FIGHTING FOR US

MAULANA KARENGA, THE **US** ORGANIZATION, AND BLACK CULTURAL NATIONALISM

FOREWORD BY
CLAYBORNE CARSON

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Contents

Foreword

I first talked with Maulana Karenga in 1966, when I conducted a long interview with him for a *Los Angeles Free Press* article. He was already widely known in the Los Angeles area as an influential young Black nationalist. At UCLA, where he was a graduate student in African linguistics and I was an undergraduate history major, his powerful orations, peppered with sardonic humor, always drew crowds. He had created a tightly organized and loyal group of followers called US—"Anywhere we are, US is." I had been suspicious of those Black nationalists who stood on the sidelines of the southern freedom struggle during the first half of the 1960s, but I was impressed that Karenga had emerged as an effective leader in post-Watts rebellion Los Angeles. At a time of uncertainty and disorganization in the African-American freedom struggle, Karenga's US exhibited confidence and discipline.

Karenga impressed me with his ability to bring new vitality to traditional Black nationalism. He adapted ideas drawn from African cultures and political movements, but his public statements conveyed an appealing originality and exceptional intelligence I looked forward to meeting him when I arrived for the interview at the office of a group called Self-Leadership for ALL Nationalities Today or SLANT, headed by Karenga's friend Tommy Jacquette. There was an élan associated with US that was immediately apparent. Members wore African-style green bubas and used Kiswahili terms. In a way similar to Nation of Islam members, they took pride in their appearance and often prefaced their remarks by deferring to the words of Maulana, their Master Teacher. The indications that US had formed a leadership cult worried me, but Karenga himself was reassuringly modest, eager to express his admiration for other leaders, such as Malcolm X, and for organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). I learned that he had tried without

success to establish ties with SNCC. During the interview, he described the seven principles that would later be celebrated during Kwanzaa, the African-American holiday he invented. I could see even then that Karenga would become a major force in the African-American freedom struggle. I was not surprised when he played major roles in the national Black Power conferences of the next few years.

We maintained occasional contact during the tumultuous years that followed my initial interview. In 1968, when I returned to UCLA after graduation and a period of draft-avoidance in Europe, the US organization had consolidated its influence in the Black Congress, the umbrella group which included most of the groups that were then active in south-central Los Angeles. In the meantime, the Black Panther Party had also become an important and competitive political force. I supported the Black Panthers, because they had the same kind of brash militancy that I had admired in SNCC, but I regretted that the two groups were fighting with one another. I believed that there was no necessary conflict between the so-called 'revolutionary nationalism' of the Black Panthers and the 'cultural nationalism' of US. I knew from my conversations with Karenga that he had wanted to become the cultural arm of SNCC and the Black Panthers. He had tried to forge a working relationship with the latter group early in 1968, during the 'Free Huey' campaign to save the Black Panther defense minister from being executed for allegedly murdering an Oakland policeman. Karenga's group had even provided security for the Newton support rally held in February 1968 at the Los Angeles sports area.

As relations between US and the Black Panthers deteriorated during 1968, I saw terrible consequences of the abrasive way in which some Panther leaders—especially Eldridge Cleaver—provoked conflicts through their attacks against cultural nationalism. I understood that the Black Panthers saw themselves as

revolutionaries facing brutal repression and thus were impatient with any group that did adopt their confrontation political style. But I also appreciated the dedication of US members and the widespread popular support for cultural nationalism in Black communities throughout the nation. By this time, Karenga's close relationship with Amiri Baraka had broadened his influence on the East coast. Yet, as the Black Panthers began to worry legitimately about police agents in their own ranks, they also began to ridicule Karenga and his followers. They referred to them as "pork-chop nationalists," implying that Karenga collaborated with the Los Angeles police chief and California governor Ronald Reagan. Karenga, like previous Black nationalists, including Elijah Muhammad, Marcus Garvey, and Martin Delany, had left himself open to this charge by insisting that all white people were the same and that therefore negotiating with powerful white conservatives made as much sense as the Black Panthers' willingness to collaborate with less powerful white leftists. The FBI predictably exploited the US/Panther conflict, to the detriment of both groups.

In January 1969, I attended a meeting at UCLA's Campbell Hall of the Black Student Union where Black Panthers and US members stood glaring at each other from opposite sides of a classroom in which intimidated students discussed how to establish a Black studies program at UCLA. Karenga pushed his candidate to head the planned Black studies program on the campus, arguing that US, not the Panthers, could mobilize the Los Angeles Black community on behalf of the program. I was not completely surprised when the escalating intergroup tensions exploded two days after the meeting into a deadly clash that left two Black Panthers dead. Subsequent police raids severely damaged both groups and ultimately contributed to the decline of the entire African-American freedom struggle. The subsequent allegation that the killings had been a planned execution

rather than a shoot out also severely damaged the reputation of Karenga and his organization.

I have since concluded that that the US/Panther conflict represented a lost opportunity for merging the two major elements of African-American resistance to racial oppression. The Black Panther Party made an important contribution to the African-American tradition of militant political struggle, while US made a similarly important contribution to the tradition of psychological and cultural struggle. Both traditions were necessary components of our liberation, but they have unfortunately often been competing traditions. Like the verbal sparing that marred relations between Malcolm and King, the US/Panther conflict weakened the modern African-American struggle and spawned divisive ideological conflicts that continue until this day.

Although there are still too few serious scholarly studies of the Black Panther Party, there are even fewer studies of US and other major Black nationalist organizations of the late 1960s and 1970s. The few references to US in the historical literature mostly reflect the Black Panther perspective, viewing it as a reactionary group of police collaborators responsible for the murder of two Black revolutionaries. The true story is more complex and enlightening, for cultural nationalism became the most enduring element of the Black Power movement. The holiday Karenga invented, Kwanzaa, continues to be celebrated, even by people who are unaware of its inventor. Karenga also remains an important influence in the Afrocentric movement, which is itself one of the most popular forms of African-American cultural resistance.

Scot Brown's study of Karenga and US is a major contribution to the historical literature of modern Black nationalism. He has written one of the few scholarly studies that takes seriously the innovative Black nationalist thought of the late 1960s and the only study that draws adequate attention to Karenga's singular contributions to African-American cultural thought. He has written a

sympathetic but also judicious account that draws attention to the roles played by activists other than Karenga in the building of US. He sheds useful light on the relationship between Karenga and Baraka and between US and the Black Panther Party, offering the best balanced account of the UCLA killings that has yet to appear. Finally, Brown provides an insightful assessment of the lasting impact of Karenga and US. I am confident that *Fighting for US* will be seen as a pioneering contribution to an emerging literature regarding African-American militancy during the period after the major civil rights reforms of the 1960s. This thoroughly-researched study represents engaged scholarship at its best.

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The idea of conducting a historical study of US came from my contact with Gerald Chaka and Terry Chaka, owners of the Kitabu Kingdom bookstore in Rochester, New York. In early 1991, Gerald Chaka, a former member of US's San Diego chapter, inspired my interest in the organization's story with intriguing tales of his 1960s life as a cultural nationalist revolutionary. In December of that year, I met Maulana Karenga for the first time in Buffalo, at a *Kwanzaa* lecture. He and his wife, Tiamoyo, invited me to attend the organization's summer institute at its headquarters in Los Angeles.

Karenga's lectures at the institute provided a stimulating and fresh interpretation of Afrocentricity, nationalism, the still-smoldering 1992 uprising in Los Angeles, and other political events of the day. Those encounters with the 1990s version of US provoked my further interest and immersion in the group's cultural-nationalist philosophy called *Kawaida,* and its Black Power–era legacy. I began doing research on US as a dissertation topic in 1994. Though Karenga and I have come to disagree in our respective views on key issues and events in US's history, this

study could not have occurred without his generous provision of access to US's papers and contacts with former US members.

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1. Introduction

The history of the cultural nationalist organization called "US," founded by Maulana Karenga and a handful of others in 1965, is, for most students of Black nationalism, an untold story. The Southern California–based organization experienced a high point in its activism during a great resurgence in African American nationalism, popularly known as the Black Power movement, roughly from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. During these years, US, a relatively small group, established an impressive network of alliances in the Midwest, in the South, and on the East Coast. As a result, US's brand of cultural nationalism influenced a diverse body of activists, artists, and organizations throughout the United States. As the 1960s unfolded, many California-based radical organizations asserted themselves, in an unprecedented manner, in national politics and American cultural life in the form of the Black Panther Party, Students for a Democratic Society, the Peace and Freedom Party, and a host of others. US, in keeping with this trend, rapidly developed a national audience and constituency.

US's story, mirroring the wider Black Power movement, traveled a course shaped by an array of historical factors, including the anticolonial struggles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the Vietnam War, and state repression via Federal Bureau of

Investigation counterintelligence operations. Internal organizational matters, such as the cult of personality, authoritarianism, alternative lifestyles, gender stratification, and vanguard self-perceptions were also driving forces in the organization's plight. Other contextual factors contributing to the makeup of US appear in Karenga's own cultural nationalist theories, inspired by Negritude, African nationalism, the Third World neutralism (or what would become the "non-aligned" movement), and African Studies as an academic discipline in the United States.

The rhetorical stress on racial solidarity, popularized during the era of Black Power, masked underlying tensions and intergroup rivalries that persisted throughout the late 1960s. An intense and bitter feud between US and the Black Panther Party degenerated into violent warfare in Southern California from the beginning of 1969 through 1970. Indeed, this sectarian struggle made lasting impressions on historical commentary and autobiographies written by veteran Black Panther activists. The repeated usage of the term "united slaves," as a reference for the US Organization, is perhaps the best example of the lasting consequences of the US/Panther conflict.[1] The name "US" actually stands for Black people: the pronoun "US" as opposed to "them," the White oppressors. As an article in the journal *Black Dialogue* in 1966 stated, "US means exactly that—all of US (black folks)."[2] During the late 1960s, some of US's rivals and opponents used the term "united slaves" to ridicule the group. This slur has been given, unwittingly, scholarly credence in several works on the Black Power movement, in spite of the fact that there are no documents or recorded speeches in which Karenga or any US members refer to their organization as such.

A series of other writings that mention US have restated, uncritically, the Black Panther Party's allegations, made during the heat of battle, that the US Organization was a collaborator with the United States government for the purpose of bringing about

the Black Panther Party's demise.[3] US leaders also accused the Black Panther Party of working with the Los Angeles Police Department in a strategy to neutralize their organization. US's perspective, in any case, did not have a comparable impact on scholarly or anecdotal interpretations of the Black Panther Party's historical legacy. Chapter 5 of this study, examining the nuances of the ideological and "turf" struggle between US and the Panthers, attempts to move the discussion past the limitations of simple accusation and vilification by focusing on the dynamic and complex relationship between these groups.

This book is part of a growing historical literature on the Black Power movement and its activist organizations.[4] The coming dialogue and debate about US's story, and other Black radical formations of the 1960s and 1970s, should inform a wider synthesis and understanding of the Black Power movement's place in African American history. Komozi Woodard's *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) & Black Power Politics* maintains that independent politics and the goal of nationality formation were key developments in Black Power–era cultural nationalism. A centerpiece in this process was the launching, in Woodard's term, of the Modern Black Convention Movement—the 1966, 1967, and 1968 Black Power conferences, the 1970 and 1972 Congress of African People conventions, the 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, and a series of other major Black political gatherings. Woodard sheds important light on the period from 1969 through 1974 in which Amiri Baraka, the Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN), and the Congress of African People (CAP) peaked in the leadership of Black cultural nationalist politics. CAP and CFUN applied US's blueprint for political power and succeeded in bringing about bold new levels of mass participation in electoral politics and grassroots community organizing. From 1966 through 1968, US led the initiating phase of the Modern Convention Movement, playing a leader-

ship role, along with Newark's Rev. Nathan Wright Jr. and others, in the planning of the 1967 and 1968 Black Power conferences. Baraka, a close ally of Karenga in the late 1960s and early 1970s, found the tools for building a mass movement in US's organizational structure and ideology. Baraka and affiliated cultural nationalists peaked during a time when US's activism was thwarted, from 1969 to the mid-1970s, by conflict with the Black Panther Party and internal divisions.

How US, a relatively small, disciplined, self-declared vanguard group based on the West Coast, became the central force behind an expansive cultural nationalist movement is the story of a single organization's dynamic relationship to wider networks of groups that comprised a social movement. The relationship between group size and overall influence is especially important for the era of Black Power, given its occurrence at a time when radical organizations had gained increased access to American mass media. These developments in the 1960s made it possible for small locally based, largely unknown groups like US and the Black Panther Party to acquire a swift entrée to national audiences and constituency. In the case of US, the group's extensive impact was dramatically disproportionate to its size—at its height US probably did not exceed five hundred to six hundred members. US sought to induce other formations to accept its ideology —a technique Karenga called "programmatic influence"—while maintaining a small membership. Awareness of these organizing techniques empowers us with a clearer understanding of how small organizations in this period were often at the core of highly visible mass movements.

This history of US is told as a topical and linear narrative. Specific areas of focus, such as US's political legacy and influence on the arts, are explored independently, yet other events herein are contained as part of the story of US's rise and decline in the era of Black Power. Chapter 2 opens with a brief discussion of cul-

tural nationalism as one among many types of Black nationalist trends in American history. An overview that introduces the US Organization follows, focusing on its genesis and ideology. The rest of the chapter sheds light on the historical context and intellectual currents that shaped Maulana Karenga's conception of the US Organization, its philosophy, and its program. Chapter 3 presents a broad sketch of the alternative lifestyle that membership in US required. The organization's own division of labor and gender and its internal hierarchy are explored for the purpose of describing the varied and complex responsibilities, roles, and experiences of rank-and-file members and leaders.

Chapter 4 begins with a discussion of US's organizational and political strategies, highlighting the group's activism in electoral politics, anti-Vietnam protest, and underground violent resistance. Chapter 5 analyzes the discourse of the US/Panther conflict and the impact of the sectarian feud and government repression, and their combined impact on the day-to-day functioning of US. Chapter 6 looks at US's outreach to larger Black audiences through African dance, jazz, and literature. Finally, the concluding chapter on Afrocentricity and Kwanzaa briefly reviews the organization's activities since 1975.

2. From Ron Everett to Maulana Karenga

The Intellectual and Political Bases for the US Organization

Black nationalist ideologies have historically maintained that people of African descent share a common history and life chances in a White or European-dominated political, economic, and social order. Studies of Black nationalism have made use of varied typologies and categories to distinguish the disparate, and sometimes competing, tendencies within nationalism. In broad terms, different Black nationalisms have been defined by a relationship to a dominant or notable area of emphasis: politics, economics, culture, and religion—to name a few.[1]

Black cultural nationalism has been broadly defined as the view that African Americans possess a distinct aesthetic, sense of values, and communal ethos emerging from either, or both, their contemporary folkways and continental African heritage. This collective identity informs, from a cultural nationalist perspective, African Americans' historical and prospective mission and unique contributions to humanity.[2] Typologies of nationalism provide significant insights into specific dimensions of Black political thought but tend to fall short of capturing the ideological complexity of a given activist or organization. Historians have situated the literary works of nineteenth-century nationalist Martin Delaney, for instance, in the cultural nationalist tradition, while his pursuit of Black nationhood finds company among those as-

sociated with territorial nationalism. The ideas espoused by the US Organization, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, were similarly complex and multifaceted. Karenga is distinct, however, in that he defined himself, and US, as "cultural nationalist," explicitly embracing the term as an identifier of the organization's philosophy. Also, the broad-based 1960s Black cultural nationalist movement was literally comprised of thousands of organizations, artists, and activists. The deliberateness with which Karenga sought to detail the theoretical underpinnings of his self-styled liberation strategy helped thrust his organization to the center of Black cultural nationalist politics and the more expansive Black nationalist resurgence of the period. This chapter explores the intellectual grounds for the US Organization's program and philosophy—canvassing discourses central to the emergence and character of the organization.

From Everett to Karenga: Eastern Shore, LACC, UCLA, and Africa

In December 1998, more than three decades after the first Kwanzaa in 1966, Maulana Karenga came back home to Salisbury, Maryland, the region of his upbringing, as a guest speaker for a pre-Kwanzaa celebration. The event, hosted by Project Sisterhood, a rites-of-passage organization for adolescent girls, attracted families, public officials, community activists, and a large number of Karenga's relatives. The crowd listened attentively as Karenga beckoned them to ponder and celebrate the moral lessons born of their African history and culture. "So we come and we celebrate this ancient history," he declared, ". . . this history that taught us to speak truth and to do justice, to honor our elders and our ancestors, to cherish and challenge our children and care for the vulnerable."[3] These teachings, for Karenga and

many in the room, though cited from the philosophers of Black antiquity, were integral to a lived experience as African Americans, raised in modern-day Eastern Shore, Maryland.

Karenga, born Ronald Everett in 1941, was the youngest among fourteen children. Throughout his childhood years, Everett family members labored as farmers in Parsonsburg, a small town just outside of Salisbury. The living and work arrangement was tantamount to sharecropping, with the landowner providing living space and permitting the Everetts to keep 50 percent of the produce they picked. Young Ronnie spent his mornings and afternoons with his siblings, picking potatoes, cucumbers, strawberries, and tomatoes that were eventually "trucked" out for sale at a local market.[4] He may have spent more time in a single day with his sisters than with his parents, who worked incessantly and found means to supplement family earnings through occasional migrant labor and domestic work. Ronnie's initial respite from the land came as he began elementary school in neighboring Salisbury.[5]

His mother and father, Addie and Levi Everett, saw Ronnie as a "special child" because he was their seventh son.[6] Their perspective was informed by a deep Christian faith and spirituality. Levi, a Baptist minister, was undoubtedly familiar with the Old Testament figures David, Eliel, Elioenai, and Enoch, each of whom was the seventh son within his respective familial place in the unfolding of the Hebrew narrative.[7] Many African Americans in Eastern Shore and beyond were familiar with some version of the lore that the seventh child (male or female) was "blessed" with special potentialities. Arnetta Church Atkins, a high school peer of Ronnie's older brother Chestyn, remembered that the seventh child was seen as a "good omen" of sorts.[8]

If Ronnie's success in school occurred as a measure of divine will, it was, indeed, a prophecy fulfilled by others in the family. The Everett children were known throughout the region as ex-