

Renegotiating the “African Woman”: Women’s Cultural Nationalist Theorizing in the Us Organization and the Congress of African People, 1965–1975

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ABSTRACT

This article explores cultural nationalist women’s gendered theorizing in the Us Organization and the Congress of African People (CAP) during the height of the Black Power Movement. Both the Us Organization and CAP practiced Maulana Karenga’s doctrine of Kawaida, an ideology that originally prescribed marginal roles for African American women. Kawaida’s patriarchal reputation has caused historians to overlook women’s roles in reshaping gender constructs as members of these organizations. This article examines their influence on Kawaida’s gendered mandates through an analysis of women’s political writings, essays, and handbooks. It argues that female members redefined their organizational and theoretical roles within Kawaida by expanding the ideal of the “African Woman” in organizational literature. This article shows that their renegotiation of this ideal caused both groups to alter their organizational and theoretical positions on gender roles. It also reframes existing arguments about the gender dynamics of cultural nationalism and uncovers new examples of African American women’s theorizing within the Black Power Movement.

In the 1960s, a new generation of Black radicals developed organizations and ideologies intent on using Black cultural practices as the foundation of the Black liberation struggle. Activists like Maulana Karenga created Us and Kawaida, a Black-centered organization and ideology predicated on African heritage and cultural traditions. Writer, playwright, and activist Amiri Baraka developed the Committee for Unified Newark (CFUN), a community-based organization dedicated to inciting revolution through Black cultural and political activism. Together, these collectives inspired a new cultural movement that answered Black Power activists' calls for Black cultural and political autonomy. African American women contributed to each of these organizations, constructing new models of the "African Woman" that placed their gender-specific concerns at the forefront.

At their inception, Us and CFUN followed the political ideology of Kawaida, created in 1965, which is defined by a commitment to culture as the "crucible in which black liberation takes form" and the idea that cultural autonomy is the cornerstone of Black liberation (Karenga, 2007b). Conventional narratives contend that cultural nationalist ideology, particularly the Kawaida doctrine, was patriarchal in its conceptualization of gender roles, leaving little space for African American women to theorize at its intersection with Black womanhood. Indeed, the doctrine, as it was originally conceived, prescribed a marginal role for the "African Woman." However, female activists in Us and CFUN developed their own interpretations of Kawaida and "African Womanhood" that challenged discourses of female submissiveness within Black Power activism. Using pamphlets and political statements, these women constructed more expansive definitions of the "African Woman" that caused both groups to adopt more equitable conceptualizations of gender roles within cultural nationalist organizing.

This article explores the changing conceptualization of the “African Woman” within the cultural nationalist faction of the Black Power Movement from 1965 to 1975. It traces the development of the “African Woman” ideal in Us and CFUN, paying special attention to the ways in which female activists articulated their gender-specific vision of this political identity. This analysis is not meant to further indict male cultural nationalists or the early Kawaïda doctrine for its sexist mandates. Rather, it is intended to reframe and further clarify this period in cultural nationalist organizing by examining how African American women influenced the intersection of gender and radical practice within these organizations. Indeed, centering African American women’s intellectual production reveals a dynamic debate about gender roles among practitioners of Kawaïda and highlights the need for a more balanced historical treatment of gender politics and women’s activism within this faction of the movement.

Cultural Nationalism in Scholarship and Memory

Cultural nationalism, and its impact on the Black freedom struggle, remains under-theorized. Early examinations focused on the viability and emancipatory promise of cultural nationalist theory, while contemporary historiography assesses the major leaders and organizations that practiced Kawaïda and its variants. The first studies of cultural nationalism developed in conjunction with the movement itself. Mirroring the debates taking place among Black Power activists, this branch of scholarship often compared Kawaïda, and cultural nationalism more broadly, to other forms of nationalist theory and protest. Robert Allen’s (1969) analysis of Black Power shed light on both Karenga and Baraka’s activism in the late 1960s. Allen explored the cultural nationalist worldview and Black value system, but maintained that the nationalism advocated by Jones and Karenga was a “passive retreat into ‘blackness,’” where

“verbal militancy” replaced militant action (Allen, 1969, p. 141). As a result, *Black Awakening* did not explore the politics or dynamics of Us or CFUN extensively. Sociologist William Julius Wilson (1970) documented the rise of cultural nationalism and the “steady stream of criticism” directed toward Us activists within the movement (p. 46). Wilson’s article included an overview of cultural nationalism and contemporary critiques of the Kawaida practice—primarily from members of the Black Panther Party—but did not expand on Karenga’s ideological viewpoint.

While scholars like Allen and Wilson weighed the effectiveness of cultural politics, African American women critiqued Karenga’s gendered mandates. Contributors to Toni Cade Bambara (1970) refuted male activists’ arguments for female submissiveness, claiming that the gender hierarchies within Us and CFUN mirrored societal racial hierarchies. Other activists like Barbara Sizemore (1973) addressed the interlocking oppression of African American women, with special attention to the ways in which Baraka’s politics and leadership supported misogynistic power structures. This initial branch of scholarship acknowledged the importance and popularity of cultural nationalism and pinpointed Karenga and Baraka as progenitors of this philosophy. However, due to their historical proximity, such authors often left the nuances of cultural nationalist politics and ideology unexplored.

In the following decades, scholars turned their attention to Karenga’s organization and its legacy. Bruce Tyler (1983), analyzed Maulana Karenga, the Us Organization, and their feud with the Black Panther Party in the context of post-war Black radicalism in Los Angeles. Tyler offered extensive documentation of Karenga’s activism and the popularity of Us. However, his assessment of Karenga’s organization and influence relied on his experiences as a local activist. Tyler claimed that Karenga worked with the local and federal governments to stymie Black liberation efforts and that his goal was to act as “a police spy and disrupter of real radicals” (p.

282). This view of Karenga framed Tyler's interpretations of Us and negated a substantive analysis of the organization's political effectiveness.

Tyler's analysis of Karenga became the foundation of subsequent scholarship on the Us Organization. For example, Nagueyalti Warren (1990) was more sympathetic to Karenga as a figure and theorist, but used Tyler's claims of his government collusion as the basis of its characterization and analysis of the Us leader. On the other hand, Warren provided a more nuanced exploration of Amiri Baraka and his politics, claiming that while the Newark leader was indebted to Karenga, he added "an artistic element" to the movement that "Karenga could not supply" (p. 21). Warren's history is notable for situating the activism and politics of Karenga and Baraka in the larger Pan-African tradition. However, her resistance to alternative depictions of Karenga limited her analysis of his politics and influence. Other notable additions to the historiography include Jennifer Jordan (1986), who identified both African and African American cultural nationalism as popular ideologies and forms of activism in the 1960s. Jordan explored Karenga's philosophy and the relationship between him and Baraka, in more depth. Yet, she characterized Us as a cultural organization, and did not explore their political significance and influence on Black Power politics. Collectively, this scholarship offered some of the first historical analyses of cultural nationalism and cultural politics, as well as of Karenga and Baraka as political leaders.

Initial studies of cultural nationalist organizing only examined male leaders and activists, overlooking the role of women and of gender constructs in Kawaida organizing. A notable exception was E. Frances White (1990), who questioned Karenga's interpretation of "African Gender roles," which, she argued, were actually predicated on conservative European constructs of male/female relationships. She also claimed that Karenga's "nationalist or Afrocentric

construction of political memory” set up “social relations that [could] be both liberating and confining” for African American women (p. 75). White’s article critiqued Karenga’s gendered framework and offered an analysis of the ways in which current Black feminist discourses validate the Afrocentric frame while resisting gender hierarchies. As a result, “Africa On My Mind” has become a seminal article for those seeking to understand how constructions of cultural nationalism can both limit and enhance race and gender liberation.

Amiri Baraka has fared better than both Karenga and female activists in the historical record. His canon of artistic and political writings, and his rise to leadership within the Congress of African People, have become the basis of both literary and activist studies. Baraka offered his own autobiographical account of the rise of cultural nationalism, *Kawaida*, and his relationship with Karenga in the early 1980s (Baraka, 1984). Scholars like Jerry Watts and James Smethurst have expanded on Baraka’s initial account, arguing that his adherence to *Kawaida* contributed to the rise of both the Black Power and the Black Arts movements. Smethurst (2005) contextualized the development of Black cultural nationalism and its relationship with the Black Arts Movement. He also complicated linear interpretations of *Kawaida* by highlighting Karenga’s influence on Black arts and literature in a diverse range of regions and literary organizations. As a result, he shows that both Karenga and Baraka were important progenitors of the Black Arts Movement and the Black cultural aesthetic. Jerry Watts (2001) isolated and explored Baraka’s advocacy of *Kawaida*, and cultural nationalism more broadly, showing how Baraka played a key role in linking the black intelligentsia to grassroots Black Power organizing. These and other scholars reveal Baraka’s extensive influence on cultural nationalist practice, as well as the ideological and artistic relationships between cultural nationalism and the Black Arts Movement.

In recent years, scholars have renewed their interest in the activists, politics, organizations, and ideologies that comprised the Black Power Movement. This interest spawned a proliferation of books and articles dedicated to developing in-depth and, at times, corrective histories of Black Power activism and politics.¹ Scot Brown (2003) is the most prolific scholar on Maulana Karenga's Us Organization and has documented Karenga's personal life, the organizational structure of Us, and the theoretical and practical implementation of the Kawaida philosophy among Us members. Brown's other articles (1997, 2001) called for a rethinking of Maulana Karenga's influence as a Black Power leader and an end to the vilification of Us due to the Us/Panther Party Conflict. In a similar vein, Floyd W. Hayes, III, and Judson L. Jeffries (2006) questioned the lack of serious scholarly inquiry into Karenga's political philosophy and organization and argued that Us, "together with their ideology of cultural nationalism," represented a serious "attempt to transform Black American consciousness and conduct" and is deserving of serious historical analysis (p. 70). These important works call on historians to resist rearticulating the same narratives about Us and Maulana Karenga and promote substantive dialogue about the politics and political theory behind the Us Organization.

Scholars have also started to reexamine the Committee for Unified Newark, the Congress of African People, and cultural nationalist groups on the East Coast. Komozi Woodard and Michael Simanga, both former members of CFUN and CAP, have created the most substantial explorations of these organizations to date. Woodard (1999) chronicled the rise of Black Power in Newark, New Jersey, and the importance of Baraka as a political figure. His study revealed the effect of local Black Power politics, the successes and failures of CFUN and CAP, and how they undergirded the development of national independent Black political movements. Simanga

¹ Scholars often refer to this branch of scholarship as "Black Power studies," a term coined by historian Peniel Joseph (2001).

(2009), in his doctoral dissertation, documented the rise and fall of CAP, with an emphasis on its ideological turns. Simanga's personal and political history highlighted another layer of the Pan-African organization by showing how the ideological phases and political alliances that CAP endured shaped Black activists on an individual level. Building on these histories, Kwasi B. Konadu (2009) has developed the only full-length study of the cultural nationalist group, The East, headquartered in Brooklyn, New York. His monograph detailed The East's organizational structure, members' application of Kawaida principles, and connection to CAP through activists like Jitu Weusi. This study not only diversified interpretations of Kawaida and cultural nationalism, it also highlighted the legacy of Maulana Karenga's philosophy outside of Newark and Los Angeles. These new scholarly interpretations pinpointed the ways in which East Coast cultural nationalist activists articulated a serious critique of American democracy and capitalism and created alternative cultural, political, and economic structures for African Americans. They also documented the gender dynamics of Us, CAP, and The East, respectively, noting how sexism affected their political and organizational shifts.

Maulana Karenga has also written extensively on his Los Angeles-based organization and the theoretical roots of the Kawaida philosophy. He penned a number of articles during and after the height of Us's influence, where he disavowed sectarian conflicts among Black Power advocates and presented an evolving view of the Kawaida doctrine (1972, 1973, 1977, 1978). The Us leader has written corrective histories of his organization, including his article "Us, Kawaida, and the Black Liberation Movement in the 1960s: Culture, Knowledge, and Struggle" (2007), an account of the rise and fall of the Us Organization from his perspective. He has also published texts that address Kawaida, African heritage, and strategies for Black liberation and education, including *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt* (2006). Due to the enduring power

of his political philosophy, Karenga has become the subject of political biography. For example, Molefi Asante (2009) examined the origins of Karenga's intellectual questions, traced his ideological trajectory, and offered a philosophical critique of his philosophy. This branch of scholarship shows that Karenga continues to play a leading role in shaping African American cultural and political discourse.

Even as scholarly attention of cultural nationalism increases, African American women are still mentioned only in passing, with the general assumption that descriptions of Karenga's sexist mandates encompass the history of their activism. Left unexplored are female cultural nationalists' own political arguments and positions and the effect of their voices on cultural nationalist ideology and their gendered political self-conception. The result is an essentialist narrative of cultural nationalist women's organizing and theorizing. This article enters the ongoing conversation about the importance, influence, and legacy of Kawaïda philosophy, while expanding and diversifying narratives about Black women's activism by emphasizing their ideological engagement with cultural nationalism.

The Rise of the Us Organization and Kawaïda

The Us Organization, founded by Maulana Karenga and developed as a response to the growing racial animosity in Los Angeles, California, popularized the "African Woman" ideal in the Black Power Movement. In the second half of the twentieth century, Black Angelinos endured ongoing waves of restrictive covenants, police brutality, and urban poverty, which came to head when California Highway patrolmen stopped an African American man, Marquette Frye, on the suspicion of driving under the influence (Flamming, 2005; Sonsenhein, 1993). What began as a traffic stop on August 11, 1965, turned into a full-scale revolt after an argument

amongst Frye, his mother, and police officers turned violent. Word of the altercation spread throughout the city and by nightfall, Los Angeles was in the midst of a full-scale rebellion now known as the Watts uprising.

Maulana Karenga was a student at the University of California, Los Angeles, when Watts erupted. Karenga claimed that the uprising signaled African Americans' frustration with the pace of the Civil Rights Movement and that it was the "catalyst" for new forms of Black political action (Calme, 1968). On September 7, 1965, Karenga—along with Hakim Jamal, Tommy Jacquette, Karl Key-Hekima, and several other local activists—founded the Us Organization (Carson, 1966). The name signified the racial power relationships of the United States, designating Black Americans ("Us") versus the implied "them," or their white oppressors (Hayes, III, & Jeffries, 2006). Founding member Hakim Jamal, a close associate of Malcolm X, designed their name and slogan and created their first publications (Carson, 1966). However, it was Karenga's notoriety as a local activist that bolstered the organization during its first of years of existence (Brown, 2003).

African American women were part of Us's programming and protests from its inception, with Dorothy Jamal and Brenda Habia Karenga, the wives of Hakim Jamal and Maulana Karenga, helping to create the original organizational structure. As Us developed and obtained its own headquarters, female membership increased significantly, due in part to the creation of the women's subunit, the Muminina, which oversaw the social development and education of Black men, women, and children. Women were also a part of the administrative and organizing circles that helped sustain Us on a day-to-day basis (Brown, 2003). As more women joined the organization, Maulana Karenga created gender-specific roles for male and female members, specifically stating that the primary role of the "African Woman" was to "inspire her man,

educate her children, and participate in social development” (Halisi & Mtume, 1967, p. 20). Female members took these directives seriously, building cultural and political institutions to fulfill this mission. One of the best examples of their activism was the Us School of Afroamerican Culture, a grassroots institution that served African American families in the Los Angeles area. Here, women like Sanamu Nyeusi developed and taught a new cultural archive for Black youth full of songs, lessons, and activities based in Kawaidist principles (Brown, 2008). Women were also members of most committees within the organization, serving as leaders and organizers in groups that oversaw legal affairs and public relations for Us (Karenga, 2007). This type of social and educational work advanced the organization’s goals of self-reliance and Black pride in the early stages of its development.

Within the private sphere, Karenga expected men and women to comply with traditional gender hierarchies, which, he claimed, supported the reinstitution and reclamation of African roles and values. This translated into a social structure that recognized African American men as the leaders of both the organization and their households and called on African American women to submit to their authority and a gendered division of labor. Karenga also valorized male supremacy and female submissiveness within personal relationships and expected his followers to engage in polygamous relationships, as he included polygamy in the marital constructs of African societies (Halisi & Mtume, 1967; White, 1990). These gendered ideals solidified organizational structure and ideology, yet they also raised questions about the liberating power of these practices for African American women.

The gender roles in Us were consistent with those of other groups across the Black Power Movement (Hayes, III, & Jeffries, 2006). Many of the most influential of these organizations practiced an implicit, if not explicit, gender hierarchy that adversely affected female activists and

Black Power organizing. Often, these hierarchical practices stemmed from claims that equated Black liberation with the restoration of Black manhood. These claims were often attributed to the 1965 Moynihan Report, which generated a damaging picture of the Black family and blamed African American women for the race problem in America (Moynihan, 1965; Beal, 1970). The Us Organization's hierarchical gender roles received more attention because of male members' explicit public declarations of male supremacy and organizational mandates that linked male supremacy to African heritage and culture. Scholars like E. Frances White (1990) have argued that the Us Organization's gender constructs were often based on interpretations of African cultures that did not reflect historical or contemporaneous African societies. Other scholars have noted that public manifestations of male supremacy "adversely affected the image of Karenga" and the organization (Hayes, III, & Jeffries, 2006, p. 83). Although Karenga revised his position on gender roles in the early 1970s, the subservience of women characterized perceptions of his organization during its existence.

Despite this controversial stance on gender roles, Us enjoyed support from the Black Los Angeles community. By 1968, however, several factors, including negative media portrayals and police targeting of the organization, weakened the Black Power group (Brown, 2003; Hayes, III, & Jeffries, 2006). The FBI and local law enforcement attempted to dismantle Karenga's group through raids of its facilities and arrests of individual members. The FBI also exacerbated feuds between the Us Organization and the Black Panther Party, creating turmoil within both groups. After the antagonisms between the two culminated in a shootout on the UCLA campus in 1969, Us began to withdraw from their community work and develop what Karenga (1977) called a

“siege mentality,” causing many members to go underground or abandon the organization all together (p. 31).²

Even with these setbacks, the Us Organization made an indelible imprint on the terrain of Black Power by politicizing African Americans around the interrelationship of Black culture and politics. Their doctrine, celebrations, and community work highlighted the importance of mending the psychological effects and cultural ruptures of slavery and the Middle Passage. Us also produced a new Black aesthetic and philosophical paradigms, rituals, and political institutions for African Americans, causing their doctrine of collective racial redefinition to remain at the forefront of Black politics. In particular, Karenga’s doctrine found new life in the political organizing of Amiri Baraka in Newark, New Jersey.

Maulana Karenga, Amiri Baraka, and Black “NewArk”

Maulana Karenga first encountered Amiri Baraka at his community center, the Spirit House, in Newark. Baraka envisioned the Spirit House as “another edition of the Black Arts” where Black residents could build community programs and fight oppression through cultural production.³ At Spirit House, Baraka and his wife Amina worked with Black Newark community members to produce publications, plays, and prose about racism and repression. The Spirit House gained a local following in Newark and attracted Karenga’s attention. In 1966, the Us leader visited the Barakas’ cultural center and introduced the Newark activists to the doctrine of

² During this period, Maulana Karenga also devoted considerable time and resources to fighting assault and false-imprisonment charges levied by Us members Gail Davis and Deborah Jones. Davis and Jones claimed that Karenga and three other male members of Us kidnapped and tortured them because of their perceived involvement in a plot to assassinate the Us leader. Karenga’s estranged wife also testified in support of the women’s charges. A jury convicted Karenga and sentenced him to one to ten years in prison in 1971 (Einstoss, 1970; Brown, 2003).

³ The Spirit House was Baraka’s second attempt to create community institution after the failure of the Harlem-based BART/S, a school and performance center dedicated to developing Black art and culture (Baraka & Harris, 1999). BART/S participants cultivated a new Black aesthetic through art, literature, and music that precipitated the Black Arts Movement (Baraka, 1984; Smethurst, 2005). In 1966, after the demise of BART/S, Baraka returned to his Newark home and created the Sprit House (Baraka, 1984; Stern, 1966).

Kawaida (Baraka, 1984). Karenga's organization and philosophy impressed Amiri Baraka, as it seemed to him to be "the kind of next-higher stage of commitment and organization as compared to the Black Arts or what was going on at the Spirit House" (Baraka, 1984, p. 358). After their second meeting in 1967 in California, Baraka restructured and expanded his community organization, determined to model his organization after Karenga's cultural group (Baraka, 1984; Woodard, 1999).

For the better part of a year, Karenga worked with Baraka and other Newark activists to make the city a center of Black politics and culture (Baraka, 1984). Baraka and his wife expanded their political reach by creating new organizations like the United Brothers and the United Sisters. Inspired by the National Black Power Conference in Newark in July 1967 and by Karenga's teachings, the United Brothers built community programs for Black men and quelled local violence. Politically, the United Brothers argued that Black Power could best be achieved through community control in local government. As a result, members sought and, at times, attained local level political offices in Newark (Aarons, 1968; Frasier, 1968). The Newark Rebellion, and Karenga's doctrine, also politicized African American women in the city. Amina Baraka spearheaded the development of the United Sisters in response to the 1967 Newark uprising and the needs of Black women in the city. A women-centered study group, the United Sisters debated political theory and cultural nationalist politics, as well as created community control through programs like the African Free School (Woodard, 1999).⁴

As their relationship developed, Karenga prompted Baraka to join forces with other local organizations, including the United Sisters and the Newark Black Community Defense and

⁴ The United Sisters viewed Kawaidist schools as another way to develop Black cultural independence. African Free School students learned African history, Swahili, cooperative living, and cooperative economics. Instructors supplemented their Black-centered curriculum with Black theater projects and productions. The African Free School's pedagogical model was so successful that the Newark Board of Education adopted aspects of the program for local public schools (African Free School, 1970).

Development (BCD), to create one umbrella organization, the Committee for Unified Newark (CFUN) (Baraka, 1984). Karenga also became Baraka's spiritual and political mentor, converting him to Kawaida and giving him the title of "Imanu," or spiritual teacher and leader. Under Karenga's direction, Baraka became one of the primary proselytizers of Kawaida, requiring CFUN members to praise Karenga and adopt African names and social practices, like the Kawaida wedding and cooperative living. CFUN also became an East Coast affiliate of the Us Organization (Baraka, 1984).

As in Us, female members of CFUN oversaw the daily functions of the organization, led rituals and events, and held a variety of administrative roles. Women ran the CFUN restaurant, poverty programs, daycare organizations, and community initiatives. Higher-ranking women, or the Mumininas, served as the female social, intellectual, and cultural council. This circle included women like Amina Baraka, who oversaw the social division of CFUN, and second in command, Malaika Akiba, who ran many of the organization's social programs and taught at the Political School of Kawaida, a training center for Black nationalists. The Mumininas also developed and participated in various cultural ceremonies within the organization (Division of Social Organization, 1972). This combination of political work, gender debates, and training caused many CFUN members to realize that the women's division was at the vanguard of their organization. It also highlighted the disconnect between women's everyday practice of Kawaida and the theoretical mandates of female submissiveness embedded in the doctrine.

By 1970, CFUN members were a culturally conscious group mobilizing Newark residents through Black Power initiatives. Baraka argued that the Newark model could translate into international liberation if actualized on a bigger scale, envisioning an organization "whose function would be to struggle for Black Power wherever black people were in the world"

(Baraka, 1984, p. 403). On Labor Day weekend in 1970, attendees of the National Black Power Conference in Atlanta created the Congress of African People (CAP), a federation of Civil Rights and Black Power organizations. In addition to promoting Black liberation, CAP fostered working relationships among Black nationalist groups and created a national Black political presence intent on influencing U.S. domestic and foreign policy regarding race relations, poverty, and third world liberation struggles. CFUN became one chapter of CAP, as did the San Diego chapter of the Us Organization, and a host of other progressive and radical groups in cities like Detroit, Atlanta, Boston, Philadelphia, Albany, and Delaware (Woodard, 1999). The conjoining of Black organizations across the nation reshaped the terrain of Black politics, strengthened relationships among Black Power advocates, and injected cultural nationalism into Black politics at the national level.

In 1972, members elected Baraka as the national chairman of CAP, solidifying Kawaida as CAP's official ideology. Baraka's new position also afforded him access to international leaders, augmenting the influence of Pan-Africanism in the organization. Under Baraka's leadership, CAP members examined and, at times, emulated contemporary African socialist groups, including Alimcar Cabral's African Party and Julius Neyerere's Tanzanian African Nationalist Union (Woodard, 1999). Baraka's ascension in the ranks of CAP leadership was also significant for female members. His new role gave women, particularly those in Newark, increased access to group leadership through his wife, Amina. Furthermore, Baraka's expansion of the Pan-African elements of Kawaida doctrine exposed members to new forms of African womanhood through the study of international female leaders and activists. This exposure to different gender constructs across the African diaspora undergirded CFUN women's evolving theories of the "African Woman."

Baraka's expanding political perspective also extended to the gender politics of the organization. He credited female members with prompting his reexamination of Kawaida gender roles, recalling that his wife "waged a constant struggle against [his] personal and organizational male chauvinism." The Newark leader also stated that CFUN women "fought [men] tooth and nail about [their] chauvinism in much more forceful and effective ways" than their activist counterparts in other Black Power organizations (Baraka, 1984, p. 307). Because of female activists' pushback, male leaders in CFUN and other factions of CAP tempered mandates for female submissiveness (Baraka, 1984). Furthermore, when Baraka developed new forms of Kawaida practice, like Revolutionary Kawaida in 1974, he incorporated a gendered critique of the original doctrine into this political ideology.

The ideological shift in CAP and CFUN, including the new gendered critique of Kawaida, reflected both the ability of Kawaida ideology to adapt to the needs of organizers and the shifting political terrain of the Black Power Movement. By the early 1970s, many Black Power organizations diversified and expanded their political position, incorporating socialist theories into their critique of the American nation-state.⁵ Open critiques of sexism also emanated from female activists across a broad swath of the movement (Bambara, 1970; Herve, 1971; Matthews, 1998), which additionally affected CAP and CFUN. The umbrella organization underwent a series of ideological conflicts and purges that greatly altered its make-up and efficacy. These conflicts arose from Baraka's turn toward Revolutionary Kawaida and, eventually, socialism, as well as the splintering of Pan-African alliances within the group (Johnson, 2007). Some members left because of leadership's adoption of socialism and progressive gender roles (Madhubuti, 1974; Simanga, 2008). Others explored new forms of

⁵ These groups included but were not limited to the Black Panther Party and some factions of CAP and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

nationalist and socialist organizing, while contemplating the primacy of women within these radical political projects.

Us Women and the Renegotiation of the “African Woman”

As early as 1969, Us women produced statements and articles that reconceptualized the “African Woman” within Kawaida practice. These debates and discussions among female members were the product of internal and societal factors, including government repression, organizational restructuring, and contemporaneous movements for gender equality. Yet, their renegotiations were not simply an attempt to challenge sexism: members created new visions of the “African Woman” in order to expand Kawaida philosophy and explore its most revolutionary and emancipatory elements. In the process, they altered the ideological basis of male/female relationships within Karenga’s group and highlighted the importance of African American women to cultural nationalist goals.

“The View from the Woman’s Side of the Circle,” published in 1969 by Us’s women’s group, the Malaika, is one of the best examples of female members’ gendered theorizing. This statement, featured in the organizational newspaper *Harambee*, reflected the internal debates taking place among members and publicly questioned the gender bias that undergirded the Kawaida doctrine. The statement created a new gendered framework based on the Kawaida Black-centered value system: the Nguzo Saba. In particular, the women isolated and expanded on one of the doctrine’s central principles, Ujamaa, or collective work and responsibility. The Malaika argued that fulfilling the principle of Ujamaa required increased political, military, and educational development of women and the breakdown of the gendered division of labor within Us organizing.

According to Karenga's doctrine, the "African Woman's" primary role was to inspire men and children. In the initial stages of Us, female activists fulfilled this role through the study of nationalism, Karenga's teachings, and the continual support of African American men and children in traditionally female roles and spaces. However, the Malaika contended that the shifting political terrain required an expansion of the "African Woman's" inspirational role. They argued that the absence of male leadership and government targeting of the organization brought about the need for women to find "new ways to inspire men" and take on more leadership roles within the group. The primary ways this could be achieved, they suggested, were by breaking down the barriers that hinder women "carrying out revolution in [men's] absence" and by affirming the ability of women to carry out revolutionary acts in "their presence." The Malaika postulated that they did "not have to wait for freedom to be achieved by men in order to make a contribution" to the Black struggle. Rather, Us women could inspire change through daily acts of protest, working alongside men, and taking up roles besides those of helpmate, caregiver, and educator. As evidence of their claims, the women spoke of their participation in the Matamba, a women's paramilitary wing of the organization modeled after African women warriors (Brown, 2003). They contended that their participation in the "male" sphere of physical combat was an example of how their parity with men further inspired revolutionary acts and spurred the success of the organization. Indeed, they argued that women's work alongside male organizers, like the "Saidi," built "brotherhood and sisterhood" that prepared members "for the future" of cultural organizing. Most importantly, however, this new role for women was "more fundamentally an example of the complementarity of Black men and women" that was at the core of Kawaida theory (Malaika, 1969).

The Malaika also formulated new roles for women within the realms of social organization and education. Traditionally, their emphasis was on educating and developing children and men within the private sphere. Augmenting the importance of African American women's political development, the Malaika argued that female activists needed to first "educate [themselves]" about revolution, politics, and violence in order to be effective activists and educators of other African Americans. They also argued that women needed to expand their reach beyond their traditional spheres of influence by "go[ing] to the people" to win "the minds of the people," rather than circumscribing their activism within homes and schools. Finally, the Malaika suggested that they should educate and cultivate social development by setting a "good example" of how men and women should complement, rather than dominate, each other in the public sphere. Indeed, they claimed that it was only through political and cultural education of *all* members of the organization, and parity between women and men, that "an unbroken circle" between "education and the social development of [their] community" could form.

Although "The View from the Woman's Side of the Circle" is notable for its commitment to redefining and advancing the role of women, Us women's conceptions of the African woman remained grounded in the Kawaida value system. Rather than attempting to denounce or defy Karenga's gendered mandates, the Malaika called for a new understanding of gender roles that required women to move from a "minimum" or "medium" role within the organization to a "maximum practice" of Kawaida in their daily roles and activities. Taking on a "maximum" role within the organization did not negate the differences between men and women on which the Kawaida doctrine rested, Us women argued. They asserted that they were not "changing [their] role," but rather "broadening the scope of [their] role" in order to ensure success and collectively work toward Black liberation (Malaika, 1969).

Us women articulated a new understanding of the “African Woman” that was defined by a commitment to the central ideals of Kwaia doctrine, but not entirely circumscribed by traditional gendered spheres of work or influence. Instead, the “African Woman” was an activist who found parity in her inspirational and educational work with her male counterpart and took on a leading role in shaping and supporting the nation-building project. The Malaika’s emphasis on the “African Woman’s” complementary role is significant for interpreting women’s political self-conception within the Black Power Movement. In their statement, the Malaika emphasized balance and asserted women’s gender-specific role within cultural revolution. Their claims not only repositioned African American women as equally central to the Black struggle, but they also described a separate, unique political identity and agenda based on women’s gendered experiences with oppression and their revolutionary goals.

The Malaika statement, and other internal debates within Us, significantly shaped the organization’s perception of gender roles. In particular, it caused male leaders, including Maulana Karenga, to abandon limited understandings of male/female relationships and adopt more progressive conceptualizations of the “African Woman.” In his article “A Strategy for Struggle,” Karenga (1973) remarked that Black men must “stop denying [their] women the full and heroic role in the history and development of [the Black] struggle” and argued that African Americans will “never liberate [themselves] as a people” until they rid themselves of the “behavioral patters of sexism, male chauvinism, and parasitic and perverse pimpism in relations with each other” (pp. 12–13). Karenga’s revised stance on gender roles reflected the evolution of male/female relationships within the Us Organization, as well as challenging the perception that African American women did not shape politics or power relationships from within its ranks.

The “Necessary” Roles of the “African Woman” in CFUN

Like the Malaika, women in CFUN contended that African American women needed to undergo a revolutionary transformation where they shed their adherence to European value systems for an African or Black-centered way of living and organizing. Amina Baraka was one of the primary advocates of this idea and her early experiences as an artist and dancer had taught her the importance of Black cultural expression (Buffalo, 1985). However, it was her work at Spirit House that reinforced the need to fuse artistic expression with Black self-transformation in the socio-political realm. The successful conjoining of art and politics was her primary goal as the leader of the social wing of CFUN. In fact, Amiri Baraka (1984) later claimed that “it was [Amina Baraka] who actually designed the most practical ways” to implement Kawaida and aid men and women in their cultural transformation (pp. 419–420).

For Amina Baraka, practical implementation of Kawaida required the redefinition and expansion of women’s roles in the organization and its ideology. As a result, she gathered high-ranking CFUN women, including Jaribu Hill, Salimu Rodgers, Jalia Woods, and Staarabisha Barrett, to debate women’s roles in cultural nationalist activism (Woodard, 2003). The Mumininas created and published the “Mwanamke Mwananchi,” or the Nationalist Woman Handbook, in 1971, to explain their vision of the “African Woman.” As part of the body of written work produced, published, and sold by CFUN and its umbrella group, CAP, the “Mwanamke Mwananchi” functioned as a political and social guide for women within the organization and the Kawaida tradition.

In their handbook, African American women respected the philosophical and spiritual directives of Kawaida while pushing the boundaries of the definition of “African womanhood” to

be more inclusive of women's multiple roles in Black nation-building. The Mumininas (1971) defined the "African Woman" as a one who was dedicated to nationalist ideology:

As Nationalists, our lives have only one purpose. That purpose is the building and maintaining of our nation. In building our nation, we must restore our people to their greatness. We can't restore anything if we are backward. We can't leave a legacy for our children if we are backward. We have to define ourselves as nationalists who are concerned with improving our lives, to *always* develop and preserve a better way of living.

While their contemporaries contended that cultural nationalism proffered conservative or commodified constructions of the Black nation, the Mumininas' definition of nationalism emphasized progress, continual evolution, and improvement, rather than "backward" motion. This meant developing new forms of womanhood that could "restore" Black cultural traditions while cultivating cultural nationalist practice. This interpretation of nationalism served as the foundation for the Mumininas' progressive construction of this gendered ideal.

According to the group, a central component of this identity was the shedding of European values and cultural markers. They ascribed to Karenga's claim that the "natural characteristics" of African womanhood "exclude[ed] all influence of Western training." Being an "African Woman" also meant following Karenga's mandates for women to complement men, or for "completing and making perfect that which is not perfect," and cultivating femininity (Mumininas, 1971). In acknowledging Karenga's teachings, the Mumininas aligned themselves with the overall goals of Kawaidist ideology. They also acknowledged that playing a "complementary role" restricted women to roles, like childrearing, that Karenga considered to be outside of the purview of men.

In their efforts to expand the parameters of this ideal, the Mumininas created a multilayered conceptualization of "natural roles" that conceded the existence of natural differences between men and women. They explained, "Women cannot do the same things as

men... they are by nature made differently.” However, they were unwilling to accept the idea that natural differences justified a gendered hierarchy or division of labor within cultural nationalist practice. They claimed, “Nature has made women submissive—she must submit to man’s creation in order for it to exist. This does not mean that she has to follow for the sake of following or to be subservient to him but to ensure that what he creates continues to exist when he has taken the next steps of our movement” (Mumininas, 1971). For the women of CFUN, biological differences often translated into less autonomy for women in their contemporary society. However, their handbook did not automatically correlate less autonomy with the submission of women as was mandated by their male counterparts. Rather, they reframed the “African Woman’s” natural role as one that “ensured” progress of the cultural nationalist political project by working alongside men.

The Mumininas (1971) also developed a new framework for women in the cultural revolution: necessary roles. They explained, “When we speak of the ‘necessary’ role of women we mean anything that’s necessary for National Liberation—to bring about National Liberation *now*.” Couching their work in the larger goals of Black liberation, they proclaimed, “Whether we’re referring to mythology (religion), history, social organization, economic organization, political organization, creative motif, or ethos, there are certain skills which [women] must have in order to develop.” They asserted that the cultural nationalist movement called for black women develop broader political roles:

This means that Black Women will have to learn and develop whatever is needed by the nation. Black Women will have to learn such things as secretarial skills, weaponry, first aid, driving, administrative skills. The necessary roles will change as the needs of the nation change.... This means that we will have to be conscious enough to know what skills are needed at a particular time—what do and when and where to do it. It might be “nice” (but harmful) to think that women should just sit at home—sewing, cooking, taking care of the house and children but we have to deal with the reality that WE ARE A BLACK AND POWERLESS

PEOPLE and will have to do all we can to gain power—self-determination, self-respect, self-defense. All who can work will have to *work hard* until we have liberated ourselves, then and only then—when we are free can we decide what new roles women must have. (Mumininas, 1971)

Without negating the central goals of the organization, these women used the separate, gendered spheres of work to highlight the incongruences between the Kawaida philosophy on gender roles and the need for women to participate in all forms of activism in order to achieve the goals of Black revolution. Taking a more direct approach than their Us predecessors, the Mumininas framed traditional forms of women's work, including "sewing, cooking, taking care of the house and children," as "harmful" and at odds with the greater goal of Black nationhood. They argued that relegating women to traditional spheres was not progressive; rather, it was counterrevolutionary and counterproductive to Black nation-building.

Notably absent, however, is a critique of how these traditional spheres of work mimicked the same White values that Kawaida was designed to refute. To do so would implicate the very core of Kawaida ideology and circumvent their claims of being the "African Woman" dedicated to the Black cultural and political project. The women instead played on communal disdain of anti-revolutionary activism. During a period where calls for Black unity were at their height, the Mumininas' equation of separate spheres with counterrevolutionary activism enabled them to advocate for their own importance to the nation-building project and avoid charges of gender divisiveness. This positioning also ensured that they fulfilled Maulana Karenga's calls for women to complement men.

In developing their argument for the "necessary roles" of the "African Woman," the Mumininas inverted the Kawaida credo popular in cultural nationalist discourse. Whereas the previous interpretations of Kawaida doctrine called for gender roles based in the African past, the Mumininas repositioned this gendered political identity as one that was steeped in the

collective values of Kawaida, but not bound by static conceptualizations of Africa or Black womanhood. More precisely, the Mumininas affirmed the durability of Karenga's Black-centered framework while simultaneously asserting the need for malleable gender roles to achieve cultural nationalist goals. These female leaders played on their male counterparts' calls for evolution and change in the minds of African Americans to assert the need for an evolving view on gender relationships. This call for shifting understandings of the categories of culture, gender, and revolution culminated in their claim that after liberation, women's roles in the movement would once again change, reaffirming their adherence to a progressive form of "African Womanhood." Indeed, the women of CFUN sought to reshape the axis along which Black women's revolutionary legitimacy and activism was measured by emphasizing the importance of the diversity of roles women played in revolutionary activism.

The Mumininas' call for egalitarian gender relationships was also a product of the changing composition of CAP and the larger Black Power Movement. As CAP developed, it incorporated groups and organizations that were radical or nationalist in their political orientation, but which were not necessarily Kawaidists. While Baraka's leadership codified this ideology within CAP's ranks, women from other Black liberation groups joined the federation of organizations with their own interpretations and understandings of Black womanhood. The resulting diverse conceptualizations of women's roles also developed because of the uneven gender composition among local chapters and the continual pushback against strict gendered divisions of labor across multiple chapters of CAP (Simanga, 2008). The Mumininas' handbook reflected female leaders' attempt at unifying women under a singular political model that all women in the organization could implement.

By the early 1970s, there was also an ongoing debate within the larger Black Power movement over the role of women in political organizing. In publications and position papers, many prominent and lesser-known Black women activists criticized the gender imbalances created and practiced by women in CFUN and the anti-radical nature of their gender constructs. In particular, they accused cultural nationalists of suffering from “ideological confusion” that did little to advance the emancipatory goals of all oppressed peoples (Patton, 1970). Published conversations among female Black Power activists often indirectly indicted other activists on these grounds. For example, Panther Kathleen Cleaver, in the same year that the handbook was published, claimed, “Too many of the black women are so brainwashed and anxious to help the men that they try to become overly submissive” (as cited in Herve, 1971, p. 58). Still others like SNCC member Frances Beal, suggested that, “Assigning women to role of housekeeper and mother... [was] a highly questionable doctrine for a revolutionary to maintain” (Beal, 1970, p. 91).

Cleaver and Beal’s statements pinpointed the negotiations and contradictions among men and women members in CAP and CFUN and the larger Black Power Movement in the early 1970s. Karenga and Baraka both changed their views on gender roles, although leadership unevenly instituted these new ideals in organizational practice. While Us and CFUN were slow to adopt a more equitable stance, their female members watched as other Black, politically active women developed different forms of womanhood in the public sphere. CFUN women were eager to support Black revolution and place value in Karenga’s claims that African Americans needed a cultural foundation, yet they were also bound by their contradictory desire to bring about liberation and their male counterparts’ ironic denial of Black women’s oppression and subjugation. While other women chose to diminish the work of cultural nationalist organizations,

members continued to develop and theorize at the intersection of cultural nationalism and gendered liberation. Through their writings, they maintained that Kawaida practice had the potential to be restorative and generative without relying on caricatures of Africa or mimicking the same oppressive gender constructs that they sought to defy. In the process, they renegotiated African American women's role as the preservers of culture. In the case of Kawaida doctrine, Karenga charged the "African Woman" with maintaining racial purity and physically building this nation through childbirth and parenting. CFUN women's rhetorical renegotiations of the "African Woman" persona reformulated this constructive project and repositioned women at the forefront of cultural construction and political engagement. Ultimately, their suggestions propelled the organization toward more progressive gender roles, as evidenced by the dissemination of the *Nationalist Woman's Handbook* as a guide for women's activism (Jihad Productions, 1972).

African American women's reshaping of the "African Woman" ideal within CFUN also significantly influenced organizational doctrine. In 1974, when Baraka developed new forms of Kawaida practice, like Revolutionary Kawaida, he incorporated a gendered critique of cultural nationalist practices in this ideological stage. In "The Meaning and Development of Revolutionary Kawaida," Baraka (1974) argued that he intended to create "a concrete understanding of the [Kawaida] philosophy that could be collectively studied and collectively interpreted." This new political focus prompted significant changes in CAP's ideology. Baraka denounced the "cultism" that "mystified" Kawaida leaders and made their actions "removed from the masses" and called on members to reject the practice of what the CAP referred to as "extended families," or polygamy, and "the feudalism which sought to make [their] women beautiful African objects" (Baraka, 1974). CAP's adoption of Revolutionary Kawaida was a

turning point for female members, as it altered the organization's stance on gender hierarchies that privileged male leadership and decision-making. Baraka's rejection of this patriarchal culture created more autonomy and opportunities for female leadership and his incorporation of diverse liberation theories opened up new spaces for women to create gendered interpretations of the doctrine. Most importantly, the institution of Revolutionary Kawaida called for African American men to "see women as equals in struggle," capping the ongoing debate about the importance of women in Black cultural revolution (Baraka, 1974).

This shift to a broader understanding of the "African Woman" resulted in a range of responses from African American women activists. Although publications like the Nationalist Women's Handbook presented new and expanded roles for women, some Black female activists were still wary of CAP's gender politics. For example, Barbara Sizemore (1973) claimed that the handbook perpetuated the idea that female submissiveness was a natural trait. However, women within CAP and CFUN continued to develop this ideal, and the role of women more broadly, creating their own organization, the Black Women's United Front (BWUF), to address the social, cultural, and political conditions of African American women. The BWUF was dedicated to ending the "triple oppression" of African American women through rigorous study and ideological debate (Black Women's United Front, 1975). The organization hewed influences from CAP's socialist turn, but its emphasis was on broadening the social outlook and political self-conception of African American women. This subsidiary group was short-lived, but its creation, and CAP's broader acceptance of its women-centered agenda, reflected the theorizing concerning the "African Woman" that developed within the ranks of the organization.

Conclusion

Much like their counterparts in other Black Power organizations, cultural nationalist women's gendered politics corresponded to the wider ideological turns of their organizations and the Left. Yet, within the explicit role assigned to women in Kawaïda doctrine, the women in Us and CFUN found ways to assert their own gender-specific political priorities while remaining committed to Kawaïda ideology. In the process, they created an evolving gendered political identity that was steeped in the goals of cultural revolution, but also critiqued the practice of separate spheres of revolutionary work. Their strategy was not one of blatant accusation and criticism; rather it was one that challenged practitioners of the philosophy to adhere to its most emancipatory elements, the liberation of all African Americans. This methodology allowed them to shape the debate in favor of more egalitarian interpretations of Kawaïda from within, ultimately influencing the organizational and ideological directions of Us, CFUN, and CAP.

Examining not just the activism, but also the theorizing and writings of female cultural nationalists reveals several key points about this faction of the movement, its importance, and women's role in its success. It shows that the cultural nationalist movement was far more inclusive of women than has been previously documented. It had to be. Within the Kawaïda tradition, African American women were important figures of cultural preservation and production and vital consumers of the emerging African American society cultural nationalists sought to develop. Indeed, in many ways, cultural nationalist leaders' hopes of racial and cultural independence and nation-building rested on the shoulders of African American women.

African American women realized their importance in this schema and capitalized on their unique position. They developed political models that engaged with these aims and goals and reshaped them to fit their political needs. Their statements, articles, and pamphlets were a

key channel through which they developed evolving and increasingly radical conceptualizations of Black women's political work, as well as new and generative elements of Kawaida theory and practice. Their writings also reveal a comprehensive understanding of Kawaidist aims and a far more nuanced engagement with the principles of Kawaida doctrine than scholars have previously acknowledged.

In addition, African American women's political statements refute traditional narratives concerning gender hierarchies and sexism within cultural nationalist activism. The women's divisions of Us and CFUN illustrate that their experiences within these organizations were far more dynamic, as they held more roles, positions, and influence than scholars have recognized. Female members also publically and collectively shaped doctrine and practice. This does not mean that sexism was not a mediating factor of their activism or that, at times, female members did not capitulate to men's demands for submission and subservience. Nor do their publications indicate that they necessarily achieved equality with their male counterparts. Rather, their written legacy also shows that, more often, women within these organizations did not blindly follow their male counterparts' hierarchical mandates, instead choosing to develop more progressive models of Kawaida practice by refashioning static definitions of womanhood.

Beyond internal politics, female activists' theorizing also sheds light on Kawaida as a liberation philosophy. Despite Maulana Karenga's claims that the Kawaida philosophy is an "ongoing synthesis" of the best thought and practices, historians continually frame the philosophy, and Kawaidist gender roles, as static and uncompromising (Karenga, 2007b). Yet women's intellectual and cultural production within these organizations suggests that Kawaida philosophy and practice were far more malleable and responsive to the political and social shifts

that took place during the movement. Women were able to create new interpretations of Kawaida principles and find ideological grounding in their gender-specific emancipatory visions.

African American women still find the Kawaida doctrine capable of sustaining their theoretical and political work and ideals. Contemporary activists like Tiamoyo Karenga and Chimbuko Tembo continue to theorize definitions of womanhood, like “Kawaida Womanism,” that are grounded in the Kawaida tradition. Speaking about “Kawaida Womanism,” Karenga and Tembo (2012) write that it is a political identity “rooted in Kawaida philosophy” and “builds on this ancient and ongoing tradition, stressing the rights, dignity and agency of African women and their liberation as an integral and indispensable part of the liberation of African people as a whole” (p. 33). That this doctrine remains relevant is a testament to the foundations that Karenga and his followers developed. Furthermore, Karenga and Tembo’s contemporary theorizing highlight the fact that African American women’s interpretations of the Kawaida doctrine, and their theories of Black liberation theory more broadly, developed and sustained the ideals of the Black Power Movement. Their work is also a reminder that African American women’s ideological and organizational engagement with Black Power ideals was, and continues to be, a critical and generative component of the movement and its legacy.

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