autobiography, *Ready for Revolution,* Carmichael wrote, "My biggest surprise, in that regard, was the discovery that not only could I compete academically, but that I was actually much better prepared than the American kids. . . . They knew little in math, while I *knew* my times tables. They couldn't write. Could barely compose or phrase sentences. . . . So I was just soaring through school."[11] While this is a dismal assessment of the quality of education at the New York public school that Carmichael attended, the larger point remains that Carmichael, like Chisholm, also rooted his sense of selfhood and intellectual pride in his education in the British Caribbean. I have yet to find a reliable empirical study that compares the quality of education in the English-speaking Caribbean to New York public schools during the time of Chisholm and Carmichael's youth; so it is impossible to objectively determine the superiority of either educational system. In this context, what matters most is Chisholm and

Carmichael's *perceptions* of their own Caribbean educational experiences as superior to that of New York public schools.

Carmichael, like Chisholm, also attributed his success to his family upbringing and his ability to take advantage of the best educational opportunities afforded him after his immigration to the United States. At home, he enjoyed a warm upbringing by his female relatives and felt a sense of security among his close-knit family and African Caribbean friends. His strict schooling in Trinidad, high quality education at Bronx High School of Science, and his experience with black diversity during his undergraduate studies at historically black Howard University in Washington, DC, helped nourish his intellect and political consciousness.[12] Although he was unimpressed with the quality of his New York public school education in junior high, the older Carmichael credited his admission into the Bronx High School of Science as a major stepping-stone in his intellectual development. When he entered the school in 1956, he mingled with a motley crew of high achievers from affluent, middle- and working-class backgrounds. Perhaps a nascent sense of black pride and commitment to racial equality was ignited when Stokely realized that in the fields of math, science, and language arts, he could go toe-to-toe with—or even surpass—his white classmates, "the majority [of whom] were just middle-class kids of college-educated parents, WASP, Jewish, Irish, [and] Italian."[13] According to Carmichael, such exceptional educational experiences in Trinidad and New York empowered him to become one of the most dynamic spokespersons for the cause of civil rights in the US and anticolonialism abroad.

In contrast, in 1939, Shirley Chisholm graduated from junior high and then attended an all-girls high school in the Brooklyn neighborhood Bedford-Stuyvesant. According to Chisholm, half of the students were white.[14] By the time she graduated from Girls High in 1942, Chisholm's academic acumen had earned her scholarships to several prestigious universities, of which she hoped to attend Oberlin College in Ohio or Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York; but she settled on Brooklyn College, because her parents could not afford room and board for the others.[15] Brooklyn College proved to be fertile ground for the Chisholm's maturation, both intellectually and psychologically. So much so, that Chisholm stated, "Brooklyn College changed my life. . . . My fiercely protective parents had given me a sheltered upbringing that was incredible. . . . In school, my intelligence had put me in a special category"; but, at Brooklyn College, Chisholm "began to bump up against more of the world."[16]

Chisholm majored in sociology and minored in Spanish. She joined the debate team and excelled, in spite of her lisp. She chose a career in education,

and worked first as daycare instructor and later as a supervisor and consultant, because, according to Chisholm, "There was no other road open to a young black woman. Law, medicine, even nursing were too expensive, and few schools would admit black men, much less a black woman. Social work was not yet open to blacks in the early 1940s . . . No matter how well I prepared myself, society wasn't going to give me a chance to do much of anything else."[17] Just as Pearl Primus's dream to become a doctor was thwarted by the racism of her time, and Paule Marshall's mother would later urge her to reign in her ambition of becoming a writer to pursue a more practical vocation—working for the phone company—Chisholm also felt the constraints of her race, gender, and class during her college years. In spite of these pernicious forces, Chisholm graduated *cum laude* from Brooklyn College in 1946. She then worked as a teacher's aide at Mt. Calvary Childcare Center in Harlem and earned her master's degree in early childhood education from Columbia University in 1951. What was the source of Chisholm's mental and emotional fortitude as she persevered, forging ahead with her career in the face of racism and sexism? She attributed her educational and professional accomplishments to the formative years that she spent with her siblings, maternal grandmother, and other extended family in Barbados. Chisholm stated,

> Those early years of my life on the island of Barbados gave me the spirit, gave me the spunk that was necessary to challenge all of these age-old traditions. I was never afraid of anything; I was never afraid of anybody. And the same thing today; you're going to hear from me.[18]

On one hand, Carmichael and Chisholm's celebration of their British colonial educational experiences is ironic, considering the radical, antiracist politics that both intellectuals endorsed throughout their political careers. On the other hand, their emphasis on the value of discipline rather than the racist underpinnings of their primary educational experiences is characteristic of immigrant constructions of selfhood in America. It resonated with the widespread belief in the infinite possibilities of America as a meritocracy. Their nostalgic recollections also demonstrate the complexity of their personal and social identities because Chisholm also recognized the irony of the ways of her compatriots' who identified themselves as more British than black. In her autobiography *Unbought and Unbossed*, Chisholm wrote, "The Barbadians are almost more British than the British and are very proud of their heritage. For instance, they brag that on Barbados the slaves were freed before they were on the other islands. Barbados has the highest literacy rate in the Caribbean—94 percent."[19] While Chisholm acknowledged the irony in black Barbadian

celebration of British values, she still defined her own personal success as an outgrowth of the British colonial, no-nonsense approach to reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Victor Robles, a district office administrator for Chisholm, also believed that her Caribbean cultural heritage positively influenced her intellectual and political development. "Shirley Chisholm was a typical West Indian," Robles observed, "I was impressed with this woman—the way she carried herself, her intelligence."[20] Chisholm undoubtedly had a way about herself—a certain savoir faire, which she attributed to her Caribbean-ness, and those around her took note. I, however, interpret Chisholm's intellect and boldness as a personal characteristic cultivated within the context of her family and educational experiences. Still, other members of Chisholm's 1972 campaign bought into positive and negative stereotypes of her Caribbean identity. Comparable to Adam Clayton Powell III's description of his mother Hazel Scott, one of Chisholm's assistants, Bevan Dufty, described Chisholm's sense of pride and even stubbornness as a uniquely West Indian characteristic. In addressing Chisholm's reaction (or lack thereof) to white women colleagues whom she had expected to support her presidential campaign but failed to do so, Dufty stated, "It was kind of a West Indian quality where she really didn't like to ask. She would look at the equation and say, 'Well, Barbara and I are friends; so, she should support me.' It doesn't work that way; it really doesn't."[21] Thus, although Chisholm was undoubtedly outspoken and persuasive, she was too proud to beg for support from some key players. Whether there's any truth to Dufty's claim that the source of Chisholm's pride was her Caribbean-ness or if the attribute was unique to her individual personality, pride did not prevent Chisholm's disappointment when key members of the National Organization of Women waivered in their support for her, and the Congressional Black Caucus failed to endorse her 1972 presidential campaign.[22] This historical context is important. Chisholm's legendary campaign took place only three years before cconomist Thomas Sowell published his controversial thesis about the alleged superior work ethic of Caribbean immigrants compared to American-born blacks; thus, Chisholm's aides' positive assessment of her Caribbean cultural identity foreshadowed scholarly discussions to come.

Chisholm also suggested that Caribbean cultural mores predisposed some immigrants to assume leadership roles in politics and the realm of artistic production. "A surprising number of successful black politicians of our time are of West Indian descent," Chisholm proudly noted, "Thomas Jones, Ruth Goring, William Thompson, and I were all of Barbadian descent. State Senator Walter Stewart of Brooklyn is a Panamanian. So are many prominent blacks elsewhere in politics and the arts."[23] Given her love of literature and music,

Chisholm may have been thinking of Jamaican-born Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay, Trinidadian-born pianist Hazel Scott, or contemporaneous Hollywood heartthrobs Sidney Poitier (Bahamas) and Harry Belafonte (Jamaica). Although Chisholm made concerted efforts to bridge cultural and racial gaps during her political campaigns, she still was not immune from ethnocentric pride.

Chisholm was well aware of cultural clashes among foreign-born and American-born blacks as she recalled overhearing American-born black New Yorkers "grumbling for years, 'They're taking over everything,'" and some even employed cultural slurs: "Why don't those monkeys get back on a banana boat?"[24] Chisholm believed that American-born black resentment against Caribbean immigrants was especially pronounced in New York, since they had immigrated in largest numbers to the metropolis.

Like Richard B. Moore, Shirley Chisholm battled negative stereotypes of Caribbean immigrants who were thought to be pushy and arrogant. But unlike Moore, Chisholm provided some fodder to fan the flames of dissent as she suggested a degree of Barbadian superiority in her autobiography titled *Unbought and Unbossed*. Chisholm wrote, "The Barbadians' drive to achieve and excel is almost an obsession and is a characteristic that other islanders do not share to the same degree. The Barbadians who came to Brooklyn all wanted, and most of them got, the same two things: a brownstone house and a college education for their children."[25] The late-twentieth-century Jamaican-born military leader Colin Powell, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as well as Secretary of State, also suggested a sense of Caribbean superiority in his autobiography as he maintained that his parents' coming of age in Jamaica—a county where black people are the majority—fostered an unparalleled self-esteem and racial pride. Although Powell was born in Harlem, he believed that his parents, Maud and Luther Powell, possessed attributes that were uniquely Jamaican that had a positive impact on him.[26] Being surrounded by so many professional black Jamaicans served as role models of success. In contrast, Richard B. Moore was a unifier to the core. There is no record of his ever portraying Caribbean people as superior to American-born blacks or of his presenting Barbadians as more intellectually advanced than his counterparts from other islands in the Caribbean. He may have easily succumbed to the temptation to discriminate in view of the widespread positive stereotypes of Barbadians.

But just as the early-twentieth-century assessment of Caribbean immigrants as the "Jews of the Black Race" was a double-edged compliment, so was the positive stereotype of Barbadians as particularly literate and intellectual as when some other islander suggested that Barbadian scholastic

aptitude was obtained at the expense of indigenous pride and self-respect. Stokely Carmichael observed in his autobiography that sometimes other islanders interpreted Barbadian intellectual achievement as a sign of their docility and full-scale acceptance of British mores: "Among Caribbean people, the popular, slightly ironic name for Barbados is 'Little Britain,' a title that, however mocking in its inspiration, was accepted by the Bajans with no little pride."[27]

Like Caribbean intellectuals Richard B. Moore, Pearl Primus, and Paule Marshall, Chisholm also underscored a common African heritage to discourage anti–Caribbean sentiments harbored among American-born blacks. Chisholm stated, "It is wrong, because the accident that my ancestors were brought as slaves to the islands while black mainland natives' ancestors were brought as slaves to the States is really not important, compared to the common heritage of *black brotherhood and unity* in the face of oppression that we have."[28] Although Chisholm capitalized on popular notions of black racial solidarity, she still intensely criticized her contemporaries who spoke the language of unity but failed to apply proactive political action to such ideals. Such analysis demonstrates the power that Chisholm's translocal status afforded her. Chisholm's translocal cultural identities allowed her to both assume and criticize numerous social and political cross-sections, which included the interests of participants in the civil rights movement, Black Power, and third-wave feminism.

## Civil Rights, Black Power, and Women's Rights

Chisholm understood the struggle for racial equality and women's rights as inextricably linked. She compared American women's struggles to overcome sexism to the previous political activism that black Americans had waged in attempts to dismantle racial oppression. "It is true that women are second-class citizens, just as black people are," Chisholm suggested, "I want the time to come when we can be as blind to sex as we are to color."[29] Chisholm was not the first to draw this comparison; antebellum white female intellectuals had found much food for thought in exploring similarities between white women's political disenfranchisement and the subaltern position of African slaves in America. But in 1970s New York, Chisholm singularly linked the long-standing political battles against racism and sexism as her personal identity as a black, educated, and outspoken woman was a political statement within itself. Contrary to antebellum eras in which white feminists manipulated the image and words of a black feminist such as Sojourner Truth, the march of

time and the evolution toward political inclusion allowed Chisholm to better control her public image and intellectual legacy.

Chisholm faced the double challenge of sexism and racism throughout her political career, but when weighing the detriment of the two, she deemed sexism to be a greater obstacle to overcome. She experienced a unique type of intraracial sexism from black male constituents and political opponents. As scholar Valerie Smith has shrewdly noted, racism and sexism often interact in complex ways and conspire to restrain black women's social and political agency.[30] "To the black men—even some of those supposedly supporting me—sensitive about female domination," Chisholm recalled, "they were running me down as a bossy female, a would-be matriarch."[31] For Chisholm, this accusation was not only political, but it was also personal. Although she was usually taciturn regarding private matters such as her marriage to Jamaican immigrant Conrad Chisholm, in her autobiography she opened up a bit as she wrote:

> Thoughtless people have suggested that my husband would have to be a weak man who enjoys having me dominate him. They are wrong on both counts. Conrad is a strong, self-sufficient personality, and I do not dominate him. As a matter of fact, a weak man's feelings of insecurity would long since have wrecked a marriage like ours.[32]

On one hand, Chisholm's description of Conrad's persistence in courtship, in spite of her aloofness, and her defense of his honor as a strong man is kind of sweet. On the other hand, as I read her words, I imagine the face of an angry, conservative "gender dictator" perched on Chisholm's shoulder—goading her to write these words. And then I think, "Fight the patriarchy," because it's a shame that she felt like she needed to justify herself.

For some black men, Chisholm's assertiveness brought to mind the negative stereotypes of overbearing black women who populated the pages of prevalent "Culture of Poverty" social scientific literature.[33] At the first National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) conference in 1974, Chisholm observed, "Black women used to be asked, what are you being educated for? You're emasculating the black man. Because of historical circumstances, black women had to develop perseverance and strength—and her reward was to be labeled 'matriarch' by white sociologists. . . . This rhetoric keeps black women hopelessly retarded. Our men are coming forward but our race needs the collective power of black men and black women. We can't be divided by the 'enemy' who tells us black women are keeping black men back. The black women [*sic*] must work side by side with her man."[34] While acknowledging

sexism, Chisholm still aimed to bridge the gender gap to press forward with her progressive political agenda. She was a shrewd and pragmatic politician who knew the language of unity is much more appealing than harping on elements of division.

Although Chisholm enjoyed a greater degree of political freedom than her early twentieth-century counterparts who tried to find a voice within Marcus Garvey's pronatal and hypermasculine regime, Chisholm still battled a new form of black political machismo that grew out of Black Power stylistic models. Chisholm recalled that her Republican opponent and former national chairperson of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), an American-born black man named James Farmer, leveraged such Black Power masculine iconography to his advantage during his congressional campaign. "Farmer's campaign was well oiled; it had money dripping all over it," Chisholm recalled, "He toured the district with sound trucks manned by young dudes with Afros, beating tom-toms: the big, black, male image. He drew the television cameramen like flies, a big national figure, winding up to become New York City's second black congressman (after Adam Clayton Powell II)."[35] This is quite a stunning scene of black male power—replete with romanticized African diasporic demonstrations of physical strength and subsequent public authority. But Farmer's money and masculine political iconography proved to be no match for Chisholm, who became an icon within her own right, coming to represent 1970s women's political empowerment.

## Feminism

Chisholm urged American women of diverse cultural and racial backgrounds to rise up and assert their political voices. Her promotion of women's political empowerment and multiracial political coalitions drastically differed from Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, which epitomized black masculinity and industrialized empowerment as its members aimed to carve out a piece of a capitalistic pie for black Americans. In contrast, Chisholm's constituency included women of all races, as she gained a considerable following among white women feminists and successfully secured the institutional support of the National Organization of Women (NOW). While Paule Marshall focused on the need for black women's voices to be heard and for black women to see reflections of themselves in literature,[36] Chisholm's political appeal was much broader as she encouraged all women, regardless of race, to speak up and to become more politically empowered. She was relentlessly optimistic in her assessment of the future

of cross-cultural feminist politics in America. "We—American women—are beginning to respond to our oppression," Chisholm observed, "While most of us are not yet revolutionaries, we are getting in tune with the cry of the liberation groups."[37]

Chisholm's understanding of women's intellectual and political character, however, was somewhat romanticized, for she suggested that women held a monopoly on good sense and good will. She believed that women's approach to political issues was more sincere, intuitive, and holistic than that of their male counterparts. Chisholm emphasized the need for women to assume steerage of an American political ship that had veered off course by employing nautical metaphors—terms usually considered masculine—and turned them on their head. "Our country is in deep trouble," she admonished, "And we need women; yes, we need women . . . to make their voices heard in policy making and decision-making processes of this nation so as to be able to get this ship of state guided clearly again on a path of sanity."[38] Chisholm's emphatic tone and effective use of repetition inspired pride and pulled at the heartstrings of female constituents as she underscored women's central role in ushering the United States into a brighter and moralistic future.

While Chisholm's use of nautical metaphors, especially her ordination of women captains of America's brighter future, somewhat challenged prevalent stereotypes of women as passive and subservient, she still extended popular definitions of women's work—rearing children and keeping a clean house—into the realm of politics. Chisholm also urged women to run for political office to "start cleaning . . . up" an unjust and corrupt political system, as an extension of her belief in perceptions of the female gender as exceptionally moral and upstanding human beings. In a 1972 publication geared toward young female readers, Chisholm deemed women politicians to be "much more apt to act for the sake of a principle or moral purpose,"[39] than their male counterparts. For Chisholm, "cleaning-up" American politics and steering the nation onto a "path of sanity" would require a reassessment of the United States role in foreign affairs and a revision of government spending—prioritizing American citizens. In a 1973 speech, Chisholm observed, "Our government called off the 'war on poverty' at home while its war abroad went on at an enormous cost in lives and resources."[40] This criticism of the irony in government spending also harked back to Chisholm's arguments about the moral economy of the nation and the need for women to employ their common sense and good will to help the nation.

Chisholm focused on the nurture of children as another woman's role that had political and social utility and gave foundation for the necessary presence of women in government. She linked a profound democratic hope

to the image of America's children—its next generation of leaders, and the proper nurturing of these children by upstanding women citizens. She declared, "I say unequivocally that there is a need for women in America to move out politically to save America's children—to save our children."[41] For Chisholm, "saving America's children" entailed improving daycare services, primary and secondary schools, and healthcare. Chisholm's voice reached a crescendo and was met with great applause. As a former primary school teacher and day care facility administrator, Chisholm spoke from personal convictions and experiential knowledge. The content and delivery of her message emphasized the need for a new era in American politics as she urged women voters to exercise their citizenship rights and fully participate in the experiment in American democracy to right the wrongs committed by war-hungry and elitist male politicians.

In stark contrast to the bellicose and bombastic politics of the war-torn late 1960s and early 1970s, Chisholm proposed a kinder and gentler approach to governing. In numerous speeches, she linked the nonviolent philosophies of Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King to the true character of most women. "The warmth, gentleness, and compassion that are part of the female stereotype are positive human values," Chisholm proposed, "values that are becoming more and more important as the values of our world begin to shatter and fall from our grasp." This passage was a prayer of sorts—that the next generation of young women would use their "female strength"[42] for the greater good of society as a whole. Although Chisholm's celebration of the virtues of female citizens grew out of her own gender essentialist notions, it also was rooted in historical realities. Pacifism was a longstanding tradition among female political activists—from Progressive Era reformist Jane Addams opposing World War I as the first president of the United States Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in 1915, to Manhattan US Representative Bella S. Abzug's vehement opposition to the war in Vietnam.

Although Chisholm's feminist appeal transcended race and attracted a culturally diverse constituency of women, Chisholm still acknowledged the enduring overlap of race and class, and how this social reality shaped white women's political concerns differently than it shaped those of their black counterparts. "It has been generally true that the women's movement has been a white middle-class phenomenon," Chisholm observed. "Black women share many of the same concerns as white ones, including the need for a national day care system and a guarantee of equal pay for equal work, but they have different priorities from white women."[43] Given the disproportionate number of poor black women compared to their white counterparts, Chisholm

characterized black women's concerns as pragmatic and white women's as more ideological.

Chisholm drew upon diverse old and new political philosophies to construct her political identity: feminism, black racial consciousness, post-civil rights multiculturalism, American democracy, humanism, and universalism. She inhabited a unique historical moment, in which the idea that the personal is political and the political is personal resonated with participants in political movements ranging from civil rights and women's rights to gay rights. In this cultural landscape, even the self-presentation of political activists took on new meaning.

## Personal Style and Visual Politics

Shirley Chisholm was meticulous about her physical appearance, she spoke Spanish fluently, and contrary to her prim and proper schoolmarm image, she knew how to tell a bawdy joke and she could dance.[44] Politician Bevan Dufty recalled:

> She was a great dancer. My analogy is she would have been the perfect dance partner to Dr. Huxtable on the *Cosby Show* because she did that very interpretive kind of mood dancing, and she'd have her eyes closed, and would really get into her groove, and she was just a lot of fun. Behind closed doors she could really cuss, and tell salty stories, but at the same time she had a regality about her and a formality about her where we never called her Shirley. We always called her Ms. C or Mrs. C. . . . And her office was wild.[45]

For Chisholm, dancing functioned as a release from the pressures of her political office. She encountered a great deal of racism and sexism—including an assassination attempt that she tried to push to the margins of her memory.[46] Like Adam Clayton Powell II, Chisholm was a celebrity politician in her own right. So, when she went out socially with friends and colleagues, Chisholm would don a wide-brimmed hat and oversized sunglasses to disguise herself to avoid being recognized. But, on the dance floor, she felt free. Pearl Primus would certainly identity with this point: given the pressures of public intellectualism, all activists should practice some form of creative release. Chisholm achieved this release and exhibited the multifaceted nature of her personality on the dance floor. Even at age sixty-one when she retired, *Jet* magazine published a short article titled "Chisholm Tells Retirees She Still Boogies at

61."[47] Chisholm based her sense of self worth on her exceptional intellect and on her vim and vigor. Upon her retirement, she proudly declared, "Very few people can keep up with me."[48]

In addition to her physical vitality and flare on the dance floor, Chisholm also defined her selfhood through her style of dress. She devoted deliberate attention to her physical appearance because she understood that the personal is political and the political is personal. In turn, Chisholm wore smart cat-eyed glasses, Fashion Fair makeup, tailored below-the-knew dresses, fur coats, and occasionally donned a fedora. Her attire mirrored her confidence, intelligence, liveliness, and likeability.

Chisholm's clothing, accessories, and demeanor also reflected her betwixt and between cultural identities and marked her as a participant in a unique moment in American political history. Her eyeglasses resembled those worn by the slain militant civil rights activist Malcolm X, one of her political role models, and she sported chic and neatly tailored dresses often made of fabric with bold geometric-shaped prints, echoing the mod styles of the time. She was remarkably poised, well spoken, and self-assured. Even her omnipresent wigs hint at her multi-layered cultural identity. She did not wear an Afro or the manufactured coif popularized by the predominantly younger prominent "Black Power" activists engaged in radical identity politics, such as Angela Davis, Kathleen Cleaver, or Assata Shakur. Nor did she wear the longer, straighter, flowing hairstyles that were prevalent in the 1970s. Chisholm's wigs most often consisted of large, piled-high curls resembling 1950s bouffant hairdos and conveying a sense of wholesomeness that was reinforced by her daycare center and schoolteacher professional roots.

Chisholm's carefully chosen attire, signature wigs, and slender physique rendered an image of the quintessential lady, perhaps to salve the reception of her aggressive rhetorical style and hardline pragmatism. Chisholm stood—historically and existentially—as a bridge between previous and present eras of hypermasculine black racial uplift agendas posed by other Caribbean–born men like Garvey and Carmichael of the Black Panthers and a new age of cross-cultural and multivocal politics. According to congressional aide, administrative assistant, and friend Joyce Bolden, Chisholm loved for her to apply makeup and assist in the selection of wigs. Caribbean New Yorker Wesley "Mac" Holder, Chisholm's mentor and adviser, was not enthusiastic about the level of care that Chisholm took regarding her physical appearance.[49] Perhaps Holder believed that Chisholm's ample wigs and glamorous jewelry might detract from her formidable intellect and the seriousness of the political issues at hand. Chisholm disagreed. She combined the political

influence of her father Charles, a true organic intellectual, with the fashion sense of her mother Ruby, an excellent seamstress, and presented herself as a smart, mature, and politically savvy woman.

Chisholm's political debut occurred when personal style was increasingly political. Her fashion sense echoed broader aesthetic trends even in the media. Black American female sitcom characters such as the title role of *Julia*, the elegant and competent nurse played by Diahann Carroll; Louise (or "Weezie"), wife of George Jefferson in *The Jeffersons*; and even project-dwelling Wilona of *Good Times* all wore similar wigs. These characters were African American women of various social and economic backgrounds who all represented a more mature generation of the "New Black Woman," being in their late thirties and older and balancing outspoken personalities with style and grace.

The fullness and height of Chisholm's wigs evoked glamorous images of Motown "girl groups," recalling the elaborate wigs worn by Diana Ross and the Supremes. Keeping with this theme, Chisholm appeared on the cover of *Jet* magazine in 1972.[50] She wore a salt-and-pepper wig with large curls, enhanced eyebrows, cat-eye frames, subtle blush, mauve lipstick, dangly gold earrings, a coat with a fur collar, and a slight smile. Chisholm looked directly into the camera, engaging the viewer head-on, conveying an image of refinement and seriousness, but also approachability. In numerous issues of *Ebony* magazine throughout the 1970s, Chisholm appeared in similar attire. Often standing beside or shaking hands with young black inner-city potential constituents, Chisholm's fur collars and coats—whether faux or real, herringbone print poncho, large wigs, and church-lady hats sometimes struck a stark contrast with the casual dress of those around her. Chisholm was forty-eight years old when she campaigned to become the Democratic Party's presidential candidate, and even her self-presentation characterized her as part of a slightly older generation's approach to black consciousness and feminism at the time.

Although Chisholm's physical appearance and pragmatic politics sharply contrasted with the more Africa-centered and militant stylized politics of the Black Panther Party, the organization still strongly endorsed her. The national chairperson Bobby Seale considered Chisholm to be "the best social critic of America's injustices to run for President from whatever party." And when some of Chisholm's supporters encouraged her to shun any association with the group's radicalism and to renounce the Black Panther's backing, she "flatly refused," because as American citizens the party members were free to support whomever they chose. Chisholm had intimate knowledge of intraracial sexism prevalent among black public and private communities at the time; she was especially "gratified . . . that the Panthers succeeded in rising above

sex prejudice, something that many blacks find difficult," for they supported Chisholm based on the integrity of her "positions and [her] programs, without regard to [her] being female."[51]

Chisholm's self-presentation conveyed her personal pride and demonstrated her broader participation in a significant historical moment. Her political presence represented a highpoint and merger of civil rights activism for racial equality and social justice and American feminist struggles against institutional and quotidian sexism, replete with the accompanying generational and cultural clashes. In many ways, Chisholm stood at a political and existential crossroads during the 1970s, as she articulated her identity as a feminist, as a black American, and as a progressive politician and human being—committed to improving the plight of everyday working-class Americans, of all races and cultural backgrounds, whom she often referred to as simply "the people."

## "Multiculturalism"

Shirley Chisholm's translocal status allowed her to speak from a position of experience and power to a broad ranging group of constituents. Chisholm's intense intellect, gumption, and political savvy combined to draw a broad range of constituents including women and young first-time voters of all races as well as members of the working classes and black Americans in general. Shirley Downs, a white feminist who served as a legislative aide during Chisholm's 1972 campaign, would later recall Chisholm's deliberate efforts to bridge cultural differences as she appealed to a somewhat eclectic constituency from diverse cultural backgrounds. "She would talk to any group. She didn't care if you were old, if you were young, if you were black, if you were white, if you were Hispanic. This was a maiden voyage."[52] Like Chisholm, Downs highlighted the newness of Chisholm's presence in the political arena. While Garvey's early twentieth-century campaign focused on racial uplift through black-nationalist forms of cooperative economics and social segregation, the political momentum of and identity politics associated with the civil rights and feminist movements allowed Chisholm to engage with a fundamentally integrationist mission and find a degree of success as she gained the most delegates for a female presidential until Hilary Clinton's 2008 campaign to represent the Democratic Party.

Chisholm's political success lay in her grassroots appeal as she launched a variegated, no-frills approach to New York politics and drew an extremely culturally diverse constituency. In her 1970 autobiography titled *Unbought*

*and Unbossed*, Chisholm recalled, "During the week I went to endless little house parties and teas given by women. In the black neighborhood I ate chitlins, in the Jewish neighborhood bagels and lox, in the Puerto Rican neighborhood *arroz con pollo*. . . . Sometimes a woman would tell me that she would like to have a party for me, but she couldn't afford it, and I would provide the money. I went to all kinds of homes. I wasn't interested in style."[53] Chisholm welcomed such encounters as she, in many ways, epitomized Brooklyn residents' polyglot political voices throughout her Congressional campaign. In her 1973 autobiography, *The Good Fight*, Chisholm recalled, "There were ordinary black and white, Jewish, WASP, and Spanish-surnamed citizens here and there who kept telling me, 'You're what this country needs.'"[54] Again, an extremely culturally diverse group of supporters embraced Chisholm because the newness of her political presence and voice was particularly refreshing at a time of upheaval. The United States was still reeling from the cultural wars of the 1960s, issues of inner-city poverty, and the catastrophes of Vietnam. Chisholm's straightforward speech and commitment to everyday people served as a counterpoint to many of her contemporaries who seemed to be out of touch with "the people."

Like Jamaican-born Unitarian minister Ethelred Brown, Shirley Chisholm presented herself as an extremely dignified and competent intellectual who just happened to be a member of a socially constructed racial group that was deemed inferior. She advanced humanist and universalist notions of the fundamental equality of all human beings, but her rhetoric of egalitarianism focused on shared biological traits, common desires, and democratic ideals instead of Unitarian theology. Chisholm suggested that underneath the epidermis, all human beings possess the same organs and biological systems, and these biological commonalities demonstrate broader existential and political equalities. Although Chisholm capitalized on the burgeoning rhetoric of multiculturalism, mainly the emphasis on mutual cultural respect, she also employed arguments of biological essentialism to underscore the basic commonalities of all human beings, regardless of race. "Take away an accident of pigmentation of a thin layer of our outer skin," Chisholm intellectualized, "and there is no difference between me and anyone else. All we want is for that trivial difference to make no difference."[55] Chisholm echoed the wish of Martin Luther King's famous 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, for they both hoped for a day when everyone would be judged by the "content of their character" instead of the "color of their skin."

Chisholm's cross-cultural understanding of "the people" also included broader appeals that transcended race and cultural differences and were

rooted in humanist and universalist philosophies. When contemplating racial bias and sexism, she posed the rhetorical question: "My God, what do we want? What does any human being want?"[56] Chisholm recognized that Americans of color were disproportionately poor in comparison to their white counterparts, but she emphasized their common desires for quality healthcare and public schools. She called for unity among American citizens in order to realize these common goals: "All of us in this country today regardless of our particular sex realize that we've got to come together in order to make the republic work for everyone regardless of race, creed, or color."[57]

Chisholm also tapped into language and concepts of intelligence and equality based in the modern human sciences and universalist understandings of spirituality to further her arguments for political equality. To cover all bases, Chisholm made intellectual and moral appeals to her constituents, urging them to recognize the unique abilities and fundamental equalities of their fellow citizens. "There is no psychological test as yet that indicates that man has a superior brain to women or vice versa," Chisholm proposed. "The fact of the matter is moralistically that the talents that we have are talents that have been given to us, if you will, by God and that it is our responsibility to utilize these talents . . . in a creative and constructive manner."[58] Chisholm relied on Christian liberalism to prove that women citizens possessed valuable skills, which could be put to good use for the greater good of their local communities and the nation.

Although Chisholm expressed pride in her cultural, racial, and gendered identity, she also employed humanist and universalist speech to transcend these socially constructed categories. While appropriating political rhetoric from the very recent civil rights movement and ongoing feminist activism, Chisholm self-consciously presented herself as a spokesperson for all working-class people, regardless of race and gender. "I am not the candidate of black America, although I am black and proud. I am not the candidate of the women's movement, although I am a woman and I am equally proud of that," Chisholm pronounced in 1972 at the Concord Baptist Church. "I am the candidate of the *people of America*."[59]

Chisholm pursued the politically astute path of celebrating her multidimensional identities as a child of immigrants, as a black American, and as a woman, while emphasizing her American-ness to appeal to the broadest constituency possible. In contrast, fellow Brooklyn-born, Barbadian-American intellectual Paule Marshall also embraced her multilayered identities as a child of immigrants, as a black American, and as a woman, but throughout

her career she has emphasized her African-ness in her literature and interviews. While Chisholm's political presence signaled a new era in American democracy, Paule Marshall's focus on Barbadian vernacular in her writing may be seen as a continuation of artistic activism within the same tradition of Pearl Primus's use of dance to promote mutual cultural respect.