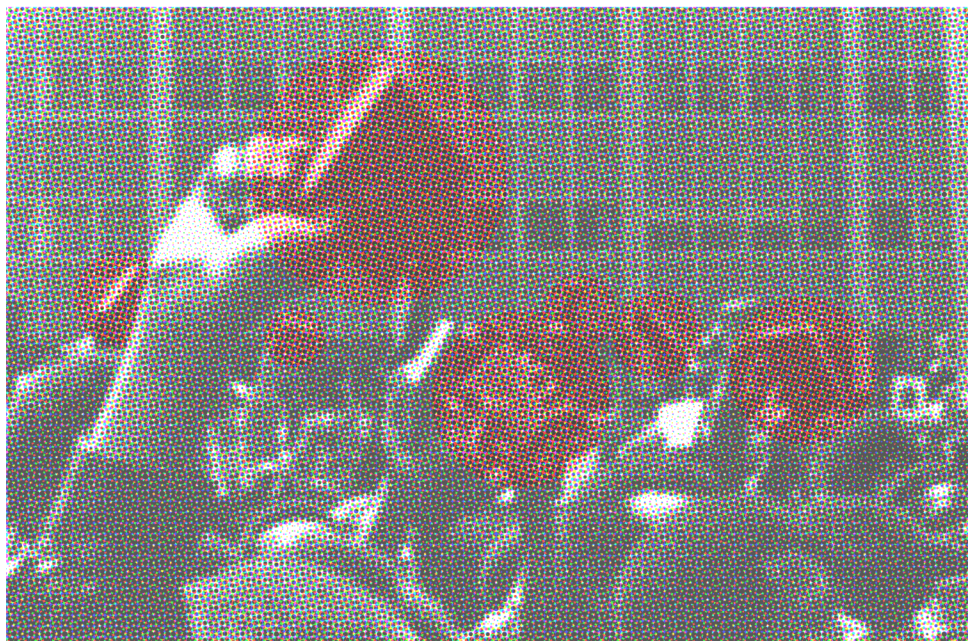


**BLACK
LIKE
MAO**



**RED CHINA AND
BLACK
REVOLUTION**

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Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution

This is the era of Mao Tse-Tung, the era of world revolution and the Afro-American's struggle for liberation is a part of an invincible world-wide movement. Chairman Mao was the first world leader to elevate our people's struggle to the fold of the world revolution.—Robert Williams, 1967

It seems as if the Chairman, at least as a symbol, has been enjoying a resurgence in popularity among youth. Mao Zedong's image and ideas consistently turn up in a myriad of cultural and political contexts. For example, The Coup, a popular Bay Area hip hop group, restored Mao to the pantheon of black radical heroes and, in so doing, placed the black freedom struggle in an international context. In a song simply called "Dig It" (1993), The Coup refers to its members as "The Wretched of the Earth"; tells listeners to read The Communist Manifesto; and conjures up revolutionary icons such as Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Kwame Nkrumah, H. Rap Brown, Kenya's Mau Mau movement, and Geronimo Ji Jaga Pratt. In classical Maoist fashion, The Coup seizes upon Mao's most famous quote and makes it their own: "We realize that power [is] nickel plated."¹ Even though members of The Coup were not born until after the heyday of black Maoism, "Dig It" captures the spirit of Mao in relation to the larger colonial world—a world that included African Americans. In Harlem in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it seemed as though everyone had a copy of Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, better known as the "Little Red Book."² From time to time supporters of the Black Panther Party would be seen selling the Little Red Book on street corners as a fund-raiser for the party. And it wasn't unheard of to see a young black radical strolling down the street dressed like a Chinese peasant—except for the Afro and sunglasses, of course.

Like Africa, China was on the move and there was a general feeling that the Chinese supported the black freedom struggle; indeed, real-life blacks were calling for revolution in the name of Mao as well as Marx and Lenin. Countless black radicals of the era regarded China, not unlike Cuba or Ghana or even Paris, as the land where true

freedom might be had. It wasn't perfect, but it was much better than living in the belly of the beast. When the Black Panther leader Elaine Brown visited Beijing in fall 1970, she was pleasantly surprised by what the Chinese revolution had achieved in terms of improving people's lives: "Old and young would spontaneously give emotional testimonies, like Baptist converts, to the glories of socialism."³ A year later she returned with the Panther founder Huey Newton, whose experience in China he described as a "sensation of freedom—as if a great weight had been lifted from my soul and I was able to be myself, without defense or pretense or the need for explanation. I felt absolutely free for the first time in my life—completely free among my fellow men."⁴

More than a decade before Brown and Newton set foot on Chinese soil, W. E. B. Du Bois regarded China as the other sleeping giant poised to lead the colored races in the worldwide struggle against imperialism. He had first traveled to China in 1936—before the war and the revolution—during an extended visit to the Soviet Union. Returning in 1959, when it was illegal to travel to China, Du Bois discovered a new country. He was struck by the transformation of the Chinese, in particular what he perceived as the emancipation of women, and he left convinced that China would lead the underdeveloped nations on the road toward socialism. "China after long centuries," he told an audience of Chinese communists attending his ninety-first birthday celebration, "has arisen to her feet and leapt forward. Africa arise, and stand straight, speak and think! Act! Turn from the West and your slavery and humiliation for the last 500 years and face the rising sun."⁵



W. E. B. Du Bois with Mao Zedong at Mao's villa in south-central China, April 1959. (Reprinted by permission of the Special Collections Department, W. E. B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts at Amherst)

How black radicals came to see China as a beacon of Third World revolution and Mao Zedong thought as a guidepost is a complicated and fascinating story involving literally dozens of organizations and covering much of the world—from the ghettos of North America to the African countryside. The text following thus does not pretend to be comprehensive;⁶ instead, we have set out in this essay to explore the impact that Maoist thought and, more generally, the People’s Republic of China have had on black radical movements from the 1950s through at least the mid-1970s. In addition, our aim is to explore how radical black nationalism has shaped debates within Maoist or “anti-revisionist” organizations in the United States. It is our contention that China offered black radicals a “colored” or Third World Marxist model that enabled them to challenge a white and Western vision of class struggle—a model that they shaped and reshaped to suit their own cultural and political realities. Although China’s role was contradictory and problematic in many respects, the fact that Chinese peasants, as opposed to the European proletariat, made a socialist revolution and carved out a position in world politics distinct from the Soviet and U.S. camps endowed black radicals with a deeper sense of revolutionary importance and power. Finally, not only did Mao prove to blacks the world over that they need not wait for “objective conditions” to make revolution, but also his elevation of cultural struggle profoundly shaped debates surrounding black arts and politics.

The Long March

Anyone familiar with Maoism knows that it was never a full-blown ideology meant to replace Marxism-Leninism. On the contrary, if anything it marked a turn against the “revisionism” of the post-Stalin Soviet model. What Mao did contribute to Marxist thought grew directly out of the Chinese revolution of 1949. Mao’s insistence that the revolutionary capacity of the peasantry wasn’t dependent on the urban proletariat was particularly attractive to black radicals skeptical of the idea that they must wait for the objective conditions to launch their revolution. Central to Maoism is the idea that Marxism can be (must be) reshaped to the requirements

of time and place, and that practical work, ideas, and leadership stem from the masses in movement and not from a theory created in the abstract or produced out of other struggles.⁷ In practice, this meant that true revolutionaries must possess a revolutionary will to win. The notion of revolutionary will cannot be underestimated, especially for those in movements that were isolated and attacked on all sides. Armed with the proper theory, the proper ethical behavior, and the will, revolutionaries in Mao's words can "move mountains."⁸ Perhaps this is why the Chinese communist leader Lin Biao could write in the foreword to Quotations that "once Mao Tse-Tung's thought is grasped by the broad masses, it becomes an inexhaustible source of strength and a spiritual atom bomb of infinite power."⁹

Both Mao and Lin Biao recognized that the source of this "atom bomb" could be found in the struggles of Third World nationalists. In an age when the cold war helped usher in the nonaligned movement, when leaders of the "colored" world were converging in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955 to try to chart an independent path toward development, the Chinese hoped to lead the former colonies on the road to socialism. The Chinese (backed by Lin Biao's theory of the "new democratic revolution") not only endowed nationalist struggles with revolutionary value but also reached out specifically to Africa and people of African descent. Two years after the historic Bandung meeting of nonaligned nations—China formed the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization. Mao not only invited W. E. B. Du Bois to spend his ninetieth birthday in China after he had been declared a public enemy by the U.S. state, but three weeks prior to the great March on Washington in 1963, Mao issued a statement criticizing American racism and casting the African American freedom movement as part of the worldwide struggle against imperialism. "The evil system of colonialism and imperialism," Mao stated, "arose and thrived with the enslavement of Negroes and the trade in Negroes, and it will surely come to its end with the complete emancipation of the black people."¹⁰ A decade later, the novelist John Oliver Killens was impressed by the fact that several of his books, as well as works by other black writers, had been translated into Chinese and were widely read by students.

Everywhere he went, it seemed, he met young intellectuals and workers who were “tremendously interested in the Black movement and in how the art and literature of Black folks reflected that movement.”¹¹

The status of people of color served as a powerful political tool in mobilizing support from Africans and African-descended people. In 1963, for example, Chinese delegates in Moshi, Tanzania, proclaimed that the Russians had no business in Africa because of their status as white. The Chinese, on the other hand, were not only part of the colored world but also unlike Europeans they never took part in the slave trade. Of course, most of these claims served essentially to facilitate alliance building. The fact is that African slaves could be found in Guangzhou during the twelfth century, and African students in communist China occasionally complained of racism. (Indeed, after Mao’s death racial clashes on college campuses occurred more frequently, notably in Shanghai in 1979, in Nanjing in 1980, and in Tianjin in 1986.)¹² Furthermore, Chinese foreign policy toward the black world was often driven more by strategic considerations than by a commitment to Third World revolutionary movements, especially after the Sino-Soviet split. China’s anti-Soviet position resulted in foreign policy decisions that ultimately undermined their standing with certain African liberation movements. In southern Africa, for example, the Chinese backed movements that also received support from the apartheid regime of South Africa.¹³

Yet, Mao’s ideas still gained an audience among black radicals. While Maoist projects in the United States never achieved the kind of following enjoyed by Soviet-identified communist parties in the 1930s, they did take root in this country. And like a hundred flowers, Mao’s ideas bloomed into a confusing mosaic of radical voices all seemingly at war with each other. Not surprisingly, at the center of the debate over the character of class struggle in the United States was the “Negro Question”: that is, what role would blacks play in world revolution.

The World Black Revolution

Maoism in the United States was not exported from China. If anything, for those Maoists schooled in the Old Left the source of Maoism can be found in Khrushchev's revelations at the twentieth Congress of the Communist Party Soviet Union in 1956 that prompted an anti-revisionist movement throughout the pro-Stalinist Left. Out of the debates within the Communist Party USA emerged several organizations pledging to push the communists back into the Stalinist camp, including the Provisional Organizing Committee (POC) in 1958, Hammer and Steel in 1960, and the Progressive Labor Party (PLP) in 1965.¹⁴

The Progressive Labor Party, an outgrowth of the Progressive Labor movement founded three years earlier, was initially led by ex-communists who believed that the Chinese had the correct position. Insisting that black workers were the "key revolutionary force" in the proletarian revolution, the PLP attracted a few outstanding black activists such as John Harris in Los Angeles and Bill Epton in Harlem. Epton had become somewhat of a cause celebre after he was arrested for "criminal anarchy" during the 1964 rebellion in Harlem.¹⁶⁵ Two years later, the PLP helped organize a student strike to establish a black studies program at San Francisco State University, and its Black Liberation Commission published a pamphlet titled *Black Liberation Now!* that attempted to place all of these urban rebellions within a global context. But by 1968, the PLP abandoned its support for "revolutionary" nationalism and concluded that all forms of nationalism are reactionary. As a result of its staunch anti-nationalism, the PLP opposed affirmative action and black and Latino trade union caucuses—positions that undermined the PLP's relationship with black community activists. In fact, the PLP's connections to the New Left in general were damaged in part because of its attack on the Black Panther Party and on the black student movement. Members of the PLP were thrown out of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1969 with the

help of several radical nationalist groups, including the Panthers, the Young Lords, and the Brown Berets.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the predominantly white Marxist-Leninist-Maoist parties were not the primary vehicle for the Maoist-inspired black Left. Most black radicals of the late 1950s and early 1960s discovered China by way of anti-colonial struggles in Africa and the Cuban revolution. Ghana's independence in 1957 was cause to celebrate, and the CIA-sponsored assassination of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo inspired protest from all black activist circles. The Cuban revolution and Fidel Castro's infamous residency at Harlem's Hotel Theresa during his visit to the United Nations brought black people face to face with an avowed socialist who extended a hand of solidarity to people of color the world over. Indeed, dozens of black radicals not only publicly defended the Cuban revolution but also visited Cuba through groups like the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.¹⁷ One of these visitors was Harold Cruse, himself an ex-communist still committed to Marxism. He believed the Cuban, Chinese, and African revolutions could revitalize radical thought because they demonstrated the revolutionary potential of nationalism. In a provocative essay published in the *New Leader* in 1962, Cruse wrote that the new generation was looking to the former colonial world for its leaders and insights, and among its heroes was Mao: "Already they have a pantheon of modern heroes—Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure in Africa; Fidel Castro in Latin America; Malcolm X, the Muslim leader, in New York; Robert Williams in the South; and Mao Tse-Tung in China. These men seem heroic to the Afro-Americans not because of their political philosophy, but because they were either former colonials who achieved complete independence, or because, like Malcolm X, they dared to look the white community in the face and say: 'We don't think your civilization is worth the effort of any black man to try to integrate into.' This to many Afro-Americans is an act of defiance that is truly revolutionary."¹⁸

In another essay, which appeared in *Studies on the Left* in 1962, Cruse was even more explicit about the global character of revolutionary nationalism. He argued that black people in the United States were living under domestic colonialism and that their

struggles must be seen as part of the worldwide anti-colonial movement. “The failure of American Marxists,” he wrote, “to understand the bond between the Negro and the colonial peoples of the world has led to their failure to develop theories that would be of value to Negroes in the United States.” In his view, the former colonies were the vanguard of the revolution, and at the forefront of this new socialist revolution were Cuba and China.¹⁹

Revolutions in Cuba, Africa, and China had a similar effect on Baraka, who a decade and a half later would found the Maoist-inspired Revolutionary Communist League. Touched by his visit to Cuba and the assassination of Lumumba, Baraka began contributing essays to a new magazine called *African Revolution* edited by the Algerian nationalist leader Ahmed Ben Bella. As Baraka explained it: “India and China had gotten their formal independence before the coming of the 50s, and by the time the 50s had ended, there were many independent African nations (though with varying degrees of neocolonialism). Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah had hoisted the black star over the statehouse in Accra, and Nkrumah’s pronouncements and word of his deeds were glowing encouragement to colored people all over the world. When the Chinese exploded their first A-bomb I wrote a poem saying, in effect, that time for the colored peoples had rebegun.”²⁰

The Ghana-China matrix is perhaps best embodied in the career of Vickie Garvin, a stalwart radical who traveled in Harlem’s black Left circles during the postwar period. Raised in a black working-class family in New York, Garvin spent her summers working in the garment industry to supplement her family’s income. As early as high school she became active in black protest politics, supporting efforts by Adam Clayton Powell Jr. to obtain better-paying jobs for African Americans in Harlem and creating black history clubs dedicated to building library resources. After earning her B.A. in political science from Hunter College and her M.A. in economics from Smith College in Northampton, she spent the war years working for the National War Labor Board and continued on as an organizer for the United Office and Professional Workers of America (UOPWA-CIO) and as national research director and co-chair of the Fair Employment Practices Committee. During the postwar purges

of the Left in the CIO, Garvin was a strong voice of protest and a sharp critic of the CIO's failure to organize in the South. As executive secretary of the New York chapter of the National Negro Labor Council and vice president of the national organization, Garvin established close ties to Malcolm X and helped him arrange part of his tour of Africa.²¹

Garvin joined the black intellectual exodus to Nkrumah's Ghana where she initially roomed with the poet Maya Angelou and eventually moved into a house next to Du Bois. She spent two years in Accra surrounded by several key black intellectuals and artists, including Julian Mayfield, the artist Tom Feelings, and the cartoonist Ollie Harrington. As a radical who taught conversational English to the Cuban, Algerian, and Chinese diplomatic core in Ghana, it was hard not to develop a deep internationalist outlook. Garvin's conversations with Du Bois during his last days in Ghana only reinforced her internationalism and kindled her interest in the Chinese revolution. Indeed, through Du Bois Garvin got a job as a "polisher" for the English translations of the Peking Review as well as a teaching position at the Shanghai Foreign Language Institute. She remained in China from 1964 to 1970, building bridges between the black freedom struggle, the African independence movements, and the Chinese revolution.²²

For Huey Newton, the future founder of the Black Panther Party, the African revolution seemed even less crucial than events in Cuba and China. As a student at Merritt College in the early 1960s he read a little existentialism, began attending meetings sponsored by the Progressive Labor Party, and supported the Cuban revolution. Not surprisingly, Newton began to read Marxist literature voraciously. Mao, in particular, left a lasting impression: "My conversion was complete when I read the four volumes of Mao Tse-Tung to learn more about the Chinese Revolution."²³ Thus well before the founding of the Black Panther Party, Newton was steeped in Mao Zedong thought as well as in the writings of Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon. "Mao and Fanon and Guevara all saw clearly that the people had been stripped of their birthright and their dignity, not by a philosophy or mere words, but at gunpoint. They had suffered a

holdup by gangsters, and rape; for them, the only way to win freedom was to meet force with force.”²⁴

The Chinese and Cubans’ willingness “to meet force with force” also made their revolutions attractive to black radicals in the age of nonviolent passive resistance. Of course, the era had its share of armed struggle in the South, with groups like the Deacons for Defense and Justice and Gloria Richardson’s Cambridge movement defending nonviolent protesters when necessary. But the figure who best embodied black traditions of armed selfdefense was Robert Williams, a hero to the new wave of black internationalists whose importance almost rivaled that of Malcolm X. As a former U.S. Marine with extensive military training, Williams earned notoriety in 1957 for forming armed self-defense groups in Monroe, North Carolina, to fight the Ku Klux Klan. Two years later, Williams’s statement that black people must “meet violence with violence” as the only way to end injustice in an uncivilized South led to his suspension as president of the Monroe chapter of the naacp.²⁵

Williams’s break with the naacp and his open advocacy of armed selfdefense pushed him further Left and into the orbit of the Socialist Workers Party, the Workers World Party, and among some members of the old CPUSA. However, Williams had had contact with communists since his days as a Detroit auto worker in the 1940s. He not only read the Daily Worker but also published a story in its pages called “Some Day I Am Going Back South.” Williams was also somewhat of an intellectual dabbler and autodidact, having studied at West Virginia State College, North Carolina College, and Johnson C. Smith College. Nevertheless, his more recent Left associations led him to Cuba and the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. Upon returning from his first trip in 1960, he hoisted the Cuban flag in his backyard and ran a series of articles in his mimeographed publication, the Crusader, about the transformation of working peoples’ lives in Cuba as a result of the revolution. In one of his editorials published in August 1960, Williams insisted that African Americans’ fight for freedom “is related to the Africans,’ the Cubans,’ all of Latin Americans’ and the Asians’ struggles for self-determination.” His support of the Chinese revolution was evident in the pages of the Crusader as well, emphasizing the importance of

China as a beacon of strength for social justice movements the world over. Like Baraka, Williams took note of China's detonation of an atomic bomb in 1960 as a historic occasion for the oppressed. "With the bomb," he wrote, "China will be respected and will add a powerful voice to those who already plead for justice for black as well as white."²⁶

By 1961, as a result of trumped-up kidnapping charges and a federal warrant for his arrest, Williams and his family were forced to flee the country and seek political asylum in Cuba. During the next four years, Cuba became Williams's base for promoting black world revolution and elaborating an internationalist ideology that embraced black nationalism and Third World solidarity. With support from Fidel Castro, Williams hosted a radio show called Radio Free Dixie that was directed at African Americans, continued to edit the *Crusader* (which by now had progressed from a mimeograph to a full-blown magazine), and completed his book *Negroes with Guns* (1962). He did not, however, identify himself as a Marxist. At the same time, he rejected the "nationalist" label, calling himself an "internationalist" instead: "That is, I'm interested in the problems of Africa, of Asia, and of Latin America. I believe that we all have the same struggle; a struggle for liberation."²⁷

Although Williams recalls having had good relations with Castro, political differences over race did lead to a rift between him and the Cuban communists. "The Party," Williams remembered, "maintained that it was strictly a class issue and that once the class problem had been solved through a socialist administration, racism would be abolished."²⁸ Williams not only disagreed but had moved much closer to Che Guevara, who embodied much of what Williams had been advocating all along: Third World solidarity, the use of armed struggle, and a deep and unwavering interest in the African revolution. Indeed, Che's leanings toward China undoubtedly made an impact on Williams's decision to leave Cuba for Beijing. Given Che's break with Fidel and the solidification of Cuba's links to the Soviet Union, Williams saw no need to stay. He and his family packed up and moved to China in 1966.

As an exiled revolutionary in China during its most tumultuous era,

Williams nevertheless predicted that urban rebellions in America's ghettos would transform the country. Although one might argue that by publishing the *Crusader* from Cuba and then China Williams had very limited contact with the black freedom movement in the United States, his magazine reached a new generation of young black militants and promoted the vision of black world revolution articulated by critics such as Harold Cruse. The fact is, the *Crusader* and Williams's own example compelled a small group of black radical intellectuals and activists to form what might loosely be called the first black Maoist-influenced organization in history: the Revolutionary Action Movement (ram).

The Revolutionary Action Movement and the Coming Black Revolution

Williams's flight to Cuba partly inspired the creation of ram. In Ohio around 1961, black members of Students for a Democratic Society as well as activists in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (core) met in a small group to discuss the significance of Williams's work in Monroe and his subsequent exile. Led by Donald Freeman, a black student at Case Western Reserve in Cleveland, the group's main core consisted of a newly formed organization, named "Challenge," made up of Central State College students at Wilberforce. Members of Challenge were especially taken with Harold Cruse's essay "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American," which was circulated widely among young black militants. Inspired by Cruse's interpretation of the global importance of the black freedom struggle, Freeman hoped to turn Challenge into a revolutionary nationalist movement akin to the Nation of Islam but that would adopt the direct action tactics of SNCC. After a lengthy debate, Challenge members decided to dissolve the organization in spring 1962 and form the Revolutionary Action Committee (originally called the "Reform" Action Movement so as not to scare the administration), with its primary leaders being Freeman, Max Stanford, and Wanda Marshall. A few months later they moved their base to Philadelphia, began publishing a bi-monthly paper called *Black America* and a one-page newsletter called *ram Speaks*, and

made plans to build a national movement oriented toward revolutionary nationalism, youth organizing, and armed self-defense.²⁹

Freeman and ram members in Cleveland continued to work publicly through the Afro-American Institute, an activist policy-oriented think tank formed in fall 1962. Under Freeman's directorship, its board—dubbed the Soul Circle—consisted of a small group of black men with ties to community organizations, labor, civil rights, and student groups. Board members such as Henry Glover, Arthur Evans, Nate Bryant, and Hanif Wahab gave lectures on African history and politics, organized forums to discuss the future of the civil rights movement, black participation in Cleveland politics, and the economic conditions of urban blacks. The institute even recruited the great drummer Max Roach to help organize a panel titled “The Role of the Black Artist in the Struggle for Freedom.” Institute members also used random leaflets and pamphlets to influence black community thinking on a number of local and international issues. Addressed “To Whom It May Concern,” these short broadsides were intended to stimulate discussion and over the black community a position on pressing topics such as “elections, urban renewal, black economic subservience, the ‘arms race,’ and the struggle in the South.” Within a year, the institute graduated from printing leaflets to publishing to a full-blown newsletter titled *Afropinion*. Through the Afro-American Institute, ram members in Cleveland worked with core activists and other community organizers to demand improvements in hospital care for black patients and to protest the exclusion of African and Afro-American history from the public school curriculum. The institute's most important campaign of 1963 was the defense of Mae Mallory, a black woman who was being held in the county jail in Cleveland for her association with Robert Williams in Monroe, North Carolina. Soon after Williams's flight to Cuba, Mallory was arrested in Ohio and awaited extradition charges. The institute and its allies, including the Nation of Islam in Cleveland, petitioned the governor of Ohio to revoke the warrant of extradition, and they also organized a mass demonstration in front of the county jail demanding Mallory's immediate release.³⁰

In Northern California, ram grew primarily out of the Afro-American Association. Founded by Donald Warden in 1962, the Afro-American Association consisted of students from the University of California at Berkeley and from Merritt College—many of whom, such as Leslie and Jim Lacy, Cedric Robinson, Ernest Allen, and Huey Newton, would go on to play important roles as radical activists and intellectuals. In Los Angeles, the president of the Afro-American Association was a young man named Ron Everett, who later changed his name to Maulana Karenga and went on to found the U.S. organization. The Afro-American Association quickly developed a reputation as a group of militant intellectuals willing to debate anyone. By challenging professors, debating groups such as the Young Socialist Alliance, and giving public lectures on black history and culture, these young activists left a deep impression on fellow students as well as on the black community. In the East Bay, where the tradition of soapbox speakers died in the 1930s (with the exception of the individual campaigns by the communist-led Civil Rights Congress during the early 1950s), the Afro-American Association was walking and talking proof that a vibrant, highly visible militant intellectual culture could exist.³¹

Meanwhile, the Progressive Labor movement (PL) had begun sponsoring trips to Cuba and recruited several radical black students in the East Bay to go along. Among them was Ernest Allen, a UC Berkeley transfer from Merritt College who had been forced out of the Afro-American Association. A working-class kid from Oakland, Allen was part of a generation of black radicals whose dissatisfaction with the civil rights movement's strategy of nonviolent, passive resistance drew them closer to Malcolm X and Third World liberation movements. Not surprisingly, through his trip to Cuba in 1964 he discovered the Revolutionary Action Movement. Allen's travel companions included a contingent of black militants from Detroit: Luke Tripp, Charles ("Mao") Johnson, Charles Simmons, and General Baker. All were members of the student group Uhuru, and all went on to play key roles in the formation of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Incredibly, the ram leader Max Stanford was already on the island visiting Robert Williams. When it was time to go back to the states, Allen and the Detroit group were

committed to building ram. Allen stopped in Cleveland to meet with ram members on his cross country bus trip back to Oakland. Armed with copies of Robert Williams's Crusader magazine and related ram material, Allen returned to Oakland intent on establishing ram's presence in the East Bay. As a result, activists such as Isaac Moore, Kenn Freeman (Mamadou Lumumba), Bobby Seale (future founder of the Black Panther Party), and Doug Allen (Ernie's brother) established a base at Merritt College through the Soul Students Advisory Council. Although the group never grew larger than a handful of people, its intellectual and cultural presence was broadly felt. Allen, Freeman, and others founded a journal called Soulbook: The Revolutionary Journal of the Black World, which published prose and poetry that is best described as Left black nationalist in orientation. Freeman, in particular, was highly respected among ram activists and widely read. He constantly pushed his members to think about black struggle in a global context. The editors of Soulbook also developed ties with Old Left black radicals, most notably the former communist Harry Haywood whose work they published in an early issue.³²

Although ram had established itself in Northern California and in Cleveland, by 1964 Philadelphia appeared to be ram's "home base." It was in Philadelphia, after all, that ram maintained an open existence, operating under its own name rather than a variety of "front" organizations. The strength of the Philadelphia chapter has much to do with the fact that it was also the home of Max Stanford, ram's national field chairman. It was out of Philadelphia that ram published a bimonthly paper called Black America and a one-page newsletter called ram Speaks; made plans to build a national movement oriented toward revolutionary nationalism, youth organizing, and armed self-defense; and recruited several Philadelphia activists to the group, including Ethel Johnson (who had also worked with Robert Williams in Monroe), Stan Daniels, and Playthell Benjamin.³³ Subsequently, ram recruited a group of young Philadelphia militants who would go on to play key roles in radical organizations, including Michael Simmons, one of the authors of SNCC's famous "Black Consciousness Paper," whose resistance to the draft resulted in his serving a two-and-a-half-year

prison sentence, and Tony Monteiro, who went on to become a leading national figure in the CPUSA during the 1970s and 1980s.³⁴

The ram organization represented the first serious and sustained attempt in the postwar period to wed Marxism, black nationalism, and Third World internationalism into a coherent revolutionary program. In Max Stanford's view, ram "attempted to apply Marxism-Leninism Mao Tse-Tung thought" to the conditions of black people and "advanced the theory that the black liberation movement in the United States was part of the vanguard of the world socialist revolution." Young ram militants sought political guidance from a number of former black communists who had either been expelled for "ultra-leftism" or "bourgeois nationalism," or had left the party because of its "revisionism." Among this group of elders were Harold Cruse, Harry Haywood, Abner Berry, and "Queen Mother" Audley Moore. Indeed, Moore would go on to become one of ram's most important mentors on the East Coast, offering members training in black nationalist thought and in Marxism. The Queen Mother's home, which she affectionately called Mount Addis Ababa, practically served as a school for a new generation of young black radicals. Moore had founded the African-American Party of National Liberation in 1963, which formed a provisional government and elected Robert Williams as premier in exile. These young black radicals also turned to Detroit's legendary ex-Trotskyists James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs, the former comrades of C. L. R. James whose Marxist and pan-Africanist writings greatly influenced ram members as well as other New Left activists.³⁵

Although ram as a movement never received the glory publicity bestowed on groups like the Black Panther Party, its influence far exceeded its numbers—not unlike the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) four decades earlier. Indeed, like the African Blood Brotherhood ram remained largely an underground organization that devoted more time to agitprop work than actual organizing. Leaders such as Max Stanford identified with the Chinese peasant rebels who led the Communist Party to victory. They seized upon Mao's famous line—"The enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue"—and they took it quite literally by advocating armed insurrection and

drawing inspiration and ideas directly from Robert Williams's theory of guerrilla warfare in the urban United States. The leaders of ram actually believed that such a war was not only possible but could be won in ninety days. The combination of mass chaos and revolutionary discipline was the key to victory. The Fall 1964 issue of Black America predicted Armageddon:

Black men and women in the Armed Forces will defect and come over to join the Black Liberation forces. Whites who claim they want to help the revolution will be sent into the white communities to divide them, fight the fascists and frustrate the efforts of the counter-revolutionary forces. Chaos will be everywhere and with the breakdown of mass communications, mutiny will occur in great numbers in all facets of the oppressors' government. The stock market will fall; Wall Street will stop functioning; Washington, D. C. will be torn apart by riots. Officials everywhere will run—run for their lives. The George Lincoln Rockwells, Kennedys, Vanderbilts, Hunts, Johnsons, Wallaces, Barnetts, etc., will be the first to go. The revolution will “strike by night and spare none.” . . . The Black Revolution will use sabotage in the cities, knocking out the electrical power first, then transportation and guerrilla warfare in the countryside in the South. With the cities powerless, the oppressor will be helpless.³⁶

The revolution was clearly seen as a man's job since women barely figured in the equation. Indeed, one of the striking facts about the history of the anti-revisionist left is how male dominated it remained. Although Wanda Marshall had been one of the founding members of ram, she did not hold a national leadership post in 1964. Besides promoting the creation of “women's leagues” whose purpose would be “to organize black women who work in white homes,” ram remained relatively silent on women's liberation until the later 1960s, when the organization had begun to collapse. In 1969, ram issued a statement on the role of “Soul Sisters” in the movement. An auxiliary of ram, the Soul Sisters were to be trained in selfdefense and work to organize the female youth, but they were also supposed to educate, care for, and positively influence potential

black male revolutionaries. Their immediate tasks included “influencing non-militant Negro men to involve themselves into organized self-defense,” promote efforts to keep “white women away from all areas of Negro political and sexual life,” report any incidents of “harassment by police or any other white men in the ghetto or the schools,” and “promote the image of Robert Williams as the international symbol of Negro freedom struggle.” The two most telling tasks that revealed the subordinate status of women involved training “girls for taking a census of the black population” and having them “design and buy sweaters for an identity symbol.”³⁷

The masculinist orientation of ram should not be surprising given the masculinist orientation of black nationalist (not to mention white New Left) organizations in the 1960s, whether they were advocating civil rights or some incipient version of Black Power. The masculinism of ram, however, was heightened by the fact that its leaders saw themselves as urban guerrillas—as members of an all-black version of Mao’s Red Army. Not all ram members saw themselves in this way, but those who did were deeply committed to a set of revolutionary ethics that Mao laid down for his own party cadre and for members of the People’s Army. We see this very clearly in ram’s “Code of Cadres,” a set of highly didactic rules of conduct that members were expected to live by. Some examples of this code are as follows:

- *A Revolutionary nationalist maintains the highest respect for all authority within the party. . . .*
 - *A Revolutionary nationalist cannot be corrupted by money, honors or any other personal gains. . . .*
 - *A Revolutionary nationalist will unhesitatingly subordinate his personal interest to those of the vanguard [without] hesitation. . . .*
 - *A Revolutionary nationalist will maintain the highest level of morality and will never take as much as a needle or single piece of thread from the masses—Brother and Sisters will maintain the utmost respect for one another and will never misuse or take*
-

advantage of one another for personal gain—and will never misinterpret, the doctrine of revolutionary nationalism for any reason. . . .38

The code's similarities to the Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung are striking. Indeed, the last example comes straight out of Mao's "Three Main Rules of Discipline," which urges cadre to "not take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses." Selflessness and total commitment to the masses is another theme that dominates Quotations. Again, the comparisons are noteworthy: "At no time and in no circumstances," says Mao, "should a Communist place his personal interests first; he should subordinate them to the interests of the nation and of the masses. Hence, selfishness, slacking, corruption, seeking the limelight, and so on are most contemptible, while selflessness, working with all one's energy, whole-hearted devotion to public duty, and quiet hard work will command respect."39

Maoism's emphasis on revolutionary ethics and moral transformation, in theory at least, resonated with black religious traditions (as well as with American Protestantism more generally), and like the Nation of Islam it preached self-restraint, order, and discipline. It's quite possible that in the midst of a counterculture that embodied elements of hedonism and drug use, a new wave of student and working-class radicals found Maoist ethics attractive. (Indeed, many in the New Left and in the women's liberation movement also found Mao's idea of revolutionary ethics attractive.) Upon his return from China, Robert Williams—in many respects ram's founding father—insisted that all young black activists "undergo personal and moral transformation. There is a need for a stringent revolutionary code of moral ethics. Revolutionaries are instruments of righteousness."40 For black revolutionaries, the moral and ethical dimension of Mao's thought centered on the notion of personal transformation. It was a familiar lesson embodied in the lives of Malcolm X and (later) George Jackson—namely, the idea that one possesses the revolutionary will to transform himself. (These narratives are almost exclusively male despite the growing number of memoirs by radical black women.) Whether or not ram

members lived by the “Code of Cadres,” Maoist ethics ultimately served to reinforce Malcolm’s status as a revolutionary role model.

The twelve-point program created by ram called for the development of freedom schools, national black student organizations, rifle clubs, black farmer cooperatives (not just for economic development but to keep “community and guerrilla forces going for a while”), and a liberation guerrilla army made up of youth and the unemployed. They also placed special emphasis on internationalism—on pledging support for national liberation movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America as well as the adoption of “pan-African socialism.” In line with Cruse’s seminal essay, ram members saw themselves as colonial subjects fighting a “colonial war at home.” As Stanford wrote in an internal document titled “Projects and Problems of the Revolutionary Movement” (1964), “ram’s position is that the Afro-American is not a citizen of the U.S.A., denied his rights, but rather he is a colonial subject enslaved. This position says that the black people in the U.S.A. are a captive nation suppressed and that their fight is not for integration into the white community but one of national liberation.”⁴¹

As colonial subjects with a right to self-determination, ram saw Afro-America as a de facto member of the nonaligned nations. They even identified themselves as part of the “Bandung world,” going so far as to hold a conference in November 1964 in Nashville titled “The Black Revolution’s Relationship to the Bandung World.” In a 1965 article published in ram’s journal *Black America*, the group started to develop a theory called Bandung Humanism, or Revolutionary Black Internationalism, which argued that the battle between Western imperialism and the Third World—more than the battle between labor and capital—represented the most fundamental contradiction in our time. The organization linked the African American freedom struggle with what was happening in China, Zanzibar, Cuba, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Algeria, and it characterized its work as part of Mao’s international strategy of encircling Western capitalist countries and challenging imperialism. After 1966, however, the term Bandung Humanism was dropped entirely and replaced with Black Internationalism.⁴²

Precisely what was meant by Black Internationalism was laid out in an incredibly bold thirty-six-page pamphlet, *The World Black Revolution*, which was published by ram in 1966. Loosely patterned on the Communist Manifesto, the pamphlet identifies strongly with China against both the capitalist West and the Soviet Empire. The “emergence of Revolutionary China began to polarize caste and class contradictions within the world, in both the bourgeoisie imperialist camp and also in the European bourgeois communist socialist camp.”⁴³ In other words, China was the wedge that sharpened the contradictions between colonial peoples and the West. Rejecting the idea that socialist revolution would arise in the developed countries of the West, ram insisted that the only true revolutionary solution was the “dictatorship of the world by the Black Underclass through World Black Revolution.” In this, of course, they were working from today’s definitions: ram used “underclass” to encompass all peoples of color in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere; the “Black Underclass” was merely a synonym for the colonial world. China was in a bitter fight to defend its own freedom. Now the rest of the “black” world must follow suit: “The Black Underclass has only one alternative to free itself of colonialism, imperialism, capitalism and neocolonialism; that is to completely destroy Western (bourgeois) civilization (the cities of the world) through a World Black Revolution[,] and establishing a Revolutionary World Black Dictatorship can bring about the end of exploitation of man by mankind and the new revolutionary world [can] be created.”⁴⁴ To coordinate this revolution, ram called for the creation of a Black International and the creation of a “People’s Liberation Army on a world scale.”⁴⁵

For all of its strident nationalism, *The World Black Revolution* concludes that black nationalism “is really internationalism.” Only by demolishing white nationalism and white power can liberation be achieved for everyone. Not only will national boundaries be eliminated with the “dictatorship of the Black Underclass,” but “the need for nationalism in its aggressive form will be eliminated.” This is a pretty remarkable statement given ram’s social and ideological roots. But rather than represent a unified position, the statement reflects the various tensions that persisted throughout ram’s history.

On one side were nationalists who felt that revolutionaries should fight for the black nation first and build socialism separate from the rest of the United States. On the other side were socialists like James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs who wanted to know who would rule the “white” nation and what such a presence would mean for black freedom. They also rejected efforts to resurrect the “Black Nation” thesis—the old communist line that people in the black-majority counties of the South (the “black belt”) have a right to secede from the union. The Boggses contended that the real source of power was in the cities and not the rural black belt.⁴⁶

After years as an underground organization, a series of “expos.s” in Life magazine and Esquire that ran in 1966 identified ram as one of the leading extremist groups “plotting a war on ‘whitey.’ ” The “Peking-backed” group was not only considered armed and dangerous, but “impressively well read in revolutionary literature—from Marat and Lenin to Mao, Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon.”⁴⁷ The Harlem Branch of the Progressive Labor Party responded to the articles with a pamphlet titled The Plot Against Black America, which argued that China is not financing revolution, just setting a revolutionary example by its staunch anti-imperialism. The real causes of black rebellion, they insisted, can be found in the conditions of ghetto life.⁴⁸ Not surprisingly, these highly publicized articles were followed by a series of police raids on the homes of ram members in Philadelphia and New York City. In June 1967, ram members were rounded up and charged with conspiracy to instigate a riot, poison police officers with potassium cyanide, and assassinate Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young. A year later, under the repressive atmosphere of the FBI’s Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), ram transformed itself into the Black Liberation Party, or the African American Party of National Liberation. By 1969, ram had pretty much dissolved itself, though its members opted to “melt back into the community and infiltrate existing Black organizations,” continue to push the twelve-point program, and develop study groups that focused on the “Science of Black Internationalism, and the thought of Chairman Rob [Robert Williams].”⁴⁹

The COINTELPRO operations only partly explain the dissolution of ram. Some of its members moved on to other organizations, such as the Republic of New Africa and the Black Panther Party. But ram's declining membership and ultimate demise can be partly attributed to strategic errors on its part. Indeed, its members' understanding of the current situation in the ghettos and their specific strategies of mobilization suggest that they were not very good Maoists after all. Mao's insistence on the protracted nature of revolution was not taken to heart; at one point they suggested that the war for liberation would probably take ninety days. And because ram's leaders focused their work on confronting the state head on and attacking black leaders whom they deemed reformists, they failed to build a strong base in black urban communities. Furthermore, despite their staunch internationalism, they did not reach out to other oppressed "nationalities" in the United States. Nevertheless, what ram and Robert Williams did do was to elevate revolutionary black nationalism to a position of critical theoretical importance for the anti-revisionist Left in general. They provided an organizational and practical example of what Harold Cruse, Frantz Fanon, and Malcolm X were trying to advance in their writings and speeches. More importantly, they found theoretical justification for revolutionary black nationalism in Mao Zedong thought, especially after the launching of the Cultural Revolution in China.

“Finally Got the News”:

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers

Although ram might have been on the decline, its leaders continued to shape some of the most radical movements of the decade. Several leading figures in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit had been leaders in ram, most notably Luke Tripp, General Baker, Charles (Mao) Johnson and, later, Ernie Allen. Tripp, Baker, Johnson, and John Watson were Wayne State University students active in the nationalist collective Uhuru, which in some respects served as the public face of ram much like Challenge had done in Ohio and the Soul Students Advisory Council had done in California. Watson, who apparently was not in ram, had worked with a number of organizations, including the Freedom Now Party (an all

black political party that endorsed the socialist Clifton DeBerry for president in 1964), SNCC, and the Negro Action Committee. Upon General Baker's return from Cuba, he moved even deeper into Detroit's labor and Left circles, taking a job as a production worker at the Chrysler-Dodge main plant and taking classes on Marx's Capital with Marty Glaberman, a veteran radical of the Johnson-Forest tendency (a breakaway group from the Socialist Workers Party led by C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya that included James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs).⁵⁰

The Inner City Voice (icv), which Watson began editing after the Detroit riots in 1967, was conceived as a revolutionary publication that could build links between black radicals, particularly students and labor activists, with the broader black community. Having studied the works of Lenin, and to a lesser degree Stalin and Mao, the militants who started icv regarded the newspaper as "the focus of a permanent organization [that] could provide a bridge between the peaks of activity."⁵¹ And they tried to live up to this injunction: in 1968 Baker organized a discussion group consisting largely of Dodge main plant workers at the icv 's office. Not long afterward—the Vday after May Day, 1968, to be exact—four thousand workers at the Dodge main plant walked out in a wildcat strike, the first in that factory in fourteen years and the first organized and led entirely by black workers. The strike was over the speedup of the assembly line, which in the previous week had increased from forty-nine to fifty-eight cars per hour. Black radical trade unionists characterized the speedups as part of a broader process of "niggermation," or as one worker explained it, the practice of hiring one black worker to do the work formerly done by three white workers. In spite of the fact that many pickets were white, the greatest company reprisals were against black workers. General Baker, accused of leading the strike, was among those summarily fired. In an "Open Letter to Chrysler Corporation," Baker wrote: "In this day and age . . . the leadership of a wildcat strike is a badge of honor and courage. . . . You have made the decision to do battle with me and therefore to do battle with the entire Black community in this city, this state, this country and in this world which I am part of. Black people of the world are united in a common struggle."⁵²

No matter what role Baker played in the walkout, it is clear that the individuals involved in the icv study group were at the forefront of the strike. This core of radical workers around Baker and the icv group gave birth to drum—the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement. The spirit and militancy that drum represented spread to other plants: ELRUM rose out of the Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle Plant, JARUM was started at Chrysler Jefferson Avenue, MERUM at Mound Road Engine, CADRUM at Cadillac Fleetwood, FRUM at the Ford Rouge, and GRUN at General Motors. Though most of these committees actively involved relatively small numbers of workers, the spread of the movement revealed the level of frustration and anger that black workers felt toward both the auto industry and the leadership of the United Auto Workers (UAW).

From the outset, black student radicals at Wayne State University were committed to building drum and the other revolutionary union movements because they saw working-class struggles as the fundamental wedge against capitalism. Besides, at a public institution like Wayne State in which 10 percent of its student body was black, it wasn't unusual to find part-time students in the plants or workers whose kids leapt into the revolutionary movement feet first. During the wildcat strikes at the Dodge main and Eldon Avenue plants, students walked the picket line after court injunctions prevented the striking workers from coming near the plant gates. Thus the distinctions between “intellectuals” and “workers” were always somewhat blurred. As Geoffrey Jacques, a black Detroit native active in radical politics during the 1970s recalled, “I would ride the bus full of auto workers on their way to the plant and there was always somebody reading Stalin, Lenin, or Mao. It seemed like everyone was part of a study group.”⁵³

It is not an exaggeration to state that most drum leaders were self-identified Marxist-Leninist-Maoists or Trotskyists of some variety. However, at the outset their main concern was unity within the revolutionary union movement. In large measure through the work of the original core group from the icv, but with the important additions of workers who had become active on the shop floor, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers came into being in 1969. Its constitution called on workers to “act swiftly to organize drum-type

organizations wherever there are black workers, be it in Lynn Townsend's kitchen, the White House, White Castle, Ford Rouge, the Mississippi Delta, the plains of Wyoming, the mines of Bolivia, the rubber plantations of Indonesia, the oil fields of Biafra, or the Chrysler plant in South Africa."⁵⁴ The organization's belief that world revolution was immanent and that people of color throughout the world were in the vanguard reflects the Maoist-inspired vision characteristic of ram. Indeed, when Ernie Allen became the League's director of political education, he recalled that practically everyone was reading Mao and Giap (the Vietnamese theoretician on guerrilla warfare). It wasn't uncommon for members to use the Chinese revolution as a framework for understanding the history of the black workers' struggles. Besides, League activists were reading more than Mao: they were interested in some of the Italian and French New Left movements, particularly Potere Operaio, Lotta Continua, and several French "workerist" organizations. Allen brought some of these heated discussions of world events back home by introducing books and articles on African American labor history.⁵⁵

Despite their deep sense of internationalism and their radical vision of trade unionism, League members were divided over strategy and tactics. One group, led by General Baker, believed that the movement should focus on shop-floor struggles, while Watson, Mike Hamlin, and Cockrel felt that the League needed to organize black communities beyond the point of production. One outgrowth of their community-based approach was the Black Economic Development Conference (bedc) held in spring 1969. At the urging of the former SNCC leader James Forman, who had recently arrived in Detroit, the League became heavily involved in the planning and running of the conference. Originally called by the Inter-religious Foundation for Community Organizations, the conference was taken over by the revolutionary left in Detroit and essentially produced a call for black socialism. Out of bedc came Forman's proposal for a Black manifesto, which demanded, among other things, five hundred million dollars in reparations from white churches.⁵⁶

The work in bedc led the League leadership, of which Forman was now a part, away from its local emphasis. Their efforts led to the founding of the Black Workers Congress (BWC) in 1970. The BWC

was conceived more or less as a coalition of black revolutionary labor activists, and it attracted a number of Maoist and Left nationalist movements, including the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization (which went on to help found the Revolutionary Workers League) and the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist). Forman was deeply influenced by Kathy Amatniek, a major theorist in the women's liberation movement, with whom he had a relationship. She had studied Chinese at Harvard and introduced consciousness-raising based on the "speak bitterness" campaigns in China. And according to Rosalyn Baxandall, one of the founding members of the radical feminist group Redstockings, Amatniek was a serious anti-revisionist who appreciated Stalin and sympathized with Albania.⁵⁷ Eventually the Forman-led BWC became a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist organization in its own right, calling for workers' control over the economy and the state to be brought about through cooperatives, united front groups, neighborhood centers, student organizations, and ultimately a revolutionary party. With Forman at the helm, the BWC called for an end to all forms of racism, imperialism, speedups, and wage freezes, and it expressed its support for the South Vietnamese Provisional Revolutionary Government.

Meanwhile, the League's local base began to disintegrate. Several League activists, including Chuck Wooten and General Baker, had been fired and all of the revolutionary union movements were barely functional by 1972. The "General Policy Statement" of the League, which based everything on the need for vibrant "drum-type" organizations, seemed to have fallen by the wayside. Divisions between the leadership groupings were so entrenched that no one could hear criticism from "the other side" without assuming hostile motivations. These contradictions came to a head when Cockrel, Hamlin, and Watson left the League in June 1971 to build the Black Workers Congress. In their document "The Split in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers: Three Lines and Three Headquarters" they described themselves as "the proletarian revolutionaries" and the two other tendencies as "the petty bourgeois opportunists" and "the backward reactionary nationalist lumpen proletarians." Not long after their departure from the League the remaining core, led by General Baker, joined the Communist League under the leadership

of the veteran black Marxist Nelson Peery. Several members of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers rose to leadership positions within the Communist Labor Party (CLP) and significantly shaped its industrial orientation. They studied Mao and Stalin with even greater rigor and built a highly disciplined party in Detroit that concentrated on the plants and factories. Although the League (which was to become the Communist Labor Party in 1972) opened the China-Albania Bookstore in Detroit, it never tried to operate as a mass organization or recruit on college campuses. Baker, especially, remained committed to the Communist League through all of its manifestations—as the CLP and, most recently, as the League of Revolutionaries.

In many respects, the League's leaders turned out to be very good Maoists— whether or not they identified with Mao. Through the newspapers and the revolutionary union movements, they always looked for ways to relate their overall political analysis to the conditions around them. They established strategic guidelines rather than a rigid blueprint for organizing. And they constantly struggled over the relationship of Marxist intellectuals, which they were in large part, to the workers they wanted to reach. In so doing they succeeded in creating a revolutionary language and making it available to black workers. Yet the promise of the League was also its peril: when the phenomenon of the revolutionary union movements began to dissipate, and as struggles led by the revolutionary union movements were defeated, the League itself was called into question. As Ken Cockrel puts it, “We had to develop a concept of what to do when workers are fired for doing organizational activity, and you are not in a position to feed them, and you are not in a position to force management to take them back, and you are not in a position to relate concretely to any of their needs. . . . If you make no response you are in a position of having led workers out of the plant on the basis of an anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist line and having the man respond and you can't do anything.”⁵⁸

But this is not the whole story. Perhaps the greatest tragedy for the League was the failure of white workers to support the revolutionary

union movements. Had the UAW used its resources to support League demands rather than lining up with the auto companies to isolate and destroy the movements, the outcome probably would have been different. Race, once again, contributed to the downfall of a potentially transformative American labor movement. It was yet another installment of a very old (and continuing) saga.

Return of the Black Belt

By most accounts, an explicit Maoist ideology and movement did not emerge on the U.S. political landscape until Mao initiated the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966. A precursor to the revolution had erupted in China nine years earlier, when Mao appealed to his countrymen to “let a hundred flowers blossom” and “let a hundred schools of thought contend.” That campaign was just a flash in the pan, however, and it was quickly silenced after too many flowers openly criticized the Chinese Communist Party.

But the Cultural Revolution was different. Hierarchies in the party and in the Red Army were ostensibly eliminated. Criticism and self-criticism was encouraged—as long as it coincided with Mao Zedong thought. Communists suspected of supporting a capitalist road were brought to trial. Bourgeois intellectuals in the academy and government were expected to perform manual labor, to work among the people as a way of breaking down social hierarchies. And all vestiges of the old order were to be eliminated. The youth, now the vanguard, attacked tradition with a vengeance and sought to create new cultural forms to promote the revolution. The people of China were now called on to educate themselves. The Cultural Revolution intensified the constituent elements of Maoism: the idea of constant rebellion and conflict; the concept of the centrality of people over economic laws or productive forces; the notion of revolutionary morality.

No matter what one’s view of the Cultural Revolution might be, it projected to the world—particularly to those sympathetic to China and to revolutionary movements generally—a vision of society where divisions between the powerful and powerless are blurred, and where status and privilege do not necessarily distinguish leaders

from the led. The socialists Paul Sweezy and Leo Huberman, editors of the independent socialist journal *Monthly Review*, recognized the huge implications of such a revolution for the urban poor in the United States: “Just imagine what would happen in the United States if a President were to invite the poor in this country, with special emphasis on the blacks in the urban ghettos, to win the war on poverty for themselves, promising them the protection of the army against reprisals!”⁵⁹ Of course, the United States is not a socialist country and has never pretended to be one, and despite a somewhat sympathetic President Lyndon Johnson, black people in the United States were not regarded by the state as “the people.” Their problems were a drain on society and their ungrateful riots and the proliferation of revolutionary organizations did not elicit much sympathy for the black poor.

For many in the New Left, African Americans were not only “the people” but also the most revolutionary sector of the working class. The Cultural Revolution’s emphasis on eliminating hierarchies and empowering the oppressed reinforced the idea that black liberation lay at the heart of the new American revolution. Mao Zedong himself gave credence to this view in his widely circulated April 1968 statement “In Support of the Afro-American Struggle Against Violent Repression.” The statement was delivered during a massive demonstration in China protesting the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., at which Robert Williams and Vicki Garvin were among the featured speakers. According to Garvin, “millions of Chinese demonstrators” marched in the pouring rain to denounce American racism.⁶⁰ Responding to the rebellions touched off by King’s assassination, Mao characterized these urban uprisings as “a new clarion call to all the exploited and oppressed people of the United States to fight against the barbarous rule of the monopoly capitalist class.”⁶¹ Even more than the 1963 statement, Mao’s words endowed the urban riots with historic importance in the world of revolutionary upheaval. His statement, as well as the general logic of Lin Biao’s “theory of the new democratic revolution” justified support for black nationalist movements and their right of self-determination.

It was in the context of the urban rebellions that several streams of black radicalism, including ram, converged and gave birth in Oakland, California, to the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Perhaps the most visible black organization promoting Mao Zedong thought, by some accounts they also were probably the least serious about reading Marxist, Leninist, or Maoist writings and developing a revolutionary ideology. Founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, a former ram member, the Black Panther Party went well beyond the boundaries of Merritt College and recruited the "lumpenproletariat." Much of the rank-and-file engaged in sloganeering more than anything else, and their bible was the Little Red Book.

That the Panthers were Marxist, at least in rhetoric and program, was one of the sources of their dispute with Ron Karenga's U.S. organization and other groups they derisively dismissed as cultural nationalists. Of course, the Panthers not only had their own cultural nationalist agenda, but the so called cultural nationalists were neither a monolith nor were they uniformly pro-capitalist. And the divisions between these groups were exacerbated by COINTELPRO. Still, there was a fundamental difference between the Panthers' evolving ideology of socialism and class struggle and that of black nationalist groups, even on the left. As Bobby Seale explained in a March 1969 interview, "We're talking about socialism. The cultural nationalists say that socialism won't do anything for us. There's the contradiction between the old and the new. Black people have no time to practice black racism and the masses of black people do not hate white people just because of the color of their skin. . . . We're not going to go out foolishly and say there is no possibility of aligning with some righteous white revolutionaries, or other poor and oppressed peoples in this country who might come to see the light about the fact that it's the capitalist system they must get rid of."62

How the Panthers arrived at this position and the divisions within the party over their stance is a long and complicated story that we cannot address here. For our purposes, we want to make a few brief points about the party's embrace of Mao Zedong thought and its position vis-.-vis black self-determination. For Huey Newton, whose

contribution to the party's ideology rivals that of Eldridge Cleaver and George Jackson, the source of the Panther's Marxism was the Chinese and Cuban revolutions precisely because their analysis grew out of their respective histories rather than from the pages of Capital. The Chinese and Cuban examples, according to Newton, empowered the Panthers to develop their own unique program and to discard theoretical insights from Marx and Lenin that had little or no application to black reality.⁶³ Indeed, a quick perusal of the Panthers' "Ten Point Program" reveals quite clearly that Malcolm X continued to be one of their biggest ideological influences.

Eldridge Cleaver was a little more explicit about the role of Maoism and the thought of the Korean communist leader Kim Il Sung in reshaping Marxism-Leninism for the benefit of the national liberation struggles of Third World peoples. In a 1968 pamphlet titled "On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party (Part 1)," Cleaver makes clear that the Panthers were a Marxist-Leninist party, but he adds that Marx, Engels, Lenin, and their contemporary followers did not offer much insight on understanding and fighting racism. The lesson here is to adopt and alter what is useful and reject what is not. "With the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948 and the People's Republic of China in 1949," Cleaver wrote, "something new was interjected into Marxism-Leninism, and it ceased to be just a narrow, exclusively European phenomenon. Comrade Kim Il Sung and Comrade Mao Tse-Tung applied the classical principles of Marxism-Leninism to the conditions of their own countries and thereby made the ideology into something useful for their people. But they rejected that part of the analysis that was not beneficial to them and had only to do with the welfare of Europe."⁶⁴ In Cleaver's view, the sharpest critique of Western Marxism's blindness with regard to race came from Frantz Fanon.

By seeing themselves as part of a global national liberation movement, the Panthers also spoke of the black community as a colony with an inherent right to self-determination. Yet, unlike many other black or interracial Maoist groups, they never advocated secession or the creation of a separate state. Rather, describing black people as colonial subjects was a way of characterizing the materialist nature of racism; that is, it was more of a metaphor than

an analytical concept. Self-determination was understood to mean community control within the urban environment, not necessarily the establishment of a black nation.⁶⁵ In a paper delivered at the Peace and Freedom Party's founding convention in March 1968, Cleaver tried to clarify the relationship between interracial unity in the U.S. revolution and, in his words, "national liberation in the black colony." He essentially called for an approach in which black and white radicals would work together to create coalitions of revolutionary organizations and to develop the political and military machinery that could overthrow capitalism and imperialism. Going further, he also called for a United Nations-sponsored plebiscite that would allow black people to determine whether they wished to integrate or separate. Such a plebiscite, he argued, would bring clarity to black people on the question of self-determination, just as the first-wave independence movements in Africa had to decide whether they wanted to maintain some altered dominion status or achieve complete independence.⁶⁶

Cleaver represented a wing of the Black Panther Party more interested in guerrilla warfare than in rebuilding society or doing the hard work of grassroots organizing. The Panthers' attraction to Mao, Kim Il Sung, Giap, Che, and for that matter Fanon, was based on their writings on revolutionary violence and people's wars. Many self-styled Panther theoreticians focused so much on developing tactics to sustain the immanent revolution that they skipped over a good deal of Mao's writings. Recognizing the problem, Newton sought to move the party away from an emphasis on guerrilla warfare and violence to a deeper, richer discussion of what the party's vision for the future might entail. Shortly after his release from prison in August 1970, Newton proposed the creation of an "Ideological Institute" where participants actually read and taught what he regarded as the "classics" — Marx, Mao, and Lenin as well as Aristotle, Plato, Rousseau, Kant, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. Unfortunately, the Ideological Institute did not amount to much; few Party members saw the use of abstract theorizing or the relevance of some of these writings to revolution. Besides, the fact that Quotations from Chairman Mao read more or less like a handbook for guerrillas didn't help matters much. Even Fanon was read pretty selectively, with his chapter "Concerning Violence" being the

perpetual favorite among militants. George Jackson contributed to the Panther's theoretical emphasis on war since much of his own writings, from *Soledad Brother* to *Blood in My Eye*, drew on Mao primarily to discuss armed resistance under fascism. Efforts to read the works of Marx, Lenin, or Mao beyond issues related to armed rebellion did not always find a willing audience among the Panthers.⁶⁷ Lemelle, then a radical activist at California State University in Los Angeles, recalls being in contact with a few Panthers who had joined a study group sponsored by the California Communist League. The reading, which included Mao's *Four Essays on Philosophy* and lengthy passages from Lenin's selected works, turned out to be too much and the Panthers eventually left the group amid a stormy debate.⁶⁸

Perhaps the least-read section of *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, at least by men, was the five-page chapter on women. In an age when the metaphors for black liberation were increasingly masculinized and black movement leaders not only ignored but also perpetuated gender oppression, even the most Marxist of the black nationalist movements belittled the "woman question." The Black Panther Party was certainly no exception. Indeed, it was during the same historic meeting of the Students for a Democratic Society in 1969, where the Panthers invoked Marx, Lenin, and Mao to expel the Progressive Labor Party for their position on the national question, that the Panther minister of information Rufus Walls gave his infamous speech about the need to have women in the movement because they possessed "'pussy power.'" Although Walls's statement clearly was a vernacular take-off from Mao's line that "China's women are a vast reserve of labour power [that] . . . should be tapped in the struggle to build a great socialist country,"⁶⁹ it turned out to be a profoundly antifeminist defense of women's participation.

While China's own history on the "woman question" is pretty dismal, Mao's dictum that "women hold up half the sky" as well as his brief writings on women's equality and participation in the revolutionary process endowed women's liberation with some revolutionary legitimacy on the Left. Of course, Maoism didn't make the movement: the fact is, women's struggles within the New

Left played the most important role in reshaping Left movements toward a feminist agenda, or at least putting feminism on the table. But for black women in the Panthers who were suspicious of “white feminism,” Mao’s language on women’s equality provided space within the party to develop an incipient black feminist agenda. As the newly appointed minister of information, the Panther Elaine Brown announced to a press conference soon after returning from China in 1971 that “the Black Panther Party acknowledges the progressive leadership of our Chinese comrades in all areas of revolution. Specifically, we embrace China’s correct recognition of the proper status of women as equal to that of men.”⁷⁰

Even beyond the rhetoric, black women Panthers such as Lynn French, Kathleen Cleaver, Erica Huggins, Akua Njere, and Assata Shakur (formerly Joanne Chesimard) sustained the tradition of carving out free spaces within existing male-dominated organizations in order to challenge the multiple forms of exploitation that black working-class women faced daily. Through the Panther’s free breakfast and educational programs, for example, black women devised strategies that, in varying degrees, challenged capitalism, racism, and patriarchy. And in some instances, African American women radicals rose to positions of prominence and, sometimes by sheer example, contributed toward developing a militant, class-conscious black feminist perspective. The most important figures in this respect include Kathleen Cleaver, Erica Huggins, Elaine Brown, and Assata Shakur.⁷¹ In some instances, the growing strength of a black Left feminist perspective, buttressed by certain Maoist slogans on the woman question, shaped future black Maoist formations. One obvious example is the Black Vanguard Party, another Bay Area Maoist group active in the mid to late 1970s whose publication *Juche!* maintained a consistent socialist-feminist perspective. Michelle Gibbs (also known as Michelle Russell, her married name at the time) promoted a black feminist ideology as a Detroit supporter of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and as a member of the Black Workers Congress. As a red-diaper baby whose father, Ted Gibbs, fought in the Spanish Civil War, and who grew up in a household where Paul Robeson and the artist Elizabeth Catlett were occasional guests, Gibbs’s black socialist feminist perspective flowed from her

political experience; from the writings of black feminist writers; and from a panoply of radical thinkers ranging from Malcolm, Fanon, and Cabral to Marx, Lenin, and Mao.⁷² Conversely, the predominantly white radical feminist organization Redstockings not only was influenced by Mao's writings but also modeled itself somewhat off of the Black Power movement, particularly the movement's separatist strategies and identification with the Third World.⁷³

Ironically, the Black Panther Party's greatest identification with China occurred at the very moment when China's status among the Left began to decline worldwide. Mao's willingness to host President Nixon and China's support of the repressive governments of Pakistan and Sri Lanka left many Maoists in the United States and elsewhere disillusioned. Nevertheless, Huey Newton and Elaine Brown not only visited China on the eve of Nixon's trip but also they announced that their entry into electoral politics was inspired by China's entry into the United Nations. Newton argued that the Black Panther's shift toward reformist electoral politics did not contradict "China's goal of toppling U.S. imperialism nor [was it] an abnegation of revolutionary principles. It was a tactic of socialist revolution."⁷⁴ Even more incredible was Newton's complete abandonment of black self determination, which he explained in terms of developments in the world economy. In 1971, he concluded quite presciently that the globalization of capital rendered the idea of national sovereignty obsolete, even among the socialist countries. Thus black demands for self-determination were no longer relevant; the only viable strategy was global revolution. "Blacks in the U.S. have a special duty to give up any claim to nationhood now more than ever. The U.S. has never been our country; and realistically there's no territory for us to claim. Of all the oppressed people in the world, we are in the best position to inspire global revolution."⁷⁵

In many respects, Newton's position on the national question was closer to Mao's than that of most of the self-proclaimed Maoist organizations that popped up in the early to late 1970s. Despite his own statements in support of national liberation movements and of Lin Biao's "theory of democratic revolutions," Mao did not support independent organizations along nationalist lines. To him, black

nationalism looked like ethnic/racial particularism. He was, after all, a Chinese nationalist attempting to unify peasants and proletarians and eliminate ethnic divisions within his own country. We might recall his 1957 statement in which he demanded that progressives in China “help unite the people of our various nationalities . . . not divide them.”⁷⁶ Thus while recognizing that racism is a product of colonialism and imperialism, his 1968 statement insists that the “contradiction between the black masses in the United States and U.S. ruling circles is a class contradiction. . . . The black masses and the masses of white working people in the United States share common interests and have common objectives to struggle for.”⁷⁷ In other words, the black struggle is bound to merge with the working-class movement and overthrow capitalism.

On the issue of black liberation, however, most American Maoist organizations founded in the early to mid 1970s took their lead from Stalin, not Mao. Black people in the United States were not simply proletarians in black skin but rather a nation—or as Stalin put it, “a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture.”⁷⁸ The anti-revisionist groups that embraced Stalin’s definition of a nation, such as the Communist Labor Party (CLP) and the October League, also resurrected the old Communist Party’s position that African Americans in the black belt counties of the South constitute a nation and have a right to secede if they wished. On the other hand, groups like the Progressive Labor Party—once an advocate of “revolutionary nationalism”—moved to a position repudiating all forms of nationalism by the start of the Cultural Revolution.

The CLP was perhaps the most consistent advocate of black self determination among the anti-revisionist movements. Founded in 1968 largely by African Americans and Latinos, the CLP’s roots can be traced to the old Provisional Organizing Committee (POC)—itself an outgrowth of the 1956 split in the CPUSA that led to the creation of Hammer and Steel and the Progressive Labor movement. Ravaged by a decade of internal splits, the POC had become a predominantly black and Puerto Rican organization divided between New York and Los Angeles. In 1968, the New York leadership

expelled their l.a. comrades for, among other things, refusing to denounce Stalin and Mao. In turn, the l.a. group, largely under the guidance of the veteran black Marxist Nelson Peery, founded the California Communist League that same year and began recruiting young black and Chicano radical workers and intellectuals. Peery's home in South-Central Los Angeles had already become somewhat of a hangout for young black radicals after the Watts uprising; there, he organized informal groups to study history, political economy, and classic works in Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought and he entertained all sorts of activists, including Black Panthers and student activists ranging from Cal State Los Angeles to l.a. Community College. The California Communist League subsequently merged with a group of sds militants called the Marxist-Leninist Workers Association and formed the Communist League in 1970. Two years later they changed their name again to the Communist Labor Party.⁷⁹

Except for, perhaps, Harry Haywood's long essay "Toward a Revolutionary Position on the Negro Question," Nelson Peery's short book *The Negro National Colonial Question* (1972) was probably the most widely read defense of black self-determination in Marxist-Leninist-Maoist circles at the time.⁸⁰ Peery was sharply criticized for his defense of the term "Negro," a difficult position to maintain in the midst of the Black Power movement. But Peery had a point: national identity was not about color. The Negro nation was a historically evolved, stable community with its own unique culture, language (or, rather, dialect), and territory—the black belt counties and their surrounding areas, or essentially the thirteen states of the Old Confederacy. Because southern whites shared with African Americans a common territory, and by Peery's account a common language and culture, they were also considered part of the "Negro nation." More precisely, southern whites comprised the "Anglo-American minority" within the Negro nation. As evidenced in soul music, spirituals, and rock and roll, Peery insisted that what emerged in the South was a hybrid culture with strong African roots manifest in the form of slave folktales and female headwraps. Jimi Hendrix and Sly and the Family Stone, as well as white imitators like Al Jolson, Elvis Presley, and Tom Jones, are all cited as examples of a shared culture. Peery saw "soul" culture embedded in

forms of daily life; for example, “the custom of eating pigs’ feet, neck bones, black-eyed peas, greens, yams, and chitterlings are all associated with the region of the South, particularly the Negro Nation.”⁸¹

Peery’s positioning of southern whites as part of the Negro Nation was a stroke of genius, particularly since one of his intentions was to destabilize racial categories. However, at times his commitment to Stalin’s definition of a nation weakened his argument. At the very moment when mass migration and urbanization depleted the rural South of its black population, Peery insisted that the black belt was the natural homeland of Negroes. He even attempted to prove that a black peasantry and stable rural proletariat still existed in the black belt. Because the land question is the foundation upon which his understanding of self-determination was built, he ends up saying very little about the nationalization of industry or socialized production. Thus he could write in 1972 that “the Negro national colonial question can only be solved by a return of the land to the people who have toiled over it for centuries. In the Negro Nation this land redistribution will demand a combination of state farms and cooperative enterprises in order to best meet the needs of the people under the conditions of modern mechanized agriculture.”⁸²

The Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) also promoted a version of the black belt thesis, which it inherited from its earlier incarnation as the October League. The CP(ML) was formed out of a merger between the October League, based mainly in Los Angeles, and the Georgia Communist League in 1972.⁸³ Many of its founding members came out of the Revolutionary Youth Movement II (a faction within SDS), and a handful were Old Left renegades like Harry Haywood and Otis Hyde. Haywood’s presence in the cp(ml) is significant since he is considered one of the architects of the original black belt thesis formulated at the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in 1928. According to the updated cp(ml) formulation, Afro-Americans had the right to secede “to their historic homeland in the Black Belt South.”⁸⁴ But they added the caveat that the recognition of the right of self-determination does not mean they believe separation is the most appropriate solution. They also introduced the idea of regional autonomy (i.e., that urban

concentrations of African Americans can also exercise self-determination in their own communities) and they extended the slogan of self-determination to Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and indigenous people in U.S. colonies (in the Pacific Islands, Hawaii, Alaska, etc.). They were selective as to what sort of nationalist movements they would support, promising to back only revolutionary nationalism as opposed to reactionary nationalism.

The Revolutionary Union, an outgrowth of the Bay Area Revolutionary Union (BARU) founded in 1969 with support from ex-CPUSA members who had visited China, took the position that black people constituted “an oppressed nation of a new type.” Because black people were primarily workers concentrated in urban, industrial areas (what they called a “deformed class structure”), they argued that self-determination should not take the form of secession but rather be realized through the fight against discrimination, exploitation, and police repression in the urban centers. In 1975, when the Revolutionary Union transformed itself into the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), it continued to embrace the idea that black people constituted a nation of a new type, but it also began to uphold “the right of Black people to return to claim their homeland.”⁸⁵ Not surprisingly, these two contradictory lines created confusion, thereby compelling rcp leaders to adopt an untenable position of defending the right of self-determination without advocating it. Two years later, they dropped the right of self-determination altogether and, like the PLP, waged war on all forms of “narrow” nationalism.

Unlike any of the Maoist-oriented organizations mentioned above, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL)—founded and led by none other than Amiri Baraka—grew directly out of the cultural nationalist movements of the late 1960s. To understand the RCL’s (and its precursors’) shifting positions with regard to the black liberation, we need to go back to 1966 when Baraka founded Spirit House in Newark, New Jersey, with the help of local activists as well as folks he had worked with in Harlem’s Black Arts Repertory Theater. While Spirit House artists were from the beginning

involved in local political organizing, the police beating of Baraka and several other activists during the Newark uprising in 1967 politicized them even further. After the uprising they helped organize a Black Power conference in Newark that attracted several national black leaders, including Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Huey P. Newton of the Black Panther Party, and Imari Obadele of the newly formed Republic of New Africa (partly an outgrowth of RAM). Shortly thereafter, Spirit House became the base for the Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN), a new organization made up of United Brothers, Black Community Defense and Development, and Sisters of Black Culture. In addition to attracting black nationalists, Muslims, and even a few Marxist-Leninist-Maoists, CFUN bore the mark of Ron Karenga's U.S. organization. Indeed, CFUN adopted Karenga's version of cultural nationalism and worked closely with him. Although tensions arose between Karenga and some of the Newark activists over his treatment of women and the overly centralized leadership structure that CFUN had imported from the US organization, the movement continued to grow. In 1970, Baraka renamed CFUN the Congress of African Peoples (CAP), transformed it into a national organization, and at its founding convention broke with Karenga. Leaders of cap sharply criticized Karenga's cultural nationalism and passed resolutions that reflected a turn to the left—including a proposal to raise funds to help build the Tanzania-Zambia railroad.⁸⁶

Several factors contributed to Baraka's turn to the Left during this period. One has to do with the painful lesson he learned about the limitations of black "petty bourgeois" politicians. After playing a pivotal role in the 1970 election of Kenneth Gibson, Newark's first black mayor, Baraka witnessed an increase in police repression (including attacks on CAP demonstrators) and a failure on the part of Gibson to deliver what he had promised the African American community. Feeling betrayed and disillusioned, Baraka broke with Gibson in 1974, though he did not give up entirely on the electoral process. His role in organizing the first National Black Political Assembly in 1972 reinforced in his mind the power of black

independent politics and the potential strength of a black united front.⁸⁷

One source of Baraka's turn to the Left was the CLP East Coast regional coordinator William Watkins. Harlem born and raised, Watkins was among a group of radical black students at Cal State Los Angeles who helped found the Communist League. In 1974 Watkins got to know Baraka, who was trying to find someone to advance his understanding of Marxism-Leninism. "We'd spend hours in his office," Watkins recalled, "discussing the basics—like surplus value." For about three months, Baraka met regularly with Watkins, who taught him the fundamentals of political economy and tried to expose the limitations of cultural nationalism. These meetings certainly influenced Baraka's leftward turn, but when Watkins and Nelson Peery asked Baraka to join the CLP, he refused. Although he had come to appreciate Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse-Tung thought, he wasn't ready to join a multiracial organization. The black struggle was first and foremost.⁸⁸

It is fitting that the most important source of Baraka's radicalization came out of Africa. Just as Baraka's first turn to the Left after 1960 was inspired by the Cuban revolution, the struggle in southern Africa prompted his post-1970 turn to the left. The key event was the creation of the African Liberation Support Committee in 1971, which originated with a group of black nationalists led by Owusu Sadaukai, the director of Malcolm X Liberation University in Greensboro, North Carolina, who traveled to Mozambique under the aegis of FRELIMO (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique). The president of Frelimo, Samora Machel (who, coincidentally, was in China at the same time as Huey Newton), and other militants persuaded Sadaukai and his colleagues that the most useful role that African Americans could play in support of anti-colonialism was to challenge American capitalism from within and let the world know the truth about their just war against Portuguese domination. A year later Amilcar Cabral, the leader of the anti-colonial movement in Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands, said essentially the same thing during

his last visit to the United States. Moreover, Cabral and Machel represented explicitly Marxist movements; they rejected the idea that precolonial African societies were inherently democratic and that they practiced a form of “primitive communism” that could lay the groundwork for modern socialism. Rather, they asserted that African societies were not immune from class struggle, nor was capitalism the only road to development.

The African Liberation Support Committee reflected the radical orientation of the liberation movements in Portuguese Africa. On May 27, 1972 (the anniversary of the founding of the Organization of African Unity), the ALSC held the first African Liberation Day demonstration, drawing approximately thirty thousand protesters in Washington alone, and an estimated thirty thousand more across the country. The African Liberation Day Coordinating Committee consisted of representatives from several nationalist and black Left organizations, including the Youth Organization for Black Unity (YOBUE); the All-African People’s Revolutionary Party (AAPRP), headed by Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Toure); the Pan-African People’s Organization; and the Maoist-influenced Black Workers Congress.⁸⁹ Because the ALSC brought together such a broad range of black activists, it became an arena for debate over the creation of a black radical agenda. While most ALSC organizers were actively anti-imperialist, the number of black Marxists in leadership positions turned out to be a point of contention. Aside from Sadaukai, who would go on to play a major role in the Maoist-oriented Revolutionary Workers League (RWL), the ALSC’s main leaders included Nelson Johnson (future leader in the Communist Workers Party) and the brilliant writer/organizer Abdul Alkalimat. As early as 1973, splits occurred within the ALSC over the role of Marxists, though when the dust settled a year later, Marxists from the RWL, the Black Workers Congress (BWC), the Revolutionary Workers Congress (an offshoot of the BWC), cap, and the Workers Viewpoint Organization (the precursor to the Communist Workers Party) were victorious. Unfortunately, internal squabbling and sectarianism proved to be too much for the ALSC to handle. Chinese foreign policy struck

the final blow; its support for UNITA during the 1975 Angola civil war and Vice-Premier Li Xiannian's suggestion that dialogue with white South Africa was better than armed insurrection, placed black Maoists in the ALSC in a difficult position.⁹⁰ Within three years the ALSC had utterly collapsed, bringing to an inauspicious close perhaps the most dynamic anti-imperialist organization of the decade.

Nevertheless, Baraka's experience in the ALSC profoundly altered his thinking. As he recalls in his autobiography, by the time of the first African Liberation Day demonstration in 1972, he was "going left, I was reading Nkrumah and Cabral and Mao." Within two years he was calling on CAP members to examine "the international revolutionary experience—namely the Russian and Chinese Revolutions—and integrate it with the practice of the Afrikan revolution."⁹¹ Their study lists expanded to include works such as Mao Zedong's Four Essays on Philosophy, Stalin's Foundations of Leninism, and History of the Communist Party Soviet Union (Short Course). By 1976, CAP had dispensed with all vestiges of nationalism, changed its name to the Revolutionary Communist League, and sought to remake itself into a multiracial Marxist-Leninist-Maoist movement. Perhaps as a way to establish its ideological moorings as an anti-revisionist movement, the RCL followed in the noble tradition of resurrecting the black belt thesis. In 1977, the organization published a paper titled "The Black Nation" that analyzed black liberation movements from a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist perspective and concluded that black people in the South and in large cities constitute a nation with an inherent right to self-determination. While rejecting "bourgeois integration," the essay argued that the struggle for black political power was central to the fight for self-determination.⁹²

The RCL attempted to put its vision of self-determination in practice through efforts to build a Black United Front. They organized coalitions against police brutality, mobilized support for striking cafeteria workers and maintenance workers, created a People's Committee on Education to challenge budget cuts and

shape educational policy, and protested the Bakke decision. The RCL's grassroots organizing and coalition building brought them in contact with the League of Revolutionary Struggle (LRS), a California based movement formed out of a merger between I Wor Kuen, the Chinese-American Maoist organization, and the predominantly Chicano August 29th Movement (Marxist-Leninist). In 1979, the RCL and the LRS decided to unite, and one of the foundations of their joint program was their support of the black nation thesis. As a result of the merger and the debates that preceded it, the RCL's position changed slightly: southern black people and Chicanos in the Southwest constituted oppressed nations with the right to self-determination. By contrast, for black people locked in northern ghettos the struggle for equal rights obviously took precedent over the land question.

Invariably the merger was short-lived, in part because of disagreements over the issue of self-determination and the continuing presence of what LRS members regarded as "narrow nationalism" in the RCL. The LRS chair Carmen Chang was never comfortable with the black nation thesis but accepted the position for the sake of unity. Baraka's group, on the other hand, never abandoned black unity for multiracial class struggle. And as an artist with deep roots in the Black Arts movement, Baraka persistently set his cultural and political sights on the contradictions of black life under capitalism, imperialism, and racism. For Baraka, as with many of the characters discussed in this essay, this was not a simple matter of narrow nationalism. On the contrary, understanding the place of racist oppression and black revolution within the context of capitalism and imperialism was fundamental to the future of humanity. In the tradition of Du Bois, Fanon, and Harold Cruse, Baraka insisted that the black (hence colonial) proletariat was the vanguard of world revolution, "not because of some mystic chauvinism but because of our place in objective history. . . . We are the vanguard because we are at the bottom, and when we raise to stand up straight everything stacked upon us topples."93

Moreover, despite Baraka's immersion in Marxist-Leninist-Maoist literature, his own cultural work suggests that he knew, as did most black radicals, that the question of whether black people constituted a nation was not going to be settled through reading Lenin or Stalin or resurrecting M. N. Roy. If the battle ever could be settled it would take place, for better or for worse, on the terrain of culture. While the Black Arts movement was the primary vehicle for black cultural revolution in the United States, it is hard to imagine what that revolution would have looked like without China. Black radicals seized the Great Proletarian Revolution by the horns and reshaped it in their own image.

The Great (Black) Proletarian Cultural Revolution

Less than a year into the Cultural Revolution, Robert Williams published an article in the *Crusader* titled "Reconstitute Afro-American Art to Remold Black Souls." While Mao's call for a cultural revolution meant getting rid of the vestiges (cultural and otherwise) of the old order, Williams—not unlike members of the Black Arts movement in the United States—was talking about purging black culture of a "slave mentality." Although adopting some of the language of CCP's manifesto (the "Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, published August 12, 1966 in the *Peking Review*), Williams's essay sought to build on the idea rather than on the ideology of the Cultural Revolution. Like Mao, he called on black artists to cast off the shackles of the old traditions and only make art in the service of revolution. "The Afro-American artist must make a resolute and conscious effort to reconstitute our art forms to remold new proud black and revolutionary soul. . . . It must create a new theory and direction and prepare our people for a more bitter, bloody and protracted struggle against racist tyranny and exploitation. Black art must serve the best interest of black people. It must become a powerful weapon in the arsenal of the Black Revolution."⁹⁴ The leaders of ram concurred. An internal ram document circulated in 1967, titled *Some Questions Concerning the Present Period*, called for a full-scale black cultural revolution in the United States whose purpose

would be “to destroy the conditioned white oppressive mores, attitudes, ways, customs, philosophies, habits, etc., which the oppressor has taught and trained us to have. This means on a mass scale a new revolutionary culture.” It also meant an end to processed hair, skin lighteners, and other symbols of parroting the dominant culture. Indeed, the revolution targeted not only assimilated bourgeois Negroes but also barbers and beauticians.

The conscious promotion of art as a weapon in black liberation is nothing new—it can be traced back at least to the Left wing of the Harlem Renaissance, if not earlier. And the Black Arts movement in the United States, not to mention virtually every other contemporary national liberation movement, took this idea very seriously. Fanon says as much in *The Wretched of the Earth*, English translation of which was making the rounds like wildfire during this period.⁹⁵ Still, the Cultural Revolution in China loomed large. After all, many if not most black nationalists were familiar with China and had read Mao, and even if they did not acknowledge or make explicit the influence of Maoist ideas on the need for revolutionary art or the protracted nature of cultural revolution, the parallels are striking nonetheless. Consider Maulana (Ron) Karenga’s 1968 manifesto “Black Cultural Nationalism.” First published in *Negro Digest*, the essay derived many of its ideas from Mao’s “Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art.” Like Mao, Karenga insisted that all art must be judged by two criteria—“artistic” and “social” (“political”); that revolutionary art must be for the masses; and that, in Karenga’s own words, art “must be functional, that is useful, as we cannot accept the false doctrine of ‘art for art’s sake.’ ” One can definitely see the influence of Maoism on Karenga’s efforts to create an alternative revolutionary culture. Indeed, the seven principles of Kwanzaa (the African American holiday that Karenga invented and first celebrated in 1967)—unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, collective economics (socialism), creativity, purpose, and even faith—are nearly as consonant with Mao’s ideas as they are with “traditional” African culture.⁹⁶ And it is not a coincidence, perhaps, that at least one of the principles, Ujamaa, or “cooperative economics,” was the basis

of Tanzania's famous Arusha Declaration in 1964 under president Julius Nyerere—with Tanzania being China's earliest and most important ally in Africa.

Although Karenga's debt to Mao went unacknowledged, the Progressive Labor Party took note. The PLP's paper, the Challenge, ran a scathing article that attacked the entire Black Arts movement and its theoreticians. Titled "[LeRoi] Jones-Karenga Hustle: Cultural 'Rebels' Foul Us Up," the article characterized Karenga as a "pseudo-intellectual" who "has thoroughly read Mao's Talks on Literature and Art. In fact he can quote from this work as if he wrote it himself. What he did with this Marxist classic is to take out its heart—the class struggle—and substitute no-struggle. In addition he has put 'art' above politics and has made art the revolution." " 'Cultural nationalism,'" the article continued, "is not only worshipping the most reactionary aspects of African history. It even goes so far as measuring one's revolutionary commitment by the clothes that are being worn! This is part of the 'Black awareness.' "97

Of course, revolution did become a kind of art, or more precisely, a distinct style. Whether it was Afros and dashikis or leather jackets and berets, most black revolutionaries in the United States developed their own aesthetic criteria. In the publishing world, Mao's Little Red Book made a tremendous impact on literary styles in black radical circles. The idea that a pocket-sized book of pithy quotes and aphorisms could address a range of subjects, from ethical behavior, revolutionary thought and practice, economic development, philosophy, etc., appealed to many black activists, irrespective of political allegiance. The Little Red Book prompted a cottage industry of miniature books of quotations compiled expressly for black militants. The Black Book, edited by Earl Ofari Hutchison (with assistance from Judy Davis), is a case in point. Published by the Radical Education Project (circa 1970), The Black Book is a compilation of brief quotes from W. E. B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, and Frantz Fanon that address a range of issues related to domestic and world revolution. The resemblance to Quotations from Chairman Mao is striking: chapter titles include

“Black Culture and Art,” “Politics,” “Imperialism,” “Socialism,” “Capitalism,” “Youth,” “The Third World,” “Africa,” “On America,” and “Black Unity.” Earl Ofari Hutchison’s introduction places black struggle in a global context and calls for revolutionary ethics and “spiritual as well as physical unification of the Third World.” “True blackness,” he adds, “is a collective life-style, a collective set of values and a common world perspective” that grows out of distinct experiences in the West. The *Black Book* was not written as defense of black nationalism against the encroachments of Maoism. On the contrary, Earl Ofari Hutchison closes by telling “freedom fighters everywhere, continue to read your red book, but place alongside of it the revolutionary *BLACK BOOK*. To win the coming battle, both are necessary.”⁹⁸

Another popular text in this tradition was the *Axioms of Kwame Nkrumah: Freedom Fighters Edition*.⁹⁹ Bound in black leather with gold type, it opens with a line in the frontispiece underscoring the importance of revolutionary will: “The secret of life is to have no fear.” And with the exception of its African focus, the chapters are virtually indistinguishable from the *Little Red Book*. Topics include “African Revolution,” “Army,” “Black Power,” “Capitalism,” “Imperialism,” “People’s Militia,” “The People,” “Propaganda,” “Socialism,” and “Women.” Most of the quotes are either vague or fail to transcend obvious sloganeering (e.g., “The foulest intellectual rubbish ever invented by man is that of racial superiority and inferiority,” or “A revolutionary fails only if he surrenders”).¹⁰⁰ More importantly, many of Nkrumah’s insights could have come straight from Mao’s pen, particularly those quotations dealing with the need for popular mobilization, the dialectical relationship between thought and action, and issues related to war and peace and imperialism.

On the question of culture, most Maoist and anti-revisionist groups in the United States were less concerned with creating a new, revolutionary culture than with destroying the vestiges of the old or attacking what they regarded as a retrograde, bourgeois commercial culture. In this respect, they were in step with the

Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. In a fascinating review of the film *Superfly* published in the CP(ML) paper *The Call*, the writer seizes the opportunity to criticize the counterculture as well as the capitalists' role in promoting drug use in the black community. "Looking around at all the people overdosing on drugs, getting killed in gun fights among themselves, and getting shredded up in industrial accidents while stoned on the job, it's clear that dope is as big a killer as any armed cop." Why would a film marketed to black people glorify the drug culture? Because "the imperialists know the plain truth—if you're hooked on dope, you won't have time to think about revolution—you're too busy worrying about where the next shot is coming from!" The review also included a bit of Chinese history: "The British did everything they could to get the Chinese people strung out [on opium]. It was common for workers to get part of their wages in opium, turning them into addicts even quicker. It was only revolution that got rid of the cause of this misery. By taking their countries back, and turning their society in to one that really served the people, there was no more need to escape into drugs." 101

Maoist attacks were not limited to the most reactionary aspects of mass commercial culture. The Black Arts movement—a movement that, ironically, included figures very much inspired by developments in China and Cuba—came under intense scrutiny by the anti-revisionist Left. Groups like the PLP and the cp(ml), despite their many disagreements over the national question, did agree that the Black Arts movement and its attraction to African culture was misguided, if not downright counterrevolutionary. The PLP dismissed black cultural nationalists as petty bourgeois businessmen who sold the most retrograde aspects of African culture to the masses and "exploit[ed] Black women—all in the name of 'African culture' and in the name of 'revolution.'" The same PLP editorial castigates the Black Arts movement for "teaching about African Kings and Queens, African 'empires.' There is no class approach—no notice that these Kings, etc., were oppressing the mass of African people." 102 Likewise, an editorial in *The Call* in 1973 sharply criticized the Black Arts movement for "delegitimizing the genuine national aspirations of Black people in

the U.S. and to substituting African counter-culture for anti-imperialist struggle.”¹⁰³

While these attacks were generally unfair, particularly in the way they lumped together a wide array of artists, a handful of black artists had come to similar conclusions about the direction of the Black Arts movement. For the novelist John Oliver Killens, the Chinese Cultural Revolution offered a model for transforming black cultural nationalism into a revolutionary force. As a result of his travels to China during the early 1970s, Killens published an important essay in *The Black World* (later reprinted by the U.S.-China People’s Friendship Association as a pamphlet titled *Black Man in the New China*) praising the Cultural Revolution for being, in his view, a stunning success. In fact, he ostensibly went to China to find out why their revolution succeeded “while our own Black cultural revolution, that bloomed so brightly during the Sixties, seems to be dying on the vine.”¹⁰⁴ By the time Killens was ready to return to the United States, he had reached several conclusions regarding the limitations of the black cultural revolution and the strength of the Maoist model. First, he recognized that all successful revolutions must be continuous—permanent and protracted. Second, cultural activism and political activism are not two different strategies for liberation but rather two sides of the same coin. The cultural revolution and the political revolution go hand in hand. Third, a revolutionary movement must be self-reliant; it must create self-sustaining cultural institutions. Of course, most radical nationalists in the Black Arts movement figured out most of this independently and Killens’s article merely reinforced these lessons. However, China taught Killens one other lesson that few other males in the movement paid attention to at the time: “ ‘Women hold up one-half of the world.’ ” “In some very vital and militant factions of the Black cultural revolution, women were required to metaphorically ‘sit in the back of the bus.’ . . . This is backward thinking and divisive. Many women voted with their feet and went into Women’s Lib. And some of the brothers seemed upset and surprised. We drove them to it.”¹⁰⁵

The other major black critic of the Black Arts movement's cultural nationalism who ended up embracing Maoism was Amiri Baraka, himself a central figure in the black cultural revolution and an early target for Maoist abuse. As the founder and leader of cap and later the RCL, Baraka offered more than a critique; instead, he built a movement that attempted to synthesize the stylistic and aesthetic innovations of the Black Arts movement with Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought and practice. Just as his odyssey from the world of the Beats to the Bandung World provide insight into Mao's impact on black radicalism in the United States, so does his transition from a cultural nationalist to committed communist. More than any other Maoist or anti-revisionist, Baraka and the RCL epitomized the most conscious and sustained effort to bring the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to America's inner cities and to transform it in a manner that spoke to the black working class.

Having come out of the Black Arts movement in Harlem and Spirit House in Newark, Baraka was above all else a cultural worker. As he and the Congress of African Peoples moved from cultural nationalism to Marxism, this profound ideological shift manifested itself through changes in cultural practice. Dismissing the "Black petty bourgeois primitive cultural nationalist" as unscientific and metaphysical, he warned his comrades against "the cultural bias that might make us think that we can return to pre-slave trade Afrika, and the romance of feudalism."¹⁰⁶ Further, CAP changed the name of its publication from Black Newark to Unity and Struggle to reflect its transition from a cultural nationalist perspective to a deeper understanding of "the dialectical requirements of revolution."¹⁰⁷ The Spirit House Movers (CAP's theater troupe) was now called the Afrikan Revolutionary Movers (arm), and a group of cultural workers associated with Spirit House formed a singing group called the Anti-Imperialist Singers. They abandoned African dress as well as "male chauvinist practices that had been carried out as part of its 'African traditionalism' such as holding separate political education classes for men and women."¹⁰⁸ And CAP's official holiday, known as "Leo Baraka" for Baraka's birthday, became a day devoted

entirely to studying Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought, the “woman question,” and the problems of cadre development.¹⁰⁹

By 1976, the year cap reemerged as the Revolutionary Communist League, Baraka had come a long way since his alliance with Ron Karenga. In a poem titled “Today,” published in a small book of poetry titled *Hard Facts* (1976), Baraka’s position on cultural nationalism vis-à-vis class struggle is unequivocal:

*Frauds in leopard skin, turbaned hustlers w/skin
type rackets, colored capitalists, negro
exploiters, Afro-American Embassy gamers
who lurk about Afrikan embassies fightin for
airline tickets, reception guerrillas, whose
only connection w/a party is the Frankie
Crocker kind.*

*Where is the revolution brothers and sisters?
Where is the mobilization of the masses led
by the advanced section of the working class?
Where is the unity criticism unity. The self criticism
& criticism? Where is the work & study. The
ideological clarity? Why only poses &
postures & subjective one sided non-theories
describing only yr petty bourgeois upbringing
Black saying might get you a lecture gig, ‘wise man.’ but will
not alone bring
revolution.¹¹⁰*

In fact, one might argue that Baraka’s *Hard Facts* was written as a kind of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist manifesto on revolutionary art. Like his former mentor Ron Karenga, Baraka builds on Mao’s oft-cited “Talks at the Yen’an Forum on Art and Literature,” though to very different ends. In his introduction to *Hard Facts*, Baraka insists that revolutionary artists must study Marxism-Leninism; produce work that serves the people, not the exploiters; jettison petty bourgeois attitudes and learn from the people, taking ideas and experiences and reformulating them through Marxism-Leninism. No artist, he asserts, is above study or should produce his or her opinions unconnected to the struggle for socialism. As Mao put it,

“through the creative labour of revolutionary artists and writers the raw material of art and literature in the life of the people becomes art and literature in an ideological form in the service of the people.”¹¹¹

Baraka tried to put this manifesto in practice through intense community based cultural work. One of the RCL’s most successful projects was the Anti- Imperialist Cultural Union (AICU), a New York-based multinational cultural workers’ organization founded in the late 1970s. In November 1978, the AICU sponsored the Festival of People’s Culture, which drew some five hundred people to listen to poetry read by Askia Toure, Miguel Algarin, and Sylvia Jones along with musical performances by an RCL-created group called the Proletarian Ensemble. Through groups like the Proletarian Ensemble and the Advanced Workers (another musical ensemble formed by the RCL), the RCL spread its message of proletarian revolution and black self-determination and its critique of capitalism to community groups and schoolchildren throughout black Newark, New York, and other cities on the Eastern seaboard.

Theater seemed to be Baraka’s main avenue for the Black Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Among the AICU’s many projects, the Yenon Theater Workshop clearly projected Mao’s vision of revolutionary art. The Yenon Theater produced a number of his plays, including a memorable performance of *What Was the Lone Ranger’s Relationship to the Means of Production?* In 1975–76, Baraka wrote two new plays, *The Motion of History* and *S-1*, that perhaps represent the clearest expression of his shift, as he stated, “from petty bourgeois radicalism (and its low point of bourgeois cultural nationalism) on through to finally grasping the science of revolution, Marxism- Leninism-Mao Tse-Tung Thought.”¹¹² *The Motion of History* is a long epic play that touches upon just about everything under the sun—including slavery and slave revolts, industrial capitalism, civil rights and Black Power, and Irish immigration and white racism. And practically every revolutionary or reformist having something to do with the struggle for black freedom makes an appearance in the play, including John Brown, H. Rap Brown, Lenin, Karenga, Harriet Tubman, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner. Through scenes of workers discussing politics on the shop floor or in Marxist study groups, the audience

learns about the history of slavery, the rise of industrial capitalism, imperialism, surplus value, relative overproduction, and the day-to-day racist brutality to which African Americans and Latinos are subjected.

In the spirit of proletarian literature, *The Motion of History* closes on an upbeat note with a rousing meeting at which those present pledge their commitment to building a revolutionary multiracial, multiethnic working class party based on Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought.

S-1 shares many similarities with *The Motion of History*, although it focuses primarily on what Baraka and the RCL saw as the rise of fascism in the United States. As a play about a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist group fighting anti-sedition legislation, Baraka wrote it as a response to the Senate Bill “Criminal Justice Codification, Revision & Reform Act,” known as S-1, which would enable the state to adopt extremely repressive measures to combat radical movements. S-1 gave police and the FBI greater freedom to search and seize materials from radical groups, as well as permission to wiretap suspects for forty-eight hours without court approval. The bill also proposed mandatory executions for certain crimes, and it revived the Smith Act by subjecting any group or person advocating the “destruction of the government” to a possible fifteen-year prison sentence and fines up to \$100,000. The most notorious aspect of the bill was the “Leading a Riot” provision, which allowed courts to sentence to three years in prison and a \$100,000 fine anyone promoting the assembly of five people with the intention of creating “a grave danger to Property.”¹¹³

We don’t know how activists and working people responded to Baraka’s plays during the ultra radical period of the AICU and the RCL, and most cultural critics act as if these works are not worthy of comment. No matter what one might think about these works, as art, as propaganda, or as both, it is remarkable to think that in the late 1970s a handful of inner-city kids in Newark could watch performances that advocated revolution in America and tried to expose the rapaciousness of capitalism. And all this was going on in the midst of the so-called “me” generation, when allegedly there was no radical Left to speak of. (Indeed, Reagan’s election in 1980

is cited as evidence of the lack of a Left political challenge as well as the reason for the brief resurrection of Marxist parties in the United States between 1980 and 1985.)

Farewell for Mao, the Party's Over?

Depending on where one stands politically, and with whom, one could easily conclude that American Maoism died when Mao passed away in 1976. In China that rings true; the crushing of Mao's widow Jian Qing and the rest of the Gang of Four and the rapid ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping suggests that Maoism doesn't stand a ghost of a chance of returning. And while some protesters in Tiananmen Square in the mid 1980s saw themselves in the tradition of the student radicals of the Cultural Revolution, the vast majority did not—nor did they invoke Mao's name in the service of their own democratic (some might say “bourgeois”) movement.

But to say that Maoism somehow died on the vine is to overstate the case. Maoist organizations still exist in the United States, and some are very active on the political scene. The Maoist Internationalist Movement maintains a Web site, as does the Progressive Labor Party (though they can hardly be called “Maoist” today), and the rcp is as ubiquitous as ever. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that the rcp played a role in helping to draft the Bloods and Crips' post-l.a. rebellion manifesto, “Give Us the Hammer and the Nails and We Will Rebuild the City.” The former CLP, now called the League of Revolutionaries, has a strong following in Chicago as well as some incredibly talented radicals, including General Baker and Abdul Alkalimat. More importantly, even if we acknowledge that the number of activists has dwindled substantially since the mid-1970s, the individuals who stayed in those movements remained committed to black liberation, even if their strategies and tactics proved insensitive or wrong-headed. Anyone who knows anything about politics knows that Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential campaign was overrun by a rainbow coalition of Maoists, or that a variety of Maoist organizations were represented in the National Black Independent Political Party. In other words, now that so many American liberals are joining the backlash against poor black people and affirmative action, either by their active participation or their

silence, some of these self-proclaimed revolutionaries are still willing to “move mountains” in the service of black folk. The most tragic and heroic example comes from Greensboro, North Carolina, where five members of the Communist Workers Party (formerly the Workers Viewpoint Organization) were murdered by Klansmen and Nazis during an anti-Klan demonstration on November 3, 1979.

The fact remains, however, that the heyday of black Maoism has passed. The reasons are varied, having to do with the overall decline of black radicalism, the self-destructive nature of sectarian politics, and China’s disastrous foreign policy decisions vis-.-vis Africa and the Third World. Besides, most of the self-described black Maoists in our story—at least the most honest ones—probably owe their greatest intellectual debt to Du Bois, Fanon, Malcolm X, Che Guevara, and Harold Cruse, not to mention Stalin and Lenin. But Mao Zedong and the Chinese revolution left an indelible imprint on black radical politics—an imprint whose impact we’ve only begun to explore in this essay. At a moment when a group of nonaligned countries sought to challenge the political binaries created by cold war politics, when African nationalists tried to plan for a postcolonial future, when Fidel Castro and a handful of fatigue-clad militants did the impossible, when southern lunch counters and northern ghettos became theaters for a new revolution, there stood China—the most powerful “colored” nation on earth.

Mao’s China, along with the Cuban revolution and African nationalism, internationalized the black revolution in profound ways. Mao gave black radicals a non-Western model of Marxism that placed greater emphasis on local conditions and historical circumstances than on canonical texts. China’s Great Leap Forward challenged the idea that the march to socialism must take place in stages, or that one must wait patiently for the proper objective conditions to move ahead. For many young radicals schooled in student-based social democracy and/or antiracist politics, “consciousness raising” in the Maoist style of criticism and self-criticism was a powerful alternative to bourgeois democracy. But consciousness-raising was more than propaganda work; it was intellectual labor in the context of revolutionary practice. “All genuine knowledge originates in direct experience,” Mao said in his

widely read essay “On Practice” (1937). This idea of knowledge deriving dialectically from practice to theory to practice empowered radicals to question the expertise of sociologists, psychologists, economists, etc., whose grand pronouncements on the causes of poverty and racism often went unchallenged. Thus in an age of liberal technocrats, Maoists—from black radical circles to the women’s liberation movement—sought to overturn bourgeois notions of expertise. They developed analyses, engaged in debates, and published journals, newspapers, position papers, pamphlets, and even books. And while they rarely agreed with one another, they saw themselves as producers of new knowledge. They believed, as Mao put it, that “these ideas turn into a material force which changes society and changes the world.”¹¹⁴

Ideas alone don’t change the world, however; people do. And having the willingness and energy to change the world requires more than the correct analysis and direct engagement with the masses: instead, it takes faith and will. Here Maoists have much in common with some very old black biblical traditions. After all, if little David can



Notes

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1. The Coup, “Dig It,” Kill My Landlord (Wild Pitch Records, 1993).
 2. Mao Tse-Tung [Mao Zedong], *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1966).
 3. Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Freedom* (New York: Doubleday Books, 1992), 231–32.
 4. Huey Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), 110.
 5. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 404.
 6. In fact, several organizations (namely, Ray O. Light, the Communist Workers Party, the Black Vanguard Party, the Maoist Internationalist Movement, and others) are only mentioned in passing or are omitted altogether for lack of information. We recognize that only a book-length study can do justice to this story. Fortunately, since the first version of this essay appeared in 1999, Max Elbaum published an excellent and comprehensive study of anti-revisionist movements in the United States. See Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (London: Verso, 2002).
 7. A. Belden Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism: Theory and Practice in France and the United States* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 16–19.
 8. The allegory in *Quotations from Mao Tse-Tung* titled “The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains” instilled a missionary zeal in many radicals that enabled them to jump quickly to the question of guerrilla war, as if revolution were immanent. Of course, chapters of the Little Red Book such as “People’s War,” “The People’s Army,” “Education and the Training of Troops,” and “Revolutionary Heroism” certainly helped promote the idea that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun,” despite the fact that efforts to apply China’s experience to the United States contradicts Mao’s own argument that each revolution must grow out of its own specific circumstances.
 9. Mao Tse-Tung, *Quotations*, iv.
 10. Mao Tse-Tung, *Statement Supporting the American Negroes in Their Just Struggle Against Racial Discrimination in the United States* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1963), 2.
 11. John Oliver Killens, *Black Man in the New China* (Los Angeles: U.S.-China People’s Friendship Association, 1976), 10.
 12. Philip Snow, “China and Africa: Consensus and Camouflage,” in *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, edited by Thomas W. Robinson and David Shambaugh (New York: Clarendon Press, 1994), 285–99.
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13. Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism*, 213. Silber criticized Chinese policy in Angola where the Chinese were on the same side as the South African apartheid regime and the United States. Chinese foreign policy was a hindrance to the American Maoists in a variety of contexts, not just southern Africa: China's reception of Nixon while U.S. bombs continued to drop on Vietnam and its support for Pinochet in Chile are two particularly striking examples.
 14. Vertical Files on the Provisional Organizing Committee, Hammer and Steel, and the Progressive Labor Party, Tamiment Collection, Bobst Library, New York University.
 15. Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* (New York: Freundlich Books, 1984), 220; Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism*, 185; Bill Epton, conversation with Robin D. G. Kelley, January 2000.
 16. Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism*, 185–97. See also Jim O'Brien, *American Leninism in the 1970s* (Somerville, Mass.: New England Free Press, n.d.).
 17. Van Gosse, *Where the Boys Are: Cuba, Cold War America and the Making of a New Left* (London: Verso, 1993), 147–48; Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 285–97.
 18. Harold Cruse, "Negro Nationalism's New Wave," *New Leader* (1962), in *Rebellion or Revolution?* (New York: Morrow, 1968), 73.
 19. Harold Cruse, "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American" (1962), in *Rebellion or Revolution?* 74–75.
 20. Baraka, *Autobiography*, 184; LeRoi Jones [Baraka], "Cuba Libre" (1966), in *Home: Social Essays* (Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco Press, 1998), 11–62; Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 52–63.
 21. Vicki Garvin, interview by the authors, January 16, 1996. Unpublished speech by Garvin in the authors' collection.
 22. Vertical file on Vicki Garvin, Tamiment Collection, Bobst Library, New York University.
 23. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 70.
 24. *Ibid.*, 111.
 25. On Robert Williams, see Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Marcellus C. Barksdale, "Robert Williams and the Indigenous Civil Rights Movement in Monroe, North Carolina, 1961," *Journal of Negro History* 69 (spring 1984): 73–89; and Williams's own writings and interviews, particularly Robert F. Williams, *Negroes with Guns* (New York: Marzani and Munsell, 1962); Robert Williams, *Listen, Brother* (New York: World View Publishers, 1968); "Interview: Robert Williams," *Black Scholar* 1, no. 7 (May 1970): 5–18; and Kalamu ya Salaam, "Robert Williams: Crusader for International Solidarity," *Black Collegian* 8, no. 3 (January-February, 1978): 53–60. See also the excellent article by Timothy B. Tyson, "Robert Williams, 'Black Power,' and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle," *Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (September 1998): 540–70. For discussions of armed self-defense movements during the civil rights era, see Akinyele O. Umoja, "The Ballot and the Bullet: A Comparative Analysis of Armed Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Black Studies*, 29, no. 4. (March 1999): 558–78; Anita K. Foeman, "Gloria Richardson: Breaking the Mold," *Journal of Black Studies* 26 (1996): 604–15; and Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the*
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- Civil Rights Movement (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), which appeared after the first version of this essay.
26. *Crusader* 2, no. 6 (August 20, 1960); *Crusader* 2, no. 21 (December 31, 1960).
 27. Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 120.
 28. "Interview: Robert Williams," 5.
 29. Maxwell C. Stanford, "Revolutionary Action Movement (ram): A Case Study of an Urban Revolutionary Movement in Western Capitalist Society," (M.A. thesis, Atlanta University, 1986), 75–80.
 30. Donald Freeman, "The Cleveland Story," *Liberator* 3, no. 6 (June 1963): 7, 18.
 31. See Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946–1956* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988).
 32. Ernest Allen Jr., interview by the authors, June 8, 1997; Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 71–72.
 33. *Crusader* 8, no. 4 (May 1967); Maxwell C. Stanford, "Revolutionary Action Movement," 75–80.
 34. Michael Simmons and Tony Monteiro, conversation with Robin D. G. Kelley, October 24, 1998, Philadelphia.
 35. Stanford, "Revolutionary Action Movement," 197; "Queen Mother" Audley Moore, interview with Mark Naison and Ruth Prago, Oral History of the American Left, Tamiment Library, New York University; Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 134; Stanford, "Revolutionary Action Movement," 40; Tim Schermerhorn, interview by Betsy Esch, May 11, 1998.
 36. Max Stanford, "We Can Win!" *Black America* (fall 1964), 22.
 37. Stanford, "The Revolutionary Action Movement," 110.
 38. Max Stanford, "Soul Sisters," ca. 1969, ram Papers.
 39. Mao Tse-Tung, *Quotations*, 256, 269.
 40. "Interview: Robert Williams," 14.
 41. "The 12 Point Program of ram (Revolutionary Action Movement) 1964," May-June 1964. ram Papers; Max Stanford, "Projects and Problems of the Revolutionary Movement" (1964), "Revolutionary Action Movement," General File, Tamiment Library, NYU.
 42. Rolland Snellings (Askia Muhammad Tour.), "Afro American Youth and the Bandung World," *Liberator* 5, no. 2 (February 1965): 4; ram, *The World Black Revolution*, ram Papers. See also Don Freeman, "Black Youth and Afro-American Liberation," *Black America* (fall 1964): 15–16.
 43. RAM, *The World Black Revolution*, 5. Echoing the Communist Manifesto, the pamphlet begins, "All over Africa, Asia, South, Afro and Central America a revolution is haunting and sweeping."
 44. RAM, *The World Black Revolution*, 29.
 45. RAM, *The World Black Revolution*, 31. See also Max Stanford, "The African American War of National Liberation," ca. fall 1965, ram Papers.
 46. See Boggs, *Living for Change*, 134–37.
 47. R. Sackett, "Plotting a War on Whitey: Extremists Set for Violence," *Life* 60 (June 10, 1966): 100–100B; D. MacDonald, "Politics: Black Power," *Esquire* 65 (October 1967): 38; Gary Wills, "Second Civil War," *Esquire* 69 (March 1968): 71–78.
 48. Harlem Branch of the Progressive Labor Party, "The Plot Against Black America" (pamphlet, 1965), Vertical File, Tamiment Collection, Bobst Library, NYU. See also A. B. Spellman, "The Legacy of Malcolm X," *Liberator* 5, no. 6 (June 1965): 13, which also challenges the press's attacks on ram.
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49. Afro-American, July 1, 1967; Stanford, "Revolutionary Action Movement," 210–15; "Interview: Robert Williams," 5–7, 14.
 50. Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 17; Stanford, "Revolutionary Action Movement," 82. See also John C. Leggett, *Class, Race, and Labor: Working-Class Consciousness in Detroit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), for studies of drum and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.
 51. John Watson, interview by George Rawick, *Radical America* (July–August 1968): 31. Watson was referring to a pamphlet written by Lenin in 1903 entitled "Where to Begin," which preceded the more well-known "What Is to Be Done?"
 52. Georgakas and Surkin, *I Do Mind Dying*, 27.
 53. Geoffrey Jacques, interview by Robin D. G. Kelley, December 4, 1995.
 54. From the film *Finally Got the News* by Stewart Bird, Rene Lichtman, and Peter Gessner (First Run Icarus Films, 1970).
 55. Ernest Allen Jr., interview with the authors, June 8, 1997.
 56. James Forman, *The Black Manifesto*; James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Washington, D.C.: Open Hand Publishers, 1985).
 57. Rosalyn Baxandall, correspondence to Robin D. G. Kelley, March 10, 1999.
 58. From the film *Finally Got the News*.
 59. Paul Sweezy and Leo Huberman, "The Cultural Revolution in China," *Monthly Review* (January 1967): 17.
 60. Vicki Garvin, interview by the authors, January 16, 1996.
 61. Mao Tse-Tung, Statement by Comrade Mao Tse-Tung, Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, in Support of the Afro-American Struggle Against Violent Repression, April 6, 1968 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1968).
 62. "Interview with Bobby Seale from Radical Education Project," in *An Introduction to the Black Panther Party* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Radical Education Project, 1969), 26.
 63. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 70.
 64. Eldridge Cleaver, *On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party* (pamphlet, 1968), Black Panther Party, Organizational File, Tamiment Collection, Bobst Library, NYU.
 65. Radical Education Project, *An Introduction to the Black Panther Party*, 19, 26.
 66. Eldridge Cleaver, "National Liberation in the Black Colony," Black Panther Organizational File, Tamiment Collection, Bobst Library, NYU.
 67. George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970); George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (New York: Random House, 1972).
 68. Sid Lamella, interview by Robin D. G. Kelley, November 11, 1995.
 69. Mao Tse-Tung, Quotations, 298; Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism*, 197.
 70. Brown, *A Taste of Freedom*, 304.
 71. There is a lot of excellent work documenting the role of black women in the Black Panther Party. See, for example, Tracye Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is': Gender and Sexual Politics in the Black Panther Party, 1966–1971" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1998); Angela Le Blanc-Ernest, "Surviving Revolution: A History of the Community Programs of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, 1966–1982" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2000); Charles Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998); and Kathleen Cleaver and George N. Katsiaficas, eds., *Liberation, Imagination*,
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- and *The Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and Their Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
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 73. For this insight we are grateful to Rosalyn Baxandall, a historian and participant in radical feminist and Left struggles.
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 78. Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question* (Calcutta: New Book Centre, 1975), 11.
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AROSE AND THROVE WITH THE ENSLAVEMENT OF NEGROES
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