

W

hen i entered Manhattan Community College i fully intended to major in business administration and then graduate into a job in marketing or advertising. Instead, i took only one business course. History, psychology, and sociology interested me more than learning how to sell somebody something.

I had truly lucked up. I had gone back to school at a time when struggle and activity were growing, when Black consciousness and nationalism were on the upswing. I had also lucked up on the school.

Manhattan Community College had a very high percentage of Black and Third World students, more than fifty percent. The level of activity was high, both on campus and off. The Golden Drums, the Black organization on campus, whose president was a principled, disciplined brother named Henry Jackson, was pushing for more Black studies courses, Black teachers, programs more responsive to the needs of Black students, and cultural awareness. They gave all kinds of programs on African dancing, drawing, and more. By word of mouth or by the bulletin board, we were turned on to concerts, plays, poetry readings, etc. The Last Poets, a group of young Black poets, knocked me out. I had always thought of poetry in a European sense, but The Last Poets spoke in African rhythms, chanted to the beat of African drums, and talked about revolution. When we'd leave their place on 125th Street—i think it was called the Blue Guerilla—we'd be so excited and fired up we didn't even notice the long subway ride home.

If i was running myself ragged before i went back to school, now i was flying. I was learning and chang-

ing every day. Even my image of myself was changing, as well as my concept of beauty. One day a friend asked me why i didn't wear my hair in an Afro, natural. The thought had honestly never occurred to me. In those days, there weren't too many Afros on the set. But the more i thought about it, the better it sounded. I had always hated frying my hair—burnt ears, a smokey straightening, and the stink of your own hair burning. How many nights had i spent trying to sleep on curlers, bound with scarves that cut into my head like a tourniquet. Afraid to go to the beach, afraid to walk in the rain, afraid to make passionate love on hot summer nights if i had to get up and go to work in the morning. Afraid my hair would “go back.” Back to where? Back to the devil or Africa. The permanent was even worse: trying to sit calmly while lye was eating its way into my brain. Clumps of hair falling out. The hair on your head feeling like someone else's.

And then i became aware of a whole new generation of Black women hiding under wigs. Ashamed of their hair—if they had any left. It was sad and disgusting. At the time, my hair was conked, but the hairdresser said it was “relaxed.” To make it natural, i literally had to cut the conk off. I cut it myself and then stood under the shower for hours melting the conk out. At last, my hair was free. On the subway the next day, people stared at me, but my friends at school were supportive and encouraging. People are right when they say it's not what you have on your head but what you have in it. You can be a revolutionary-thinking person and have your hair fried up. And you can have an Afro and be a traitor to Black people. But for me, how you dress and how you look have always reflected what you have to say about yourself. When you wear your hair a certain way or when you wear a certain type of clothes, you are making a statement about yourself. When you go through all your life processing and abusing your hair so it will look like the hair of another race of people, then you are making a statement and the statement is clear. I don't care if it's the curly conk, latex locks, or whatever, you're making a statement.

It was a matter of simple statement for me. This is who i am and this is how i like to look. This is what i think is beautiful. You can spend a lifetime discovering African-style hairdresses, there are so many of them, and so many creative, natural styles yet to be invented. For me, it was important not just because of how good it made me feel but because of the world in which i lived. In a country that is trying to completely negate the image of Black people, that constantly tells us we are nothing, our culture is nothing, i felt and still feel that we have got to constantly make positive statements

about ourselves. Our desire to be free has got to manifest itself in everything we are and do. We have accepted too much of a negative lifestyle and a negative culture and have to consciously act to rid ourselves of that negative influence. Maybe in another time, when everybody is equal and free, it won't matter how anybody wears their hair or dresses or looks. Then there won't be any oppressors to mimic or avoid mimicking. But right now i think it's important for us to look and feel like strong, proud Black men and women who are looking toward Africa for guidance.

I wasn't in school but a hot minute when a brother in my math class told me about the Golden Drums. After a couple of meetings i was hooked. They addressed me as sister, were glad to see me at meetings, worried about how I was making out in school, and were really concerned about me as a person.

The subject of one of the many lectures scheduled by the Drums was about a slave who had plotted and planned and fought for his freedom. Right here in amerika. Until then my only knowledge of the history of Africans in amerika was about George Washington Carver making experiments with peanuts and about the Underground Railroad. Harriet Tubman had always been my heroine, and she had symbolized everything that was Black resistance for me. But it had never occurred to me that hundreds of Black people had got together to fight for their freedom. The day i found out about Nat Turner I was affected so strongly it was physical. I was so souped up on adrenalin i could barely contain myself. I tore through every book my mother had. Nowhere could i find the name Nat Turner.

I had grown up believing the slaves hadn't fought back. I remember feeling ashamed when they talked about slavery in school. The teachers made it seem that Black people had nothing to do with the official "emancipation" from slavery. White people had freed us.

You couldn't catch me without a book in my hand after that. I read everything from J. A. Rogers to Julius Lester. From Sonia Sanchez to Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee). I saw plays by Black playwrights like Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins. It was amazing. A whole new world opened up to me. I was also meeting a lot of sisters and brothers whose level of consciousness was much higher than mine—Black people who had gained knowledge not only by reading but by participating in the struggle, who talked about Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, Cinque, as well as Nat Turner, because they had gone out of their way to learn about our history and our struggle.

Many of us have misconceptions about Black history in amerika. What we are taught in the public school system is usually inaccurate, distorted, and packed full of outright lies. Among the most common lies are that Lincoln freed the slaves, that the Civil War was fought to free the slaves, and that the history of Black people in amerika has consisted of slow but steady progress, that things have gotten better, bit by bit. Belief in these myths can cause us to make serious mistakes in analyzing our current situation and in planning future action.

Abraham Lincoln was in no way whatsoever a friend of Black people. He had little concern for our plight. In his famous reply to editor Horace Greeley in August, 1862, he openly stated:

My paramount objective in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it and if i could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.

Lincoln was elected president in 1860. Immediately afterward, South Carolina had a convention and unanimously voted to withdraw from the Union. Before he had even been inaugurated, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas followed suit. In his inaugural speech on March 4, 1861, Lincoln said that slavery was legal under the constitution and that he had no right and no intention to abolish slavery. He further promised to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act, which permitted Southern slave owners to "reclaim" their escaped slaves in Northern states. What the law actually did was give any white man with a "certificate of ownership" the right to kidnap any "free" Black man, woman, or child in the North and force them into slavery. Because of this position, Lincoln received a great deal of criticism from Black abolitionists. Ford Douglas, a runaway slave who accompanied Frederick Douglass on his anti-slavery tours in the West, blasted Lincoln's position, saying,

In regard to the repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law, Abraham Lincoln occupies the same position that the old Whig Party occupied in 1852. . . . Here, then, is Abraham Lincoln in favor of carrying out that infamous Fugitive Slave Law, that not only strikes down the liberty of every black man in the United States, but virtually the liberty of every white man as well, for, under that law, there is not a man in this presence who might not be arrested today upon the simple testimony of one man, and, after an ex-parte trial, hurried off to slavery and to chains.

On April 12, 1861, Southern troops fired on Fort Sumter, South Carolina, thus starting the Civil War. The response of the Northerners was electrifying. Millions who had been indifferent or lukewarm to the secession of the South jumped on the bandwagon to defend the Union. But the enthusiasm was short-lived. They already viewed Black workers in the North as competitors for their jobs, and the white Northerners, for fear of losing even more jobs to the Blacks, refused to enlist in sufficient numbers for the North to win the war. When the draft law was enacted, tens of thousands of white workers in New York City took to the streets and brutally beat and murdered every Black person they could find. It has been estimated that between four hundred and a thousand Blacks were killed as a result of the so-called New York draft law riots. Draft riots and the murder of Blacks also took place in other Northern cities.

Lincoln had originally opposed Blacks fighting in the Civil War, stating:

I admit that slavery is at the root of the rebellion, and at least its sine qua non. . . . I will also concede that emancipation would help us in Europe. . . . I grant, further, that it would help somewhat at the North, though not so much, I fear, as you and those you represent imagine. . . . And then, unquestionably, it would weaken the Rebels by drawing off their laborers, which is of great importance; but I am not so sure we could do much with the Blacks. If we were to arm them, I fear that in a few weeks the arms would be in the hand of the Rebels. (History of the Negro Race in America, Vol. II, p. 265.)

Northern whites were more than happy at the prospect of Black people fighting in the war. A popular verse published in the newspapers of the day reflected the sentiment of many Northerners:

Some say it is a burnin' shame
To make the naysurs fight
An' that the trade o' bein' kilt
Belongs but to the white;

But as for me upon me sowl,
So liberal are we here,
I'll let Sambo be murdered in place o' meself
On every day in the year.

It was not until 1863 that Lincoln in fact issued the Emancipation Proclamation. But the document had very little immediate

effect. It freed slaves only in the Confederate states; the slaves in states loyal to the Union remained slaves. Lincoln clearly did not believe Black people could live in the u.s. as equal citizens. In the Lincoln-Douglas debates, he stated:

If all earthly power were given to me, I should not know what to do as to the existing institution. My first impulse would be to free all the slaves and send them to Liberia—to their own native land. But a moment's reflection would convince me that, whatever of high hope . . . there may be in this, in the long run its sudden execution is impossible. . . . What then? Free them all and keep them among us as underlings? It is quite certain that this betters their condition? I think I would not hold one in slavery at any rate, yet the point is not clear enough for me to denounce people upon. What next? Free them and make them politically and socially our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this, and, if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of whites will not.

Lincoln was a firm believer in the massive exportation of Black people anywhere. In 1865, at the end of the war, he asked General Butler to explore the possibility of using the navy to remove Black people to Haiti or to other areas in the Caribbean and South America.

It's also important to understand that the Civil War was not fought to free the slaves. It was a war between two economic systems, a war for power and control of the u.s. by two separate factions of the ruling class: rich, white Southern slave owners and rich, white Northern industrialists. The battle was between a plantation slave economy and an industrial manufacturing economy.

An industrial revolution was taking place in the years before the Civil War. Inventions such as the cotton gin, the telegraph, steamships, and steam trains completely changed methods of manufacturing, transportation, mining, communications, agriculture, and trade. The amount of goods produced was no longer determined by the number of people working in the process but by the capacity of the machines. Amerika was no longer a country that produced raw materials for the manufacturing nations in Europe. By 1860, the census reports that 1,385,000 people were employed in manufacturing and that one-sixth of the whole population was directly supported by manufacturing. The number was much higher when clerks, transportation workers, and merchants were added.

As manufacturing centers began to grow, European immigrants were imported as a source of cheap labor. More than five

million entered the u.s. between 1820 and 1860. Although the South had many cotton mills functioning, the factories were small and their numbers grew slowly. In 1850, the value of manufactured goods produced in the Northern "free" states was four times the output of the Southern "slave" states. And with the rise of industry came the rise of economic crisis and the threat of industrial collapse.

Even though there had been economic crises in the past, people had generally lived on farms and the economic depressions didn't create such a great hardship for the masses. But with many people living in cities, economic crises meant unemployment and no way to pay for food, clothing, and shelter. The first big crash came in 1825, followed by further depressions in 1829, 1837, 1847, and a severe depression in 1856. The recession in 1857 almost completely destroyed the early labor movement. The poverty in Northern and Southern cities was staggering. Rags, filth, squalor, hunger, and misery were words used to describe the ghettos of the 1800s.

To solve the problems in industrial cities, many called for reforms such as the abolition of debtors' prison, an end to the laws that kept white men who did not own property from voting, free education, the right to strike, an end to child labor, establishment of a ten-hour workday, and granting of land in the West to poor people in the cities. Big business proposed the expansion of capitalism and industry to other parts of the country. And this was where Northern capitalists clashed with Southern slave owners.

Northern capitalists wanted new states to enter the Union as "free" states. Slave owners wanted new states to enter as "slave" states. To maintain a balance of power, the North and the South had entered into several compromises. The main one was the Missouri Compromise. Northern capitalists were afraid slave owners would open factories and produce goods more cheaply because they didn't have to pay for labor. White workers were afraid of losing their jobs because of slavery. Southern plantation owners, of course, wanted the system of slavery to expand across the country.

All the differences between the North and the South were economic, not moral. For capitalists to control the economy and the political system, the slave system had to be defeated.

In 1856, the newborn republican party ran Abraham Lincoln, a former whig, as their first presidential candidate. He lost. In 1860, he ran again with a strong, three-point platform:

1. To shut slavery out of the territories.
2. To establish large protective tariffs.
3. To enact a homestead law giving a medium-size farm free to anyone willing to till the land.

The platform was designed to appeal to rich Northern capitalists, poor white laborers, farmers, and abolitionists. For only a tiny portion of the population was the abolition of slavery a moral issue, and the overwhelming majority of the white people who supported the abolition of slavery or who fought in the Union's army did so because they believed it was in their interests, not for love or concern for Black people.

I was gradually becoming more active. I began to control my life. Before going back to college, i knew i didn't want to be an intellectual, spending my life in books and libraries without knowing what the hell was going on in the streets. Theory without practice is just as incomplete as practice without theory. The two have to go together. I was determined to do both.

The major way i got hip to things was by listening to people. The Black students going to Manhattan Community College belonged to every type of organization. There were Black Muslims, Garveyites, Malcolm X's Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), members of various community and cultural organizations, and a few who were young turks of the NAACP. We got together and talked about everything under the sun. I did a whole lot more listening than talking, but i asked questions about anything i didn't understand. Sometimes the discussions and debates got so heated that they lasted until eleven o'clock, when night school ended and the building was being closed up.

One of the first organizations i checked out was a Garveyite group that had a big hall on 125th Street. I had just read a book on Marcus Garvey. In fact, i had only recently learned he existed. It was a shame. Here he had headed up one of the strongest movements of Black people in amerika and i hadn't heard about him until i was grown. One of the brothers who was studying there invited me to a meeting.

The meeting was upstairs. There seemed to be hundreds of chairs in the room. I arrived a little early and hardly anyone was there. I spotted the brother who had invited me, and he introduced me to the ten or fifteen people already there. We sat around in a little group talking and waiting for the others to arrive. They never came. It was obvious that everyone knew each other and had been

coming to these meetings for a long time. After a while, a speaker climbed the podium. He welcomed me to the meeting, then gave an impassioned speech. One after another got up and gave speeches as if they were talking to a roomful of people. The others applauded loudly. I felt sad. They were such nice people, and so sincere, but their circle had grown so small they were reduced to giving speeches to each other.

No movement can survive unless it is constantly growing and changing with the times. If it isn't growing, it's stagnant, and without the support of the people, no movement for liberation can exist, no matter how correct its analysis of the situation is. That's why political work and organizing are so important. Unless you are addressing the issues people are concerned about and contributing positive direction, they'll never support you. The first thing the enemy tries to do is isolate revolutionaries from the masses of people, making us horrible and hideous monsters so that our people will hate us.

All we usually hear about are the so-called responsible leaders, the ones who are "responsible" to our oppressors. In the same way that we don't hear about a fraction of the Black men and women who have struggled hard and tirelessly throughout our history, we don't hear about our heroes of today.

The schools we go to are reflections of the society that created them. Nobody is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free. Schools in amerika are interested in brainwashing people with amerikanism, giving them a little bit of education, and training them in skills needed to fill the positions the capitalist system requires. As long as we expect amerika's schools to educate us, we will remain ignorant.

The parents in the Ocean Hill–Brownsville section of Brooklyn, like Black parents all around New York at that time, were pushing for control of the schools in their communities. They wanted a say in what their children were taught, in how their schools were run, and in who was teaching their children. They wanted the local school boards to have hiring-and-firing power over teachers in their districts, but the city's board of education and the American Federation of Teachers was against them.

A whole bunch of us from Manhattan Community College loaded on the subway and took the train out to a demonstration called by the Ocean Hill–Brownsville parents. As soon as we got off

the train we ran into some students from CCNY. It seemed like the whole train had been heading for the demonstration, and it was just the kind of demonstration i like.

An energetic sea of Black faces. Proud, alive, angry, disciplined, upbeat, and, most of all, with that sisterly, brotherly kinship i loved. Several of the parents spoke to the crowd, along with the Black principal the parents had insisted on hiring. A Black teacher, head wrapped in a galee, talked about the importance of Black people controlling our schools. She made sweeping gestures with her bangled arms as she spoke. Everybody dug what she said. We were all high on the atmosphere. It seemed like a kinetic dance was boogying in the air.

When it was over, i hated to go home. There aren't too many experiences that give you that good, satisfied feeling, that make you feel so clean and refreshed, as when you are fighting for your freedom.

Most of us felt that taking control of our neighborhoods was the first step toward liberation. We sat in the subway station tripping. When a train did come, we just let it pass. First we would take control of the schools; then we would take control of the hospitals; then we would take control of the colleges, the housing, etc., etc. We would have community-controlled employment, welfare centers, and city, state, and federal agencies.

"Hold on for a minute," somebody said. "Where are ya'll gonna get the money to run all that stuff?"

"We'll take community control of the banks," someone else answered.

"You'd better take control of the army, too, because those banks aren't gonna just let you take their money lying down."

"We'll take control of the political institutions in our community. Then we'll take control of the congressional seats, the senate seats, the city council seats, the mayor's office, and every other office that we can take control of. We'll take control of the political offices so we can allocate money to the people who need it."

"Y'all just wishing and hoping," someone said. "You can control the social institutions and the political institutions, but unless you control the economic and military institutions, you can only go but so far."

Everybody just sort of got quiet, thinking.

"Well, what are we supposed to do, then? Just sit back and do nothing?"

“Fighting for community control is just the first step. It can only go so far. What you need is a revolution.”

Everybody started talking about what the brother had said. We were all confused, but we were all enthused. That was the one thing i dug about those days. We were alive and we were excited and we believed that we were going to be free someday. For us, it wasn't a matter of whether or not. It was a question of how.

We always started out talking about reform and ended up talking about revolution. If you were talking about anything except a few little jive crumbs here and there, reform was just not going to get it. I was long past the day when i thought that reform could possibly work, but revolution was a big question mark. I believed, with all my heart, that it was possible. But the question was how.

I had heard a lot about the Republic of New Afrika and had promised myself to check it out. The Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika advocated the establishment of a separate Black nation within the u.s., to be made up of what is now South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. At the time, i thought the group was kind of wild and far out, but i got a good feeling being around them and the idea of a Black nation appealed to me.

The first time i attended a Republic of New Afrika event, i drank in the atmosphere and enjoyed the easy audacity of it all. The surroundings were gay and carnival-like. A group of brothers were pounding out Watusi, Zulu, and Yoruba messages on the drums. Groups of sisters and brothers danced to motherland rhythms until their skins were glazed with sweat. Speeches were woven between songs and poems. Vibrant sisters and brothers with big Afros and flowing African garments strolled proudly up and down the aisles. Bald-headed brothers, wearing combat boots and military uniforms with leopard-skin epaulets, stood around with their arms folded, looking dangerous. Little girls running and laughing, their heads wrapped with galees, tiny little boys wearing tiny little dashikis. People calling each other names like Jamal, Malik, Kisha, or Aiesha. Sandlewood and coconut incense floated through the air. Red, black, and green flags hung from the rafters alongside posters of Malcolm and Marcus Garvey. Serious-looking young men, wearing jeans and green army field jackets, passed out leaflets. Exotic-looking sisters and brothers, decked out in red, black, and green, sat behind felt-covered tables and sold incense, bead earrings, and an assortment of other items.

“Peace, sister,” a voice said. “Do you wanna be a citizen?”

“What?” i asked, without the slightest notion of what she was talking about.

“A citizen,” she repeated. “Do you want to be a citizen of the Republic of New Afrika?”

“How do i become a citizen?”

“Easy. Just sign your name in the citizens’ book.”

“That’s all?”

“Yeah. You want a name?”

“A name?”

“Yeah, sista, a name. If you want an African name, just ask that brother over there to give you one.”

The brother she pointed out was wearing a long bubba with matching pants and a matching fez-type hat. He was wearing various necklaces made of beads, bones, shells, and pieces of wood. His left ear was pierced and his face was strained in concentration, the veins in his forehead throbbing.

Without giving it a second thought, i went over to have my name changed. The brother looked at me, asked me a couple of questions which i don’t remember, and then began shaking a container furiously. He hurled out the contents, which turned out to be shells, onto a soft cloth. After a long, concentrated stare at the shells and after glancing back and forth at me, the brother decided that my name was Ybumi Oladele. He spelled the name out to me as i wrote it down, then i hurried over to the sister’s table and became a citizen of the Republic of New Afrika. Ybumi Oladele. I liked the way it sounded. Soft and musical, kinda happy-sounding. I filed my new name away in my pocketbook and continued sucking in the atmosphere, tripping out on the idea of a Black nation in Babylon, a nation of Black people smack dab in the middle of the belly of the beast. Imagining Black youth flourishing and being nourished in Black schools, taught by teachers who loved them and who taught them to love themselves. Controlling their lives, their institutions, working together to build a humane society, ending the long legacy of suffering Black people have endured at the hands of amerika. My mind spaced out on the idea and in a minute i was imagining red, black, and green buses, apartment buildings with African motifs, Black television shows, and movies that reflected the real quality of Black life rather than the real quality of white racism. I imagined everything from cities called Malcolmville and New Lumumba to a reception for revolutionary leaders around the world at the Black House. Sure enough, i liked the idea of a Black nation, but i didn’t give it any serious consideration as a possible

solution. Back then, the idea just seemed too farfetched. I guess, at the time, having an African name seemed a little farfetched, too. I told my friends about the name, talked about it for a few days, and then promptly forgot about it.

It wasn't until years later—after college and more revolutionary activism and marriage—that i began to seriously think about changing my name. The name JoAnne began to irk my nerves. I had changed a lot and moved to a different beat, felt like a different person. It sounded so strange when people called me JoAnne. It really had nothing to do with me. I didn't feel like no JoAnne, or no Negro, or no amerikan. I felt like an African woman. From the time i picked my hair out in the morning to the time i slipped off to sleep with Mingus in the background, i felt like an African woman and rejoiced in it. My big, abstract black and white inkblot-looking painting was replaced by paintings of Black people and revolutionary posters. My life became an African life, my surroundings took on an African flavor, my spirit took on an African glow. From the paintings on my walls to the big, fat pillows on my floor, from the incense burning in the air to the music dancing through the rooms, my whole life was moving to African rhythms. My mind, heart, and soul had gone back to Africa, but my name was still stranded in Europe somewhere. JoAnne was bad enough, but at least my mother had given it to me. As for Chesimard, well, i could only come to one conclusion. Somebody named Chesimard had been the slavemaster of my ex-husband's ancestors. Chesimard, like most other last names Black people use today, was derived from massa. Black folks went from being Mr. Johnson's Mary and Mr. Jackson's Paul to being Mary Johnson and Paul Jackson. Sometimes, before dozing off to sleep, i would lie in bed and think about it, wondering how many slaves Chesimard had owned in Martinique and how often he beat them. I would stare up at the ceiling wondering how many Black women Chesimard had raped, how many Black babies he had fathered, and how many Black people he had been responsible for killing.

So the name finally had to go. I thought about Ybumi Oladele, but there was one problem. I didn't know what the name meant. My new name had to mean something really special to me. At the time, there were little pamphlets being put out listing names and their meanings, but i had a hard time finding one i liked. A lot of the names had to do with flowers or songs or birds or other things like that. Others meant born on Thursday, faithful, loyal, or even things like tears, or little fool, or one who giggles. The

women's names were nothing like the men's names, which meant things like strong, warrior, man of iron, brave, etc. I wanted a name that had something to do with struggle, something to do with the liberation of our people. I decided on Assata Olugbala Shakur. Assata means "She who struggles," Olugbala means "Love for the people," and i took the name Shakur out of respect for Zayd and Zayd's family. Shakur means "the thankful."

At first, the Golden Drums society concentrated its efforts on Black culture and history. But after a while we started to examine our role as students. We didn't want to be tape recorders, recording whatever information, facts, lies they gave us and then playing them all back during examinations. We began to talk about an education that was relevant to us as Black people, that we could take back to our communities. We didn't want to learn Latin or classical Greek. We wanted to learn things that we could use to help free our people.

One of our first struggles centered on student government. Most of us were from working-class or poor families and we wanted a student government that was responsive to what we needed. We didn't need a student government that was brownnosing the administration in return for favors and good grades. We wanted a student government that supported a Black studies program, more Black faculty members, and other Black causes. As a result, the Golden Drum Society and the Students for Democratic Society (SDS) ran a joint ticket and won by a landslide.

It soon became evident that having control of the student government wasn't enough. It had no real power. We would pass resolutions and come up with proposals, which the administration would promptly deny. The only power we had was over the student government budget. Instead of inviting reactionary "scholars" or politicians to speak, we invited the Young Lords or the Black Panther Party or some other group who was saying something relevant.

One of our proposals was for students to work during the summer in remedial programs to improve the level of kids who had trouble with reading and math. Our idea was to have a few kids assigned to each student-teacher. In that way, each one would receive the individual attention he or she needed. The academic curriculum was to be supplemented with courses that would enhance the students' sense of self-worth and give them more of a sense of their history. Student-teachers would work with parents, visit the kids' homes, and create a kind of day camp by offering

sports, trips, crafts, etc. Several of the Black faculty members helped us with the proposal. As soon as it was submitted it was rejected.

The administration claimed there was no money. A small investigation into finances, aided by some concerned Black and white faculty members, revealed that the president of the college was living in a house rent-free, that taxpayers were also providing him with chauffeur and maid services, and that student fees, which had not been spent in previous years, were being invested on the stock market. A rather strange financial picture was emerging. After we made some of our investigation results known to the administration, we were informed that the money for the project had been found.

As a student-teacher i taught reading and math in the morning and arts and crafts in the afternoon. The morning classes were tiny, while the afternoon classes were larger, combining various morning groups. The curriculum included Black history, dancing and drumming, physical education, arts and crafts, in addition to reading and math. There was an excursion every Friday afternoon.

My mother thought my teaching reading and writing was a joke. My spelling is terrible, and my skills in mathematics are limited to two and two equaling four. To prepare myself for the day's lesson, i had to study just as hard as the kids. My students shocked the hell out of me. Through conversation, it was obvious just how bright they were, yet they scored way below their grade levels in reading and math. There was such a big contradiction between the intelligence they exhibited in class and their test scores that i didn't know where to begin. The books we had to work with were Reader's Digest-like textbooks that i couldn't even imagine using. I didn't even want to read those things and i knew sure as hell that my students wouldn't want to use them. So every day, i took the vocabulary out of those books and wrote a little story, something i thought the students would find interesting, typed it on a stencil, and ran it off. I brought all kinds of books to school for them to read, and as long as they found the books interesting, those students would read until the cows came home. I was learning just as much as the kids. I found it oppressive playing teacher all the time, so every day i rotated the thing around. Everybody got to be teacher for a while. It was also great for discipline, since if somebody acted up in your class, you were free to act up in theirs. Nobody wanted people to act up in their class so everyone was more or less cool.

In order to teach, each one of us had to prepare our lesson and know what we were talking about. One of the boys in the class

worked so hard on his lessons that he would just lay me out. I don't know where he is now or what he's doing, but if he isn't a teacher, it's a damn shame, because he would have been a great one. He would cut out pictures and even make up math games for us to play.

My class in the afternoon was usually exhausting. Clay, paint, papier-mâché over everything and everyone, especially me. The first days of that class i wanted to do nothing but go somewhere and have a good cry. On the first day of the arts and crafts class i had nothing really prepared, so i asked everyone to draw themselves. When i looked at the drawings i felt faint. All of the students were Black, yet the drawings depicted a lot of blond-haired, blue-eyed little white children. I was horrified. I went home and ransacked every magazine i could find with pictures of Black people. I came in early the next day and plastered the walls with pictures of Black people. We talked about what was beautiful. We talked about all the different kinds of beauty in the world and about all the different kinds of flowers in the world. And then we talked about the different kinds of beauty that people have and about the beauty of Black people. We talked about our lips and our noses. We made African masks out of clay and papier-mâché, made African sculptures, painted pictures of Black people, of Black neighborhoods. Over the summer i felt the classroom changing. The kids were changing and so was i. We were feeling good about ourselves and feeling good about being with each other.

I was so involved in working at the school that i had time for little else. If one of the students didn't come to school, i was at his or her house that very day wanting to know why. I would go home and spend hours rewriting some story or preparing for the next day. Half the time my mother would find me asleep with a book in my hands and all the lights on. I loved working with the kids, and i loved teaching. My mother helped me quite a lot and we grew closer than we had ever been before. I thought about becoming a teacher but decided against it.

For the first time, i became aware of what my mother had been going through all those years trying to teach in New York schools. Most of these principals are caught up in bureaucracy and they force the teachers to be caught up in it too. They care more about what the teachers have written in their plan books than what they are actually teaching in the class. My mother was working in an environment where white teachers often showed a hostile, condescending attitude toward Black children and where some teachers thought of themselves as zookeepers rather than teachers.

As much as i loved working with kids, i knew that i could never

participate in the board-of-education kind of teaching. I wasn't teaching no Black children to say the pledge of allegiance or to think George Washington was great or any other such bullshit.

That fall, the level of activity on campus surpassed anything that we had dreamed of. Large numbers of students became involved in the antiwar movement. It seemed that there was no time to catch up with all of the things that were happening. I would be at the construction workers' demonstration one day and then marching with the welfare mothers the next. We got down with everything—rent strikes, sit-ins, the takeover of the Harlem state office building, whatever it was. If we agreed with it, we would try to give active support in some way. The more active i became the more i liked it. It was like medicine, making me well, making me whole. I was home. For the first time, my life felt like it had some real meaning. Everywhere I turned, Black people were struggling, Puerto Ricans were struggling. It was beautiful. I love Black people, i don't care what they are doing, but when Black people are struggling, that's when they are most beautiful to me.

As usual, i was speeding. My energy just couldn't stop dancing. I was caught up in the music of struggle, and i wanted to dance. I was never bored and never lonely, and the brothers and sisters who became my friends were so beautiful to me. I would mention their names, but the way things are today, i'd only be sending the FBI or the CIA to their doors.

There were a lot of communist groups on campus. I had no idea at the time that there were so many different kinds of communists and socialists. I had been so brainwashed i had thought that all communists were the same, that there were Marxists, Leninists, Maoists, Trotskyites, etc. Most of the so-called communists i met weren't in any party at all, but just related to the philosophy of communism. Most followed very different political lines and policies, and it was difficult for them to sit down and agree on the time of day, much less hatch up some "communist plot."

I was surprised to learn that there were all different types of capitalist countries and different types of communist countries. I had heard "communist bloc" and "behind the iron curtain" so much in the media, that i had naturally formed the impression that these countries were all the same. Although they are all socialist, East Germany, Bulgaria, Cuba, and North Korea are as different as night and day. All of them have different histories, different cultures, and different ways of applying the socialist theory, although they have the same economic and similar political systems. It has never ceased to amaze me how so many people can be tricked

into hating people who have never done them any harm. You simply mention the word "communist" and a lot of these red, white, and blue fools are ready to kill.

I wasn't against communism, but i can't say i was for it either. At first, i viewed it suspiciously, as some kind of white man's concoction, until i read works by African revolutionaries and studied the African liberation movements. Revolutionaries in Africa understood that the question of African liberation was not just a question of race, that even if they managed to get rid of the white colonialists, if they didn't rid themselves of the capitalistic economic structure, the white colonialists would simply be replaced by Black neocolonialists. There was not a single liberation movement in Africa that was not fighting for socialism. In fact, there was not a single liberation movement in the whole world that was fighting for capitalism. The whole thing boiled down to a simple equation: anything that has any kind of value is made, mined, grown, produced, and processed by working people. So why shouldn't working people collectively own that wealth? Why shouldn't working people own and control their own resources? Capitalism meant that rich businessmen owned the wealth, while socialism meant that the people who made the wealth owned it.

I got into heated arguments with sisters or brothers who claimed that the oppression of Black people was only a question of race. I argued that there were Black oppressors as well as white ones. That's why you've got Blacks who support Nixon or Reagan or other conservatives. Black folks with money have always tended to support candidates who they believed would protect their financial interests. As far as i was concerned, it didn't take too much brains to figure out that Black people are oppressed because of class as well as race, because we are poor and because we are Black. It would burn me up every time somebody talked about Black people climbing the ladder of success. Anytime you're talking about a ladder, you're talking about a top and a bottom, an upper class and a lower class, a rich class and a poor class. As long as you've got a system with a top and a bottom, Black people are always going to wind up at the bottom, because we're the easiest to discriminate against. That's why i couldn't see fighting within the system. Both the democratic party and the republican party are controlled by millionaires. They are interested in holding on to their power, while i was interested in taking it away. They were interested in supporting fascist dictatorships in South and Central America, while i wanted to see them overthrown. They were interested in supporting racist, fascist regimes in Africa while i was interested in seeing them overthrown. They were interested in defeating the Viet Cong and i

was interested in seeing them win their liberation. A poster of the massacre at My Lai, picturing women and children lying clumped together in a heap, their bodies riddled with bullets, hung on my wall as a daily reminder of the brutality in the world.

Manhattan Community College had not one course on Puerto Rican history. The Puerto Rican sisters and brothers who knew what was happening became our teachers. I had hung out all my life with Puerto Ricans, and i didn't even know Puerto Rico was a colony. They told us of the long and valiant struggle against the first Spanish colonizers and then, later, against the u.s. government and about their revolutionary heroes, the Puerto Rican Five—Lolita Lebrón, Rafael Miranda, Andres Cordero, Irving Flores, and Oscar Collazo, each of whom had spent more than a quarter of a century behind bars fighting for the independence of Puerto Rico. Once you understand something about the history of a people, their heroes, their hardships and their sacrifices, it's easier to struggle with them, to support their struggle. For a lot of people in this country, people who live in other places have no faces. And this is the way the u.s. government wants it to be. They figure that as long as the people have no faces and the country has no form, amerikans will not protest when they send in the marines to wipe them out.

I had begun to think of myself as a socialist, but i could not in any way see myself joining any of the socialist groups i came in contact with. I loved to listen to them, learn from them, and argue with them, but there was no way in the world i could see myself becoming a member. For one thing, i could not stand the condescending, paternalistic attitudes of some of the white people in those groups. Some of the older members thought that because they had been in the struggle for socialism for a long time, they knew all the answers to the problems of Black people and all the aspects of the Black Liberation struggle. I couldn't relate to the idea of the great white father on earth any more than i could relate to the great white father up in the sky. I was willing and ready to learn everything i could from them, but i damn sure was not ready to accept them as leaders of the Black Liberation struggle. A few thought that they had a monopoly on Marx and acted like the only experts in the world on socialism came from Europe. In many instances they downgraded the theoretical and practical contributions of Third World revolutionaries like Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Augustino Neto, and other leaders of liberation movements in the Third World.

Another thing that went against my grain was the arrogance and dogmatism i encountered in some of these groups.

A member of one group told me that if i was really concerned

about the liberation of Black people i should quit school and get a job in a factory, that if i wanted to get rid of the system i would have to work at a factory and organize the workers. When i asked him why he wasn't working in a factory and organizing the workers, he told me that he was staying in school in order to organize the students. I told him i was working to organize the students too and that i felt perfectly certain that the workers could organize themselves without any college students doing it for them. Some of these groups would come up with abstract, intellectual theories, totally devoid of practical application, and swear they had the answers to the problems of the world. They attacked the Vietnamese for participating in the Paris peace talks, claiming that by negotiating the Viet Cong were selling out to the u.s. I think they got insulted when i asked them how a group of flabby white boys who couldn't fight their way out of a paper bag had the nerve to think they could tell the Vietnamese people how to run their show.

Arrogance was one of the key factors that kept the white left so factionalized. I felt that instead of fighting together against a common enemy, they wasted time quarreling with each other about who had the right line.

Although i respected the work and political positions of many groups on the left, i felt it was necessary for Black people to come together to organize our own structures and our own revolutionary political party. Friendship is based on respect. As long as much of the white left saw their role as organizing, educating, recruiting, and directing Black revolutionaries, i could not see how any real friendship could occur. I felt, and still feel, that it is necessary for Black revolutionaries to come together, analyze our history, our present condition, and to define ourselves and our struggle. Black self-determination is a basic right, and if we do not have the right to determine our destinies, then who does? I believe that to gain our liberation, we must come from the position of power and unity and that a Black revolutionary party, led by Black revolutionary leaders, is essential. I believe in uniting with white revolutionaries to fight against a common enemy, but i was convinced that it had to be on the basis of power and unity rather than from weakness and unity at any cost.

To my momma,
who has swallowed the amerikan dream
and choked on it.

To my momma,
whose dreams have fought each other—
and died.

Who sees,
but cannot bear to see.
A volcano eating its own lava.

To my momma, who couldn't turn
hell into paradise
and blamed herself.
Who has always seen
reflected in her mirror
an ugly duckling.

To my momma,
who makes no demands of anyone
cause she don't think she can afford to.
Who thinks her money talks
louder than her womanhood.

To my butchfem momma,
who has always
taken care of business.
Who has never drifted
hazily to sleep
thinking, "he will take care of it."
Who has schemed so much
she sometimes schemes against herself.

To my sweet, shy momma.
Who is uneasy with people
cause she don't know how
to be phony,
and is afraid to be real.

Who has longed for sculptured gardens.
Whose potted plant
dies slowly on the window sill.

We have all been infected
with a sickness
that can be traced back
to the auction block.

You must not feel guilty
for what has been done to us.
Only the strong go crazy.
The weak just go along.

And what i thought was cruelty,
I understand was fear
that hands, stronger than yours,
and whiter than yours,
would strangle my young life
into oblivion.

Momma, i am proud of you.
I look at you
and see the strength of our people.
I have seen you struggle
in the dark;
the world beating on your back,
dragging your catch
back to our den.
Pulling your pots and pans out
to cook it.
A mop in one hand.
A pencil in the other,
marking up my homework
with your love.

The injured have no blame.
Let it fall on those who injure.

Leave the past behind
where it belongs—
and come with me
toward tomorrow.

I love you mommy
cause you are beautiful,
and i am life that springs from you:
part tree, part weed, part flower.

My roots run deep.
I have been nourished well.