RUSSELL RICKFORD

WE ARE AN AFRICAN PEOPLE

INDEPENDENT EDUCATION, BLACK POWER, AND THE RADICAL IMAGINATION

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For Manning Marable,
with gratitude.

And for Adrienne,
eternally.

One of the most important things we must now begin to do is to call ourselves "African."

—Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture), 1969

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I came to the topic of Black Power and independent education while grappling with my own contradictions. In fall 1995, as a Howard University junior, I attended the Million Man March (MMM). The idea of hundreds of thousands of black men converging on the National Mall in Washington, DC, ignited my political imagination. In high school, I had aspired to open an Afrocentric academy as a symbol of my commitment to black nationalist development. In college, I continued to see black unity, Afrocentric cultural expression, and charismatic, male leadership as paths to African-American liberation. Though the MMM featured all these elements, its theme of black patriarchal solidarity and atonement struck me as curiously anemic. Keynoted by the Nation of Islam's Min. Louis Farrakhan, the rally lacked the searing indictment of the state, white supremacy, and the accommodationist black establishment that Malcolm X had once embodied.

In subsequent years, I developed a materialist analysis of structural racism. As my critique of narrow or "bourgeois" black nationalism deepened, I recognized that the MMM and similar rituals of black cohesiveness largely ignored or denied class and gender inequities, overlooked or discounted systemic origins of racial exploitation in the capitalist system, and envisioned no wholesale transfer of wealth and capital to workers and the poor. I concluded that most contemporary expressions of black nationalism posed little or no threat to the ruling class and primarily served the interests of people like me—comfortable members of the African-American middle class.

As I entered graduate school in my late 20s, I wanted to understand why the strains of black nationalist ideology that I had absorbed as an adolescent lacked overtly anticapitalist themes. My theory was that radical impulses within the eclectic black nationalist revival of the 1960s had reinvigorated popular critiques of capitalist society, but that those tendencies had waned (or had been suppressed) as revolutionary nationalism was eclipsed by more benign varieties that

stressed identity politics. Probing the genealogy of my own bourgeois nationalist origins led to an analysis of the fate of Black Power ideologies in the age of neoliberalism. *We Are an African People* is the product of that inquiry.

Along the way, I learned that the transmutation of black nationalism and Pan Africanism in the aftermath of the mass movements of the 1960s was far more complicated than I had imagined. I discovered that the "Pan African nationalist" renaissance of the 1970s had generated an incredibly fertile institutional life, part of a larger outpouring of theory and cultural production that changed African-American politics, and that raised critical questions of class, gender, and citizenship. This flourishing of activity included powerful internationalist elements and inspired a crusade to remake black America through a conversion from "Negro" to "African." Attempts to construct what I call the African-American "postcolony," a projected condition of cultural and political sovereignty, were central to that quest. Yet the dominant motif of contemporary Pan African nationalism was not "identity," but rather, "liberation." Using the medium of education to explore the complex relationship between these two themes is the primary objective of this book.

The task has been challenging. Thankfully, I have had plenty of support. This study benefited from grants from the National Academy of Education Spencer Postdoctoral Fellowship; the Faculty Research Grant, Rockefeller Center, Dartmouth College; the Walter and Constance Burke Research Award, Dartmouth College; and the Bancroft Awards Committee, Columbia University. It also was enriched by a John Sloan Dickey Center manuscript review at Dartmouth.

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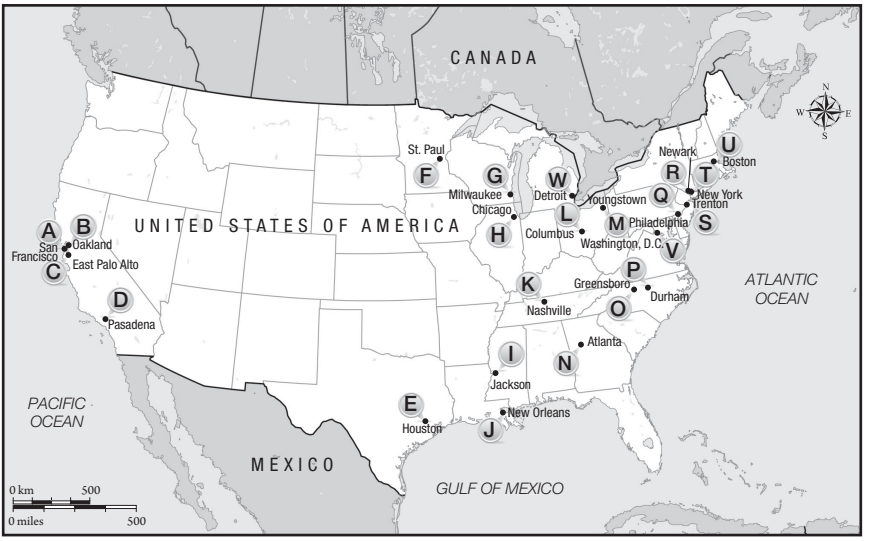
My partner, Adrienne Clay, remains a revelation in my life. Despite the rigors imposed by this book, our friendship is unbroken. Undying. She above all is responsible for the completion of this study, and for the grace that envelops me every day. For that, and for past and future journeys, my love, thank you.

No one, not even the rain . . .

ABBREVIATIONS

ATA	Afro-American Teachers Association
AFS	African Free School
ALD	African Liberation Day
ALSC	African Liberation Support Committee
CAP	Congress of African People
CBE	Center for Black Education
CFUN	Committee for a Unified Newark
CIBI	Council of Independent Black Institutions
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
FST	Free Southern Theater
HBCUs	Historically Black Colleges and Universities
HPC	Harlem Parents Committee
IS 201	Intermediate School 201
LEI	Lynn Eusan Institute
MPLA	People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola
MXLU	Malcolm X Liberation University
NAAAE	National Association of Afro-American Educators
NOI	Nation of Islam
NSM	Northern Student Movement
PASP	Pan African Services Project
Six-PAC	Sixth Pan African Congress
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SOBU	Student Organization for Black Unity
TABU	Toward a Black University
UFT	United Federation of Teachers
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association
UNITA	National Union for the Total Independence of Angola

PARTIAL LIST AND LOCATIONS OF INDEPENDENT BLACK NATIONALIST SCHOOLS



A. San Francisco, CA: **Malcolm X School**
B. Oakland, CA: **Oakland Community School**
C. East Palo Alto, CA: **Nairobi Day School and High School; Nairobi College**
D. Pasadena, CA: **Omowale Ujamaa Community School**
E. Houston, TX: **Kazi Shule; Lynn Eusan Institute**
F. St. Paul, MN: **Institute of African Learning**
G. Milwaukee, WI: **Clifford McKissick Community School**
H. Chicago, IL: **Arusha-Konakri Institute; New Concept Development Center; Shule Ya Watoto; Black People's Topographical Research Center**
I. Jackson, MS: **Black and Proud Liberation School**
J. New Orleans, LA: **Ahidiana Work/Study Center**
K. Nashville, TN: **Nashville Liberation School; People's College**
L. Columbus, OH: **Umoja Sasa Shule**
M. Youngstown, OH: **Marcus Garvey School**
N. Atlanta, GA: **Learning House; Pan African Work Center; Martin Luther King, Jr. Community School**
O. Greensboro, NC: **Malcolm X Liberation University**
P. Durham, NC: **Pan African Early Education Center**
Q. Philadelphia, PA: **ARD Self-Help Center; Freedom Library Day School; Nidhamu Sasa School**
R. Newark, NJ: **African Free School; Chad School**
S. Trenton, NJ: **African People's Action School**
T. New York, NY: **Our School; Uhuru Sasa Shule; School of Common Sense**
U. Boston, MA: **Highland Park Free School; St. Joseph's Community School**
V. Washington, D.C.: **Center for Black Education; Nationhouse Watoto School; New School of Afro-American Thought; New Thing Art & Architecture Center**
W. Detroit, MI: **Aisha Shule**

We Are an African People

Introduction

Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination

> Our education must therefore inculcate a sense of commitment to the whole community and help the pupils to accept the values appropriate to our kind of future, not those appropriate to our colonial past.
>
> —Julius Nyerere, "*Education for Self-Reliance*"

On a July evening in 1968, a television audience witnessed a demonstration of the new black militancy and its exacting pedagogy. Some 22 million viewers of a CBS special on the African-American experience watched John Churchville, a former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee member and one of the pioneering institution builders of the Black Power era, preside over North Philadelphia's Freedom Library Day School. They saw him train preschoolers to echo phrases like "My nationality is Afro-American!" designed to crush the "Negro" cowering within the black child. During the program, Churchville posed a series of ritualized questions meant to test the resolve of his three- to five-year-old students, all residents of the surrounding riot-scarred neighborhood. In one sequence, Jenell, a four-year-old girl, answered her teacher:

Churchville: What do you want, Jenell?
Jenell: I want freedom.
Churchville: When do you want it?
Jenell: I want my freedom now.
Churchville: No, you have to wait until next week, Jenell, you can't have it now. Can you wait until next week?[1]

Scenes of the exchange played during *Black History: Lost, Stolen or Strayed*, the first installment in a series about the cultural representation of African Americans. Churchville's methods, a narrator explained, reflected a struggle for psychological fortification. Freedom Library was a reaction—an overreaction,

the program suggested—to white racial hostility. Following the broadcast, a few commentators praised Churchville's attempt to prepare African-American children for future encounters with public schools modeled on the cultural values of the white middle class. Black writer Toni Cade argued that Freedom Library's "lesson in selfhood" would ensure that its students never became sycophants of white America. "I know of no blacks who did not rejoice in that [televised] sequence," a *Negro Digest* contributor declared. But many viewers saw the Churchville segment as a case of indoctrination. Several people telephoned CBS or their local station to complain. "I don't believe that a major network should contribute to white backlash and resentment," one caller said.[2]

If *Black History* sparked controversy, it also offered an inside look at a new breed of private school. Churchville's goal of resocializing the oppressed was no more unique than his brand of black nationalist and Pan Africanist education—an approach combining concepts of black American nationality with commitment to linking black struggles worldwide. By 1970, more than 60 "Pan African nationalist" institutions, from preschools to postsecondary ventures, had appeared in cities across the country.[3] The small, independent enterprises were often accused of teaching hate and were routinely harassed by authorities. Yet these institutions served as vital mechanisms of "black consciousness"—a sense of pride and awareness defined against the self-abnegation of "Negro" mentality.[4]

Founded by young activist-intellectuals, Pan African nationalist schools strove not simply to bolster the academic skills and self-image of inner-city African-American youth but also to "decolonize" minds, to nurture the next generation of activists, and to embody the principles of self-determination and African identity. As grassroots "counterinstitutions" built on a thoroughgoing critique of white cultural hegemony, Pan African nationalist schools, or "independent black institutions" as they were known by the 1970s, served as successors to the civil rights movement's "freedom schools"—temporary organs linked to mass struggles of the early to mid-1960s—and as forerunners to modern Afrocentric academies, alternative models that sparked debates about race, ideology, and pedagogy beginning in the 1980s and '90s.[5] Independent black institutions were more than sites of indoctrination. They constituted a vibrant Black Power submovement, a crusade rooted in the renascent idea that African Americans were a subjugated nation, an "internal colony" that needed to claim intellectual and cultural autonomy before achieving true liberation through formal statehood or community self-rule.[6]

In the late 1960s and '70s, an array of African-American activists and educators embraced black independent schools as symbols of a new phase of struggle: the quest to concretize the ideals of "blackness" and "Africanness" that had been rekindled by the mass movements of the 1960s. Scores of organizers—from artists and cultural figures to college students, parents,

antipoverty workers, and insurgent public school teachers—helped start "liberation schools," "community schools," and other avowedly ideological academies in basements and storefronts, while many more black-consciousness advocates actively supported such ventures. The growth of these institutions signaled a strategic and philosophical shift from the pursuit of reform within a liberal democracy to the attempt to build the prospective infrastructure for an independent black nation, an entity that many activists imagined as a political and spiritual extension of the Third World.

This reconceptualization occurred during and after the mid-1960s amid the upsurge of theory that characterized the Black Power renaissance. Independent black institutions exemplified the contemporary politics of personal and collective conversion. They were the instruments of a stratum of radicalized, largely middle-class activist-intellectuals. Some of these figures were known nationwide, such as Owusu Sadaukai (Howard Fuller) of Greensboro, North Carolina's Malcolm X Liberation University, and Black Arts Movement leaders Amiri Baraka and Haki Madhubuti, respective cofounders (along with their spouses, educators Amina Baraka and Safisha Madhubuti) of Newark's African Free School and Chicago's New Concept Development Center. Others, such as Nairobi Day School founder Gertrude Wilks of East Palo Alto, California, were recognized only in their local communities. All were veterans of social battles in the Jim Crow South and northern metropolises who wished to initiate a rebirth of blackness, a revolution in culture and political theory that could connect poor and working-class African Americans to Africa, the Caribbean, and the masses of the nonwhite world.

Creators of the schools—cultural and revolutionary nationalists, Pan Africanists, and a few budding Marxists—strove to codify a major insight of civil rights campaigns and earlier liberation struggles, namely, that black people could develop alternatives to the oppressive social institutions that dominated their lives. The schools reflected a search for indigenous structures that could "house our aspirations" while forming "liberated zones" of self-determination within deteriorating urban centers. Subsisting on donations, private grants, modest tuition fees, and, to a lesser extent, federal antipoverty funds, the academies served only a tiny fraction of urban schoolchildren and young adults.[7] The significance of the ventures lies less in the size of their enrollments (generally from 25 to 250 students) than in their role as organs of radical imagination and products of the effort to fashion a new peoplehood—styled as "Afro-American" or simply "African"—through a transformation of consciousness.

Organizers of Pan African nationalist schools understood citizenship as a cultural construct. Though postwar struggles had expanded the scope of legal equality and civil rights, these theorists believed white supremacy remained the central reality of black existence throughout the world. For them, cultivating

an alternative citizenship—a sense of transnationalism that defied the cultural norms and political dictates of the American empire—was a vital means of subverting Western hegemony and combatting the psychology of the oppressed, a syndrome described by thinkers from Frantz Fanon to Malcolm X.[8] *We Are an African People* describes a moment in which cadres of activist-intellectuals saw rethinking schools in poor and working-class African-American communities both as a way to redeem the process of formal learning and as a way to pursue, indeed *prefigure*, black cultural and political sovereignty.

Pan African nationalists viewed the classroom as the placenta of a nation. They believed formal education could sever sociopolitical, material, and psychological dependencies and aid in the creation of what I call the African-American "postcolony"—an independent polity ready to take its place among the rising powers of the non-Western world. They believed that black America must prepare its youth not merely to navigate a racist society or an increasingly specialized job market but also to contribute technical expertise to the cause of "national development" wherever in the African world they were called to serve. Over the course of the 1970s, this stunningly romantic premise foundered in the face of complex political, economic, and social circumstances in the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean, revealing the perils of an ahistorical mystique of global blackness and invented Africanness.

The goal of black cultural redefinition through independent education nevertheless generated a tremendous surge of theory and practice. A "struggle in the arenas of ideas" over the definition of the black experience, this cause reverberates today in everything from African-American home schooling to black enthusiasm for charter schools.[9] Pan African nationalist schools did not spawn organizations that oversaw the day-to-day instruction of tens of thousands of children (though a handful of the campuses, including Chicago's New Concept Development Center, survive to this day). Their legacy lies instead in the tenacious belief that African Americans must be educated to recognize and develop the subordinate nation to which they belong by right of birth.

The quest for independent black institutions was not solely or primarily defined by classroom experiences. Pan African nationalist schools were far more than vessels of formal education. They were cooperatives, collectives, cultural centers, organs of community action and agitprop, and laboratories for a spectrum of ideas—from anti-imperialism and Third Worldism on the left to patriarchy and racial fundamentalism on the right. This book examines the broad ideals that animated these institutions and galvanized their founders. It explores the political imagination of a collection of organizers who, having witnessed the limitations of desegregation battles, struggles on college campuses, antipoverty work, and grassroots campaigns for decent public education, concluded that autonomous social and cultural structures were essential tools of black liberation

and regeneration in an age that combined the discourse of "colorblind" equality with a racialized matrix of mass incarceration, chronic unemployment, and dwindling social welfare.

Seeing themselves as a people's intelligentsia fostering resistance through African reidentification, operators of independent black institutions consciously blended pedagogy, organizing, and propaganda. *We Are an African People* illuminates their philosophies of education, their attempts to foster global solidarities, and their crusade to reimagine blackness. It offers an intellectual history of subaltern education, a critical analysis of the fate of Black Power ideologies in the postsegregation era, and a portrait of African-American self-activity at the neighborhood level.

In a sense, this is a study of Black Power's afterlife. *We Are an African People* depicts an aspect of the movement that flourished in the early to mid-1970s, a time not often associated with vigorous black nationalist and Pan Africanist efforts in multiple communities. For many African-American urbanites, local organizations and establishments—not spectacular events or charismatic leaders—gave the contemporary struggle its thrust and meaning.[10] Yet the political and cultural practices of independent black institutions are enshrined in neither the iconography nor the popular memory of Black Power. Notwithstanding the televised scenes of Freedom Library Day School described earlier, relatively few reporters or TV cameras entered the schools. My narrative of Black Power begins after the media spotlight faded.

We Are an African People offers a glimpse at a lost 1970s, a moment of political flux and cultural ferment whose creative social possibilities remain unfulfilled. The story contained in these pages will be unfamiliar to most readers. To some, the ideological and conceptual underpinnings of Pan African nationalist schools will seem esoteric. We are used to imagining the 1970s as a moment of malaise, retrenchment, and decline. What are we to make of a small yet formidable movement that arose substantively during that decade, that proved remarkably resilient, and that posited education as the final battlefield of "the colonized," with no less at stake than the very meaning and future of the oppressed in relation to "the mother country"?[11]

Many of the theories and discursive strategies associated with independent black institutions were highly abstract. The political rhetoric of the schools was steeped in idealism. Though Pan African nationalists touted institution building as a viable frontier for mass action, the vast majority of African-American schoolchildren remained in public institutions. Indeed, the turn to private education reflected some of the elements of fragmentation and retreat from radical agitation that afflicted the larger liberation struggle. Many operators of Black Power counterinstitutions were justifiably criticized for preoccupation with "internal purification," a trait that reinforced strains of dogmatism and social isolation.[12]

Yet the quest for independent black institutions cannot be dismissed as empty symbolism or narrow identity politics. The schools served as key programmatic expressions of Black Power. They represented conscious attempts to transcend rhetoric and create enduring mechanisms of consciousness and resistance. Many of the establishments were centers of radical commitment. Their organizers expressed solidarity with liberation fronts in Africa and throughout the Third World while engaging social justice campaigns within African-American neighborhoods. They strove to provide decent, socially relevant education in places where such amenities were severely limited. At their best, Pan African nationalist schools honored the activist tradition of addressing pragmatic, everyday needs while "preparing the field" of struggle for tomorrow.[13]

We Are an African People conveys a panorama of possibilities even as it offers sober critiques. To understand the rise of independent black institutions in the 1970s, we must be willing to examine social movements—especially complex, highly symbolic movements—on their own terms. We must heed historian Nikhil Pal Singh's assertion that "Aspirations for black freedom and equality have long been deemed exorbitant in the normative and normalizing frames . . . used to contain them." This study accepts radical exorbitance and elaborate symbolism as genuine modes of opposition and as necessary spiritual and intellectual components of self-liberation. As Robin D. G. Kelley has noted, neither utopian outlooks nor imagined communities are apolitical.[14]

In the pages that follow, I attempt both to grapple with nationalist myths and to comprehend the social functions that they perform for the oppressed. Despite its shortcomings, the political imaginary of Pan African nationalism—the philosophical and ideological architecture of its beliefs—offered powerful, alternative visions of African-American cultural citizenship, by which I mean the discourses of identity and belonging within the social production of subordinate groups.[15] This book demonstrates how those visions were invigorated by the mystique of postcoloniality and instantiated by activist-intellectuals who saw revolution as the primary imperative of their lives.

The rise of Pan African nationalist schools highlights important dimensions of modern African-American thought. Much of the original impetus for the movement sprang from dissatisfaction with the politics and strategies of integration. The 1970s marked the high tide of official desegregation efforts in many municipalities. African-American resistance to separate schools remained strong and continued to offer a crucial means of seeking access to resources and opportunities overwhelmingly concentrated in white institutions.[16]

However, the profound flaws of the integrationist strategy and agenda deepened black ambivalence toward the approach. Those misgivings intensified amid feeble and inequitable desegregation plans, virulent white opposition to

racial intermingling, black concerns about isolation in white-controlled establishments, and the demographic realities of white flight from city centers and public education. As New York City school boycott leader Milton Galamison acknowledged in 1968, "Black people who had not previously thought the matter through decided that it might not be an advantage to have their children educated beside the children whose parents sanctioned bigotry and hatred."[17]

Some African Americans rejected integration on strategic, philosophical, and ideological grounds. Traditionally a site of African-American struggle for social inclusion, education was also a historic arena of black self-determination. African-American schools have served as instruments for instilling "race pride" and nurturing "race leaders" since the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Following the Civil War, freed people bolstered traditions of black educational autonomy by establishing and running their own schools. African Americans continued to pursue self-help in education during the twentieth century, even as they endured the stifling repression of Jim Crow. Black nationalist sentiment and encounters with systemic discrimination in the urban North and West, as well as the South, led some African-American migrants to create separate educational models, including the private schools of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and the Nation of Islam.[18]

The vast majority of black inner-city children, however, remained in public schools, many of which were severely neglected as white ethnic populations abandoned the city core in the postwar era. By the 1960s, some African-American urbanites viewed local systems of public education as colonial apparatuses designed to stultify children of color. They accused neighborhood schools of preparing youngsters for lives of marginality and servitude on the fringes of an opulent society. Nor did "multiethnic" studies and "integrated" textbooks end the chronic alienation of African-American students. Organizers of Milwaukee's Clifford McKissick Community School, an independent black institution, noted in 1970 that inclusion of African-American history and culture in public school curricula had created little more than "a black patchwork on a snow-white blanket of white nationalist education."[19]

The contemporary black drive for educational justice included ongoing campaigns for desegregation and parity, creation of professional associations and advocacy groups, and demands for curricular changes, more black personnel, and parent participation in school governance. The range of strategies suggested the diversity of African-American visions of dignified schooling. Though some of these efforts yielded substantial concessions, the thrust for reform never fulfilled overarching goals of social mobility, collective advancement, and open opportunity, and thus failed to produce the democratic revolution in school and society envisioned by many African-American parents. In the late 1960s, pragmatism and political growth revitalized black nationalist themes in educational struggles,

a development that fueled the drive for local control over public schools in the Ocean Hill–Brownsville section of Brooklyn. As urban "community control" initiatives foundered, however, the search for alternatives continued.[20]

As "ghetto schools" spawned functional illiterates and white resistance to busing and other methods of achieving "racial balance" intensified, a small but growing segment of African-American urbanites sought educational salvation beyond public education. They were not alone. The era witnessed a flourishing of alternative school movements. "Free schools" were created by counterculture activists who argued that the compulsory nature and authoritarian methods of public schools bred conformity and smothered the creative genius of children. While innovative, free schools were overwhelmingly white and middle-class. Their organizers shared black radicals' disdain for the materialism and individualism of bourgeois culture. Yet free schoolers hoped to humanize a decadent and "overdeveloped" society, while black radicals wished to cultivate communities that a racist power structure had willfully "underdeveloped."[21]

The constellation of alternative establishments included urban "street academies" geared toward dropouts and the underprivileged, as well as politically moderate black private schools serving middle-class populations and offering black studies along with traditional college preparation. Few of those models appear in this study. Rather than attempt a taxonomy of black private schools, *We Are an African People* examines a cluster of secular institutions expressly devoted to fostering black national and transnational consciousness as a primary pedagogical and social mission. In the heyday of Black Power, the phrase "independent black institution" was closely associated with grassroots, militant enterprises in major cities.[22] It was these outfits—not traditional African-American boarding schools or historically "Negro" colleges and universities—that embodied the contemporary meaning of "independent" (both private and free from the influence and control of the white power structure) and "black" (racially assertive, proud, and uncompromising).

Pan African nationalist schools engaged in academic uplift, but their primary purpose was sociopolitical and counterhegemonic. In this respect, they resembled contemporary American Indian "survival schools," Chicano heritage academies, and the liberation schools of the Young Lords, a radical Puerto Rican group. Forged by nationalist movements, these institutions encouraged their students to speak indigenous tongues and regard native territories as proud homelands rather than degraded reservations. In their strenuous efforts to socialize children, their wariness toward mainstream culture, and their close ties to neighborhoods, independent black institutions mirrored older ethnic and parochial models as well, including Catholic schools, Chinese private schools, and Jewish day schools.[23] Unlike these more traditional establishments,

however, Pan African nationalist schools paired separatist impulses with strains of radical internationalism and anti-imperialism.

The breakthrough year for independent black institutions was 1970. Operators of the schools and other black-consciousness devotees gathered at conferences and Afro-American teacher conventions to share visions of nationalist development and educational autonomy. They concluded that independent institutions must nurture communitarian values, encourage "rediscovery of self as an African," and attempt to train and export "teachers and technicians, scientists, engineers, whatever is needed by any African nation anywhere in the world."[24]

In June 1972, almost 30 teachers and organizers from throughout the country assembled in the Frogmore section of the historic South Carolina Sea Island of St. Helena—a former refuge for escaped slaves and now a retreat for civil rights workers seeking recuperation and Neo-Pan Africanists seeking African "restoration"—to formalize the Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI), a national federation. Attendees hailed from 14 schools, including campuses in Atlanta, Chicago, New York, and Columbus, Ohio. They chose as their mantra the Pan-African slogan "We Are an African People." They agreed that independent institutions must offer programs for welfare recipients and prisoners, maintain strict regimens of self-defense training, and avoid insidious, "Western" distinction between physical and intellectual labor. Finally, the new alliance crafted an ambitious statement of purpose. CIBI would be "the political vehicle through which a qualitatively different people is produced . . . a people who can be trusted to struggle uncompromisingly for the liberation of all African people everywhere."[25]

To fully comprehend this mission, we must trace the genealogy of post-1960s struggle. The history of independent black institutions illuminates larger transformations of African-American political culture. As young civil rights veterans outgrew obsolete protest strategies, powerful currents thrust them toward new analyses and approaches, re-energizing them and giving them a sense of control over their lives. The themes "from freedom to liberation" and "from colony to capital" illustrate the paths that these figures traveled to Pan African nationalist education. Though the phrases were not used by contemporaries, they offer a useful framing for the transitions that propelled activists from a first wave of mass insurgency in the early 1960s to a second wave of grassroots organizing in the late '60s and '70s.

The genesis of many independent black institutions began with the dissolution of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). After emerging from the southern desegregation movement and scattering to various cities, former SNCC workers John Churchville, Jimmy Garrett, Cleveland Sellers, Judy

Richardson, Willie Ricks, Ralph Featherstone, Jean Wiley, Stanley Wise, Karen Edmonds, Courtland Cox, Bernice Reagon, Charlie Cobb, Fred Brooks, George Ware, and Syrtiller Kabat helped create, staff, or sustain an array of institutions, including Philadelphia's Freedom Library Day School, Atlanta's Pan African Work Center, Greensboro's Malcolm X Liberation University, Washington, DC's Center for Black Education, and the Nairobi Day School of East Palo Alto, California.

They and other organizers hoped to hasten the conversion from civil rights to human rights, a reorientation heralded by Malcolm X. They shed the vestiges of Cold War parochialism, trading the mantra of "freedom"—an ideal associated with the quest for legal equality—for that of "national liberation," a concept that connoted black self-determination and identification with the revolutionary world. Some of these figures again joined cadres of activists, believing that such "organizations of organizers" could help prepare black America for coming struggles.[26]

In their hunt for forms of political and cultural sovereignty that the mainstream civil rights movement had failed to deliver and neglected to pursue, young black progressives and militants (like many of their white, New Left counterparts) looked to the Third World as a source of social models. For them, the critical divide was not the American South versus the North, but rather, the colonizer versus the colonized. This theoretical turn reflected growing contempt for liberalism, recognition of dwindling possibilities for social reform via traditional channels, and, not infrequently, a dose of romanticism. But black "Third Worldism" also signaled genuine optimism about the radical potential of transnational solidarity. Contemporary black nationalism was inextricable from Pan Africanism, because black nation-states were viewed as key indexes of the freedom and power of African-descended people across the globe.[27]

Many African-American internationalists thus evinced a bold form of nationalism, a core element of black consciousness whose cultural and political influence markedly increased. African Americans, these thinkers insisted, were not merely another ethnic group. To realize their destiny, black Americans needed "to die a tribe and be born a nation," as the people of Mozambique and other revolutionary lands were attempting to do.[28] Nationhood was the true condition of African America and the ultimate mechanism of self-determination.

However, formal statehood remained a distant ideal, and there was no consensus about what form it should take or whether it was even necessary. What most young radicals could agree on was the need to foster national consciousness and rehabilitate African-American identity. Escaping colonial mentality meant spurring the cultural and psychological reorientation that Malcolm X had advocated. Collective redefinition would bring redemption. As the Nation of

Islam had long demonstrated, the construction of a new and meaningful peoplehood could begin with the rigorous restructuring of individual lives.[29]

Looking to stimulate a transformation of consciousness, a host of battle-tested activists returned to the arena of education, refining theories of liberatory pedagogy drawn from their experiences in freedom schools, black studies campaigns, and student protests. Not all these figures were associated with SNCC. Former or current members of the Republic of New Africa and the Nation of Islam created Omowale Ujamaa Northwest Community School in Pasadena, California. Abdullah Abdur-Razzaq, who as "James Shabazz" had been a top Malcolm X aide, helped his spouse, Ohra, establish the Al-Karim School in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. The borough was also home to the 150-student School of Common Sense, a venture founded by Sonny Carson, militant director of Brooklyn's breakaway Congress of Racial Equality chapter. The local community control struggle, a Carson ally later recalled, had convinced the leader that the education of African-American children could not remain in the hands of "white working class teachers aspiring to become members of the petit-bourgeoisie."[30]

The new institution builders were seasoned organizers who had remolded themselves. Like the Black Panthers, who launched similar "liberation schools" in the late 1960s (though with more explicit emphasis on Marxist-Leninist themes), Pan African nationalists continued to see education as a route to black empowerment. Now, however, they envisioned permanent ventures that could replace, rather than merely critique or destabilize, the institutions of the dominant culture. They also broadened their theoretical base. Some read Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire, whose 1970 treatise, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* argued that the reconstruction of subject peoples required the cultivation of critical consciousness. Even more influential was "Education for Self-Reliance," a 1968 essay by Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere that discussed the need to eliminate the psychological and political residue of colonialism by reshaping education.[31]

This message resonated with black liberationists, many of whom believed a quasi-colonial education had "depersonalized" African Americans, preparing them for subservience in much the same way that European empires had denatured their nonwhite subjects. Such theorists looked to postcolonial and revolutionary societies for solutions, impressed by accounts of how Cubans, North Vietnamese, and others had reduced illiteracy and used education as a tool for nation building. Especially inspiring were reports of how Southern African liberation movements had constructed temporary schools for the benefit of their cadres and indigenous populations, a practice depicted in *A Luta Continua,* an African-American-made documentary about the anticolonial struggle.[32]

The idea of converted military camps deep in the liberated zones of Mozambique (a Portuguese colony until 1974) where "bush schools"—often little more than a blackboard on a tree—transformed guerillas and villagers

into "new men and women" captivated African-American radicals and deepened their vision of education as the reclamation of a subject people's humanity. They concluded that a revolution *by* education required a revolution *in* education. Schools would have to be dramatically reimagined if they were to be engines of the new society rather than bulwarks of the status quo. They would need to become "liberated zones" that could function as self-contained communities and embryos of the coming nation.[33]

If education was a crucial realm of struggle, the African-American metropolis was the new land. Young militants regarded the black city core as a suppressed political territory and as a key site for reimagining community. In the mid-1960s, SNCC cadres had expanded efforts to establish pilot programs in urban areas, especially in the North, recognizing that "the axis of the struggle appeared to be shifting away from the rural South." As SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael maintained, the time had come "to return to the ghetto to organize these communities to control themselves."[34] After SNCC's demise in the late 1960s, civil rights veterans continued to regard the inner city as a test site for linking revolutionary theory and everyday attempts to serve the oppressed.

The call for experienced organizers to "return" to urban enclaves meant a recommitment to territories that exemplified both the oppressive nature of racial capitalism and the "national" character of black America. The reconceptualization of "second ghettoes"—repositories for waves of African-American migration since World War II—as the future province of black sovereignty reinforced the concept of inner cities as potential powerbases. The challenge lay in transforming these colonial domains into capitals of black dignity, and in doing so largely (or entirely) without the aid of the War on Poverty.

From their inception, many Pan African nationalist institutions had benefited from antipoverty funds. The community action arm of the Great Society sustained many of the self-help projects that later evolved into independent schools. However, the belief that the poverty programs were designed to mollify and coopt militants bred growing disillusionment with the federal initiatives. By the late 1960s and early '70s, amid dwindling social spending and intensifying critiques of antipoverty measures as sophisticated pacification schemes, many African-American organizers concluded that independent, grassroots initiatives—not federal programs—were the critical instruments of community self-sufficiency and revival.[35]

The explosion of urban uprisings after 1964, and especially the insurrections of 1967–1968, underscored the "proto-revolutionary" potential of ghetto territories. Authorities depicted "riots" as responses to concentrated poverty and inequality, and as outbursts of frustration, criminality, and violence. Yet elements of empowerment accompanied the turmoil. While some

observers saw evidence of pathology, many organizers sensed that a reservoir of political energy had been exposed.

Radical theorists understood the uprisings not simply as responses to the failure of racial reform to alleviate the suffering of the slums but also as local expressions of global revolt and as opportunities for sustained organizing. The police slaying of an unarmed 18-year-old during Milwaukee's 1967 insurrection, for example, led to the conversion of a local youth center into the Clifford McKissick Community School, an independent senior high offering instruction in algebra, chemistry, karate, African affairs, and the West African language of Yoruba. Throughout the "long hot summers" of the 1960s, community activists strove to harness the wave of militancy and to develop the restive, inchoate nation that postwar migration had engendered.[36]

Autonomous institutions offered a means of doing so. The concept of urban enclaves as incipient sovereignties deepened the appeal of parallel black structures. Black Power advocates hailed the construction of such entities as a step toward formal self-determination and as a practical survival strategy at a time of economic stagnation and retrenchment. The "mounting proclivity of black people to create their own independent organs of struggle," as one journalist put it, accompanied ongoing attempts to improve existing schools, hospitals, and public accommodations within African-American neighborhoods.[37] However, the deficiencies of community control campaigns strengthened the conviction that the redevelopment of black urban centers required the creation of grassroots enterprises able to remain separate from the state and existing power apparatuses.

The construction of parallel institutions, a cornerstone of black nationalist practice, offered a means of pursuing self-reliance, meeting social needs, and conveying moral and political principles. New African-American cultural centers, publishing houses, theaters, and health clinics emerged. Intellectuals, activists, and artists created influential Pan African nationalist organs such as Atlanta's Institute of the Black World, a think tank, and the Drum & Spear Bookstore, a radical political salon that opened in a riot-torn section of Washington, DC. At a time when reshaping consciousness was considered indispensable, schools were among the most cherished forms of autonomy. They included establishments like Uhuru Sasa Shule (Kiswahili for "Freedom Now School") of Brooklyn, West Side Chicago's Shule Ya Watoto ("School for Children"), and the Black and Proud Liberation School of Jackson, Mississippi.[38]

The appeal of parallel institutions had grown as the freedom struggle evolved. Emphasis on independent structures and power blocs had re-emerged in the early to mid-1960s, producing northern and southern freedom schools, the Freedom Now Party in Michigan, and the Lowndes County Freedom Organization in

Alabama. "A conscious bid for political power is being made, and in the course of that effort a tactical shift is being effected," civil rights strategist Bayard Rustin noted in 1964. "Direct-action techniques are being subordinated to a strategy calling for the building of community institutions or power bases. Clearly, the implications of this shift reach far beyond Mississippi." Offering a more nationalistic framing, SNCC in 1966 called upon African Americans "to begin building independent political, economic and cultural institutions that they will control and use as instruments of social change in this country."[39]

The construction of parallel institutions assumed richer symbolic meaning in the late 1960s as autonomous black trade unions (including Detroit's League of Revolutionary Black Workers) proliferated, the Black Panthers unveiled a series of "survival programs" designed to deliver social services directly to poor communities, and Pan African nationalism enjoyed a moment of ideological hegemony in black political culture. "The most crucial work for this particular era of African existence is the building of revolutionary nationalist institutions," editors of the newly launched *Rhythm Magazine* asserted in 1970. "By 'institutions' we mean schools, political parties, cultural centers, military units, presses—all those programmatic structures that enable a people to see beyond survival; in short, the elemental ingredients of a viable nation."[40]

Such establishments promised to supplement the social services that were vanishing from the urban core, a site of massive disinvestment and neglect. Parallel institutions seemed capable of offering an alternative structure of authority, a provisional power that could replace hostile and inadequate local agencies. By presenting credible alternatives that fulfilled human needs, such ventures could win the loyalty of the people, exposing the failings of the existing social apparatus and serving as tools for mass politicization. The metaphor of black nationhood could become material reality, crystallizing in an emerging network of independent enterprises.[41]

Though it was rarely invoked explicitly, the concept of "dual power," or the formation of alternative institutions as a means of supplanting corrupt state authority, captures the aims and exuberance of Black Power's autonomous establishments. A mainstay of leftist practice since the formation of workers' "soviets" during the Russian Revolution of 1917, the approach appealed to African-American organizers who wished to formalize elements of intellectual independence from a majority culture they viewed as rapidly decaying. The principle of dual power provided a rationale for constructing within black neighborhoods institutional models of a free and just society. It offered a method of discrediting the structures of white elite power while gradually subverting their control over black life.[42]

The dual power model had many African-American antecedents. Some of the mutual aid societies and other indigenous establishments devoted to

strengthening the viability of southern black communities during and after Reconstruction performed quasi-governmental functions, including maintaining internal order and discipline, delivering social services, and providing for collective defense. In the interwar years, Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association organized schools, a nurse and paramilitary corps, and other parallel institutions. As theorists James and Grace Boggs observed, the growth of the Nation of Islam in black urban neighborhoods between the 1930s and the 1960s rested in part on the strength of an organizational framework that "approximates the structure of government, including leaders, followers, taxation, discipline, and enforcement agencies." *Freedomways* editor Jack O'Dell later argued that the most profound characteristic of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s was its role as an independent center of authority that "represented the people's alternative to the power of institutionalized racism and colonialist war." By 1970, the creation of "alternative forms or institutions" was closely associated with Pan African nationalist development and the "We Are an African People" slogan.[43]

Despite its contemporary relevance, the principle of dual power contained a number of contradictions. The construction of autonomous social prototypes reflected awareness that revolution required more than spontaneous eruption. Yet institutional preservation often meant supplementing rather than confronting the dominant political apparatus, a strategy seemingly inconsistent with broad social transformation. Dual power reflected both practical and utopian ideas. It strove to address material conditions at the grassroots, but it could also reinforce the fantasy that the state would simply wither away or foster the belief that official authority might be usurped by a few isolated counterinstitutions. Finally, the drive to create separate structures encompassed both egalitarian and authoritarian impulses, embodying the ideal of widespread, democratic participation while replicating the hierarchy of a vanguard formation.

The rediscovery of dual power enriched the black renaissance of the 1960s and '70s, conflicting tendencies notwithstanding. At a time when anticolonial theory shaped the discourse of liberation, efforts to craft alternative structures shifted the radical gaze toward future horizons. The practice of dual power suggested that black people could design viable prototypes of the societies they wished to inhabit. The postcolonial process of establishing a political culture based on the aims of the revolution could thus begin immediately, even amid the throes of struggle.[44]

To the young organizers who remade African-American politics in the 1960s, the conversion from "freedom" to "liberation" seemed necessary and promising. The ferment of street uprisings, the rejuvenation of nationalism, the rise of black consciousness, the rendezvous with the Third World, the colonial analogy, the

Pan African resurgence—all were essential to the transformation of the movement. Black Power, or that phase of insurgency known to participants as "the black liberation struggle," was a social awakening, a period of intense political maturation that helped shape African-American modernity. The movement, or conglomeration of submovements, was led by grassroots organizers and charismatic mobilizers. It was local as well as national and transnational, strategic and sustained as well as abortive, and democratic as well as authoritarian.

Examining Black Power through the lens of independent schools opens new vistas of struggle. Schools are rich sites of knowledge production. They generate a fertile set of political ideas and offer a valuable means of assessing contemporary efforts to model a postrevolutionary future. Black nationalism and Pan Africanism did not simply disrupt or derail educational struggles in the 1960s, as some scholars suggest. *We Are an African People* presents nationalism as an organic outgrowth of the range of impulses within black educational thought and practice.[45]

The narratives of disillusionment with which historians once explained transitions to black nationalism and to speculative varieties of radicalism seem curiously one-dimensional. A rich corpus of scholarship has demonstrated that Black Power's multiple political and cultural expressions were neither merely phenomena of the urban North nor purely manifestations of frustration or bravado. They were not simply episodes of rhetoric or catharsis.[46]

As scholars have argued, the radicalism of the late 1960s and 1970s reformulated rather than ruptured the "organizing tradition," the painstaking, egalitarian approach that helped define earlier stages of struggle.[47] This was the case in the realm of education. Organizers who adopted revolutionary outlooks increasingly scorned progressive Western pedagogy, believing that its ideals of self-actualization and individual expression masked an underlying commitment to capitalist accumulation and racial hierarchy. But many Black Power institutions maintained democratic philosophies and instructional techniques. Overemphasis on decline—in the methods and objectives of alternative education or in the transformation of black political culture more broadly—obscures the progressive ethics that marked all phases of the movement.[48]

Independent black institutions exemplified another critical dimension of Black Power organizing—its pragmatism. Pan African nationalist schools were more than sources of theory. They were also direct responses to material and other deficiencies in urban infrastructure and schooling. Organizers and supporters of the institutions recognized that "people do not just fight for ideas."[49] They yearned to politicize black residents of core cities, but they also wanted the children of such territories to become fully literate and conscious of the world as it was and as it might be. Anything less would compromise the political and cultural transfiguration they envisioned.

Focusing on the activities of Pan African nationalist educators helps highlight the everyday practices of Black Power while challenging the notion that advocates of the movement abandoned community work for proselytizing and "skillful manipulation of media." Black Powerites were pedagogues and propagandists. They engaged bread-and-butter issues of education, housing, and employment even as they forged new political paths and created centralized organizations. "There will be no instant revolution this year," a SNCC officer acknowledged in 1968. "We have to prepare our people for a very long haul. We have to propose programs."[50]

Depictions of the late 1960s and '70s as an incomprehensible welter of events and ideas, or as a mere splintering of groups and coalitions, require reconsideration.[51] The dynamics of chaos and fracture strongly marked contemporary politics. Yet the period also offered elements of intellectual and tactical coherence. Despite the intricate organizational and ideological realignments that accompanied their rebirth, Pan Africanism and African reidentification supplied an intellectual matrix upon which an array of activists and cultural workers coalesced.

Tales of post-1960s political failure have eclipsed not just Black Power's pragmatism and coherence but also its radical optimism.[52] During the pregnant moment between the mid-1960s civil rights legislation and the political alienation of the late 1970s, bitter disenchantment and exhilarating possibilities commingled. The turn to Pan African nationalism was an expression of hope more than a symptom of despair. Radical internationalism reinvigorated the freedom struggle and enlarged its political visions.

A holistic view of the Black Power era must depict its fusion of alienation and expectation while conveying the depth and scope of its intellectual production. *We Are an African People* stresses the ideological diversity and complexity of Pan Africanism (or "Neo-Pan Africanism"), a major tendency of the movement. Like other scholars of transnational African-American consciousness, I do not regard African cultural identity and solidarity efforts as illusory.[53] In such crusades, the politics of engagement and escape often coincide. The freedom dreams of black internationalists were audacious, but rarely were they flimsy or ephemeral.

Nor were such visions markers of larger, inexorable processes of decline. A detailed mapping of discursive practices and countersymbolic strategies can highlight the political fertility of the 1970s. Upon careful analysis, many of the decade's seemingly evanescent struggles appear rigorous, theoretically expansive, and influential. Such campaigns belie accounts of the abrupt collapse of grassroots activity.

New scholarship has reframed the decade. "Far from belonging to the post-civil rights era," historian Stephen Tuck writes, the 1970s represented "the high-water mark of the black liberation movement." A number of grassroots struggles, from the revolts of rank-and-file workers to welfare rights campaigns,

unfolded during a period that is often viewed as the "tragic denouement" of 1960s protests.[54] The rise of a generation of black independent schools underscores the need to rethink the decade. Dismissing even seemingly quixotic Black Power institutions as symbols of hubris and fantasy conceals the liminal moment in which they flourished and leads to truncated and reductionist accounts of the liberation struggle.

Historicizing Pan African nationalism's quest to remake African-American identity in the post–Jim Crow era means reconstructing a range of visions and activities. It also means transcending the impulse to vindicate Black Power. Serious movements demand rigorous scrutiny. I accept Ann McClintock's assertion that "All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous," as well as E. Frances White's premise that black nationalism contains both liberating and repressive discourses.[55] *We Are an African People* offers a sympathetic yet critical analysis of Pan African nationalism's ideological groundings. In so doing, it expands an ongoing discussion of the internal contradictions of Black Power and black nationalism.[56]

As this study demonstrates, a host of theoretical and practical weaknesses plagued the quest for independent black institutions. Patriarchy was an especially severe deficiency. Many Pan African nationalist schools were founded and operated by women, including Atlanta's Learning House (Lonnetta Gaines and Victoria Skaggs); St. Paul, Minnesota's Institute of African Learning (Sylvia Hill); Philadelphia's ARD Self-Help Center (Alice Walker); and Durham, North Carolina's Pan African Early Education Center (Mary McDonald). Overall, however, independent black institutions reproduced the pronounced male supremacy inherent in the majority culture. Their masculinist framing of liberation marginalized black women, including those who played central roles in their organization. As Christina Greene has noted, such male-centered approaches "obscured the critical contributions of women to Black Power projects, particularly those undertaken at the local level."[57]

An exaggerated view of the significance of identity was another serious shortcoming. Leaders of the schools attempted to preserve "blackness" and "Africanness" as a set of specific cultural behaviors and political values, even as those motifs were commoditized, appropriated by liberal and conservative forces, and stripped of oppositional meaning as symbols of mass resistance to racial capitalism.[58]

Preoccupation with internal conversion and the inculcation of values suggested that resocialization could replace other forms of struggle, or that resocialization *was* the struggle. The effort to forge a new peoplehood, an ideal closely associated with cultural nationalism, was embraced by practically every Black Power tendency. Yet the authoritarian implications of campaigns to govern consciousness and "win the mind" were often ignored. At times, emphasis on

re-education and psychological liberation eclipsed more substantive challenges to structural racism. The fixation of activist-intellectuals on reconditioning students, staff—indeed, all black Americans—threatened to reduce emancipation to an act of culture or a psychic quest.[59]

The equation of Pan Africanism with the activities of true believers, and the notion that the enculturation of the masses was the duty of an advance guard of ideologues, further separated some varieties of black radicalism from the everyday realities and aspirations of the African-American working classes. The real value of "liberated territories" lay in their capacity to return decision-making power to the people, not in the creation of a new layer of intellectual or political elites.

Finally, organizers of independent schools misjudged the capacity of black self-help and communitarianism to prefigure more robust forms of political autonomy and to mitigate the effects of capitalist restructuring. Wedded to notions of urban centers as sites of racial solidarity, they were ill equipped to confront the social devastation spawned by the growing isolation and poverty of postindustrial cities.

Despite these and other flaws, independent black institutions were more than rearguard formations or distractions from confrontation politics. The schools embodied the rich institutional life of the Black Power and Black Arts movements; they were products of a cultural efflorescence that remains remarkably underappreciated. They disseminated ideas through their own small libraries, radio programs, night courses, newsletters, publishing houses, pamphlets, bookstores, cooperatives, study groups, lecture series, rallies, prison programs, plays, festivals, cultural centers, concerts, and films.[60] Pan African nationalist institutions were emblems of ingenuity and organs of a vibrant black radical counterpublic.

They were also dynamic social and intellectual experiments. *We Are an African People* chronicles the transformation of ideas in the context of daily practice. It avoids analytical compartmentalism, the tendency to treat activists and organizations as if they were politically static. Physical travel almost always accompanied intellectual growth and transition. The political realm of Pan African nationalist thinkers encompassed Cuba, Algeria, Guyana, Tanzania, Trinidad, Angola, and China. International fellowship and exchange with revolutionaries—from Mozambique's Samora Machel to Guinea-Bissau's Amilcar Cabral—spurred the ideological development of individual activists and that of the institutions they represented. This study traces those complex circuits and metamorphoses. It strengthens the burgeoning scholarship on Black Power's global trajectories.[61] It charts an extraordinary struggle to build the new society, within and beyond the classroom, at home and abroad.

We Are an African People begins with the 1960s community control, "relevance," and black studies battles that inspired many independent black institutions

and that helped popularize the theories of "black education" they attempted to refine. Chapters 1 and 2 address the practical inadequacies of school desegregation campaigns and describe alternative approaches to which black urban parents, activists, and students turned. Demands for curricular changes and "home rule" in school governance were part of larger, grassroots efforts to reimagine the classroom as a site of social democracy and cultural dignity. As these ambitions strained the limits of reform, some organizers looked for solutions beyond public education. Separatist impulses and persistent conflict with public school bureaucrats led to the founding in 1970 of Brooklyn's Uhuru Sasa Shule, one of the most influential Pan African nationalist establishments of the era.

Uhuru Sasa and other contemporary institutions extended a long-standing tradition of constructing autonomous schools within black mass movements. Chapter 3 chronicles the evolution of such "movement schools," from the "universities" of the Universal Negro Improvement Association in the early twentieth century to the freedom schools and liberation schools of the 1960s. Changing philosophies of citizenship helped determine whether movement schools attempted to supplement, challenge, or replace the dominant institutions of the larger society. Chapter 4 describes the emergence of the Nairobi School System of East Palo Alto, a Northern California town whose struggles for self-government and educational opportunity fueled a transition from militant integrationism to pragmatic black nationalism. The quest of young East Palo Altans to change the town's name to "Nairobi" frames the chapter's discussion of the "African restoration movement," the limitations of culturalist politics, and the competing impulses within the "We Are an African People" concept.

While the first four chapters of this study emphasize experimentation and redefinition, Chapters 5 and 6 examine more fully the construction and ideological evolution of Pan African nationalist schools. Chapter 5 chronicles the rise of Neo-Pan Africanism in the late 1960s as a major tendency of Black Power and identifies the Congress of African People, a national formation, as a central organizational framework for contemporary institution building. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the shortcomings of "Racial Pan Africanism," an approach whose essentialism severely constrained African-American internationalist politics. The revival of "Left Pan Africanism," an alternative tendency that offered a more critical, anti-imperialist perspective, is discussed.

Chapter 6 explores the paradigm of the "Black University" and the innovative prototypes of adult education that it inspired. Rebellions on college campuses produced Malcolm X Liberation University in Durham and then Greensboro, North Carolina; the Center for Black Education in Washington, DC; and Nairobi College of East Palo Alto, California. Similar impulses triggered a

revolt at Howard University (also in Washington), whose students rejected the school's status as a "Negro" institution largely disconnected from surrounding, poor and working-class African-American neighborhoods. Ideological growth led to the creation of African Liberation Day in North America, an expression of the popular internationalism that undergirded the Black University theme. The appearance of "left" models of the Black University, including the Lynn Eusan Institute of Houston, Texas, raised hopes for a progressive, radical turn in the politics of institution building.

Chapter 7 and the Epilogue depart from the theme of radicalization and demonstrate instead how the ascent of "Afrocentrism" after the late 1970s signaled the consolidation of a more conservative brand of nationalism and provided another case of the domestication of 1960s insurgencies. Chapter 7 outlines the forces of demobilization and demoralization that activists confronted in the first half of the 1970s. As the liberation struggle endured escalating violence and state repression, new crises of factionalism and sectarianism arose. Disputes between Left Pan Africanists and Racial Pan Africanists plunged independent black institutions into bitter ideological combat. The political intricacies of the Sixth Pan African Congress further disoriented African-American radicalism and internationalism.

By the end of the decade, many surviving Pan African nationalist schools were politically divided, destitute, and crisis ridden. New black alternative models appeared in the last two decades of the century, but most lacked the explicit anticapitalism, anti-imperialism, and Third Worldism that had characterized radical institutions of the early 1970s. The new generation of black nationalist schools generally accepted, or were unable to substantially challenge, the brittle tenets of corporate multiculturalism. Some Afrocentric educators aligned politically with conservatives who wished to recast educational reform as a drive for privatization, vouchers, and charter schools. As the discourses and rituals of Pan African nationalism separated from the politics of mass opposition, few alternative institutions were able to reinvigorate the radical and progressive traditions of Black Power organizing.

Though the most expansive, global impulses of independent black institutions were ultimately blunted, *We Are an African People* is not primarily a narrative of decline. My purpose is not simply to disentangle radical and conservative tendencies. Rather, I hope to illustrate complexities and possibilities, casting alternative social visions in the full span of their development, always mindful of the enduring potential for positive adaptation and growth.

Long after the tides of 1960s radicalism had receded, many marginalized Americans continued to imagine the schoolhouse as a locus of self-determination. Education remains an arena of struggle. We still need counterinstitutions, radical democratic spaces in which people of all colors can craft and enact creative

theories of social reconstruction. Today, as many parents, students, and activists strive to reimagine and redesign schools that have long stood as sites of civic abandonment and criminalization, a re-examination of recent traditions of educational dissent may prove invaluable. The following pages, then, seek to capture the spirit of the liberation struggle and to acknowledge its triumphs and errors in the hopes of crafting more resilient movements in the future.

1

Community Control and the Struggle for Black Education in the 1960s

> The most damaging thing a people in a colonial situation can do is to allow their children to attend any educational facility organized by the dominant enemy culture.
>
> —George Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 1970[1]

On January 6, 1965, an elementary school student at Harlem's Public School (PS) 80 wrote the following composition for class, a piece cryptically titled "Sen Feel Sad":

1. Why a baby Rabbit's eyes are clos
   It was a letter baby and her
   eyes Hurt him
2. what baby Rabbit's like to eat
   baby Rabbit's eat caBBage
3. a mother Rabbit's and six new
   babies, is all children
4. Bunny and Her Babies
   are a little children
5. why the Rabbit make a nest
   they makes they nest with
   grass

In a way, the essay was poignant. Almost poetic. It was also depressingly typical—another testament, it seemed, to the effects of the community's public schools. Circulating copies of the prose as further vindication of their cause, members of a local campaign for educational justice acknowledged what many

Harlemites already knew: that such inaptitude in the language arts placed a disgraceful share of local children among the legions of "the doomed." What lay ahead for the essay's author if not the indignity of menial employment, and perhaps even the frontlines of the Vietnam War or the narcotics trade?

Harlem children performed two to four years behind national and citywide academic norms. The longer they remained in school, the further behind they fell. A 1964 study reported that "less than half of Central Harlem's youth seem destined to complete high school, and of those that do, most will join the ranks of those with no vocational skills, no developed talents, and, consequently, little or no future." Chronic miseducation had already relegated countless local youngsters to lives of drudgery in a land of abundance. Over the course of the 1960s, as they mounted a minor revolution to reclaim the neighborhood's schools, Harlem's black and Puerto Rican parents rediscovered an appropriately unsettling term for such degradation: "educational genocide."[2]

In the mid- to late 1960s, the militant cry for "quality integrated education" in Harlem and other mobilized African-American communities gave way to demands for African-American control of schools in black neighborhoods. The patent shortcomings of desegregation campaigns helped spur the transition. Working-class African-American urbanites had long seen desegregation as a pragmatic way to gain access for their children to the educational resources overwhelmingly reserved—in the North and the South—for white students. Most members of the black rank and file had no particular affinity for white middle-class institutions or norms. They willingly embraced a quest for African-American educational autonomy when changing demographic and political realities suggested that such a tactical adjustment was necessary.

However, the community control movement and the theories of "black education" that it helped spawn transcended purely academic concerns. Grassroots opposition to the underdevelopment of African-American schools and communities signaled a broader crusade to liberate both the black urban "colony" and African-American consciousness itself. Black parents, children, and activists sought educational dignity and the right to define themselves within and beyond the classroom. In time, these rudimentary desires would produce a new generation of independent schools.

"The Road Upward": Intermediate School 201 and the Transition from Integrationism

Local schools had long been cruel symbols of the oppression of Harlem, a place described by one of its resident journalists as "a six square mile festering black scar on the alabaster underbelly of the white man's indifference." Though Harlem