

Book Review: We Are An African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and The Radical Imagination by Russell Rickford

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Rickford, Russell. *We Are An African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and The Radical Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. ix + 368 pages. Paperback, \$27.95.

In *We Are An African People*, historian Russell Rickford narrates the rise and decline of black-run independent educational institutions in dozens of urban settings across the United States. Young activist-intellectuals, many of whom were veterans of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party, founded these private schools. The institutions included preschools and K-12 facilities, as well as tertiary campuses. Independent black schools arose as grassroots “counterinstitutions” from the critique of white cultural hegemony. They served as replacements of the civil rights movement’s “freedom schools” linked to mass struggles of the early and mid-1960s and as antecedents to recent Afrocentric academies (p. 2). They combined academic instruction with robust political education, seeking to instill students with a militant black consciousness and a deep commitment to black self-determination. As Rickford describes it, “Pan-African nationalist schools were far more than vessels of formal education. There were cooperatives, collectives, cultural centers, organs of community action and agitprop, the laboratories for a spectrum of ideas—from anti-imperialism and Third Worldism on the left to patriarchy and racial fundamentalism on the right” (p. 4).

Chapters 1 and 2 focus on the practical inadequacies of school desegregation campaigns and the political imagination of a collection of activists, who having observed the shortcomings of desegregation battles and grassroots push for decent public education concluded that the degradation of public schools were tantamount to “educational genocide” (p. 24). To the activists, only self-governing sociocultural arrangements were crucial to black emancipation and reawakening. Therefore, the organizers started these schools not only as genuine alternative to substandard inner-city public schools, but also as medium to decolonize the minds of African-

American youth and reinvigorate a sense of African identity. Part of the appeal of the broad ideal of these independent institutions was to mold a team of young activists dedicated to the struggle for black political self-determination throughout the world. In effect, the organizers believed that African Americans must prepare its youth not only to navigate a racist society or an increasingly specialized labor market, but also to contribute technical expertise to socioeconomic development anywhere in the African world. Agitation for changes in Eurocentric curricular in public schools to Afrocentric curricular, particularly African languages, art, and literature, as well as local input in school governance united larger grassroots efforts to look for a way out beyond public education. The intensification of militant black nationalism in the mid-to-late 1960s revamped the movement for African American educational justice.

Incidentally, the life span of many of these independent institutions was short. Since the schools were fee-paying, the number of youth offered authentic alternative education compared to the substandard public schools was, indeed, modest. The challenges of financially supporting the independent schools in relatively poor neighborhoods were daunting. Evidently, the principle of self-reliance touted to eliminate dependency came into critical reality check, with respect to makeshift and unheated classrooms, inadequate instructional materials, teacher shortages, and increasing operating costs. Additional challenges were accreditation and government oversight.

Chapter 3 details the evolution of “movement schools,” from the private schools of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association and Prophet Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam in the early and mid-twentieth century to the freedom and liberation schools of the 1960s. The liberation schools were the brainchild of the Black Panther Party, which emerged in 1966 as a means of defending urban African American neighborhoods against police brutality. By the summer 1969, the Panthers began establishing liberation schools to supplement its hot,

daily meals to thousands of children in several metropolitan areas. The Panthers called initiatives to address existential problems of hunger, health, and education “socialism in action” (p. 89). In addition, it is noteworthy that liberation schools energized the cultural identity fad of adopting Africa as homeland, more so among militant activists.

Chapter 4 describes the emergence of the Nairobi School System in East Palo Alto, California. The town’s struggles for self-government and educational opportunity powered the transition from militant integrationism to actual black nationalism. The attempt of East Palo Alto youth to change the town’s name to Nairobi (name of Kenya’s capital) dominate the discussion of the African restoration movement, the constraints of cultural politics, and the competing motivations surrounding the concept, “We Are an African People.” Prior to his assassination, Malcom X redefined the black resistance as a human rights struggle, and turning a search for African identity into a modern idea of multinational blackness. African restoration and cultural politics implied various cultural perspectives and experiences, including adoption of African names, wearing of *dashiki*, visiting Africa, and the observance and celebration of *Kwanzaa*, all of which made African Americans feel grounded in the restoration of their African identity. In the midst of fragmented black politics, the doctrine of *Kawaida*, centered on the seven principles of unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith provided African American youth a roadmap to social change and personal enlightenment.

Chapter 5 details the leaning of Black Power in the late 1960s towards Neo-Pan-Africanism, particularly the resurgence of Left Pan-Africanism that offered a more critical, anti-imperialist outlook. In embracing Africanization, Pan-African nationalist intellectuals circulated ideas and images intended to promote radical consciousness. One of those symbolic signals was

spelling “Afrika” with a “K.” Chapter 6 discusses the “Black University” and the “Total Community.” Unrest on college campuses triggered Malcolm X Liberation University in Durham and later Greensboro (NC); the Center for Black Education (DC); and Nairobi College in East Palo Alto. These institutions vigorously connected with the surrounding poor and working-class African American neighborhoods.

Chapter 7 and the Epilogue focus on the waning tides of radical and progressive Black nationalism following rising violence, state repression, and internal schismatic conflicts. Many of the independent institutions became ideologically divided, financially hamstrung, and crisis ridden. The emergence of a more conservative brand of nationalism in the 1970s lacked explicit anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, and Third Worldism. *We Are An African People* provides a detailed intellectual narrative of the roles of the independent school movement, Pan Africanism, and Afrocentrism in the post-civil rights era as indigenous Black nationalism. Russell Rickford produced an insightful, well-researched and scholarly, analyzed work.

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