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Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usou20>

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Published online: 20 Nov 2013.

To cite this article: Akinyele Umoja (2013) From One Generation to the Next: Armed Self-Defense, Revolutionary Nationalism, and the Southern Black Freedom Struggle, *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 15:3, 218-240, DOI: [10.1080/10999949.2013.838857](https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2013.838857)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2013.838857>

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From One Generation to the Next

Armed Self-Defense, Revolutionary Nationalism, and the Southern Black Freedom Struggle

Akinyele Umoja

The Black Power ideology revolutionary nationalism grew out of a pro-armed self-defense orientation that was composed of a network of the Marxist-Leninists and Black nationalists in the 1950s and early 1960s. The Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) is the first organized expression of revolutionary nationalism. This article documents the connection between the pro-armed-self-defense orientation of the 1950s and early 1960s and the development of Black revolutionary nationalism. I also examine RAM's attempt to organize in Mississippi in 1964, and what this means for the development of Black Power.

Keywords: armed resistance, Black power, Civil Rights movement, Mississippi freedom struggle, Revolutionary Action Movement

One of the leading ideological tenets of the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was revolutionary nationalism. One of the primary influences for revolutionary nationalism was a pro-armed self-defense tendency in the Black freedom struggle of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The pro armed-self defense elements in the Black freedom movement of that period were an ideologically heterogeneous group that included the militant wing of the indigenous Civil Rights Movement (e.g., Robert Williams, Gloria Richardson, and later the Deacons for Defense, elements of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the Lowndes County Freedom Organization); Black nationalists and Pan-Africanists (e.g., John Henrik Clarke), Malcolm X, and elements of the Nation of Islam; and the influence of independent Marxists (e.g., James and Grace Lee Boggs), members of the Workers World Party (e.g., Mae Mallory and Ethel Johnson)

and Socialist Workers Party, and former Communist Party members (e.g., Harry Haywood, Gwendolyn Hall, and Queen Mother Moore). This diverse political grouping supported the use of armed force by the Black freedom movement, particularly in the South, to repel and resist white terrorist violence. While some elements accepted non-violence as a practical tactic, the pro-armed self-defense orientation rejected and openly critiqued philosophical nonviolence as the primary strategy for Black freedom. This collection of politically heterogeneous factions of the radical and Black freedom struggle collectively influenced the political development of Black revolutionary nationalism. The Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) was the first organized expression of self-identified revolutionary nationalism in the Black freedom struggle. The primary purpose of this article is to document the development of Black revolutionary nationalism. I argue that the armed self-defense orientation of the 1950s and '60s were a critical influence on the development of revolutionary nationalism in the Black Power movement. This study will also examine the attempt by self-described revolutionary nationalists to organize in the southern Black freedom struggle in Mississippi in 1964, and what this meant for the development of the Black Power movement later in the decade.

Robert Williams, Monroe, and the Pro-Armed Self-Defense Orientation of the 1950s and '60s

The example of Robert Williams and his activities and ordeal in North Carolina represented a significant rallying point for elements of the Black Left and Black Nationalism of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Williams was the most vocal and visible advocate and practitioner of armed self-defense during that period. He reached national attention in 1957 as president of the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter; Williams organized an armed sentry called the Black Guard in his North Carolina hometown of Monroe. Monroe was located in Union County, North Carolina, a bastion of white supremacist activity. While other activists in the southern Black freedom movement practiced armed self-defense, what distinguished Williams from his peers in the 1950s and early 1960s was his open advocacy of armed resistance. The Monroe movement understood the necessity of utilizing media to win solidarity with their cause. In 1959, Robert and Mabel Williams and their comrade and neighbor Ethel Azalea Johnson collaborated to publish a newsletter *The Crusader* as a vehicle to win support for the Monroe movement and to advocate the position of armed

self-defense.¹ Williams also presented a critique of the point of view of philosophical nonviolence. While not condemning nonviolence, Williams challenged the notion that it was the sole strategy and tactic to be employed in the Black freedom struggle. He considered abandoning armed self-defense to weaken the potential of victory of the Civil Rights movement and for the security of the Black community. In a published exchange with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. debating nonviolence versus armed resistance, Williams argued:

The Southern brute respects only force. Non-violence is a very potent weapon when the opponent is civilized, but non-violence is no match or repellent for a sadist.

... An open declaration of non-violence, or turn-the-other cheekism is an invitation that the white racist brutes will certainly honour by brutal attack on cringing, submissive Negroes. It is time for the Negro in the South to reappraise his method of dealing with his ruthless oppressor.²

Williams' vocal challenge to nonviolence as the primary strategy of the southern Black freedom struggle was as Black intellectual Harold Cruse argued, "the ideological spark that ignited a hidden potential within a newly emerging phase of the Negro movement."³

Militant and radical elements and those in solidarity with the Black freedom struggle significantly mobilized to support Williams on two occasions. The first was the national NAACP hierarchy stripped him from the presidency of its Monroe chapter as a reprimand for his statement calling for meeting "violence with violence" in 1959. Williams' statement followed the acquittal of a white man charged with sexual assault on a Black woman in Union County. Interpreting the court decision as a demonstration of the lack of value of Black humanity, Williams offered, "We cannot take these people who do injustice to us to court and it becomes necessary to punish them ourselves. In the future we will have to try and convict them on the spot."⁴

Movement forces would again rally to support Williams after kidnapping charges were issued against him, his wife Mabel, and cousin and New York activist Mae Mallory, after the Williams sheltered a white couple in the midst of an August 1961 hostile conflict between white supremacists and the Black Guard in Monroe. A part of the New York support network for the Monroe self-defense movement, Mallory was in Monroe during those August 1961 hostilities between the Black Guard and the Klan. Williams and his family went underground and ultimately in exile in Cuba, China, and Tanzania to avoid capture. Mallory fled to Ohio in October where she would fight extradition for three years before being returned to North Carolina to face trial, where she was convicted with three other Monroe defendants John Lowry, Richard Crowder, and Harold Reape. Lowry was a white

college student and “Freedom Rider” from New York and Crowder and Reape were Monroe activists and members of the Black Guard. Mallory was sentenced to a maximum of twenty years, and her co-defendants received between five to ten years. The North Carolina Supreme Court overturned the conviction of the four Monroe defendants in 1965. The Court’s reversal of the conviction was based on the exclusion of Blacks from the grand and trial juries in Union County.⁵

Elements of the U.S. Left and urban Black nationalists formed networks of support for Williams before, after, and during his exile from the United States. Williams’ presence in the Black freedom struggle in the United States would continue even in exile through radio broadcasts from Cuba, the continued circulation of *The Crusader*, and relationships with radical comrades. The Committee to Aid the Monroe Defendants (CAMD) was a national, multi-racial network to support the legal defense of the charged activists and solidarity with the Black freedom forces charged in Monroe. The Monroe NAACP initiated the CAMD and Williams’ colleague Dr. Albert E. Perry headed the defense committee. CAMD attracted such notable personalities as W.E.B. Dubois, Dick Gregory, James Baldwin, Ruby Dee, and Ossie Davis as supporters to Monroe defendants.⁶

CAMD became a vehicle for militant and radical political forces to show their support for armed self-defense in the southern Black freedom struggle. Some Marxist-Leninist organizations that saw revolutionary potential in Williams’s example of armed resistance in Monroe actively participated in the CAMD. The predominately white Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Workers World Party (WWP) particularly played a critical role in building the CAMD after the federal and state political repression of the Williams and their comrades in Monroe. The Trotskyist SWP collaborated with Williams prior to his exile and the formation of CAMD. Williams published poetry in the SWP newspaper *The Militant* as early as 1953. Williams’s activism in Monroe was frequently covered in *The Militant*. The SWP also supported Williams’s campaign to fight for the release of two Black male children (seven and nine years old) sentenced to indefinite incarceration for kissing white girls. Williams utilized his networks to make the “Kissing case” an international human right cause to win release for the Black male juveniles. The SWP also sponsored speaking tours for Williams. Members of the organization played a significant role in assisting the Williams family escape federal, state, and local law enforcement after the kidnapping charges were issued against him and obtaining political exile in Cuba.⁷

The WWP was founded in 1959 culminating from a ten-year ideological struggle within the SWP that resulted in a split in 1958.

The WWP joined the CAMD from its inception and sent activists to Monroe after the indictments and the Williams went underground. Members of the WWP provided property for Mallory's bail in Ohio and led the campaign to fight her extradition to North Carolina. The WWP linked support for Mallory's legal defense to solidarity with the Black freedom forces engaged in armed self-defense. Mallory would ultimately become a member of the WWP. Ethel Azalea Johnson had begun studying Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought as an activist in Monroe. After the mysterious drowning death of her son Raymond, *Crusader* founder and columnist Johnson would ultimately leave Monroe and join the WWP after moving to Philadelphia. Johnson would maintain communication and collaborate with the Williams after their exile from the United States.⁸

Solidarity with Williams was the "litmus test" for those supporting armed self-defense in the southern Black freedom movement. James and Grace Lee Boggs were Detroit-based independent Marxists. Grace Lee (Boggs) had been a member of the SWP who left the organization along with Caribbean Pan-Africanist and Marxist C.L.R. James in 1951 to form the left collective the Correspondence Publishing Committee (CPC). The same year, an autoworker and union organizer James Boggs would soon join James and Lee as a member of the CPC. James Boggs and Grace Lee would wed in 1953. By 1962, the Boggs severed their political relationship with C.L.R. James. The Boggs rejected the classical Marxist notion that the predominately white industrial working class would lead the socialist revolution in the United States and began to see the Black Freedom movement as the "revolutionary social force." The periodical of the CPC, *Correspondence*, covered Williams' activism in Monroe in 1959 and the Boggs worked as part of a network to provide material aid and arms to Williams and the Black community of Monroe. The Boggs served as coordinators of the CAMD in Detroit. James Boggs analyzed the development of Monroe's Black Guard as a critical juncture in the movements for Black liberation and social transformation of the United States (which he saw were linked). Echoing Williams' "violence meeting violence" statement, Boggs stated in the foreword to Attorney Conrad Lynn's 1962 pamphlet on the Monroe defendants, that the campaign in the North Carolina town, "represents the turning point . . . and the early stages of revolution."⁹

The issue of solidarity with Williams, the Monroe movement, and armed self-defense motivated a significant cross-section of activists, including liberals, leftists, and nationalists who supported his cause in New York. The activist scholar and Pan-Africanist John Henrik Clarke, writer Julian Mayfield, the left-leaning thespian couple Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, politician and reverend Adam Clayton Powell,

and Black nationalists Carlos Cooks and Edward “Pork Chop” Davis were all a part of the New York network who raised funds for the self-defense movement in Monroe and circulated *The Crusader*. Historian Tim Tyson documents a trek Mayfield and Clarke made to Monroe in December 1960 with “a truckload of clothes and weapons” which, according to Williams, came “mostly from Harlem.” Williams was also a member of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC) in 1960. Many of Williams’ New York supporters were also in solidarity with the Cuban Revolution. Williams, Clarke, Mayfield, Harold Cruse, and writer Leroi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) were all a part of a FPCC delegation to Cuba in July of 1960. The interest of Williams and his solidarity network in the Cuban Revolution also demonstrates the connection between the pro-armed self-defense orientation and anti-imperialist internationalism.¹⁰

Two significant actors in the New York solidarity network for Williams and the Monroe movement were Queen Mother Audley Moore and Malcolm X. A former member of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) and reparations activist Queen Mother Moore actively organized in Harlem in the 1950s, often combining a Marxist-Leninist analysis with Black Nationalist politics. She was in the center of the network of nationalistic Black Harlemites who distributed Williams’ newsletter *The Crusader* and raised funds to support the armed self-defense efforts in Monroe in the late 1950s. In 1963, Queen Mother formed a Black Nationalist political party, the African Descendants Independence-Partition Party (ADNIP). Moore wrote Williams, in exile in Cuba, and requested he served as president of an African American government in exile. Williams accepted the offer but the ADNIP was short-lived, going out of existence due to internal conflict in late 1963.¹¹

Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam (NOI) Temple Number Seven in Harlem, New York were supporters of Williams and the Black Guard in Monroe. Williams addressed services in Malcolm’s Mosque Number Seven in New York on more than one occasion and the Harlem NOI raised funds for weapons for the Black Guard. On one occasion, Malcolm introduced Williams as, “. . .the first brother to take up arms and fight. . . .He and his people are facing death for all of us.” Williams and Malcolm would maintain communication, as the Monroe NAACP president became one of the NOI spokesperson’s sources for information on the southern Black freedom movement.¹²

Robert and Mabel Williams returned from exile in 1969 and fought extradition to North Carolina (from Michigan) until 1975. The network of comrades who supported the Williams in the 1950s and ‘60s did not abandon them. Former CPUSA member Gwendolyn Midlo

Hall served as the chair of his defense committee for his 1975 trial. In 1965, Hall had been harassed and dismissed from a teaching position at Elizabeth City State College in North Carolina for teaching her students about Robert Williams' positions on armed self-defense. The state of North Carolina ultimately dropped all charges against Williams.¹³

Origins of Revolutionary Nationalism and the Pro-Armed Self-Defense Orientation

Self-identified Revolutionary nationalists asserted that Black liberation would not be possible without the overthrow of the political constitutional order and capitalist economic system. This is a common tread that runs between self-described revolutionary organizations as RAM, the Black Panther Party, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and the Black Liberation Army. Revolutionary nationalism has the political objective of securing self-determination and state power for Black people and a radical transformation of the social, political, and economic order. Revolutionary nationalists embraced confrontational and insurgent political action, including nonviolent direct action and armed struggle. Black Power activists defining themselves as revolutionary nationalists generally called for Black people forming their own independent organizations.

The term “revolutionary nationalism” was first used and applied to the Black freedom movement in a 1962 article by Harold Cruse titled “Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American” published in the radical journal *Studies in the Left*. Cruse' article did not articulate a clear definition of revolutionary nationalism. A former member of the CPUSA, Cruse makes an argument for a radical ideological alternative to Marxism. He cited the Cuban Revolution as the model, since Fidel Castro was in conflict with Orthodox Marxists in the early days of the revolution there. Cruse argued that classical Marxist analysis of struggle in the United States viewed class dimensions of the Black freedom movement, but did not see the relationship of African descendants to anti-colonial revolutions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. He also argued that the Black freedom struggle was “the leading revolutionary force” in the United States.¹⁴ Cruse's argument giving a vanguard role to the Black freedom struggle resonated with young Black militants and radical Blacks inclined to build a liberation movement autonomous of the white left.

RAM emerged from a student activist organization that formed at Ohio's Central State College in 1962. It had ideological influences from the direct action wing of the Civil Rights movement (particularly

SNCC and CORE), the NOI, and Marxist-Leninist organizations. This group would study and incorporate the Cruse article. The original RAM group would leave the campus in 1963 and eventually attract and consolidate with other young Black radical collectives in Philadelphia, Cleveland, New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Northern California. Historian Robin Kelley argues one motivation to form RAM was young Black radicals' "dissatisfaction with the civil rights movement's strategy of nonviolent passive resistance . . ." Kelley also states young radicals looked for answers and direction from, "Third World liberation movements," many of which employed guerilla warfare and other means of armed struggle.¹⁵ Williams's articulation of the "potential of a minority revolution" through the use of guerilla tactics made him a logical personality for these young militants to unite around.¹⁶

Williams's influence was present in the inception of RAM, whose founder Max Stanford's father was an NAACP member who supported Rob Williams in his internal fight in the civil rights organization. Monroe activist and *Crusader* founder/contributor and WWP member Ethel Johnson mentored Stanford and other Philadelphia RAM members. Johnson also provided Stanford and RAM a liaison to the Williams when they were in exile in Cuba.¹⁷ The Williams would meet a gathering of young Black revolutionary activists from Detroit and Northern California visiting Cuba on a trip sponsored by the Marxist-Leninist Progressive Labor Party (PLP) in 1964. Stanford was also visiting the socialist Caribbean country, but not on the PLP sponsored trip. These young Black radicals would help RAM move from a group based in Philadelphia and Cleveland to a truly national organization. Many returned from Cuba with issues of *The Crusader* for distribution, at that time published by Robert and Mabel Williams on the socialist island. Rob Williams was declared International Chairman of RAM. RAM promoted William's position on armed self-defense through its journal, *Black America*.¹⁸

Other armed self-defense advocates active in the Black freedom movement mentored RAM members. Ethel Johnson and Queen Mother Moore guided Stanford and his colleagues in Philadelphia. Johnson led political education sessions for the city's initial RAM group. She emphasized the necessity of grassroots organizing. Johnson later introduced the group to Moore. The former UNIA and Communist Party member Moore provided the group an orientation in dialectical and historical materialism and grassroots nationalism. Moore's home, called "the Black house" by RAM members, was the venue for her courses on radical politics. Johnson, Moore, and the RAM activists collaborated in the campaign to free Mae Mallory.¹⁹

RAM militants in New York interacted with Malcolm X. Just as Williams' stance on armed self-defense attracted young Black radicals; Malcolm's insurgent nationalist rhetoric was inspirational for a new generation of Black activists in the early 1960s. Stanford initiated contact with Malcolm X in 1962. At that time, Malcolm was a minister of the NOI in Harlem. The young RAM organizer maintained regular communication with Malcolm until his assassination in February of 1965. The RAM organizer was encouraged by Malcolm's Pan-Africanist and pro-socialist development after his political separation from the NOI and envisioned the former Black Muslim spokesperson as the public voice of an African national liberation movement inside the United States. Stanford reported to Malcolm on the developments with SNCC in the South and development of Black Nationalist youth formations throughout the United States. RAM cadre in New York, including writer Larry Neal attended Harlem mass meetings of Malcolm X's Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) and sold the RAM journal *Black America* to those in attendance.²⁰ After the OAAU leader's assassination, one connection with Malcolm's legacy in New York continued through the recruitment of local educator Herman Ferguson, the OAAU's Educational Committee chairman. After Malcolm's assassination, Ferguson formed the Black Brotherhood Improvement Association (BBIA) in Queens, New York, which affiliated with RAM in 1967. Ferguson and the BBIA remained a part of RAM until its dissolution in 1968, when he became Minister of Education in the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa (PGRNA). The New York educator served as mentor for Black Panther Party and PGRNA units in the borough of Queens, New York. Ferguson left the United States after a conviction on federal conspiracy charges forced him to flee to political exile in Guyana in 1970.²¹

James and Grace Lee Boggs advised and partnered with young revolutionary nationalists in the Detroit and Chicago areas. The Boggs home became an ideological school for UHURU (Ki-Swahili for freedom) a radical nationalist collective in Detroit. Wayne State college student Luke Tripp founded UHURU in 1963. He was joined by other activist oriented young activists from working class backgrounds including General Baker, Charles Simmons, Charles "Mao" Johnson, John Williams, and John Watson. Tripp, Johnson, Simmons, and Baker were part of the 1964 PLP trip to Cuba and met Williams and Stanford in the historic meeting of Black radicals on the island. UHURU militants became the foundation of the Detroit RAM contingent and years later the foundation of the League for Revolutionary Black Workers. Max Stanford would also travel to Detroit to engage in political dialog with the Boggs. UHURU members attended

sessions of the NOI and SWP in Detroit.²² The Boggs also collaborated with radical activists in Chicago forming the Organization for Black Power (OBP). The founding meeting of OBP occurred in the Boggs home on May 1, 1965. OBP emerged from the grassroots activists in Detroit, Cleveland, and Chicago collaborating to push an autonomous strategy for Black political power. Within the Chicago OBP grouping were young, radical intellectuals who were the local RAM affiliate.²³

While in exile in Mexico, former CPUSA members Harry Haywood and Gwendolyn Midlo Hall served as elder guides for Northern California RAM militants Ernie Allen and Ken Freeman. Haywood (born Haywood Hall) is considered the architect of the 1930 Communist International thesis on self-determination for the descendants of enslaved Africans in the Black Belt or historic majority Black counties of the southeastern portion of the continental United States. He was expelled from the CPUSA in 1959 due to ideological differences. Haywood believed the Black freedom struggle had revolutionary potential and the CPUSA leadership ignored and abandoned the militant, grassroots Black movement, but supported moderate, pro-assimilationist, integrationist, Black leadership. The CPUSA was not engaged in solidarity with the struggle of Williams in Monroe and opposed Williams' efforts in exile.²⁴ Gwendolyn Midlo was an intellectual from an activist Jewish family in New Orleans, where she as a youth she actively participated in desegregation efforts. Midlo also engaged in left organizing in the CPUSA affiliated mass organizations, the Southern Negro Youth Congress and the Civil Rights Congress. Haywood and Midlo met while she was studying in Paris and wed in 1956. Midlo added Haywood's birth surname as her last name. Haywood and Hall collaborated in writing manuscripts about self-determination and the Black freedom movement from 1953 to 1964.²⁵

Northern California RAM leaders Allen and Freeman were founders and editors of the independent, revolutionary nationalist journal *Soulbook*. Both Allen and Freeman had been active in Donald Warden's Afro-American Association (AAA), along with Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, and Ron Everett (later known as Maulana Karenga). While the AAA emphasized Black Nationalism and knowledge of African and African-American History, the young activists, including Allen, Freeman, Seale, Newton, and Karenga, desired a more radical orientation and program. Ken Freeman (later known as Mamadou Lumumba), considered by some as one of the "premier neo-Black intellectuals" of the Black Power movement had attended graduate school in Mexico, where he was inspired by and studied the Cuban Revolution. Allen was a student at the University of California at

Berkeley, who traveled with the 1964 PLP tour to Cuba, where he encountered Robert Williams, Stanford, and the Detroit UHURU militants. Allen and Freeman established *Soulbook: The Revolutionary Journal of the Black World* in 1964. *Soulbook* was one of the most influential publications of the Black Power and Black Arts movements.²⁶

Haywood and Hall established contact with the editors of *Soulbook* after the publication of a chapter of the former CPUSA member's unpublished manuscript, "Towards a Revolutionary Program for Negro Freedom" in 1964. The manuscript was dedicated to Robert Williams and was circulated in mimeographed form to radical circles in the United States. The editors of *Soulbook* were intrigued by Haywood and Hall's analysis of the direction of the Black freedom struggle and published two other chapters of the manuscript. Haywood and Hall's analysis connected the experience of Robert Williams and Monroe and the efforts for armed self-defense in the southern Black freedom movement with the growing trend of revolutionary nationalism. In their article (published solely under Haywood's name), the authors acknowledge a, "revolutionary Black nationalist trend which is already beginning to manifest itself in the movement for self-defense in the deep South and among Black workers and radical intelligentsia throughout the country."²⁷ Haywood and Hall became frequent contributors to *Soulbook* and advisors to Northern California RAM.²⁸ Haywood would come to Oakland in 1966 to visit Allen and Freeman when they initiated the Black Panther Party of Northern California (BPPNC) in San Francisco, a RAM mass political formation. Allen and Freeman abandoned this effort after internecine conflict with former RAM and *Soulbook* staff member Bobby Seale and Huey Newton's Black Panther Party for Self-defense. After RAM disbanded in 1968, Allen and Freeman initiated a revolutionary nationalist, Pan-Africanist, and pro-socialist secret society, the House of Umoja (HOU). One influence in this development was Haywood's sharing with the *Soulbook* editors his experience and memory of the radical secret society, the African Blood Brotherhood.²⁹

In the 1964 publication in *Soulbook*, Haywood and Hall identified a "Third Trend" in the Black freedom struggle, which was a revolutionary trend. Their description of this development was that:

The present situation urgently raises the question of revival of a THIRD TREND, a revolutionary trend, based upon the most dis-privileged sections of the Black population, the vast majority; the workers and depressed and land-hungry population in the South, the small bourgeoisie and semi-proletarian elements of the urban ghettos: a trend reflecting the basic interests of the masses, their life needs, aspirations, their fighting determination to achieve freedom and human dignity.³⁰

Haywood and Hall distinguished this trend from the integrationists and separatists (e.g., Nation of Islam); neither of whom they believed could lead the Black Liberation movement on a course of revolution and national liberation.

Revolutionary Nationalism: The Third Force Between Integration and Separatism

Haywood and Hall's thinking was consistent with the development of young Black radicals who comprised RAM. In a 1963 article titled "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American Liberation Movement," Max Stanford argued revolutionary nationalism represented a "third force" between integration and separatism.

The two conflicting ideologies of the Afro-American struggle is Integration vs. Separation. The integrationists say that Afro-Americans will become a part of the mainstream of American life, while the separationists say the majority of white people in the U.S. are either racist or fascists and that they will never accept the Black man as an equal. We had just as well separate from them. But growing in some circles is a third force. The force is known as revolutionary nationalism.³¹

While RAM origins are primarily linked to the pro-armed self-defense orientation in the Black freedom movement, it must be noted that the direct action of nonviolent forces did influence the development of revolutionary nationalism. Stanford argued that "third force" identified with the militant confrontation tactics of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) but opposed integration and nonviolence of integrationist activists in the Civil Rights movement. RAM was critical of what it labeled the "Bourgeois Reformism" of the Civil Rights Movement. The revolutionary nationalists believed that with the exception of SNCC, which organized Southern "grassroots" people, the rest of the Civil Rights Movement was "bourgeois in orientation." RAM argued that most integrationists were "seeking upward mobility" with the U.S. political and economic system rather than a "structural transformation of the system." RAM mentor Donald Freeman articulated that the organization embraced "W.E.B. Du Bois' conviction that 'capitalism cannot reform itself, a system that enslaves you cannot free you.'" The revolutionary nationalists agreed that "full integration" of the masses of Black people "within the capitalist system" was "impossible." Thus, RAM opposed integration as a solution and advocated radical Black self-government in the context of dismantling capitalism and U.S. constitutional order.³²

RAM attempted to promote solidarity with the southern Black armed self-defense through agitation-propaganda tactics in civil

rights activities in the north to support desegregation campaigns in the South. According to historian Matthew Countryman, Stanford and another Philadelphia RAM activist Stan Daniels attended a 1963 NAACP sponsored rally to support civil rights activities in Birmingham holding signs stating, “All Afro-Americans Do Not Advocate Non-violence.” Believing their signs were provocative, the NAACP organizers asked the two RAM militants to leave the rally.³³ Stanford would get attention attending a rally at the national convention of the NAACP that year wearing a tee-shirt with an image of Kenyan independence fighter Jomo Kenyatta and carrying a sign proclaiming “Arm Negroes for Self-defense.”³⁴

Revolutionary Nationalism, Elijah Muhammad, and the Nation of Islam

The NOI also influenced the development of the revolutionary nationalist trend. NOI’s fiery rhetoric and posture on self-defense certainly appealed to young Black militants. While the “Black Muslims” did not encourage Black people to use weapons, Elijah Muhammad did advocate Blacks defend themselves against white racists. In reference to nonviolent Civil Rights demonstrators attacked by police with batons, water hoses, and dogs in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, Muhammad stated, “. . . they (Civil Rights activists) would have been justified by God and the divine law of self-defense to fight and defend themselves against such savage dog and human attack.”³⁵ Muhammad’s rhetoric on self-defense appealed to the young militants, but was not sufficient to have some activist-oriented Blacks to join the ranks of the NOI.

Utilizing a similar class analysis similar to that of the Boggs, Haywood, and Hall, RAM also criticized the Nation of Islam as being “bourgeois nationalists.” Just as it criticized integration into a capitalist system, RAM believed the NOI economic program would not lead to Black liberation ultimately leaving the Black workers oppressed. RAM also analyzed that U.S. capitalism would not allow Blacks to develop an autonomous economy with enough economic independence to achieve meaningful self-determination.

RAM applauded the self-determination and self-reliance represented in the Nation of Islam and other separatists. Stanford and his RAM colleagues distinguished themselves from the NOI by their participation in civil disobedience, militant demonstrations and other desegregation protest activities. Stanford argued, “As revolutionary Black nationalists, we do not believe that standing on the street corners alone will liberate our people.” He received a rare invitation

to comment on the “Black Muslim” program in an August 1963 editorial the NOI organ *Muhammad Speaks*. Stanford offered:

We agree with some of the precepts of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad but we still remain to be convinced on some of the others. When one calls the white man the devil he may be just in his assumption, but RAM feels that the argument must be carried further. Just calling your oppressor names isn't going to solve the fact that the white power structure has its clamps around every Afro-American's neck.³⁶

RAM hoped its engagement in the desegregation protests that had captured the support and attention of the African-American community in the early 1960s could inject a more insurgent and radical consciousness and organization into the mass movement.

Revolutionary Nationalism and the Black Radical Tradition

Influenced by the Black radical tradition of the Black left, RAM articulated an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist politics with a class analysis. Believing the system of United States capitalism and imperialism represented the main enemy of Black people and the majority of humanity, RAM argued:

There are “greedy pigs” such as the Rockefellers, Mellons, Duponts, and Kennedys who horde (sic) millions and who make profits from racism, suppression and exploitation. These are people who form the Wall Street military-industrial complex that chokes America's economy and forces thousands of babies to die in poverty while a few reap the benefits of its cold war product. These are people who send us to war to protect their foreign holdings while denying us the basic necessities for human survival.

The people who exploit us are the same oppressors of our brothers and sisters in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Like their mentors and elders, RAM connected the Black liberation movement with anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles around the globe. RAM literature often spoke of a “World Black Revolution” and also interchanged the term Black revolutionary nationalism with “Black internationalism.” Consistent with Cruse, RAM believed that Black people and people of color domestically and internationally comprised the social group to base a revolutionary movement to defeat capitalism and imperialism.

RAM also saw armed struggle as the primary means by which Black liberation would come about. RAM described itself in league with “Robert Williams and the concept of organized violence.” By 1965, from exile in Cuba, Robert Williams had moved beyond armed self-defense to articulate the possibility of a “minority revolution” through the means of urban guerilla warfare. The leadership of RAM believed it was necessary to build a Black liberation army to

wage guerilla warfare in the United States. Ultimately, RAM believed a revolutionary situation would be created through a “strategy of chaos” utilizing mass civil disobedience to disrupt the U.S. economic and social order and enable organized revolutionaries to seize state power through armed struggle. Robert Williams was appointed the International Chairman of RAM in the summer of 1964, while he was in exile in Cuba. The association with Williams, considered a living hero by many, helped gain legitimacy for RAM in some freedom circles.³⁷

Revolutionary Nationalism in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement

RAM would also further consolidate itself in 1964 by convening young radical Black college students, intellectuals, and grassroots activists convening at Fisk University in 1964 for the Afro-American Student conference on Black Nationalism. A call was issued from the meeting of Black radical youth in Cuba to push the revolutionary nationalist movement forward. This gathering was also RAM’s first organizing venture in the South. The “Afro-American Student Conference on Black Nationalism” at Fisk University in Nashville occurred on May 1–2, 1964. The purpose of this conference was to consolidate Black college students and youth who were leaning towards Black Nationalism and radical politics to be a force in the Southern Black Freedom Struggle. The Afro-American Student Movement (AASM) was the local organizing group for the RAM conference. AASM were members of the Nashville Student Movement who were sympathetic to revolutionary nationalism.³⁸

The Nashville Student Movement (NSM) was considered the vanguard of philosophical nonviolence in SNCC. Advocates of non-violence within NSM came to the conference to confront the revolutionary nationalists and condemn RAM as “black racists.” The nonviolent core of NSM was so concerned by RAM’s conference that they invited Martin Luther King Jr. to speak in Nashville the same weekend. King blasted the RAM conference as “hate in reverse.” On the other hand, a few Mississippi SNCC staff members attended the Nashville RAM gathering in solidarity.³⁹

Conceding to the desires a few Mississippi staff members (notably Willie Peacock), SNCC Chairman John Lewis agreed to allow two revolutionary nationalist organizers, RAM Field Chairman Max Stanford and Harlem-based Black writer/activist Roland Snellings (a.k.a. Askia Ture), to participate in the SNCC project in Greenwood.⁴⁰ Stanford had previously visited Mississippi when he was secretly “smuggled” into the state in 1963 through SNCC activist Willie

Peacock. Snellings, a veteran of the U.S. military, joined RAM after becoming a central participant of what would eventually become the Black Arts Movement in Harlem. He also dialogued and was influenced by Malcolm X and mentored by writer John Oliver Killens (another Harlem supporter of Williams and armed self-defense).⁴¹

Stanford and Snellings went to Greenwood in May 1964. Both participated in the Council of Federated Organization's (COFO)⁴² freedom school in Greenwood. Snellings focused on instruction in African and African-American history and Stanford on political education and voter registration. Besides their official role in the project, they planned to wage ideological struggle within the ranks of the SNCC field staff. RAM's objective in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement was to win the Black field organizers over to Black nationalism and armed self-defense and to "push the bourgeois reformists 'up temp' as fast as possible" to radicalize the southern Black freedom struggle. Stanford and Snellings emphasized the need for Black leadership in the projects, which resonated with the Mississippi-born field staff, many of whom opposed the drive to bring hundreds of northern white students from elite colleges and universities to Mississippi Freedom Summer. RAM argued that white friends of the Civil Rights Movement should organize in white communities to confront white supremacists. Stanford and Snellings also believed that Black male activists often compromised their advocacy for Black indigenous leadership and autonomy after sexual trysts with white female staff and volunteers.⁴³

Stanford and Snellings found SNCC organizers had already established an armed watch of the Greenwood Freedom House prior to the RAM members' arrival. Greenwood SNCC staff member Peacock organized an armed sentry at the Freedom House as early as January of 1964, five months prior to RAM's official presence in Greenwood. Snellings reported that the Greenwood Freedom House was armed with carbine rifles and shotguns. The RAM members vocally advocated armed patrols of the community after White terrorist threats accelerated in the wake of Freedom Summer and Greenwood activist Laura McGhee's home was firebombed by White supremacists. RAM found local Blacks in Leflore County were "strapped" (armed) and prepared to initiate armed patrols in response to the threats.⁴⁴

Stanford, Snellings, and members of the Mississippi field staff met with SNCC elder and movement veteran Amzie Moore at his home to discuss the organization of armed self-defense in the Mississippi. Moore was a World War II veteran, a Mississippi Civil Rights activist since the 1950s, and SNCC first contact in the state. He was known for being prepared to use arms to protect himself and others. SNCC organizer Lawrence Guyot referred to Moore as "a one man protection

agency.” RAM discovered at the meeting at Moore’s house that Mississippi Civil Rights organizers were ready “to establish a state-wide self-defense system.” Aware of the national relationships that provided the armed self-defense efforts in Monroe funds and arms, Stanford pledged to solicit support from northern radical networks for the Mississippi freedom struggle. After the meeting at Moore’s home, Stanford left Mississippi to meet with friends of RAM and members of its national leadership to obtain resources and plan a broad strategy to include fellow travelers within SNCC. He received advise to leave Mississippi after excerpts of a report he wrote titled “Towards a Revolutionary Action Movement Manifesto” were published in an editorial of the independent Marxist journal *Monthly Review*. Stanford’s statement was highlighted in an issue that also published Robert William’s treatise on urban guerilla warfare from exile in Cuba (“Revolution without Violence?”). The issue’s editorial was titled “The Colonial War at Home.” An interview with Malcolm X also appeared. Williams sent a telegram from Cuba to Stanford advising him “to get out of Mississippi” because the publication of the editorial made him an elevated target for white supremacists in Mississippi. Stanford had left Mississippi by the time the communication was sent.⁴⁵

While members of a nonviolent organization, many of the SNCC field staff viewed RAM’s pro-armed self-defense orientation as consistent with their own. Concerning the field staff’s relations with RAM, Mississippi-born SNCC activist MacArthur Cotton remembered: “the majority of the local SNCC people didn’t have a problem with RAM.” According to Cotton, most of the Mississippi-born field staff believed “that other philosophy [nonviolence] was foreign.”⁴⁶ Another possible indicator of Greenwood SNCC project organizers’ support for armed self-defense was revealed in June of 1964 when Mississippi police found a significant quantity of *The Crusader* in their possession. Greenwood SNCC staff members, notably Sam Block and Willie Peacock among them, were arrested on a traffic charge in Columbus, Mississippi. Police officers found “large numbers” of *The Crusader* after searching the SNCC activists’ vehicle. Mississippi officials assumed communist influence since *The Crusader* was being produced in Cuba while Robert and Mabel Williams were in exile there. It was also assumed that Block and Peacock were distributing the pro-armed self-defense newsletter given the large quantity in their possession.⁴⁷

During RAM’s presence in the Greenwood project, SNCC members debated whether they should be armed and defend their lives and offices at a June 10, 1964 SNCC staff meeting. The existence of an armed sentry at the Greenwood SNCC Freedom House was reported

at the meeting and sparked a vigorous debate. The debate reached an impasse when SNCC organizer Charles Cobb offered a scenario in the debate after he decided to pick up arms to defend a family from white supremacists. Cobb then asked, "Where does SNCC stand... when the police arrest me?" After this impasse, SNCC advisor Ella Baker interceded, "I can't conceive of the SNCC I thought I was associated not defending Charlie Cobb." While associated with the founding of two preeminent nonviolent organizations, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and SNCC, Baker was in solidarity with movement activists employing armed self-defense. She gave a 1959 speech supporting armed self-defense in Birmingham, Alabama, when Robert F. Williams was in the midst of fighting his censure and suspension by the national NAACP. Baker also visited Monroe in 1962 after Williams exile to appraise the situation there as the guest of Monroe activist Ethel Azalea Johnson. Baker's position in the debate must also demonstrate her affinity for armed self-defense as a necessary tactic in the Jim Crow South.⁴⁸

Opponents of armed self-defense in the June 10 debate noted RAM's presence in Greenwood. Some were concerned that the charismatic Stanford was exerting, "a great deal of influence" among Black activists in Mississippi. Bob Moses dispatched Stokely Carmichael to Greenwood after the decision was made to remove the guns from all Freedom Houses as well as SNCC offices and to disassociate from any volunteer who was armed. Carmichael was to remove the guns from the Greenwood office and ask that RAM forces also leave the Freedom House and not participate in any SNCC project. Snellings remembered Carmichael telling James Jones, the head of the Greenwood project, "if you want to remain head of this project, you need to get these guns out of here... This is SNCC not RAM." Writing about his experience in Mississippi, Snellings stated that the Greenwood staff was told that "SNCC... is nonviolent, and when one becomes 'influenced' by another philosophy; one should leave." After the purge of RAM from Greenwood, Snellings would leave to connect with Stanford and RAM leadership in Detroit.²⁹ Snellings' departure meant the end of the RAM involvement in SNCC/ COFO projects in Mississippi.

Ironically, during Freedom Summer, many SNCC militants did carry and use weapons. SNCC Executive Secretary James Forman, who opposed the guns being in the Greenwood Freedom House, placed an armed sentry around the Greenwood office.⁴⁹ RAM's ideological position on the role of whites in the Civil Rights Movement would also ultimately become the dominant position within SNCC during the two years in which the revolutionary nationalist organization was present in Mississippi, when "Black Power" became its

official position. Roland Snellings would return to the south and was active in the Atlanta SNCC project that first called for Black Power in the organization and helped draft its position paper.⁵⁰

The June 1964 staff meeting represented the first national debate for SNCC on the issue of armed self-defense. While the SNCC field staff reached a consensus on this issue on the eve of Freedom Summer, support for armed self-defense and the practice of carrying weapons grew within the organization. In fact, the Freedom Summer experience played a significant role in diminishing nonviolence as a philosophy and practice of the organization.

Armed Self-Defense and the Black Power Movement

The previously nonviolent SNCC and CORE openly embraced armed self-defense by 1966. As Black Power emerged, armed self-defense and the advocacy of armed resistance would become common for Black activists. Haywood and Hall were correct to connect the movement for self-defense in the southern Black Freedom movement to the revolutionary nationalist trend. The compatibility of Mississippi-born activists engaged in armed self-defense like Cotton, Peacock, and Moore with revolutionary nationalist politics predates the development of the Deacons for Defense. The fact that RAM organizers found an armed self-defense network already forming in Mississippi in 1964 reveals that Williams or the Deacons for Defense were not an isolated exception, but the most visible advocates and representations of armed resistance in the Black freedom struggle.

A gender analysis of the role of women's influence on revolutionary nationalism reveals contradictions in the historiography and popular memory of the origins of Black Power. It must be noted that patriarchy limited the acknowledgement of female elders of the revolutionary nationalist trend. This has contributed to radical women such as Queen Mother Moore, Ethel Johnson, Mae Mallory, Grace Boggs, and Gwendolyn Hall not been acknowledged as their male counterparts in the historiography or popular accounts of the Black Power movement. RAM literature contained articles, images and quotes of male leadership like Malcolm X, James Boggs, Robert Williams, and Elijah Muhammad, but no radical female personalities. While Harry Haywood and Gwendolyn Hall both authored their articles in *Soulbook* only Haywood's name appeared on the essays. This omission was due to the agreement of the couple to project the name of the husband. The role of female activists, like Laura McGhee, was not well documented or reported by activists or historians. It is important to make a corrective to the history of the Black Freedom

movement that recognizes the contributions of female freedom fighters.

Historians of the Black freedom struggle must acknowledge the existence of the pro-armed self-defense orientation of the 1950s and 1960s and its role in influencing the development of revolutionary nationalism and Black power. One common philosophical feature of the ideologically diverse group of activist movement veterans who influenced the young revolutionary nationalists of the 1960s was political support for armed self-defense. Armed self-defense linked a variety of elements of Marxist-Leninists, Black Nationalists and Pan-Africanists, and militant Civil Rights forces of the 1950s and early 1960s. Political scientist William Sales identified ideology as an important intellectual and emotional resource in the development of a social movement.⁵¹ The political support for armed self-defense, particularly manifested through solidarity with Robert Williams and the Monroe struggle, was an important ideological development that influenced the emerging Black Power movement. The pro-armed-self-defense orientation of the 1950s and 60s became the order of the day during the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early '70s. While the contributions of nonviolence to challenging U.S. apartheid cannot be denied, the orientation of armed resistance, particularly self-defense, overshadowed the advocacy of passive resistance in the Black freedom movement after 1964. Following the course of RAM, other self-described revolutionary nationalist formations, like the Black Panther Party, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and the Black Liberation Army all embraced armed resistance. In fact, every tendency within the Black Power movement, whether territorial separatists, cultural nationalists, pluralists, Black capitalists, Pan-Africanists, or Black feminists supported armed self-defense. Exemplified by the 1964 gathering of young Black revolutionaries in Cuba with Robert and Mabel Williams, the intergenerational connection of elder radicals from the 1950s and early 1960s with their younger comrades cannot be underestimated as a catalyst in promoting revolutionary nationalist ideology and ultimately ushering the Black Power and Black Arts movement into existence.

Notes

1. Timothy Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie: Robert Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999) gives an excellent description of Robert Williams and the Monroe movement. Freedom Archives' *Robert and Mable Williams: Self-Determination, Self-Defense and Self-Respect* (San Francisco: AK Press, 2005) is an audio CD with essential primary sources in examining the Williams contribution to the Black Liberation struggle. I distinguish Robert Williams from his contemporaries in *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 43–44, 48–49.

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4. Robert Williams quoted in James Ivy (editor), "The Robert Williams' Case: The Essential Facts," *The Crisis: A Record of Darker Races* (June–July 1959), 6, 66, 324–326; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 147–149.
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7. Muhammad Ahmad, in discussion with author, December 25, 2012; Richard Fidler, "Robert Williams: Outspoken, Feared but Largely Forgotten," <http://archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/marxism/2006w06/msg00061.html> (accessed September 22, 2013); Jack Barnes, "Tribute to the Life of a Black Rights Fighter," *The Militant* (November 4, 1996), 60, 39, http://www.themilitant.com/1996/6039/6039_20.html (accessed September 22, 2013).
8. Ahmad discussion; Merrill, "Mae Mallory"; Muhammad Ahmad, *We Will Return in the Whirlwind: Black Radical Organizations 1960–1975* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2007), 100; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005), 214; Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), 107.
9. Ahmad, *We Will Return*, 19, 21; Stephen Ward (ed.), *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook: A James Boggs Reader* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 12–18, 37.
10. Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999), 204; Harold Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 356; Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1999), 52.
11. Eric McDuffie, "I Wanted a Communist Philosophy, but I Wanted Us to have a Chance to Organize Our People": The Diasporic Radicalism of Queen Mother Audley Moore and the Origins of Black Power," *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* (July 2010), 3, 2, 186; Ahmad, *We Will Return*, 11; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 203.
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16. Robert F. Williams, "USA: The Potential of a Minority Revolution," *The Crusader Monthly Newsletter* 5, no. 4 (May–June 1964), 1–7, Freedom Archives, http://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC513_scans/Robert_F_Williams/513.RobertFWilliams.Crusader.May-June.1964.pdf (accessed September 22, 2013).
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18. Ahmad discussion with author, November 20, 2011, Atlanta, GA; Baba Lumumba, in discussion with author, January 20, 2013, Atlanta, GA; Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 75–76.
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20. Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for a Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), 125; Ahmad discussion (December 25, 2012); Ahmad, *We Will Return*, 99, 116, 124–129.

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25. Hall, *Black Communist*, xx–xxi; Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 604.
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35. Elijah Muhammad, “The Right of Self Defense,” *Muhammad Speaks* (June 7, 1963), 2, 19, 1, 8.
36. Max Stanford, “As Others See It: New Group Blasts White Power Block,” *Muhammad Speaks* (August 16, 1963), 2, 24, 14.
37. Max Stanford, “Revolutionary Nationalism, Black Nationalism, or Just Plain Blackism,” in ed. John Bracey, August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick, *Black Nationalism in America* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 508; Robert Brisbane, *Black Activism: Racial Revolution in the United States 1954–1970* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974), 181–182; Cohen, *Black Crusader*, 211–213, 223–224, 225–226.
38. Baba Lumumba discussion; Freeman, “Black Youth,” 15–16; Ahmad, *We Will Return*, 117–119; Muhammad Ahmad (Max Stanford Jr.), in discussion with the author, November 20, 2011, Atlanta, Georgia; Askia Ture (Roland Snellings), in discussion with the author, September 3, 1994, Atlanta, Georgia.
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42. The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) was a coalition of Civil Rights organizations operating in Mississippi, including the NAACP, SNCC, CORE, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.
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45. Ahmad, discussion (November 20 2011); A. Ture, discussion; Ahmad, *We Will Return*, 54–5, 121–2; “The Colonial War at Home,” 1–13.

46. Stanford “Revolutionary Action Movement,” 93; Roland Snellings, “The Long Hot Summer,” *Black America* (Fall 1965), 13–14; Askia Ture, interviewed by author, December 1994, Atlanta, Georgia; MacArthur Cotton, in discussion with author, July 23, 1994, Jackson, Mississippi.

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