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History 91
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Final Research Paper
December 17, 2011

Shule Ya Uhuru¹:

The “Modern Strivers” and D.C.’s Eastern High School Freedom Annex

On February 4th 1970, Charles Robinson, president of Eastern High School’s “Modern Strivers” club, testified before the District of Columbia’s Board of Education on the issue of safety at Eastern High School’s student-run Freedom Annex. In response to four school shootings that all took place on one day in D.C. public schools the prior month, Mayor Walter E. Washington had installed “strongly defended” police guards on the halls of the District’s 46 public junior and high schools and called for a five million dollar school budget increase to keep the guards stationed there another month.² The Board of Education called for a community meeting to hear citizens’ comments on the subject of “school safety” and the measures Mayor Washington had taken.³ Robinson, who had been kicked out of junior high school 16 times because, in his words, “they say I was undisciplined,” spoke to the Board about his understanding of the roots of violence and student unrest in the D.C. public school system.⁴

Robinson boldly opened his statement: “Students who are interested and challenged by their educational experiences do not [sic] cause violence within the schools. The roots of this problem lie within the bowels of the American society and must

¹ Shule Ya Uhuru was the Swahili name for Eastern’s Freedom School.

² Lawrence Feinberg, "School Patrols Continue: Mayor to Keep Police Guards Indefinitely," *Washington Post* [Washington, D.C.] 20 Jan. 1970: C1.

³ District Board of Education, *Meeting of the Board of Education: Community Meeting*, 4 Feb. 1970.

⁴ *Ibid.*

be dealt with on that level.”⁵ To Robinson, the violence in D.C. public schools did not stem from any cultural depravity of its students, but rather from an educational system composed of uncaring, ill-prepared teachers who “dispense the garbage of a polluted society” to students who must periodically “regurgitate the filth and be graded for their ability to exactly imitate the model.”⁶ Increased police presence at Eastern would not solve school violence, he declared, because youth are *not* criminals: “We just seem like this. You make us criminals. That’s right. When you put those police in there you made us look bad, you made the community look bad.”⁷ To truly prevent student unrest, he contended, the schools needed a new curriculum, one that did not prepare students for today’s society, but rather a “more sane [sic], human one.”⁸ This is what Eastern’s Freedom School had been doing for the past 18 months, making great efforts to “salvage” the minds of young Black people, minds that, in Robinson’s view, the Board had nearly destroyed.⁹

Charles Robinson reported that Eastern’s Freedom Annex, a student-run school with a focus on black studies, had no cops, no truancy or drop out problems, no broken windows, and no violence, all issues that plagued the public school system throughout the city.¹⁰ The only major issue of violence and vandalism that Robinson could recall occurred two years prior, before the all-white congregation at the Luther Keller Memorial Church, where the Freedom School was located, had disbanded. The church’s all-white congregation had fled D.C. for the suburbs during the post-World War II federally- and

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid

municipally-subsidized “white flight,” through the G.I. Bill and Highway Development Act, leaving behind the neighborhood’s growing working-class and poor black community to face the reign of Nixon’s urban “benign neglect.”¹¹ Each Sunday, the white churchgoers drove in from out of the suburbs, and each Sunday, they left, acting as if the Church’s surrounding black community “never existed,” according to Charles Robinson.¹² In response, the Church’s black neighbors asked to take over the Church, and when denied, vandalized the Church. In this context, the Church agreed to house the “Modern Strivers” burgeoning Freedom Annex, an act which Robinson viewed as “more of a tokenism thing” than an act of redistributive justice.¹³ The Church ultimately disbanded, however, after D.C.’s 1968 street uprising, which followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and destroyed large swaths of D.C.’s chain stores and white-owned businesses that profited greatly during this period of government-sponsored divestment from urban black communities.¹⁴

The Lutheran churchgoers made up part of a much larger stream of whites who fled D.C. after the 1954 *Bolling v. Sharp* decision that desegregated D.C.’s public schools, leaving the city’s black majority population increasingly isolated, with a

¹¹ For an explanation of the federally subsidized roots of white flight in D.C. see: : Damien J. Thompson, "Pictures on the Wall: Urban Restructuring, Gentrification, and the Struggle for Place in 21st Century Washington, D.C," (Diss. American University, 2006); “benign neglect” refers to a period of governmental neglect of people of color during Nixon’s presidency.

¹² District Board of Education, *Meeting of the Board of Education: Community Meeting*, 4 Feb. 1970.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Clayton Jeffers, "Death of Another Church," *Washington Star* [Washington, D.C.] 1 Nov. 1969; On April 17, 1968, Black Power activist, Rufus “Catfish” Mayfield explained to white high students in Bethesda, Maryland that D.C.’s April 4th rioters did not indiscriminately burn buildings, but rather strategically targeted big businesses. See: Lawrence Feinberg, "Catfish Mayfield Tells High School Pupils of the 'New 3 R's'" *Washington Post* [Washington, D.C.] 18 Apr. 1968: B4. For further analysis on the riot’s targeted nature and its origins in the federally-subsidized growth in economic disparities between black and white communities in D.C. post WWII see: Thompson, 105-8.

shrinking tax base and a harmful reputation for crime and urban decay.¹⁵ By the mid-1960s, only a decade after school desegregation efforts, D.C. and many other cities across the nation had failed to improve black students' access to quality education, especially given that by 1968 only seven percent of D.C.'s school children were white.¹⁶ In D.C., ability-tracking policies implemented two years after the local 1954 *Bolling v Sharpe* decision and were initially put in place to solve such "failures of desegregation", by reassuring whites in D.C. that poor achieving (black) students would not hold back "more advanced" students in the classroom, tracking served only to reinstate segregated education in the District and subordinate black students.¹⁷

In the context of such disparaging circumstances and in the face of an educational establishment that criminalized and dehumanized them, Charles Robinson and the politically conscious "Modern Strivers" of Eastern High envisioned opportunity. They connected their personal experiences in D.C. public schools and their evolving black consciousness to an awareness of the longstanding continuities and recent accomplishments of the black freedom struggle, particularly in the local context of Julius Hobson's successful legislative campaign to outlaw ability tracking in D.C. public schools in the year before the Strivers formed, as well as to global issues, especially flourishing Third World anti-colonial struggles. Further inspired by the late 1960s resurgence of black nationalist thought, black high school students at D.C.'s Eastern High

¹⁵ James Clark Moone, *The Problem of Designing an African-American Studies Program in U.S. Public Schools the Challenge for New Directions: "A Case Study of the Washington, D.C. Public Schools, 1969-1974,"* (Washington: Howard University, 1976) 86.

¹⁶ "White Students Dip to 7.1% in District High Schools," *Washington Star* [Washington, D.C.] 25 Oct. 1968: C1; Russel J. Rickford, "'A Struggle in the Arena of Ideas': Black Independent Schools and the Quest for Nationhood, 1966-1986" (Diss., Columbia University, 2009) 60.

¹⁷ Floyd W. Hayes III, "Race, Urban Politics, and Educational Policy-Making in Washington, D.C.: A Communities Struggle for Quality Education," *Urban Education*, 25.3 (1990), p. 240.

School decisively and strategically organized to take control of the educational system that shaped their lives and to improve the quality of life for working-class and poor black youth in D.C.. Grassroots-oriented and committed to a politics of self-determination, the Strivers drew upon the confluence and complexity of black political ideologies surging in the late 1960s to redefine and re-envision public secondary education and black studies.

To many, the 1968 riots that fueled the disbanding of Luther Memorial Church's congregation also ushered in the decline of the *heroic* civil rights era. They symbolized the abandonment of earlier, "more promising and effective" black movements for social justice.¹⁸ The seemingly sudden burst of black power into late 1960s American politics is often portrayed in stark contrast to the grassroots organizing tradition of the civil rights movement as a "rhetorically grandiose but practically delusional politics that indulged in racially separatist fantasies and placed a premium on style over substance," in the words of historian Charles Payne.¹⁹ Recent historians of the black power movement, such as Joseph Peniel, however, challenge such a strict dichotomy between the "good 1960s" and "bad 1960s," for failing to consider the diversity within civil rights era movements and ignoring the longstanding existence of Black Power's black nationalist ethos in earlier historical periods.²⁰ By tracing the modern roots of both the Civil Rights and Black Power movements to post-World War I movements for black self-determination and economic justice, such as Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association

¹⁸ Penel E. Joseph, "Community Organizing, Grassroots Politics, and Neighborhood Rebels: Local Struggles for Black Power in America," *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level*, Ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 2.

¹⁹ Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: the Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995) 338-390.

²⁰ Joseph, "Community Organizing," 2.

(UNIA) and A. Phillip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), these historians argue that, "far from being mutually exclusive," the Civil Rights and Black Power movements formed parallel, and at times intersecting, branches of a centuries-long struggle for black liberation.²¹ Additionally, scholar Matthew J. Countryman demonstrates through his analysis of local black power organizing in Philadelphia that, contrary to Payne's assertions, local black power activists "borrowed political rhythms" from the civil rights movement, continuing its community organizing traditions.²² Furthermore, approaching the black power movement from a local, community-studies framework, as Rhonda Williams does in her examination of Baltimore's black power organizing, sheds long-overlooked light on the prevalent black women activists who, in their tenant and welfare-rights organizing, "engendered" black power politics in "innovative and unpredictable ways," refuting "the male-dominated iconography that remains attached to the era," and mobilizing its militant rhetoric to empower their communities.²³

Recent black freedom studies scholars also challenge the predominant role historians have afforded to struggles for integration in their examinations of black educational organizing. In *More Than One Struggle: the Evolution of Black School*

²¹ Ibid, 11. For other examples of recent, long black freedom struggle histories, that challenge strict dichotomies between civil rights and black power movements, see: Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'till the Midnight Hour: Black Political and Intellectual Radicalism, 1960-1975* (New York: Henry Holt and, 2000); Matthew J. Countryman, "Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia, 1940-1971," Diss. (Duke University, 1998); Peniel E. Joseph, ed. *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*. (New York: Routledge, 2006); Jack Dougherty, *More than One Struggle: the Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004); Russell J. Rickford, "'A Struggle in the Arena of Ideas': Black Independent Schools and the Quest for Nationhood, 1966-1986" (Diss., Columbia University, 2009); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: the Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003).

²² Matthew J. Countryman, "Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia, 1940-1971," Diss. (Duke University, 1998).

²³ Rhonda Y. Williams, "Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power," *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*. Ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006) 97-103.

Reform in Milwaukee, Jack Dougherty crucially highlights that integration was just one of *many* strategies deployed by African Americans throughout the 20th century as a means to gain a quality education for black students. He describes instances in which black parent activists in Milwaukee even downplayed the value of integrated schools in order to improve their children's access to educational resources.²⁴ My research builds off of Russell J. Rickford's examination of the role of black power politics in transforming black struggles for libratory education. He traces emergence of a "basic black" educational philosophy in the late 1960s to black activists' growing disenchantment with the results and philosophy behind integration and the rising black nationalist and Pan Africanist consciousness of the time. Rickman describes black theorists' mounting consensus around the need for "relevant" curricula, black cultural self-definition, and community self-determination in schools to instill in black students a racial identity and inspire them to transform, rather than just assimilate into mainstream society, encouraged movements for black studies, community control, and autonomous black institutions of education during the black power era. While Rickford acknowledges that ideological cleavages existed between some proponents of community control and others of independent black schools, the two movements commingled and greatly influenced one another, and his historical narrative presents independent black schools as the inevitable result of efforts for community control. In doing so, his very brief reference to the Modern Striver's Eastern Freedom Annex mischaracterizes the school as moderate

²⁴ Jack Dougherty, *More than One Struggle: the Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004).

school reform effort, overlooking the Strivers' complex incorporation of both principles of institutional autonomy and community control through their activism.²⁵

Rickford not only overlooks the confluence of Black Nationalist and Pan-Africanist ideologies and grassroots pragmatism in the Strivers' organizing, he also fails to acknowledge the importance of the youth-driven nature of their struggle. He, along with many other historians of both educational and black freedom struggle organizing, continuously ignores the key leadership and strategizing roles youth of color have played in these movements. With the exception of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), historians typically dismiss youth of color as passive or manipulated followers of adult militants, driven to action solely by disaffected anger or an anti-intellectual rage. In spite of the widespread organizing that black high school students initiated and participated in across the nation, from L.A. to York, Pennsylvania during this time, only recently have scholars, such as Dionne Danns and Jean Theoharis begun to examine the intricacies of youth-of-color-led school reform efforts of the late 1960s.²⁶

The Modern Strivers and their Eastern Freedom Annex emerged from an organic process of Eastern students' practice of self-discovery, self-expression, and self-determination in an English classroom. Guided by the political consciousness of writers in the Black Arts Movement and influenced by student organizing efforts at other D.C. public schools, the Eastern students in John "Jay" Lord's 1967 English class engaged in critical reflection on their environment and built a collective consciousness of the

²⁵ Rickford, 243.

²⁶ Dionne Danns, "Black Student Empowerment and Chicago: School Reform Efforts in 1968," *Urban Education* 37.51 Nov. (2002): 631-55; Jeanne Theoharis, "'W-A-L-K-O-U-T!': High School Students and the Development of Black Power in L.A.," *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level*, Ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

oppression they experienced at Eastern. The open-ended, student-centered act of questioning their environment not only shaped Eastern students' critical thinking, but was also a radical assertion of students' agency and democratic fellowship, inspired by earlier pedagogical tools popularized in SNCC's 1964 Mississippi freedom schools and the civil rights era black "organizing tradition," epitomized by the lifeworks of Ella Baker and Septima Clark decades earlier. Charles Payne describes the slow "spadework" of the black organizing tradition, which sought to develop the leadership capacities of ordinary people by challenging hierarchical leadership and stressing egalitarian, grassroots methods as a means to achieve liberation. The Strivers emerged out of this legacy.

In their fall semester in John "Jay" Lord's English class, the students who would eventually come to form the Modern Strivers, critically engaged with prominent poets from the Black Arts Movement such as Leroi Jones and Langston Hughes, in a noted departure from "most comparable English courses", which "dwell on such writers as Cooper, Twain, Dreiser and the like," a local newspaper commented.²⁷ Lord, a white Amherst graduate and Peace Corps veteran, stressed relevant and progressive pedagogy in his classroom, which he conducted similar to "a college seminar, encouraging student participation." Students read not only the works of black literary figures, something Lord emphasized was necessary for his students to identify with, but also the literature of white Americans. By providing a mixture, Lord rationalized, "I believe it gives them a more critical outlook."²⁸ Out of this critical outlook, the students began to discuss the

²⁷ Winstin Grom, "He Teaches English, 'Identity'" *Washington Star* [Washington, D.C.] 17 Mar. 1968: F9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

conditions of the Washington, D.C. school system, and in particular their experiences at Eastern, a school of 2400 black students and one white student.²⁹

Influenced by earlier civil rights traditions of participatory democratic practices as well as the literature of the late 1960's "new nationalism," the Strivers both embodied and reconciled tensions between Civil Rights' liberal reformism and Black Power's nationalism, demonstrating how these two, seemingly disparate branches of the black freedom struggle intermingled in local organizing contexts. In his essay on the origins of the Freedom Annex, co-founder and Modern Strivers member Willis Brooks described the conclusions drawn from students' reflection on their everyday lives at Eastern in Lord's English class:

"It seemed that Eastern was receiving less money than some of the schools that had a substantial enrollment of white students. These black students found that they were receiving hundreds of dollars less per pupil than the white students. They found that they had more temporary teachers, fewer textbooks, and most important they found they were receiving a white education. The result of all this was one of the lowest reading and math scores in the country"³⁰

Out of their open-ended, critical consciousness-raising practice, students in Lord's class identified that they were not getting the kind of education they wanted and the reasons why. Lessons from SNCC's 1964 Mississippi freedom schools resound in Brooks' description of the Eastern students' exercise. SNCC teachers used this same technique of engaging students in questioning their environment and experiences in order to build up a realistic perception of oppression in American society, three years earlier in Mississippi. Daniel Perlstein explains that teachers in SNCC's earlier freedom schools were instructed "to train people to be active agents in bringing about social change' by having students

²⁹ Willis Brooks, et al., "Shule Ya Uhuru: Freedom and Manhood," *High School*, Ed. Ronald Gross and Paul Osterman (New York: Simon and Schuster) 1971: 288.

³⁰ Willis Brooks, et al., 285-6.

describe the schools they attended and then comparing black schools to white ones.”³¹ Celebrated widely, SNCC’s racially-conscious, progressive freedom school pedagogy permeated the nation, influencing activists and teachers as freedom schools spread north and west, emerging in D.C. the semester before Lord’s fall English course, as a component of Julius Hobson’s 1967 school boycott against tracking policies.³²

In addition to the influence of student-centered democratic pedagogy on students in Lord’s English class, Strivers’ co-president Roger Newell stressed the influence of black consciousness literature on his analysis and conclusions about issues at Eastern. He explained: “I had been doing some reading on my own and had become aware of my blackness, but I found that in a school system which is over 95 percent black there were no courses in black history or subjects like that.”³³ Similarly, the Black Arts Movement works of Leroi Jones and Langston Hughes, which students read in Lord’s class that semester, left a lasting impression on them, for students in the class who grew to form the Modern Strivers went on to perform their plays and poetry publicly, as a means to publicize the Freedom Annex.³⁴ Out of their experiences with radical democratic-participatory pedagogy and their exposure to new Black Nationalist literature and thought, the students in Lord’s English class decided to form the “Modern Strivers,” a student group that “tries to Get Things Done at Eastern.”³⁵ Guided by a pragmatic devotion to improving the quality of education for the masses of black youth at Eastern

³¹ Daniel Perlstein, “Freedom, Liberation, Accommodation: Politics and Pedagogy in SNCC and the Black Panther Party,” *Teach Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African-American Tradition*, Ed. Charles M. Payne and Carol S. Strickland (New York, NY: Teachers College) 2008: 77.

³² Moone, 126; Rickford, 129.

³³ “Freedom Annex Opens,” *Washington Post* [Washington, D.C.] 22 Nov. 1968: C1.

³⁴ “Calendar,” *The Washington Post* [Washington, D.C.] 27 Feb. 1969: E5.

³⁵ “Eastern Pupils Get Action on Cooker,” *Washington Star* [Washington, D.C.] 2 Mar. 1968: B2.

High more than any ideological commitment, the Strivers' built off of previous high school organizing movements in D.C. and straddled tensions between reformist and autonomous movements for black educational improvement of their time.

The Strivers strategically selected a popular concern and winnable goal for their first public action. The students discovered that a brand new food steamer had sat idle in their cafeteria for the past two years because the school could not afford the costs to install it. Meanwhile, students ate from a barely functioning steamer that had been taken from an old ship's tramp steamer, a very old model long since destroyed. Willis Brooks described the logic behind their campaign to get a new steamer installed: "This was an issue that nobody could oppose, because teachers and students had been complaining about the food for years."³⁶ On January 12, 1968, in Eastern's cafeteria, the Strivers organized their first boycott. That day, fewer than 50 lunches were sold, compared to the regular 500 served.³⁷ The Strivers used the issue of the schools' poor food as a basis for a wider discussion about what was wrong at Eastern. Media coverage from the protest explained, "Students at Eastern High school boycotted their cafeteria yesterday but most of the complaints were about the quality of education they are receiving rather than the food they are served."³⁸ Gathering in a small corner of the teachers' lunchroom at Eastern, the Strivers led students in an open discussion about their experiences and problems at Eastern. The press highlighted the voices of a wide array of students and their concerns, ranging from the need for more reading courses, improved guidance counseling, and most pronouncedly, "'uncensored' courses in Negro history and

³⁶ Brooks, et al., 286.

³⁷ Ernest Holsendolph, "Eastern Pupils Stage Boycott of Cafeteria," *Washington Star* [Washington, D.C.] 1 Jan. 1968: B1.

³⁸ Susan Jacoby, "Students Protest at Eastern High," *Washington Post* [Washington, D.C.] 13 Jan. 1968: A1+.

instruction about their African heritage, including a course in Swahili.”³⁹ The Strivers tactically employed a grassroots mobilizing approach and a democratic, participatory process to organically elicit students’ widespread grievances with the school. A month later, administrators at Eastern finally started using the new “Cadillac of cookers.”⁴⁰

Following the press and popular attention the Strivers achieved from their successful cafeteria boycott, the group, numbering between 25-40 black students at Eastern, compiled the list of students grievances into a concise six-point student bill of rights. The bill called for students’ freedom from censorship by the administration in any school activity, such as dress, expression, and the formation of groups, as well as courses in “Negro history” and social psychology, “to explore teen-age [sic] drug addiction, alcoholism, and delinquency.”⁴¹ In a context which students themselves described as “grim,” where the reading skills of Eastern graduates rated in the lower 15 percent of the US and over 30 percent of Eastern’s graduating class in 1967 was neither working nor continuing their education, the Strivers envisioned opportunity.⁴² Their activism defied traditional narratives of the post-civil rights era as a period of decline and urban despair, in which militant black youth are typically portrayed as driven to violence by anti-intellectual anger.⁴³ Instead, the students at Eastern High powerfully sought greater control over the institution that shaped the lives of black youth in their community.

³⁹ Holsendolph, “Eastern Pupils Stage Boycott of Cafeteria”

⁴⁰ “Eastern Pupils Get Action on Cooker,” B2.

⁴¹ “Student Vote on Rights Okd at Eastern,” *Washington Star* [Washington, D.C.] 17 Jan. 1968: A1.

⁴² Jack Vitek, “Recognition Elates Students: Bill of Rights Drafted for Eastern High,” *Washington Daily News* [Washington, D.C.] 16 Jan. 1968: 9; Ernest Holsendolph, “School Figures List 31.6% of Eastern’s June Class as Idle,” *Washington Star* [Washington, D.C.] 16 Jan. 1968.

⁴³ Theoharis 123.

The Strivers did not seek to enact their student bill of rights through the schools' traditional student council. Instead, they petitioned Eastern's principal, Madison W. Tignor, for a student-wide vote on the bill. In a newspaper comment, Tignor attempted to discredit the Strivers for not making their demands through student council, suggesting that they did not represent the majority of students.⁴⁴ However, the Strivers were not attempting to subvert a process of democratic governance in the school by not going through student council, rather they challenged the very democratic nature of the council to begin with. Gregory Taylor, a senior in the Strivers questioned: "Why should the snobs, who happen to get A's and meet the teachers' approval be set up as the censored voice of the student body?"⁴⁵ The Strivers saw students with poor academic records discriminated against in the school and sought a truly democratic process wherein students who did not get A's or B's could express their opinions legitimately. On January 17th, Tignor reluctantly granted the Strivers recognition as a student group, with the ability to hold a school-wide referendum on their student bill of rights. The following semester, Eastern offered courses in Negro history and social psychology.⁴⁶ The Strivers' initial demands and actions around issues of hot food and a better education at Eastern demonstrated their commitment to principles of participatory democracy, community organizing, and political pragmatism aimed at improving the education of the mass of black students at Eastern.

⁴⁴ Vitek.

⁴⁵ Ernest Holsendolph, "Quiet D.C. Revolution: Student Voice Growing," *Washington Star* [Washington, D.C.] 15 Jan. 1968: B2.

⁴⁶ Brooks, et al., 286.

The resurgent Black Nationalist consciousness of the late 1960s, which fueled black activists' campaigns for "community control" and "relevant" education across the nation, inspired the Strivers not only to fight for increased black student self-determination and participatory democracy within Eastern, but also to demand greater black community control over Eastern and the formation of an autonomous black studies model program, which they called "Freedom Annex." A month after the Strivers' victory over cafeteria food, students' rights, and course offerings at Eastern, the students went before the District Board of Education with a petition from 500 Eastern students stating: we "do not believe that we are receiving as good an education as possible from this institution."⁴⁷ With this petition in hand, Gregory Taylor, Roger Lewis, Wanda Robinson, and Stephen Adams of the Modern Strivers approached the Board at their February 7th meeting, asking, not for favors, but "only for the return of our stolen education."⁴⁸ Their demands reflected the Strivers' evolving definition of what quality education meant for the poor and working-class black youth at Eastern High.

Having "evaluated the Washington School System by experiencing Eastern High School from the students point of view," the Strivers put forth a proposal to the Board that reflected their idea of the model conditions for the process of learning, conditions that, in their words, would "teach us to indentify with ourselves, the Black People." These model conditions rested on underlying principals of community and youth control, "Endarkenment," a process "where the truth is told about Black people...[to] help the Black man overcome the hurdles of self-hatred placed in his path by the white

⁴⁷ District Board of Education, *Meeting of the Board of Education: Community Meeting*, 7 Feb. 1968.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

educational system,”⁴⁹ and self-autonomy, reflecting the permeation of Black Nationalist thought into the Strivers consciousness and organizing strategies.⁵⁰ At the same time that they called for an autonomous, student-run freedom school and criticized the racism saturating all of American society, the Strivers also organized for change within Eastern and D.C. public schools as a whole, reflecting their continuous commitment to serving the grassroots and to the liberal ideal of education as a tool for social mobility.

Gregory Taylor introduced the Strivers’ appeal by reading a quote from the *Washington Post* given by Principal Tignor in response to their cafeteria boycott. Tignor asserted that students had Eastern did not have a right to be disappointed in the low reading scores of the school because “they don’t take into account the odds we are working against...we have every kind of student in this school. Some come from fine professional homes, but we have many from other kinds of homes, you know.”⁵¹ He added to his defense that Eastern had the best cadet corps and athletic program in the city.⁵² Tignor spouted the popular theory of “cultural deprivation” to excuse the grim circumstances and unjust educational conditions for black students at Eastern. Reinforcing theories of black cultural pathology by linking academic performance to students’ “family background,” “culture of poverty” explanations grew common amongst staunch liberals and civil rights allies in the 1960s and came to replace experts’ more explicitly racist, *genetic* explanations for black students’ poor academic performance.⁵³ However, by the late 1960s, the Strivers, along with other increasingly militant black

⁴⁹ Modern Strivers, *Proposal for Eastern Freedom School*, Typescript, Herrick S. Roth Collection, Wayne University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit. Undated.

⁵⁰ Modern Strivers, *Proposal for Eastern Freedom School*.

⁵¹ District Board of Education, 7 Feb. 1968

⁵² Brooks, et al., 286.

⁵³ Rickford, 67-69.

activists, forcefully rejected “cultural deprivation” theories for their underlying paternalism and racism and for discounting the structural factors such as isolation and municipal neglect devastating black communities at the time.⁵⁴ Gregory Taylor himself boldly stated his rejoinder to Tignor’s espousal of the “cultural deprivation” theory before the entire District School Board: “Am I inferior because I am not from a professional background? Or is it that you don’t want me, and other students like me, to become a professional? I, myself, believe that it is because you do not want me to be a professional.”⁵⁵ Taylor, the Strivers, and other students at Eastern had come to the consensus, along with other black nationalists at the time, that the issues black students faced in urban public schools did not result from any innate black or poor cultural disadvantage, but rather from teachers and administrators who did not care and tracked students like Taylor into basic courses such as cooking and woodshop for their entire lives just to “get them out of the way.”⁵⁶ In response, the Strivers and other militant black school activists in the late 1960s determined that they “could not depend on the school system” and must instead take matters into their own hands.⁵⁷

Roger Lewis of the Strivers approached the Board next, addressing both the context and content of the group’s immediate demands for increased black student and community control over Eastern. The Strivers contended that improving the quality of education at Eastern required a structure of increased community and student participation that would provide them with a truly *meaningful* education.⁵⁸ The Strivers’ immediate demands included: the right for Eastern students to travel throughout the

⁵⁴ Rickford, 71.

⁵⁵ District Board of Education, 7 Feb. 1968.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

country to recruit and hire teachers specifically for Eastern, that students, parents, and teachers at Eastern be granted direct power to hire the school's next principal, and that the school be immediately re-evaluated by the Middle States' Association of Colleges and Schools.⁵⁹ Though some of the Strivers' demands, such as community and student control over principal and teacher hiring, reflected a Black Nationalist orientation towards increased self-determination over their education, others, such as the Middle-States reevaluation of Eastern, simultaneously indicated the students' continued faith in the liberal ideal of education as a means to achieve full participation in mainstream American society. Upward mobility through quality education remained a priority for the Strivers, at the same time that they espoused a critical orientation towards mainstream society and D.C.'s public school system overall, a system which they believed "did more harm than good."⁶⁰ The tension between the radical and reformist ideologies underlying the Strivers' immediate demands for improving Eastern High further underscores that at the local level, Black Power nationalism and Civil Rights integrationism did not exist as politically polar dogmas. As the Strivers increasingly adapted a Black Nationalist consciousness in their demands, they remained pragmatically committed to ensuring black students' access to a quality education as well as the skills and resources necessary to incorporate into mainstream American society.

The developing Black Nationalist ethos of the Modern Strivers' organizing did not preclude them from engaging and attempting to reform mainstream institutions in order to improve the lives of black youths, nor did their growing militancy stem from a dogmatic adherence to the iconic elders making newspaper headlines for their black

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Modern Strivers, *Proposal for Eastern Freedom School*.

power rhetoric at the time. Shortly after the Strivers first cafeteria boycott and petition to the Board of Education, their faculty advisor, Jay Lord, got notice that his draft deferment had been revoked. Lord discovered that Principal Tignor had requested that Lord's deferment be withdrawn as a "patriotic gesture."⁶¹ Tignor's politically repressive move signaled to the Strivers that they could not wait for his retirement in June. They proceeded to organize 500 of Eastern's students, more than 20 percent of the student body, in a massive walkout calling for Tignor to be fired.⁶² The Strivers used grassroots organizing tactics to mobilize Eastern students outside of the school arena as well. In the summer before the Eastern Freedom Annex would open, the National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH) contacted the Modern Strivers to recruit black youth in their neighborhood for a job internship through the "Youth Opportunities Program."⁶³ Gregory Taylor and Wanda Robinson of the Strivers recruited 50 students from Eastern in less than three weeks. Furthermore, they negotiated with the NIMH personnel to ensure that students would "get away from menial chores" and instead work at "established jobs that were really educational for us and really useful to the employer."⁶⁴ The Strivers harnessed the community organizing skills they had honed through their school activism in order to get other students in their neighborhood important access to skills, social capital, and money.⁶⁵ In their local-level attempts to practice a politics of black self-determination, the Strivers demonstrated the widespread adaptability and complexity of

⁶¹ Brooks, et al., 287

⁶² Students Quit For an Hour in Draft Row," *Washington Post* [Washington, D.C.] 12 Mar. 1968: B1.

⁶³ Susan Jacoby, "Students Find Jobs for Ghetto," *Washington Post* [Washington, D.C.] 4 July 1968: D3.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

black nationalist politics and its intermingling with reformist efforts in practice, defying traditional views of black power as static, rigid, and dogmatic.

In addition to their pragmatic applications of black power ideologies, the Strivers refused to be made into the pawns of adult militants. When black power elder Rufus Catfish Mayfield tried to rally the Strivers and students at nearby Spingarn High School to go down to the District Building to “complain about the lousy education in Washington,” the Strivers tactically refused. Roger Newell explained: “when only one Spingarn student showed up at the rally, the Eastern students decided to pull out, because a march to the District Building about general complaints wouldn’t mean anything.”⁶⁶ Newell’s comment underscores his tested organizing skills and developed political consciousness, challenging typical portrayals of youth involved in black power activism as agent-less actors, manipulated by authoritarian black power leaders.

In addition to increased community and student control over Eastern, the Strivers called for the formation of an autonomous institution within Eastern, wherein they could put into practice their model conditions for student-learning and relevant, black studies curricula. The Strivers’ logistical and conceptual plan for the Freedom Annex further illustrates the influence of late 1960’s Black Nationalist and resurgent Pan-Africanist thought on their activism, while still reflecting their commitment to reform of the wider D.C. public school system as well as to serving the needs of the Strivers’ neighborhood community. The catalogue for Eastern’s Freedom Annex explains that the purpose of the school is to “make black people aware of who they” are as well as to “enlighten black

⁶⁶ Ernest Holsendolph, "Mayfield at Eastern, Spingarn Before Disorder," *Washington Star* [Washington, D.C.] 16 Oct. 1968: B1.

people to the creative and scientific tools that are needed in order to obtain whatever we want to mean as FREEDOM [sic].”⁶⁷ Underlying these objectives, the Strivers articulated their desire for black education to play a major role in bringing about a radically sovereign and self-sufficient black community.

The Strivers understood the longstanding roots of Black Nationalism in the black freedom struggle. The first page of the Strivers’ informational pamphlet about the freedom school contains a bold proclamation from the earlier, nationalist UNIA leader Marcus Garvey himself: “make your history so laudable, magnificent and untarnished, that another generation will not seek to repay your seeds for the sins inflicted upon their fathers.”⁶⁸ Below the quote, a hand-drawn image depicts the hands of two black people clasping each other above an outline of the United States, invoking a symbolic representation of Black Nationalist solidarity spreading across the country during the rise of Black Power. The students’ juxtaposition of the Garvey quote alongside an artistic portrayal of Black Nationalist unity underscores their political awareness of the longstanding theoretical roots of the 1960s “new nationalism” in which they participated.

However, in their conceptualization of the school, the Strivers did not solely aim to put into practice a black power politics handed down to them from previous generations. They envisioned powerful and innovative ways themselves through which to build black political consciousness within the school. For instance, in place of the impersonal bell system between classes, classes ended with “the recordings of our people,” Charles Robinson continued:

⁶⁷ Modern Strivers, *Freedom School Pamphlet*, Typescript, Capital Hill Restoration Society, Gregory New Papers: 1964-1981, George Washington University Special Collections Research Center, D.C. Undated.

⁶⁸ Modern Strivers, *Freedom School Pamphlet*.

Whether it be the dulcet tones of sisters Miriam Makeba Carmichael or Nina Simone, bringing us to the realization that African peoples throughout the world suffer and enjoy similar experiences, or the kingly voice of brother Malcolm X teaching us the methods to overcome the problems we face as a people, each formal class period is ended with yet another learning experience.⁶⁹

Their innovative bell system was one of many ways in which the Strivers attempted to make develop a sense of collectivity amongst students at the Freedom Annex and nurture within them a black consciousness. The importance given to developing spiritual bonds amongst students in the Freedom Annex however did not preclude them from influencing the larger student population as well. In a written proposal for the school, the Strivers put forth: “there would be a group of students going into Eastern every day challenging the traditional approach of traditional teachers in a traditional school. This would present a challenge to every teacher in the regular school which we hope they would try to meet, thereby making Eastern a better school.”⁷⁰ The Strivers’ profound alienation from their established D.C. public school and their demand for an autonomous black institution, did not preclude them from petitioning their teachers and the school administration for reform within the system as well.

A newspaper clipping on the third page of the Eastern Freedom Annex catalogue refers to the school motto: “Build, Baby, Build.” This motto references the “Burn, Baby, Burn” slogan associated with the 1965 Watts Riots of L.A., but it flips the slogan on its head, articulating a creative, productive energy behind the students’ Black militancy efforts, rather than a destructive wrath. The schools’ optimistic motto further highlights that the Black Power movement was not a monolithic entity brought about through a few, overly-stylistic, Black Nationalist actors across the U.S., but rather an organic,

⁶⁹ Brooks, et al., 289.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

community-based force driven by the interaction between local and national actions, such as earlier school-based activism in the District and the riots that exploded across Northern cities in the summer of 1965. In picking “Build, Baby, Build” as their school model, the Black high school students who made up the Modern Strivers demonstrated their political awareness of Black Power organizing going on around them. Their choice shows that Black youth were not just politically apathetic, or uninformed, as dominant racist stereotypes purport, but rather were local leaders and visionaries influenced by the nationwide emergence of the Black Power movement. The Modern Strivers’ Black Power activism represented more than just disillusionment; rather, it was an explosive confluence of various black political and cultural theories that at the time opened up new possibilities and hope for their struggle.

The Modern Strivers’ establishment of the nation’s first student-run, public Freedom Annex in D.C. further challenges strict dichotomies that historians traditionally represent between an integrationist civil rights movement and black power nationalism. In contrast to popular narratives of Black Power declension and disillusionment, the Strivers’ movement highlights the profound hopefulness and abundant cultural and political energy that spurred on the resurgence of Black Nationalism. Additionally, the students’ efforts reveal the contradictions and complexities within Black Power ideology, undermining a simple rejection of Black Nationalist ideologies as dogmatic and hierarchical, and supporting Matthew J. Countryman’s assertion that Black Power efforts were driven by a grassroots commitment to the pragmatic concerns of local black communities more than any staunch ideology.⁷¹ Ultimately, though the Strivers’ efforts illustrated the tensions

⁷¹ Matthew J. Countryman, “Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia, 1940-1971,” (Diss. Duke University, 1998).

and paradoxes within Black Power thought, dispelling static conceptions of the movement as a foil to integration, the Strivers' Freedom Annex did represent an overall shift away from viewing formal education as the path to freedom and towards pursuing liberation through educational autonomy, self-determination, and cultural pride.

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