

# More than a Contract

## *Black Self-Determination and People's Assemblies in Jackson, Mississippi*

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The Jackson City Council's special meeting on February 24, 2022, lasted just under fifty minutes. Called amid a simmering dispute over a garbage collection contract between Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba's administration and four of the seven members of the council, the proceedings were confused from the start.<sup>i</sup> An order was approved to discontinue a declared state of emergency regarding residential waste collection, then disapproved, then heavily amended to change the prospective vendor.

About forty-five minutes into the meeting, the mayor's chief of staff, Dr. Safiya Omari, raised her hand to speak. "It is clear that what is taking place here is a whole bunch of maneuvering and disingenuous statements to ensure that Waste Management [one of the bidders] gets a contract," she said. "Richard's [Disposal, Inc.] was the lowest bidder. They won the bid. . . . [M]aybe you're not trying to fight the mayor, but you are trying to subvert the process of bidding."<sup>1</sup> The meeting rapidly devolved into a shouting match between Omari and Ward 3 Councilman Kenneth Stokes, who reminded the chief of staff that "Nobody elected you to [expletive]!"<sup>2</sup>

At the mayor's weekly press conference on February 28, Omari made a statement: "As chief of staff to the mayor, my job is to move this city forward for its residents, and that requires that I speak the truth to the people. . . . I will not be silent because someone can't handle or doesn't want me to speak the truth."<sup>3</sup>

### Self-determination

Growing up in Shreveport, Louisiana, amid the boycotts, demonstrations, and state violence of the civil rights era, Omari was curious about what drove people to behave the way they did. She recalled, "As a little girl, you know how in Black middle-class families you always had a set of encyclopedias . . . on a bookcase in the living room? I picked up the Psychology encyclopedia and decided to read, and from that point forward, I knew that's what I wanted to do."<sup>4</sup> Omari went on to get her PhD in experimental social psychology, studying the effects of identity-based discrimination on individuals.

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<sup>i</sup> Chokwe Antar Lumumba was the second Mayor Lumumba in Jackson. His father, Chokwe Lumumba, had previously served in the role. The elder Lumumba, born Edwin Finley Taliaferro in Detroit in 1947, changed his name in 1969 to highlight his African ancestry, as did many members of the National Afrikan Independence Movement. He took the name Lumumba in honor of Patrice Lumumba, the assassinated prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the name Chokwe in honor of the Chokwe people of Central and Southern Africa. For clarity, this case refers to Chokwe Antar Lumumba and Rukia Lumumba, two of the first Mayor Lumumba's children, as Antar Lumumba and Rukia Lumumba.

In 1980, while Omari was earning her master’s degree and working with the Center for Black Survival in Los Angeles, Chokwe Lumumba, a Detroit-based civil rights attorney and co-founder of the National Black Human Rights Coalition was invited to speak at a fundraiser for Geronimo Ji-Jaga Pratt, a Black Panther Party leader framed for murder by the FBI.<sup>5</sup> Like Omari, Lumumba had chosen his profession with advancing the cause of Black self-determination in mind.<sup>ii</sup> He viewed the matter through the prism of international law: “Malcolm [X] put it real clearly: . . . Our attachment to the American state has been involuntary, and we have never made an informed choice . . . [D]o we want to become part of America? Do we want to go back to Africa or some other place? Or do we want to have a nation of our own?”<sup>6</sup> These questions drove the New Afrikan Independence Movement (NAIM), in which Lumumba was a leader. Omari and Lumumba became fast friends and collaborators.

Just as Lumumba looked outside US law and embraced international human rights as a legal basis for fighting racial injustice and defending political prisoners, Omari looked outside of the individual and embraced the formation of social identity as her lens for understanding and advancing self-determination. “[F]or Black people,” she explained, “traditional psychology and the way it was practiced was just not gonna get us to where we needed to be, wasn’t gonna facilitate the healing, facilitate the building, facilitate the self-determination of people.”<sup>7</sup> This outlook helped make Omari an effective organizer and powerful voice in the NAIM.

## Free the Land!

Jackson, sometimes called “the crossroads of the South,” was established as Mississippi’s state capital in 1821. The city was named for Andrew Jackson, who became the seventh president of the US in 1829. As a military commander, Jackson had defeated British and Indigenous fighters in the war of 1812, and subsequently used his reputed strength and ruthlessness to coerce Indigenous people to cede land across the deep south. In Mississippi, Choctaw land was sold cheap to white farmers, creating a booming market for enslaved Africans and their descendants.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Mississippi was the cotton production capital of the world, and enslaved workers represented 55 percent of the state’s population.<sup>8</sup> When, in the aftermath of the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment outlawed enslavement, Mississippi’s new (all-white) state legislature moved to codify white control over the Black majority, establishing the first “Black Codes”—predecessors of the Jim Crow laws that dictated segregation and upheld white supremacy across the Southern states.<sup>iii</sup> Black Mississippians enfranchised by the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 gained a measure of political, economic, and social freedom, but widespread anti-Black violence and the persecution and killing of Black leaders quickly erased those gains. Between 1877 and 1950, Mississippi was ground zero for a century-long campaign of terror against African Americans, with white lynch mobs murdering at least 581 Black citizens—more than any other state.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>ii</sup> In African American culture, self-determination was one of the seven principles of Kwanzaa established by scholar Maulana Karenga; it refers to the responsibility of both individuals and the collective African diaspora to “define, defend, and develop ourselves” (<https://www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org/kujichagulia.html>).

<sup>iii</sup> In 1865, post-Civil War, Mississippi’s Black Codes used a variety of mechanisms to maintain white supremacy and keep Black citizens in coercive labor conditions. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments outlawed these codes, but the end of Reconstruction in 1877 allowed Jim Crow laws to proliferate.

Mississippi's brutal history and dogged opposition to any effort to afford Black citizens opportunity made it a hub (albeit a dangerous one) for civil rights organizers, who formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party during the "Freedom Summer" of 1964. In 1966, it was from Mississippi that Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Chairman Stokely Carmichael called upon Black Americans to claim their power: "We have to organize ourselves to speak from a position of strength. . . We have to organize ourselves to speak for each other. That's Black Power. We have to move to control the economics and politics of our community."<sup>10</sup> (See Appendix 1 for select events in the history of Mississippi race relations.)

The ambition of many in the NAIM was to establish an independent Black nation in the Southern states—to "free the land" for the descendants of the enslaved people who had tended it for more than two centuries. Accordingly, in 1971, a group of NAIM leaders moved the headquarters of their nascent nation-state, the Republic of New Afrika (RNA), from Detroit to Jackson. (See Appendix 1 for the origin story of the call to "free the land!") Lumumba, arguing that a revolution without a mass base of support would not have credibility to lead, founded the National African People's Organization (NAPO) in 1984, working with Omari and other organizers across the US to build grassroots support for the NAIM.<sup>11</sup> In the late 1980s, the call to "free the land" drew Omari, Lumumba, and their families to Jackson. Their first organizing effort there was a protest against a Ku Klux Klan march.

Jackson's population in 1970 was about 40 percent Black. Twenty years later—between white flight and an influx of Black families, workers, and students in search of economic opportunity or, like Omari and Lumumba, solidarity in the struggle for self-determination—it had a majority Black population, at 55 percent. NAPO leaders in the city established the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM) to mobilize "a revolutionary Black political party that could bring the mass struggles into a unified political program" in 1990.<sup>12</sup> It would be another seven years before Jackson elected its first Black mayor.

## The Jackson People's Assembly

As Jackson's Black majority grew, so did its representation in city government, but most elected officials steered clear of rhetoric associated with Black power and the NAIM. Kamau Franklin, an Atlanta-based organizer and attorney, observed, "Moderate Black elected officials who are beholden to the Democratic Party . . . dominate the southern Black population."<sup>13</sup> As Jordan Jefferson, a longtime Jackson resident and activist, saw it: "Nobody has plans. Nobody has an agenda. Folks just want to talk all day."<sup>14</sup>

Whether these were fair characterizations of Jackson's political class or not, a steep population decline beginning in 1980 eroded the city's tax base, widening the gap between haves and have-nots and leaving precious few resources to address growing problems with infrastructure, crime, economic development, food access, and environmental management. All the while, the state capitol and the governor's mansion sat in the heart of downtown, well-maintained and manicured, flying the state flag with its stars and bars.<sup>iv</sup> Blocks away, the remains of the Farish Street commercial district—where Black entrepreneurs and professionals had kept shop and entertainers like Redd Foxx, Louis Armstrong, Lena

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<sup>iv</sup> The Mississippi state flag featured the Confederate battle flag until January of 2021, when the state adopted a new flag following decades of protest.

Horne, and Cab Calloway had once thrilled audiences—stood overgrown with weeds, making the disinvestment and division plain.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina barreled into the Gulf Coast, killing more than 1,000 residents and displacing over a million people, with Black populations suffering disproportionately.<sup>15</sup> Lumumba, Omari, and other MXGM organizers mobilized the community to support grieving neighbors and refugees, spearheading the Mississippi Disaster Relief Coalition. “It was the first humanitarian crisis that we’d responded to as community organizers,” Omari explained. “Even though we said we were human rights activists, Katrina really brought that to the forefront in our work.”<sup>16</sup>

Drawing inspiration from historical precedents in both African American and Indigenous Latin American communities, the coalition created “people’s assemblies” to assess needs, provide a space for sharing stories, mobilize mutual aid, and organize political action. Omari recalled, “We learned a lot from the organizing around Katrina about how people’s voices had to be heard and how sometimes as activists who have a particular political ideology, you’re not in tune with the basic needs of the very people that you’re supposed to be organizing and fighting for.” She and other MXGM organizers in Jackson held onto this lesson, establishing the Jackson People’s Assembly (JPA) as a vehicle of “Black self-determination and autonomous political authority of the oppressed peoples and communities in Jackson.”<sup>17</sup>

The JPA organized mass gatherings to deliberate and decide on strategies, action plans, and timelines.<sup>18</sup> Assemblies were designed to effect social change through both “self-organized and executed social projects” that helped meet residents’ needs and pressure campaigns “on the government and the forces of economic exploitation.”<sup>19</sup> A People’s Task Force led the organizing and administrative work, setting strategy, timelines, and agendas and overseeing committee work that grew out of the mass assemblies. (See Appendix 2 for an overview of the JPA.) Through the JPA, MXGM organizers kept alive the NAIM’s vision of Jackson and surrounding counties in the Mississippi Delta as the future site of “a socialist, majority-Black, eco-focused model society.”<sup>20</sup>

In the fall of 2008, MXGM members encouraged Lumumba to run for city council in Jackson. He was initially reluctant, but he was a pragmatist: “[N]othing could be more of an oxymoron than a ‘revolutionary lawyer,’ because the law itself is a reactionary thing in the United States . . . But that doesn’t mean . . . that you can’t do all you can in order to change the situation.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, he was a loyal soldier for the movement. He ran for a city council seat in Ward 2 and won.

## Mayor Chokwe Lumumba, the Jackson-Kush Plan, and the 1 Percent Tax

Lumumba began his service as a council member in 2009 and brought every consequential decision to the Ward 2 People’s Assembly. Ward 2 resident Halima Olufemi attended her first Assembly after meeting Lumumba at church, and she quickly became involved in committee work: “We wanted people to understand what it meant to govern themselves and to hold elected officials accountable, so we developed committees,” she explained, including a church committee (“because people in our communities are deeply rooted in church and utilize those spaces for meetings”), an education committee, a legal committee, and a constituent services committee. “We would identify issues concerning Ward 2 residents by going to home-owners associations meetings and/or city council

meetings,” said Olufemi. “We would take [residents’] complaints and follow them until the end to make sure they were being dealt with fairly and that the work was getting done.”<sup>22</sup>

In 2012, the JPA Task Force and MXGM published the Jackson-Kush<sup>v</sup> Plan: a political platform focused on institutionalizing people’s assemblies, building “a broad-based solidarity economy,” and establishing a bench of progressive political candidates in Jackson and surrounding counties.<sup>23</sup> The document outlined MXGM’s intention to run Lumumba for mayor and another MXGM member, June Hardwick, for city council in Ward 7, which included the white enclave of Belhaven. Omari, who was teaching and running the Southern Institute for Mental Health Advocacy Research and Training at Jackson State University, stepped up to manage Lumumba’s mayoral campaign.

Lumumba never shied away from his history with the NAIM, but he and Omari understood that he would be mayor for all Jackson residents and delivered a message of unity. His campaign slogan, “one city, one aim, one destiny,”<sup>vi</sup> conveyed his intention to “blend these populations into a struggle forward.”<sup>24</sup> As mayor, he would hold quarterly people’s assemblies across the city to “educate, motivate, and organize” Jacksonians.<sup>25</sup> His opponent in the Democratic primary was a thirty-five-year-old Black businessman named Jonathan Lee, who campaigned on his ability to make “people of all backgrounds feel comfortable at the table.”<sup>26</sup>

Lumumba won a run-off against Lee by nine points in May and sailed to victory with 85 percent of the vote in the general election on June 4, 2013.<sup>vii</sup> Omari co-chaired his transition team and was the obvious choice to serve as his chief of staff, though she felt some ambivalence about taking the job. In city government, she knew there would be uncomfortable compromises. “It’s hard to compromise when you think you’re right. I’m right, of course,” she said, chuckling. “That’s that story.” The pair got to work building a cabinet and working up a budget, and the national organizer for MXGM, Kali Akuno, was appointed director of special projects and external funding.

The challenges they faced in these new roles were daunting. Economic indicators that had lagged for decades were trending in the wrong direction.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the city was struggling to provide the most basic services. Jackson’s water infrastructure was on the brink of collapse, requiring at least \$400 million worth of repairs under the terms of an Environmental Protection Agency consent decree. At the time Lumumba took office, the city had issued a bond to pay German conglomerate Siemens \$90 million for more accurate and efficient water meters and a new billing system that promised at least a 30 percent return on investment over the next fifteen years, but that was only a partial solution to total infrastructure expenses expected to run well over \$1 billion.<sup>28</sup> To raise additional funds for infrastructure, Omari and Lumumba organized close to a dozen assemblies to rally public support for a proposed 1 percent sales tax, which had stalled due to concerns about local control over the funds.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>v</sup> “Kush” referenced the Kingdom of Kush, an ancient civilization along the southern portion of the Nile River and signaled the intention of the JPA and MXGM to build a base of power across the “Kush region” of Mississippi, comprising eighteen contiguous counties along the Mississippi River with predominantly Black populations. (*Jackson Rising*, p. 324.)

<sup>vi</sup> This slogan was an adaptation of the slogan of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association.

<sup>vii</sup> Hardwick won just a quarter of the vote in the Ward 7 primary.

On January 14, 2014, nine out of ten voters approved the tax in a referendum, a success beyond anything the new administration had dared hope for.<sup>viii</sup>

A little over a month later, Lumumba called his son and namesake, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, complaining of chest pain. He died of a heart attack in the hospital later that afternoon, leaving the city, Omari, and his family reeling. On March 9, mourners packed the convention center for a five-hour “home-going” and celebration of Lumumba’s life. Omari addressed the crowd: “This man, that people thought was too divisive, was able to bring every segment of this city together.” Former Mississippi governor William Winter agreed: “Based on the stereotypes this old white man had formed . . . I thought that he would divide our city. I was wrong.”<sup>30</sup> Two of Lumumba’s children, Antar and Rukia Lumumba, spoke of his fierce love for the people. “Chokwe Lumumba was love,” said Antar. “My father lives in the people’s struggle, and he will never die. My father lives in me.”<sup>31</sup>

## Jackson Rising

Antar Lumumba, who had followed his father into the legal profession, was thirty years old. Though he had long resisted the idea of running for office himself, he recalled his father’s frequent reminder that “sometimes the movement requires that you give of yourself and do something you didn’t envision as part of your plan.”<sup>32</sup> While waiting, grief-stricken, for his sister to arrive from New York, Antar Lumumba resolved to run for mayor.

On the eve of the April 22, 2014, special election, speaking haltingly, he appeared on the local news to make his case to voters: “We want you to consider these characteristics when you return to the voting booth: integrity, good judgment, courage. You need leadership that is willing to put the people before the politics.”<sup>33</sup> Antar Lumumba lost the special election to Tony Yarber, a thirty-six-year-old Black pastor and city council member who benefited from strong turnout in majority white wards.<sup>34</sup>

A few weeks later, in early May, Jackson State hosted the three-day “Jackson Rising New Economies Conference” as planned under Mayor Lumumba. The conference “brought together cooperative members, developers, and specialists to train, exchange development strategies, and coordinate local, regional, and national movements for cooperative development.”<sup>35</sup> In her address to the crowd, Omari highlighted the need for city leaders to work with the people “to transform government from a system of oppression into a system that served the people,” and reminded conference attendees of the late mayor’s maxim: “If you don’t love the people, you’ll eventually betray the people.”<sup>36</sup>

Kali Akuno outlined the administration’s unrealized ambition to advance a cooperative economy and “to transform how contracts were structured, what they prioritized, what they incentivized, who was incentivized and what they could do. Change the procurement: who we bought from and why.”<sup>37</sup> Echoing Omari’s message that city government had a role to play but required the people’s participation, Akuno explained, “The government can’t run [worker-owned cooperatives]. It won’t build them, but it can set the table.”<sup>38</sup> With a new administration moving into city hall, Omari returned to

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<sup>viii</sup> Lumumba had negotiated with the chamber of commerce for mayoral approval of its nominees to an oversight board, alleviating concerns about local control.

academia and Akuno started an organization called Cooperation Jackson as an incubator for new cooperative enterprises.

Under Mayor Yarber, city hall by and large reverted to business as usual. During the special election, the state legislature had proposed new exemptions for the city's infrastructure tax. The JPA Task Force held an assembly to rally opposition, but the Yarber administration did not participate and accepted legislation making the tax retroactive as a "trade-off."<sup>39</sup> Without a foothold in city government, leaders in MXGM, Cooperation Jackson, and the JPA struggled to sustain momentum following the Jackson Rising conference. Organizers tussled over priorities and strategy.

Foreshadowing the conflict that would blow up in the city council in early 2022, an effort by Cooperation Jackson to join a Black-owned recycling company and bid on the city's recycling contract was, according to Akuno, "undercut by the maneuvers of . . . Waste Management, and how it manipulated the city's waste hauling contract under the administration of Tony Yarber."<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, the water meters installed by Siemens subcontractors were causing widespread billing errors and stymying collection.

As the city turned its attention to the next election cycle, MXGM once again threw its support behind Antar Lumumba, urging him to lean into his "radical" roots. At a candidates' forum in March of 2017, Lumumba's response to a pointed question about whether he "is going to be an anti-white mayor, and push away white folks," received raucous applause: "Martin Luther King was a radical. Medgar Evers was a radical. Jesus *Christ* was a radical . . . If you look outside these doors and you see a need for change, then you should all be radical."<sup>41</sup> In the May 2 Democratic primary, Yarber, facing sexual harassment complaints and scrutiny for alleged contract steering, received just five percent of the vote. Antar Lumumba's candidacy had the support of 55 percent.<sup>42</sup> On June 6, Antar won 94 percent of the vote in the general election.

## "The Most Radical City on the Planet"

The new Mayor Lumumba asked Omari to serve as his chief of staff, as she had for his father, and she agreed. "She's in that role, one, to offer some protection and support to decrease the stress of the mayor," said Rukia Lumumba. "And she's there to also be a liaison, to help offer some understanding of what it means to actually be in these governing spaces and to not always be able to push for more radical action."<sup>43</sup> She and Omari both saw engaging the people in decision making as the key to change: "My father said in the eighties, 'We don't enter office to do business as usual. We don't enter office to compromise. We enter office to reconstruct the office and to develop something new.'" Three days after his election, Mayor Antar Lumumba spoke at a national gathering of political progressives: "In Mississippi, we've always been at the bottom. We have to decide that we're going to rescue ourselves. . . . So we've made the decision that we're going to be the most radical city on the planet. We're going to make certain that we change the whole scope of electoral politics."<sup>44</sup>

This would mean, at minimum, engaging with residents and organizers to help rebuild the infrastructure of the JPA while simultaneously rebuilding and repairing the city's physical infrastructure and protecting its often-tenuous authority over its assets and institutions. At his inauguration, the mayor asked attendees to pledge a "people's oath" to participate in the city's governance and "faithfully serve as a

citizen.”<sup>45</sup> Resurrecting the JPA fell to a group called the Democratic Visioning Committee—co-chaired by Rukia Lumumba and veteran MXGM organizer Akil Bakari—which invited the community to “communicate priorities, and speak directly to city officials.”<sup>46</sup> Omari was clear, however, that the JPA had to be an entity unto itself. “We didn’t want it to come from government,” she said, “simply because we felt that we might have some kind of undue influence on who shows up and how they respond. We wanted to make sure that we heard the authentic voices of the people.” The mayor’s first strategic planning document, based on the priorities identified during the Visioning Committee’s assemblies, promised to build a “Dignity Economy” in the city of Jackson by promoting health, affordable homes in safe neighborhoods, a thriving educational system, a growing tax base with occupational opportunities, and a city that is open and welcoming to visitors.

To some who had invested in the promise of radical change, this sounded like a capitulation. For Akuno and others at Cooperation Jackson, the kind of social movement needed to realize the vision outlined in the Jackson-Kush plan had to be bigger than—and might be impossible to reconcile with—Jackson city politics. Citing “irreconcilable differences” with MXGM and city hall on the best approach for achieving their shared aims, Akuno and Cooperation Jackson severed ties in 2018.<sup>ix</sup> The same year, Rukia Lumumba launched the nonprofit People’s Advocacy Institute (PAI) to “partner with community members. . . and together develop new policies and practices that prevent harm, address oppression, and foster self-determination and a more unbiased system.”<sup>47</sup> PAI became the new institutional home for the JPA (still an initiative of the MXGM) and served as a planning base for community-led solutions. The JPA worked closely with the administration in 2019, organizing educational assemblies to lay the groundwork for a “people’s budget” and creating a celebratory “Jackson Love Fest” at a centrally located park with food trucks, local performers, and children’s activities. “The dignity that comes with being able to come together helps people emotionally, physically,” said Omari, “and it makes them feel a part of community and want to build community.”

### “Difficult in Almost Every Conceivable Way”

“The plan for 2020 was to strengthen our assembly infrastructure by ensuring that we were having assemblies in each ward, that we facilitated our participatory budgeting process, and that we really increased participation,” said Rukia Lumumba. To boost participation, she and fellow JPA organizers also planned to build on the success of Love Fest with a series of festivals that would show residents that the Assembly was “more than just a place to talk, but a place to engage and really build community.” If city council members could see their own constituents represented in the JPA, perhaps they would embrace and work with ward-based assemblies like her father had as Ward 2 council member.

COVID-19 disrupted these plans. A core of fifty or so JPA volunteers hit the ground as soon as the mayor issued a stay-at-home order, delivering food and supplies. By mid-summer 2020, the pandemic was killing two to three Hinds County residents a day.<sup>48</sup> Brooke Floyd, an organizer with PAI who was working for a nonprofit serving Jackson children at the time, reflected on the extreme difficulties they faced. “The system was dead set against us. . . . There were food deserts, so when everything shut

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<sup>ix</sup> Cooperation Jackson remained in the city to continue pursuing their vision on their own terms and held their own people’s movement assemblies in alignment with the practices of the World Social Forum.



down, they had to go even farther. There was a lack of public transportation. Their parents, the jobs that they worked were the essential jobs, so they had to still go to work, and they were not covered.”<sup>49</sup>

COVID, however, was only the beginning of what the first two years of the 2020s had in store for Jackson. In February 2021, freezing temperatures hit the South, and Jackson’s water infrastructure collapsed. More than eighty water mains burst, leaving parts of the city without access to clean water for up to six weeks. “Life has been quite difficult for our residents,” said the mayor, “in almost every conceivable way.”<sup>50</sup> The governor and lieutenant governor pointed fingers at city leaders for inaction and at Jackson residents for not paying their water bills.<sup>x</sup> “It has been the history of the city of Jackson to not have support which is commensurate with the support that the city of Jackson provides to the state of Mississippi,” said Mayor Lumumba. “[M]any of our properties are not taxable, and we provide services to the state such as . . . water, with no payment for water bills.”<sup>51</sup> Residents were without water for three weeks before the governor declared a state of emergency in the city. City workers, community groups, and JPA volunteers did their best to fill the gap.

The hits kept coming. In May 2021, a tornado dropped trees on homes in several Jackson neighborhoods. In July, flash floods coursed through downtown. In August, Hurricane Ida slammed the Gulf Coast, sending hundreds of evacuees into Jackson. On top of these disasters, gun violence was spiking. “There’s about eight different issues that are what I call the last straw,” said Ward 5 Councilman Vernon Hartley.<sup>52</sup> “When you get a gun shot in your house, it’s like, ‘Okay, that’s it. I’m out.’”

Only two candidates contested Mayor Antar Lumumba in the 2021 Democratic primary, and he won easily, but the wave of grassroots support that initially swept him into office was more subdued the second time around. Voter participation dropped by 25 percent, and he received just 69 percent of the vote.<sup>53</sup>

## The Politics of Picking Up the Trash

While Omari and Antar Lumumba grappled with how to stem rising crime and shore up the city’s infrastructure, the city council’s new president, Ward 5 council member Virgi Lindsay, moved council meeting times from evenings to mornings and restricted public comment. Rukia Lumumba saw this as an effort to dodge accountability to the JPA and other community voices. Although the council president sometimes aligned with the administration on matters of policy, a slim majority of council members routinely did not. “What we tend to see,” said Rukia Lumumba, “is that whichever way the mayor is moving, there are four city council members that vote in the opposite direction.” (See Appendix 3 for information on city council members and their wards.)

In this tense environment, the city was pursuing a new contract for solid waste collection. For more than three decades, Waste Management (WM) had provided twice-weekly trash pickup for Jackson residents. Resident and employee complaints about unsafe labor conditions and inequitable service provision, however, troubled the administration. Omari and Antar Lumumba had made it clear to the

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<sup>x</sup> Antar Lumumba’s administration sued Siemens, alleging that the company was responsible not only for the failure of the new meters and billing system but also a fraudulent scheme to meet the contract’s equal business opportunity obligations. (See *City of Jackson v. Siemens et al.*) The city was awarded an \$89.8 million settlement that recouped the cost of the contract but did not cover either the significant costs of repairing the faulty billing system or the lost revenues it caused.

company that equitable service and employees' dignity and safety were non-negotiable. Improvements were promised, but the administration did not feel WM had delivered. Resulting frustration, looming fee increases for sanitation and water, tensions with the council, existing subcontractor relationships, and WM's long legacy in the city all set the table for an unusually sensitive and contentious procurement process.

An initial request for proposals had garnered bids that the review committee deemed unaffordable, so the city had retained WM for the final year option in its contract and sought residents' feedback on whether once-a-week garbage pickup would be acceptable. "My position was that we should go with once a week," said Omari, figuring it would save money and that residents would "be mad at you for two weeks, and then they'll get over it." Residents were divided on the question but clear that they wanted litter and illegal dumping addressed. Knowing collection fees would nearly double no matter what, the city issued another RFP on March 25, 2021, requesting bids for once-a-week and twice-a-week pickup and monthly cleanup of illegal dumping.

Three companies bid on the contract: WM, FCC Environmental Services, and Richard's Disposal. The evaluation committee recommended FCC, and the mayor's office began negotiating a contract for once-a-week garbage, yard waste, and bulk item pickup with 96-gallon carts; weekly cleanups of illegal dumping; 5-days-a-week litter pickup and beautification crews; and provision and maintenance of 100 public trash receptacles around the city.<sup>xi</sup> The contract came before city council for approval on August 9. In its presentation, FCC explained that Jackson would serve as a hub for the corporation's operations in the Southern US, promising good local jobs with full benefits. Council members expressed concern about raising fees on residents, who had not seen their costs increase in over a decade. A renegotiated contract was proposed on August 19, and the council voted it down again, objecting to a process that they said felt rushed.

The administration asked WM for a one-year contract to allow time for another RFP, but the company refused, offering a slightly amended proposal that failed to impress. The administration then went to the third-ranked bid, Richard's Disposal, Inc., a Black-owned company out of Louisiana. Richard's told the city it did not have the lead time to stand up operations. In a last-ditch effort to ensure ongoing service, the administration declared an emergency on September 17 and scrambled to pull together subcontractors to form a company that could work under an emergency contract. On September 19, the mayor published an opinion piece in the *Clarion Ledger* promising a new RFP "to ensure there is some measure of good faith between the companies we do business with and the needs of our city and its residents."<sup>54</sup>

On September 27, the council voted to end the state of emergency, then declared its own state of emergency and proposed a six-month emergency contract with WM. The mayor was incredulous: "The council hired an attorney to sue me so that they could enter into a contract [with WM]. Now this is a strong mayor form of government. I don't know any form of government where a [legislative] body gets to propose the contract and vote on it at the same time. That's what they were attempting to do."

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<sup>xi</sup> FCC also won the highest marks in the first RFP, which did not result in any contract negotiations.

Vernon Hartley, a newcomer to the city council, had served as director of solid waste for the city and as a state environmental regulator. His experiences left him with a low opinion of solid waste companies: “I distrust all of them. They’re all in it to make money.” He was among the majority rejecting the FCC contract. “To me, it should have been a lot simpler,” said Hartley. “You do the RFP, you compare apples to apples. . . . It’s not a whole lot of negotiating you’re supposed to be doing.” With Hartley and other council members requesting greater transparency, the administration took pains to lay out the details of the next RFP for the council, updating members at every working session. The mayor also held a series of town halls explaining the options each vendor would present in the RFP, the timeline, the anticipated rate increases, and how the bids would be scored. Omari and other members of the review committee attended so they could consider residents’ concerns during the evaluation. At the suggestion of the city attorney, who had experience in procurement at the state level, the city implemented a blind bidding process and what the mayor called a “cone of silence” prohibiting city officials from talking to prospective vendors. (See Appendix 4 for details on both RFPs.)

The winning bid came from Richard’s, whose proposal for twice-a-week collection was significantly cheaper than WM’s and included new bins for residents, but the council, again, voted down the contract. Omari and Lumumba believed the city had made a good faith effort on this RFP, but they were at an impasse. City council members who opposed switching vendors seemed immovable. Asking the courts to intervene in a dispute between the city’s executive and legislative leaders was a roll of the dice. JPA organizers were focused on stemming violence, holding assemblies with youth and caregivers, and pressuring the city to dedicate funding to an Office of Violence Prevention. Residents were weary. Mutual suspicion, legal maneuvering, and accusations of bribery were straining relationships between city hall and city council to the breaking point. All her years as an organizer, a scholar of social psychology, and a public servant had taught Omari that the mayor could not win this fight alone, but where should she advise him to go to secure the necessary support?

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Timeline of Select Events in Mississippi Race Relations

#### COLONIAL AND ANTEBELLUM ERAS

**16th – early 18th centuries:** Spanish, French, and English colonists disrupt and displace Indigenous groups living along the Mississippi, Pearl, and Yazoo rivers, establishing trade relationships, and inciting violent conflict among and between Europeans and Indigenous groups.

**1820-1837:** Andrew Jackson, first as an army general and then as president, coerces Choctaw chiefs to cede lands east of the Mississippi River.<sup>55</sup> The Choctaw become the first nation to relocate to Oklahoma under the Indian Removal Act. White farmers and speculators drive a booming market for enslaved people.

**1860:** More than 436,000 people, constituting 55 percent of the population, are enslaved in Mississippi.<sup>56</sup>

#### CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION ERAS

**1861:** Mississippi secedes from the US to preserve the legally sanctioned enslavement of Black laborers.<sup>57</sup>

**1867-1876:** Under Reconstruction-era Republican rule, Black Mississippians establish newspapers and colleges and elect representatives to the US Congress. Terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan arise and help white Mississippi Democrats overthrow Republican rule through threats and violence.

#### JIM CROW ERA

**1888:** Mississippi Jim Crow laws establish segregation by race in all public facilities.

**1890:** Mississippi Constitution institutes poll taxes and literacy tests, disenfranchising most Black and poor white citizens.

**1901:** Ida B. Wells Barnett publishes “Lynching and the Excuse for It,” cataloging and condemning “America’s national crime.”<sup>58</sup>

**1927:** The Great Mississippi Flood accelerates the Great Migration from the agrarian South to the Industrial North and Midwest.

**1940:** Jackson College, later Jackson State, is established as a teachers’ college for Black students.

**1944:** A Choctaw Reservation is established in Mississippi.

#### CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

**1954:** Brown v. Board of Education rules “separate but equal” unconstitutional. White Mississippians form Citizens Councils to resist integration.

**1956:** Mississippi forms the State Sovereignty Commission to maintain segregation. The Commission targets civil rights organizers—infiltrating, undermining, and harassing proponents of integration.

**1962:** Jackson Nonviolent Movement organizes a bus boycott in Jackson. James Meredith becomes the first Black student enrolled at the University of Mississippi.

**1963:** Hundreds of Black students and citizens organize sit-ins, marches, and voter registration drives in Jackson. White Citizens’ Council member Byron de la Beckwith assassinates NAACP Mississippi field secretary Medgar Evers. Civil rights leaders Aaron Henry, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ella Baker lead the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegation to the Democratic National Convention. Offered just two seats at the convention, Hamer declines, saying “We didn’t come all this way for no two seats when all of us is tired.”

**1964:** Thousands of civil rights activists, mostly college students, arrive in Mississippi to register Black voters as part of the “Freedom Summer.” Organizers and activists face violent opposition.

**1965:** The Voting Rights Act passes, prohibiting literacy tests and poll taxes and mandating federal control of voter registration.

**1967:** Jackson police fire on protesters at Jackson State University, killing JSU student Benjamin Brown.

**1970:** Jackson police and highway patrol officers open fire on a women’s dorm following a student protest of the Vietnam War, injuring dozens, and killing two.

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## FREE THE LAND!

In 1970, the provisional government of the Republic of New Afrika (RNA) purchased twenty acres from a Black farmer in the town of Bolton, Mississippi, just outside of Jackson. They made plans for a celebration and dedication of the land in March 1971. Twenty-three-year-old Chokwe Lumumba oversaw security for the event, leading a caravan of RNA families toward their intended capital. What happened next became Lumumba family legend. “The same fellow [. . .] who had been responsible for the leadership of the police who had shot and killed the Jackson State students was in the middle of the road,” Lumumba recounted. The previous day, the leaders had found a sign posted near the property: “[Racial slur], THERE WILL BE NO MEETING HERE SUNDAY. FREE SIX-FOOT HOLES.” As the caravan of RNA families approached the police blockade, Klansmen, the presumed authors of this message, brandished weapons from their trucks. Lumumba steeled himself to speak to the officers blocking the road. He and the other leaders made it clear that they were not looking for a fight, but they were armed and ready to defend themselves and the women, elders, and children with them. Praying for their lives and safety, the caravan continued its progress toward the roadblock. “Just like the Red Sea,” Lumumba said, “the roadblock opened up. And that’s where you get your slogan, ‘Free the land!’” The RNA was eventually forced to leave the land and relocated its headquarters to Jackson.

“Free the Land” story source: Jackson Rising, “Mayor Chokwe Lumumba at NFG Conference 11.20.13” (video, 23:09, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWgSct2AA4>) and Katie Gilbert, “The Socialist Experiment: A New-Society Vision in Jackson, Mississippi,” in *Jackson Rising*, 627-630.

### MODERN ERA

**1989:** Judge orders Sovereignty Commission files be opened; revelations of the Commission’s jury tampering leads to retrial and eventual conviction of Byron de la Beckwith for the murder of Medgar Evers.

**1997:** Harvey Johnson, Jr., becomes the first Black mayor of Jackson.

## Appendix 2 Jackson People's Assembly Overview

The following overview of People's Assemblies, edited by the case authors, was adapted from materials shared by Rukia Lumumba of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM). An extended overview of the Jackson People's Assembly Model written by Kali Akuno for the New Afrikan People's Organization and MXGM can be found in Chapter 5 of *Jackson Rising*. (<https://pressbooks.pub/jacksonrising/chapter/peoples-assembly-overview-the-jackson-peoples-assembly-model/>)

### Basic Functions of a People's Assembly

People's Assemblies have two broad functions and means of exercising power:

1. *They organize "autonomous," self-organized and executed social projects* that help the people sustain themselves and, ultimately, gather the resources to fight proactively for their right to self-determination.
2. *They apply pressure on government and forces of economic exploitation* through strategic protests, direct action, boycotts, non-compliance, policy advocacy, or electoral campaigns.

### How to Carry Out the Functions of the Assembly

[A]n Assembly must organize its proceedings to produce clear demands, a coherent strategy, realistic action plans, and concrete timelines. It must also organize itself into units of implementation, (committees or action groups) to carry out the various assignments.

The Jackson People's Assembly model distinguishes between the Assembly as an "event" (for gathering, deliberating, and deciding how to address issues), the Assembly as a "process" (for setting strategy and creating accountability for progress toward goals and deliverables), and the Assembly as an "institution" (a product of the combined social weight of the Assembly's events, processes, actions, and social outcomes).

### Basic Organizing Assumptions for Starting a People's Assembly

1. The social forces organizing the People's Assembly can mobilize and assemble a significant number of people (ideally 1/5 of a given community/population) to participate and engage in a democratic process.
2. The social forces organizing the People's Assembly have experience participating in, and ideally facilitating broad democratic processes.
3. The social forces organizing the People's Assembly will be guided by norms established, accepted, and self-enforced by the assembled body.

### Key Components of the Assembly as a "Process"

The People's Task Force and various Committees and Working Groups are the primary organizing bodies of the Assembly. These bodies execute the "work" of the Assembly: outreach, networking, fundraising, communications, intelligence gathering, trainings, and campaigning.

The People's Task Force, directly elected by the Assembly, serves as the coordinating committee to facilitate the work of Committees and Working Groups.

Committees are standing bodies of the Assembly to deal with certain functions and/or operations including: Outreach and Mobilization, Media and Communications, Fundraising and Finance, and Security.

Working Groups are campaign- or project-oriented bodies.

All Committees and Working Groups operate on a volunteer principle, usually with self-selected participants.

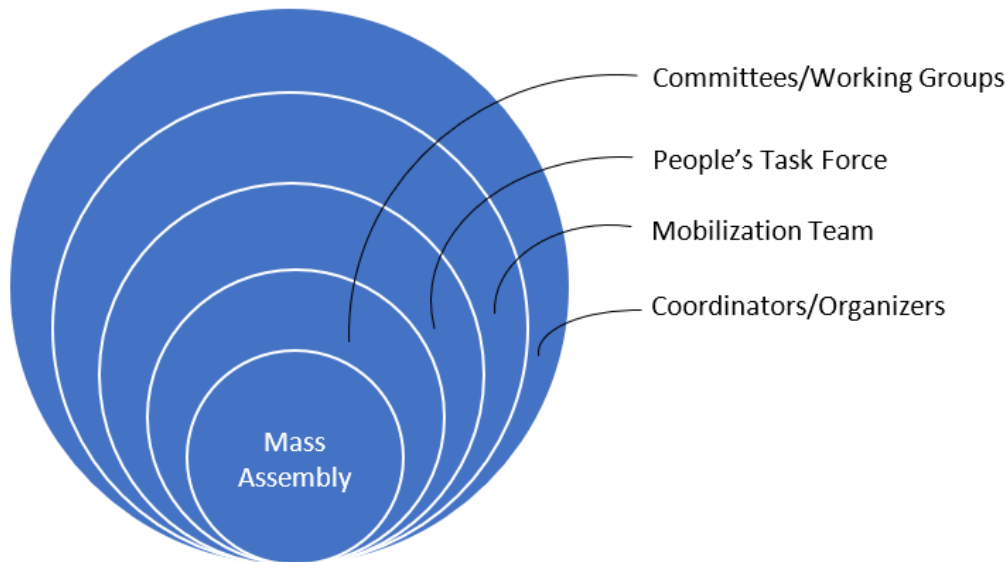
### People's Assembly as an Institution

*The beauty of the People's Assembly is that, though it's government related, it is meant as a way to apply outside pressure to those in government. Assemblies are strategically placed throughout the city, so we can give information to the community and get information back from the community about what issues are facing them.*

- Chokwe Antar Lumumba

Sustainability is one thing that makes a People's Assembly an institution, but what validates the Assembly as an institution more than its staying power is its ability to act as a "dual power" or counterweight to the policies and actions of the government and local and regional business interests.

Proposed Jackson People’s Assembly Structure



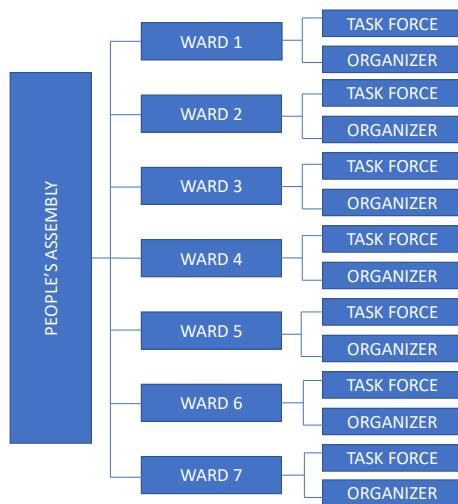
**Mass Assembly:** Community members of Jackson of all ages, cultures, class, ability, and background are central to the Assembly process. They are the core of the Assembly and are the decision-makers on policy recommendations.

**People’s Task Force:** Serving as representative leadership of the Assemblies and elected by the Assembly members, Task Force members present issues, solutions, and concerns to the administration and/or other community members.

**Mobilization Team:** Stipends will be provided to community members who apply and are selected to join a mobilization team to distribute information on a mass scale to community members through traditional outreach such as door knocking and phone banking.

**Community Organizers/Anchors:** Anchors are based in each ward to mobilize Assembly participation.

**Co-Coordinators:** The Co-Coordinators are responsible for oversight of the People’s Task Force, the Assembly as a process, and the Assembly as an event, ensuring coordination, development, implementation, and negotiation for effective collaboration. To ensure efficiency and balance of gender roles, the People’s Assemblies requires two coordinators: one either gender non-conforming/female and the other either male/female.



**Appendix 3** Jackson City Council Members and Ward Information<sup>xii</sup>

| Ward | Council Member  | Vote on FCC Contract (RFP 2) | Approx. Population | Approx. Percentage Black/White | Median Household Income Range (by census tract) |
|------|---|------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| 1    | Ashby Foote<br>      | No                           | 26,900             | 60/40                          | \$47,400-93,600                                 |
| 2    | Angelique Lee<br>    | Yes                          | 24,100             | 95/4                           | \$26,300-52,100                                 |
| 3    | Kenneth Stokes<br>   | No                           | 23,000             | 97/2                           | \$15,700-41,000                                 |
| 4    | Brian Grizzell<br> | Yes                          | 20,000             | 91/8                           | \$20,000-64,100                                 |
| 5    | Vernon Hartley<br> | No                           | 23,100             | 94/4                           | \$14,800-48,000                                 |
| 6    | Aaron Banks<br>    | No                           | 23,400             | 85/14                          | \$27,200-75,400                                 |
| 7    | Virgi Lindsay<br>  | Yes                          | 27,700             | 60/37                          | \$23,100-93,600                                 |

Photo Source: <https://www.jacksonms.gov/council-members/>

<sup>xii</sup> The population, demographic, and income data presented are estimates based on data from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (2016-2020) cross-referenced with Jackson ward maps by Gaylen Moore and Jiwon Park. Estimates are rounded to the nearest 100 (population and income) or the nearest whole number (demographics).



**Appendix 4** RFP Criteria and Rankings

Jackson’s second solid waste collection RFP asked for both once-a-week and twice-a-week pickup options.

May 2021 RFP (RFP 2)

*Dr. Omari and four other review committee members evaluated bids from three vendors according to the following criteria:*

- A. Service Provider's innovative approach to encourage and maintain a sustainable solid waste system (20%)
- B. Service Provider's experience, qualifications, and references as demonstrated in similar engagements (25%)
- C. Expertise of key personnel to be assigned to the project (10%)
- D. EBO Plan and commitment to exceeding MBE and FBE participation goals (10%)
- E. Fee proposal (35%)

*FCC was the only company to answer the RFP’s request to break out the cost of bins, creating a degree of confusion about which company had won the bid once all costs were considered.*

| Rank | Service Provider           | Once-a-Week Monthly Rate (per household) | Cart Cost      |
|------|----------------------------|--|----------------|
| 1    | FCC Environmental Services | \$13.87                                  | \$3,217,272.56 |
| 2    | Waste Management           | \$14.12                                  | Included       |
| 3    | Richard’s Disposal, Inc.   | \$14.25                                  | Included       |

| Rank | Service Provider           | Twice-a-Week Monthly Rate (per household) | Cart Cost      |
|------|----------------------------|---|----------------|
| 1    | FCC Environmental Services | \$19.67                                   | \$3,217,272.56 |
| 2    | Waste Management           | \$17.25                                   | Included       |
| 3    | Richard’s Disposal, Inc.   | \$16.00                                   | Included       |

The administration negotiated with FCC for once-a-week pickup with carts plus additional litter and illegal dumping collection and maintenance of 100 public trash receptacles in the city at \$16.90 per unit per month. City council voted down this contract on August 9, 2021. The administration went back to FCC and, through adjustments including a reduction in FCC’s profit margin, negotiated a monthly rate of \$16.08 per unit. The council voted down this contract on August 19, 2021.

October 2021 RFP (RFP 3)

For its third RFP, the city instituted a blind bidding process and a more detailed set of review criteria.

Selection of Service Provider for Contract negotiation was based on an evaluation of the following criteria:

- A. Technical Proposal (30%)
- B. Innovative approach to encourage and maintain a sustainable solid waste system (10%)
  - 1. Plan for performing the required services (20%)
- C. Service Provider’s Presentation/Interview (25%)
  - 1. Experience in providing similar services (10%)
  - 2. Qualifications and Key Personnel (10%)
  - 3. References (5%)
- D. EBO Plan and commitment to exceed MBE and FBE participation goals (10%)
- E. Fee proposal (35%)
  - 1. How cost compares to other proposals in this algebraic equation: ((Lowest Priced Proposal divided by Service Provider’s Price) x 35) = the number of points/percentage assigned.

The same three vendors bid on the contract, this time submitting each of four options anonymously. The evaluation committee presented the scores to the city council on January 4, 2022. Once weekly options (shaded areas) were ruled out:

|                            | <b>Vendor 1</b>    | <b>Vendor 2</b>    | <b>Vendor 3</b>    |
|----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Total Score Before Price   | <b>56.66666667</b> | <b>47.83333333</b> | <b>57.66666667</b> |
| <b>1x Per Week No Cart</b> | 31.44              | 35                 | 27.18              |
| TOTAL SCORE                | 88.10666667        | 82.83333333        | 84.84666667        |
| PRICE (monthly)            | \$651,180.83       | \$585,000.00       | \$753,300.00       |
| <b>2x Per Week No Cart</b> | 24.14              | 35                 | 26.62              |
| TOTAL SCORE                | 80.80666667        | 82.83333333        | 86.47666667        |
| PRICE                      | \$945,856.25       | \$652,500.00       | \$858,060.00       |
| <b>1x Per Week + Cart</b>  | 30.53              | 35                 | 28.81              |
| TOTAL SCORE                | 87.19666667        | 82.83333333        | 86.47666667        |
| PRICE                      | \$786,655.85       | \$686,250.00       | \$833,760.00       |
| <b>2x Per Week + Cart</b>  | 23.55              | 35                 | 23.69              |
| TOTAL SCORE                | 80.21666667        | 82.83333333        | 81.35666667        |
| PRICE                      | \$1,123,342.09     | \$756,000.000      | \$1,116,720.00     |

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